



From Critical Awareness to Transformative Action in Higher Education: The Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM) and the Work of Inclusive Leadership

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Abstract

Efforts to advance educational justice in higher education increasingly emphasize inclusive leadership, representation, and equity-oriented reform. Yet epistemic, institutional, relational, and political boundaries continue to constrain transformative change. Drawing on critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Brookfield, 2017), intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), this conceptual article argues that boundary-breaking is fundamentally a literacy challenge. Leaders may occupy positions of authority without possessing the critical literacies required to interpret, navigate, and disrupt systems shaped by racialized power. Building on the Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM) (Robinson, 2020, 2021a; Robinson et al., 2025), this paper positions inclusive leadership as a developmental, justice-oriented praxis. Situated within the theme of the 2025 American Association of Blacks in Higher Education Annual Conference, *Breaking Boundaries: Cultivating Inclusive Leadership*, this article serves as a conceptual anchor for the Educational Justice Journal special issue and offers a shared interpretive framework for advancing educational justice.

Keywords: Educational Justice; Critical Literacies; Inclusive Leadership; Leadership Practice; Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM)

Introduction: Boundary-Breaking as an Educational Justice Imperative

Boundary-breaking has long been central to Black educational struggle and leadership. Freire (1970) framed education as a practice of freedom requiring learners and leaders to critically read the world to transform it, while Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasized that equity-oriented educational work must challenge, rather than accommodate, dominant norms. These traditions underscore a core premise of this article: inclusion without critical literacy risks reproducing inequality. In higher education, racialized boundaries are rarely explicit. Instead,

they are embedded within epistemic hierarchies, organizational cultures, and informal power networks that regulate whose knowledge is legitimized and whose leadership is authorized (Crenshaw, 1991). Extensive scholarship documents how institutions benefit from Black labor while constraining Black influence through cultural taxation, invisible labor, and limited decision-making authority (Bonner et al., 2015; Banda et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2014)

The 2025 AABHE Annual Conference theme, *Breaking Boundaries: Cultivating Inclusive Leadership*, invites a critical reconsideration of what boundary-breaking requires in practice. This article contends that sustainable educational justice demands more than access or representation; it requires critical literacies that enable leaders to read, navigate, and actively reshape systems of power. The Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM) (Robinson, 2020; 2021) responds directly to this challenge.

This article advances educational justice scholarship by offering the CLAM as a praxis-oriented framework that operationalizes critical consciousness into actionable leadership capacities. By articulating how literacies of self, institutions, power, relationships, and futurity function developmentally, this work extends justice-oriented theory into a model capable of guiding policy, practice, and research in Black higher education. Educational justice, in this framing, is understood not as an institutional outcome, but as an ongoing practice requiring leaders to develop the literacies necessary to interrogate, disrupt, and reimagine systems of power. While prior scholarship has positioned the CLAM as a framework for critical awareness, media literacy, and identity development, this article extends that work by explicitly theorizing CLAM as a justice-oriented leadership framework within higher education. In doing so, it reframes boundary-breaking not as a matter of representation or access alone, but as a literacy

challenge that demands leaders develop accountable capacities to interpret institutions, navigate power, and enact inclusive leadership in practice.

The Limits of Inclusion Without Critical Literacies

Critical scholars have long cautioned that awareness alone does not yield transformation. Brookfield (2017) argues that critical reflection must be paired with power-aware action, while Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality demonstrates how reforms that neglect structural power routinely fail those most marginalized. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that inclusion efforts lacking critical literacy risk reproducing the very inequities they seek to address.

Recent scholarship in adult education illustrates the gap between rhetorical commitments to critical literacies and their substantive integration into educational practice. An analysis of adult education degree program curricula across nearly 50 U.S. institutions found that explicit attention to critical literacies, particularly those aligned with diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, was notably limited in course titles and descriptions (Robinson & Stojanović, 2024). While critical literacy is widely invoked as a value, it remains underdeveloped as a structured pedagogical and leadership capacity within adult education programs. This curricular absence has implications not only for instructional practice, but for the preparation of leaders capable of navigating complex, multicultural, and power-laden institutional contexts.

Related work examining gender literacy, emotional literacy, and crisis leadership further demonstrates how critical literacies are often treated as peripheral rather than foundational in educational leadership contexts (Robinson, 2021b; Robinson & Stojanović, 2021; Robinson et al., 2022). As a result, leadership initiatives frequently emphasize representational diversity while overlooking the institutional and political literacies required for systemic change (Banda et

al., 2017; Robinson & Stojanović, 2022; Robinson & Williams, 2023). Consequently, Black leaders are frequently positioned to manage inequity rather than dismantle it. Persistent patterns of cultural taxation and role strain in ostensibly inclusive environments illustrate the gap between equity rhetoric and justice-oriented practice capable of guiding policy, practice, and research in higher education.

The Critical Literacies Advancement Model

It is in response to these persistent limitations in inclusion-oriented leadership initiatives that the Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM) was developed. The CLAM was developed to address the persistent gap between critical awareness and transformative action in adult and higher education contexts (Robinson, 2020, 2021; Robinson et al., 2025). Extending Freirean conscientization and culturally relevant pedagogy, CLAM operationalizes critical literacy as a leadership praxis.

CLAM advances critical traditions by moving beyond critique toward operationalization. While Freire (1970) foregrounded conscientization, Crenshaw (1991) exposed the structural consequences of intersecting systems of power, and Brookfield (2017) emphasized critically reflective practice, these frameworks stop short of offering a developmental architecture for leadership enactment within complex institutions. CLAM addresses this limitation by specifying the literacies leaders must cultivate to translate critical awareness into sustained action.

CLAM has been taken up as a generative framework in justice-oriented scholarship beyond formal leadership development. For example, Burrell-Craft, Robinson, and Allen-Handy (2022) employed CLAM to support critical media literacy and positive Black female identity formation, while Robinson, Allen-Handy, and Burrell Craft (2021) extended the model to

examine identity politics and media representation. These applications demonstrate CLAM's capacity to anchor context-specific literacies while maintaining conceptual coherence.

Unlike foundational theories that emphasize consciousness or critique, CLAM provides a praxis-oriented model that integrates identity, structure, power, relationships, and futurity into a coherent developmental framework. In doing so, CLAM offers a mechanism for accountability: leaders are not evaluated solely by intent or position, but by their demonstrated capacity to enact literate, justice-oriented leadership across institutional contexts.

From Core Literacies to Integrated Literacies

The CLAM is depicted as a non-linear framework which emphasizes the iterative and mutually reinforcing nature of five literacy categories (foundational, sociocultural, technological and informational, psychosocial and environmental, and social justice literacies). See Figure 1.

While CLAM is anchored in five core literacy categories, its application gives rise to integrated literacies that emerge through sustained praxis rather than design. Prior applications illustrate how integrated literacies, such as critical media literacy, gender literacy, and emotional literacy, surface in response to contextual demands (Burrell-Craft et al., 2022; Robinson, 2021b; Robinson et al., 2022). These literacies signal depth of enactment rather than expansion of the model, reinforcing CLAM's developmental logic. This distinction is central to the conceptual integrity of CLAM.

Critical Literacies Advancement Model (Robinson, 2020)

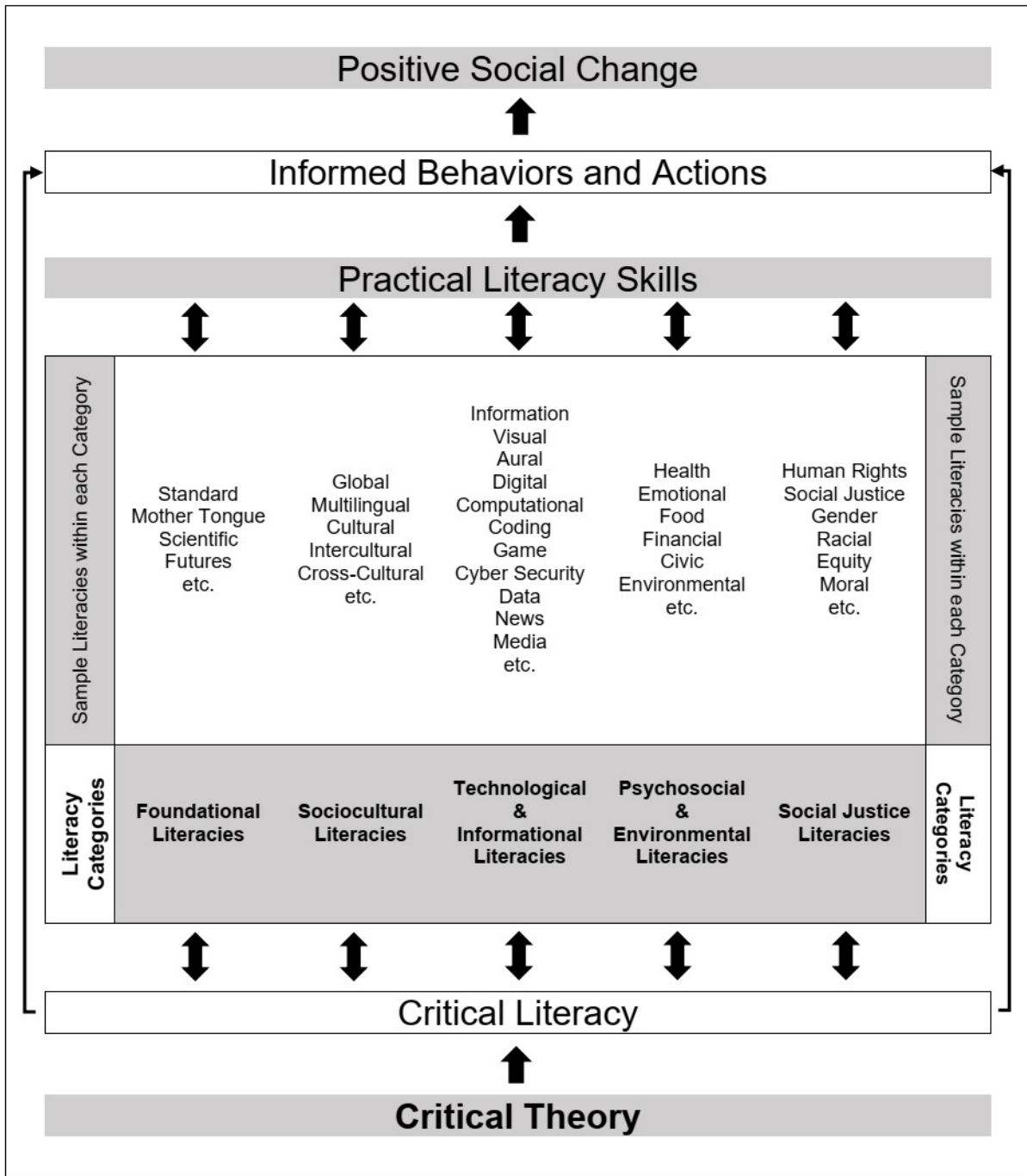


Figure 1. The Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM)

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The core literacies constitute the stable, transferable architecture of the model, whereas *integrated literacies* represent context-specific expressions of how the model is enacted over time. Prior applications illustrate how integrated literacies, such as critical media literacy, gender literacy, racial literacy, and emotional literacy, surface in response to contextual demands (Burrell Craft et al., 2021; Robinson, 2021b; Robinson & Stojanović, 2022; Robinson et al., 2022; Robinson & Williams, 2023). For example, institutional literacy may be enacted through policy analysis and governance navigation in formal leadership roles, or through coalition-building and strategic advocacy in cross-unit or community-based initiatives. These literacies signal depth of enactment rather than expansion of the model, reinforcing CLAM's developmental logic, further distinguishing it from more descriptive or additive literacy frameworks.

In studying the application of the CLAM in relation to *Breaking Boundaries and Cultivating Inclusive Leadership*, five integrated literacies emerge: (1) critical self-literacy, which emphasizes identity, positionality, reflexivity, and ethical self-interrogation; (2) institutional literacy, which enables leaders to interpret governance structures, policies, norms, and organizational cultures; (3) power literacy, which supports the recognition and navigation of formal, informal, and relational power; (4) relational literacy, which centers coalition-building, trust, and principled engagement across difference; and (5) future-oriented literacy, which fosters the capacity to imagine, articulate, and work toward more just educational futures. These literacies are reflected through the foundational architecture of CLAM (critical theory and critical literacy) and remain conceptually stable across institutional, cultural, and national contexts. These *integrated* literacies become visible when leaders consistently apply the core literacies to complex institutional challenges, such as policy interpretation, strategic

decision-making, or equity-oriented organizational change. Their presence signals not the expansion of the model, but the depth of its application.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

The Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM) offers a unifying framework for advancing educational justice across policy, practice, and research by shifting attention from representational outcomes to the conditions that cultivate justice-oriented leadership. At the policy level, CLAM provides a lens for evaluating leadership development and equity initiatives beyond demographic indicators, foregrounding leaders' demonstrated capacity to interpret institutional structures, navigate power, and engage accountability mechanisms in service of equity. Policy leaders, senior administrators, and governing bodies may use CLAM to assess whether equity initiatives cultivate the literacies necessary for sustained institutional change rather than symbolic inclusion.

In practice, CLAM informs the intentional design of leadership development curricula by centering its five core literacies as developmental capacities, thereby moving inclusion efforts beyond symbolic participation toward sustained structural transformation. Faculty developers, leadership educators, and doctoral program designers can draw on CLAM to structure curricula, mentoring, and professional learning experiences that intentionally cultivate justice-oriented leadership capacities. From a research perspective, CLAM invites empirical examination across institutional contexts, including longitudinal studies that trace how core literacies develop over time and comparative analyses that assess how differing organizational environments enable or constrain justice-oriented leadership. Researchers and leadership evaluation committees may employ CLAM as an analytic framework for examining leadership effectiveness, accountability, and equity outcomes across roles and institutional contexts. Together, these implications position

CLAM as both an analytic tool and a practical guide for advancing educational justice through literate, context-responsive action.

Conclusion

Contemporary efforts to advance educational justice in higher education frequently emphasize inclusion, representation, and leadership development, yet often leave unexamined the literacies required to disrupt institutions structured by historical and ongoing inequities. As this article has argued, boundary-breaking is not merely a structural or symbolic endeavor; it is a profoundly *literate practice* that requires leaders to develop the capacity to read, interpret, and intervene within complex systems of power, policy, and culture. Absent these literacies, inclusive leadership risks becoming rhetorical rather than transformative.

The Critical Literacies Advancement Model (CLAM) responds to this challenge by offering a praxis-oriented framework that moves educational justice beyond awareness toward sustained action. By distinguishing between core literacies as the stable architecture of the model and integrated literacies as emergent outcomes of enactment, CLAM provides conceptual clarity while remaining responsive to contextual variation. This distinction resists reductive or performative approaches to equity and instead foregrounds leadership as an ethical, developmental, and accountable practice.

Situated within the traditions of Black educational struggle and justice-oriented scholarship, CLAM reframes inclusive leadership as a collective responsibility rather than an individual accomplishment. It shifts evaluative attention away from intent, rhetoric, or positional authority and toward leaders' demonstrated capacity to engage institutions critically, relationally, and futuristically in service of equity. In this way, CLAM extends critical traditions not by

replacing them, but by offering a framework through which their commitments may be enacted within contemporary institutional contexts.

Ultimately, this article invites scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to reconsider what it means to pursue educational justice in higher education. Rather than asking whether institutions are inclusive in name or composition, CLAM urges sustained attention to whether leaders are being prepared to engage inequity as a persistent condition requiring literate, reflective, and justice-oriented action. As struggles for equity and accountability continue to shape the landscape of higher education, CLAM offers a generative framework for advancing educational justice not as an endpoint, but as ongoing work.

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