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The central purposes of this research study were to understand how school principals define and enact culturally responsive leadership (CRL). I was also interested in the challenges they have experienced in trying to lead in culturally responsive ways, as well as the successes that they have had in practice. In this qualitative research study, I interviewed eight school principals in a school district located in North Carolina. Through interviews and document analysis, I used my findings to answer my research questions. First, research participants described their definition of CRL and how their lived experiences impact how they serve students of color. Participants then shared the challenges of moving from theory to practice, while describing the successes of programs and strategies that support historically underserved student populations.

As I made sense of my findings, I found that many of the principals perceived themselves as culturally responsive leaders, however, they struggled to fully implement culturally responsive practices in their schools. In addition to interviews, I analyzed documents to help me to better understand how they assess and implement CRL in their schools. A few documents I analyzed include, the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, North Carolina School Report Cards, and school district websites.

Currently there is little research on how school principals enact culturally responsive leadership. With that in mind, this study will add to the research on how school leaders implement cultural responsiveness in K-12 schools, while challenging the educational disparities historically marginalized students encounter.

DISCOURSE SURROUNDING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP:

HOW SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IMPLEMENT CHANGE

by

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Approved by

_____
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing family: My dad (James), my mom (Myrtle), my sister (Tateasa), my husband (Daniel), and my children (Trey, Aidan, and Paris) thank you for being my loudest cheerleaders.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Jamie Davis-Burgins has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Merriam-Webster dictionary (2020) defines the American dream as "a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful." As I reflect on questions such as "Am I living the American dream?" "How did I get here?" "Am I fulfilled in my career?" and "Who helped me?" I realize that becoming an educator positions me to have an impact and a responsibility to help students reach their full potential.

Over the years of my career as an educator, I notice there are many challenges that impact students of color in educational settings. As an African American female, I have experienced the effects of microaggressions and academic disparities, for example, in terms of access to resources and opportunities. I often question how public schools support school leaders in their efforts to implement culturally responsive practices, acquire and distribute resources for students, and prepare teachers to embrace and acknowledge students' lived experiences as relevant in educational settings.

To better understand cultural responsiveness, educators must acknowledge that one central goal of culturally responsive leadership (CRL) is to promote equity. Green (2017) defines equity as the impartial and unhindered access to, and distribution of, opportunities and resources in all settings to improve one's quality of life. To create equitable educational experiences for all students, educational leaders must have a strong understanding of the cultures of the students in their schools and use this knowledge to create meaningful learning experiences for all students. Principals demonstrate their commitment to culturally responsive leadership by providing all students access to high-quality education despite their socioeconomic status and backgrounds. As part of this work, they intentionally consider how school climate impacts educational outcomes

for students from marginalized subgroups (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Mansfield, 2014; Santamaria, 2014; Theoharis, 2007). They also support the development of their teachers, especially so their teachers are also culturally responsive in the classroom. Raising teacher awareness of cultural diversity as it relates to learning and behavior is part of developing cultural responsiveness (Voltz et al., 2003). In turn, culturally responsive leaders help to ensure historically marginalized students' academic achievement in school settings.

School leaders are tasked with developing mission and vision statements with intentions to increase student achievement. Ultimately, they lead the charge to make a connection between the school and the communities they serve. One way to bridge schools and communities is to ensure educators and educational leaders are culturally responsive. Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings were the forerunners in research on culturally responsive education and leadership. Ladson-Billings coined the term "culturally relevant pedagogy." With this construct, she aimed to draw attention to the importance of teachers' willingness to appreciate student assets in urban classrooms, specifically African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Gay's (2002) intent was to increase awareness of cultural diversity while using student characteristics, perspectives, and experiences that students bring to the classroom as assets in learning. Gay and Ladson-Billings study how educators can effectively bridge gaps between historically marginalized students and school success. Still, many schools are not culturally responsive, warranting more research on this topic.

Statement of the Problem

Much of my career experience has taken place in Title I low performing schools. What I find is that many principals in these settings perceive themselves as culturally responsive leaders, however, they struggle to implement culturally responsive practices in their schools. Johnson

(2007) noticed that while researchers have defined and encouraged culturally responsive leadership extensively, there is comparatively much less research on how leaders apply and enact the framework of cultural responsiveness in challenging and/or high poverty schools. Furthermore, the educational system is inundated with racial disparities, for example, in terms of funding and support, which have a negative impact on minoritized groups (de Silvia et al., 2018).

Within my 18 years as an educator, I have been a strong advocate for students, while trying to understand how outside influences affect their school experiences. Groenke (2010) finds that high-minority/high-poverty schools are continuously at a disadvantage and teachers typically do not fully understand the systemic and structural inequities that lead to achievement gaps between students of color and their white counterparts. When school administrators work in environments that do not acknowledge the cultural differences of students, their academic needs may not be met. Gay (2015) maintains that the "underachievement of students from poor, urban, rural and non-mainstream ethnic, racial, and logistic groups is a recurrent concern of educators in the United States" (p. 123).

Morrison et al. (2008) find that the pressure teachers experience under standardized curriculum and high stakes testing often steer them away from drawing on student experiences as assets in learning and providing them voice and choice within the classroom. As a result, students are taught the traditional standards based upon White middle-class norms. At the same time, one of the challenges in creating culturally responsive school environments is that teacher preparation programs rarely include sufficient study of issues of whiteness and its effects on culturally responsive initiatives (Hayes & Juarez, 2012).

Some teachers may feel unprepared to support diverse student populations, which results in high teacher turnover rates that are often attributed to ineffective school leaders (Khalifa et al.,

2016); these changes cause a ripple effect of instability for students. Effective school leaders hire and retain good teachers who provide a stable environment for marginalized students (Khalifa et al., 2016). Teacher longevity in schools is one factor that supports helping all students to learn, especially when those teachers are culturally responsive in their classrooms.

Contributing to conversations and experimenting with solutions to issues of inequality and marginalization requires determination and endurance. School administrators must enhance teachers' strengths and empower them to be creative in their pedagogical approaches. Research tells us that schools often lack culturally responsive leaders who are advocates for equity in education, the community, and the curriculum (Johnson, 2007). If education is to be emancipatory, teachers and administrators must address gender, class, race, disability, and other oppressions many school-aged students encounter (Lynch, 2019). While there is a growing body of research on the need for culturally responsive leaders, there is significantly less research on how school leaders work to be culturally responsive, as well as the challenges and enablers they encounter. Educators must acknowledge that exclusion from quality education based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and learning abilities (Banks, 2017) widens the gap between positive school experiences and long-term academic success. The more academic success a student experiences, the more connected to school the student becomes (Griffin, 2002).

Purpose of the Study

The central purpose of this research study is to understand how educational leaders define and enact culturally responsive leadership. I am also interested in the challenges they experience in trying to lead in culturally responsive ways, as well as the successes that they have had in practice.

Culturally responsive educators build on the experiences, traditions, values, and beliefs of ethnically diverse students as a foundation for effective teaching (Brown, 2007; Gay, 2002; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Morrison et al., 2008). Rust (2019) argues that it is necessary for teachers and leaders to be aware of their own racial/cultural identity, values, and biases towards other groups. Through conducting this study, I hoped to learn from educational leaders who center cultural responsiveness in their work, about the practices they engage in, their challenges, and their successes. I was particularly interested in how they work to integrate theory and practice, as well as, overcome local challenges within their schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative study:

1. How do educational leaders define and enact culturally responsive leadership in their schools?

2. What challenges do school leaders face in implementing culturally responsive practices and how do they navigate these challenges?

3. What successes have school leaders experienced and how do they assess the impact of their culturally responsive leadership?

Background: School Factors that Impact the Experiences of Students of Color

As I write this dissertation in 2022, there are social justice movements occurring around the world. The death of unarmed Black males at the hands of law enforcement over the past several years has sparked worldwide protests as people march for equality. While there is a widening gap between those who support the Black Lives Matter movement versus those who view this movement as an attack on law enforcement, current events, and movements no doubt affects students of color; their educational experiences are especially challenging when they are

not in school districts that implement culturally responsive leadership (CRL). CRL helps to ensure that all students develop a positive self-perception, see themselves as learners who can achieve, and develop school relationships that propel them to be successful and optimistic about learning (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Griffin, 2002; Whiting, 2009). Understanding the factors that make school challenging for students of color is important background information for my study. In what follows in this section, I discuss some of these factors: school culture, specialized programs, school rankings, culturally responsive teachers, and policies.

School Culture

Students who attend schools in poor communities are often negatively impacted by inequalities that have led to concerns for school success. They also frequently attend schools where the culture is not positive. Buehler (2013) notes that "in urban schools where the majority of teachers are White and the majority of students are members of racial minority groups, working to improve school culture requires educators to address issues of race" (p. 629).

In my experiences as an assistant principal, I have noticed that students, teachers, and school administrators have differing opinions about what constitutes a positive school culture and climate, as well as the factors that comprise an inclusive school environment. Unfortunately, many school leaders do not know enough about how culturally responsive school leadership impacts the school environment. When school leaders create an atmosphere that celebrates and values student cultures, students feel safe (Fraise & Brooks, 2015). The perspectives, attitudes, and belief system of culturally responsive leaders can shape the school culture in ways that support all students successfully matriculating through the K-12 experience.

Students from diverse cultural, religious, gender, and ethnic backgrounds sometimes come to school socialized in ways that are different from the school culture (Gay, 2002;

Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Common school-based policies and practices tend to place parameters around students' socialization, while at the same time they are expected to learn according to the norms of White Americans (Brown, 2007). For example, Ladson-Billings (2018) found that long-term suspension rates are higher among Black and Brown students, and they are frequently placed in remedial classes that do not meet higher education admission standards. On the contrary, culturally responsive teachers embrace diverse students' experiences and create lessons that build on these experiences and on the cultures of these students.

Furthermore, culturally responsive leaders value the languages and cultural practices of students and families from diverse racial and ethnic groups such as African American, Latina/o, Indigenous American, Asian American, and Pacific Islander Americans (Paris, 2012). They are also well-versed in multicultural education and tools required to increase awareness of inequality, stereotypes, and discrimination while using cultural assets as valuable contributors to students' educational experiences (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Maasum et al., 2014).

Specialized Programs

Most school districts justify their academic programs and curricular choices based upon research and data. However, this seemingly objective approach is often discriminatory. For example, in her in-depth look into Academic and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) school programs, Mansfield (2016) discovered that many still operate under the context of whiteness and colonization by using IQ scores and genetics to place students, thereby widening the disparities among Black and White students. Critics of the standards by which we measure success, question "who has the power to define which abilities have merit?" and "how does society know and measure abilities?" (Lynch, 2019, p. 7). The experiences of students of color are influenced by the degree to which they have access to specialized programs.

School Rankings

Terms used to rank schools in such ways as low performing, turn around schools, and Title I add to social pressure facing school leaders (Carpenter et al., 2017; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). For example, many states have incorporated various standardized tests, such as benchmark and end-of grade exams, to gauge students' knowledge. Once those scores are released, school districts are ranked and labeled as low or high performing. Ladson-Billings (2018) argues that it is important that schools consider how testing and accountability affects students of color. School improvement practices encompass more than closing achievement gaps, social and cultural aspects are key to ensuring all students success (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020).

Culturally Responsive Teachers

The existence of culturally responsive teachers can significantly enhance the experiences and learning opportunities of students of color. Schools that serve historically marginalized student populations often have limited resources, as well as struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Rust, 2019). Moreover, in their case study of an urban school principal's journey to improve academic achievement and school climate, Reed and Swaminathan (2016) found that when new teachers are placed in urban settings, they want their students to be more like suburban students with middle-class White dispositions. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2000) found that many field experiences for new teachers occur in White middle-income communities and most educators do not have the same cultural backgrounds as their students (Fraise & Brooks, 2015), limiting their ability to develop as culturally responsive pedagogues.

Policies

Research suggests that education leaders must re-examine our focus, enhance communication, create relationships with students, be willing to recognize our position, and empower others (Carpenter et al., 2017; Irby, 2018; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Rust, 2019). Mansfield et al. (2018) believe one foundation for institutional change is understanding the role whiteness plays in contributing to unequal treatment, along with the need for school principals to use anti-racist leadership in policy and practice.

Some school districts across the country begin work in cultural responsiveness by redesigning district policy requirements, including a requirement that school leaders complete extensive training. For example, Denver Public Schools (n.d.) requires all new employees to attend culturally responsive education training and obtain English Language Acquisition qualifications. Pittsburgh Public Schools (n.d.) redesigned their strategic plan to address the achievement gaps among African American students through seven focus areas that include the following: board support, instructional support, equity in discipline, reducing the achievement gap, equity in special education, special program access, monitoring, and administrative support. These are important first steps to ensuring schools respond to the cultural backgrounds and needs of their students. I discuss these issues in much more depth in the second chapter of this study where I review the extensive literature on culturally responsive education and leadership.

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Description of Methods

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For this dissertation, I conducted a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) using document analysis and interviews. I interviewed eight educational leaders in North Carolina who center cultural responsiveness in their work. The impact of COVID-19 limited

face-to-face interactions inside school buildings; however, I was able to conduct interviews face-to-face.

For document analysis, I asked research participants to share any documentary evidence of their work related to culturally responsive leadership, such as professional development activities, faculty meetings agendas, and Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meeting minutes, etc. I also used public information such as school district websites, school board meeting minutes, and individual school improvement plans. I describe these methods in much more detail in chapter three.

Culturally Responsive Leadership Framework

My theoretical framework is based on the Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) behaviors described by Muhammad Khalifa, Mark Anthony Gooden, and James Earl Davis. Khalifa et al. (2016) argue that CRSL encompasses closing achievement gaps, as well as addressing the social, cultural, and educational needs of minority students. Khalifa, et al. (2016) name four behaviors that culturally responsive school leaders must undertake which are "critically self-reflecting on leadership behaviors, developing culturally responsive teachers, promoting culturally responsive/inclusive school environments, and engaging students, parents, and indigenous community members" (p. 1283).

A school leader's "awareness of his/her values, beliefs, and/or dispositions when it comes to serving poor children of color" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1280) guides the first behavior. Khalifa et al. (2016) note that "critical reflection, which is also important to culturally responsive leadership, is foundational and proceeds any actions in leadership" (p. 1285). The second behavior "ensures that teachers are and remain culturally responsive" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1281) with school leaders continuing this effort through culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Culturally responsive school leaders also "affirm and protect Indigenous student identities" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1282). In addition, the fourth behavior, "highlights the ability of the school leader to engage students, families, and communities in culturally appropriate ways" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1282).

In the following sections, I describe research-based examples of culturally responsive behaviors that support the theoretical framework on culturally responsive leadership that will guide my study.

Critical Self-Reflection

Critical self-reflection by school leaders can be achieved when culturally responsive leaders consistently reflect on their actions and beliefs and shift from school-centric/school-based epistemologies to community-based beliefs and values (Khalifa, 2018, p. 40). As a result of this shift, students of color are better served in educational settings. Khalifa (2018) argues that "cultural responsiveness is a necessary component of effective school leadership" (p. 13) and is based on leadership behaviors that include critical thinking and self-reflection. Devoting time to reflect and discuss structures to improve programs and activities (Beachum, 2011) for minority students is essential. Fraise and Brooks (2015) remind us that it is especially important for school leaders to reflect on their personal biases and model cultural responsiveness among their peers and students in their schools.

Classroom Practices for Developing Culturally Responsive Teachers

Gay (2002), Ladson-Billings (2000), and Morrison et al. (2008) find that "cultural scaffolding," which is using students' own culture and experiences, creates reciprocity in the classroom between teachers and students. When done well, students and teachers develop a partnership, while expanding their intellectual horizons (Gay, 2002). Likewise, it is important to

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highlight the achievements of various racial and ethnic groups. Typically, school curricula and courses lack representation from diverse groups. Ladson-Billings (2018) tells us that there is a need to evaluate curriculum standards for representation and perspectives in the content students receive at school. For this reason, it is imperative that the core curriculum is paired with and enacted though culturally relevant activities that increase students' self-esteem, so students experience an increase in academic successes (Schellenberg & Grothaus, 2009).

Culturally Responsive School Environments

Over the past 30 years, the implementation of interventions and programs related to equity has decreased the math and reading achievement gaps between minority groups and White students in grades 4 and 8 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). However, racially marginalized students regularly score lower on standardized tests, receive lower academic course grades, and have increased dropout rates. Whiting (2009) argues that contributing factors of student dropout rates are the lack of caring relationships with educators and disengagement with the school environment. Culturally responsive leaders proactively remove barriers, such as structural inequalities and cultural differences, that hinder minority student successes (Rust, 2019). In addition, it is as equally important for students to learn about their own culture as well as others they interact with (Gay, 2015).

Engaging Students, Parents, and Indigenous Communities

It is important for school leaders to evaluate the needs of the students and families, while providing meaningful support to teachers as culturally responsive change agents (Webb-Johnson, 2006). There is not one method or formula to address the concerns that impede student success; however, educators must collaborate across local and regional education agencies to advocate for students (Mansfield, 2019). When school leaders develop positive relationships among school

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personnel, parents, students, and the community, while leading with equity in mind, they

challenge deficit perspectives (Beachum 2011). As part of being culturally responsive, school

leaders consider whose language, history, and values are the framework into which all children

are required to fit (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), while at the same time ensuring that students

from all cultures are valued.

Significance of this Study

I conducted this study of culturally responsive leadership in North Carolina. School

administrators in this state are evaluated annually based on the seven standards constructed by

the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Standard three governs how school

administrators should demonstrate cultural leadership. Some questions that administrators must

reflect upon include "What tradition, symbol or value contributes to your school culture?" and

"How does your leadership visibly support the positive, culturally responsive traditions of the

school community?" (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). According to

Khalifa (2018) partnerships between schools and families, creating safe spaces for dialogue, self-

reflection, and on-going professional development aid school leaders in this work. How leaders

engage in these practices, as well as their challenges and successes, are studied much less in the

literature than the theory behind culturally responsive practices. Thus, learning more about how

educational leaders enact cultural responsiveness in their schools, as well as how they navigate

the challenges that they face and characterize their successes, is an important contribution to the

existing research on this topic.

This study adds to the research on culturally responsive leadership practices, specifically

how school leaders enact cultural responsiveness in their daily practices. I hope this research can

help school leaders challenge deficit thinking and foster a culture that changes the negative

perceptions of students of color. This supportive culture is an important prerequisite to all students achieving their potential in schools.

Overview of Chapters

In this chapter, I introduced the study by stating the problem and describing the purposes of culturally responsive leadership, while calling attention to the experiences of students of color in schools. I also described my theoretical framework based on Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis's (2016) research on culturally responsive school leadership and detailed the behaviors they say are important for leaders: critically self-reflecting, supporting their teachers in enacting culturally responsive pedagogy, developing culturally responsive school environments, and promoting equity through parent and student engagement. I then shared my research questions, briefly introduced my methods, and explained the significance of my study.

I review the literature in chapter two, which I organized into the following sections: student achievement and the need for culturally responsive leadership, culturally responsive leadership behaviors, culturally responsive strategies in educational settings, and examples of culturally responsive leadership programs. Lastly, I point out areas where we need more research.

In chapter three, I review the methods for this study in detail. Through interviews and document analysis, I explore how school leaders enact cultural responsiveness, navigate challenges, and reflect on the successes they have had in implementing culturally responsive leadership. In chapter four, I present the findings from my study, organized by the four key areas of my conceptual framework. Finally, in chapter five, I answer my research questions, put my findings in conversation with the literature, offer recommendations for research and practice, and reflect on my study overall.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has shown that often educators fail to consider issues of cultural background, racial equity, socioeconomics, and the social class of students when designing lessons, developing policies and practices, and organizing schooling. Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) argue that "significant changes are needed in how African American, Asian, Latino, and Native American students are taught in U.S. schools" (p. 178). Culturally responsive school leaders must be willing to challenge the status quo and make changes to acknowledge and build upon the diversity in their schools (Lopez, 2015).

The purpose of my literature review is to examine research regarding the implementation of culturally responsiveness in K-12 schools. In this chapter, I explain the need for culturally responsive leadership along with school leadership behaviors that best serve historically marginalized students. I also describe culturally responsive strategies and programs in educational settings and the impact of CRL on student achievement.

Student Achievement and the Need for Culturally Responsive Leadership

Being culturally responsive encompasses gaining knowledge about cultural diversity, building caring relationships, communicating with all constituents, learning student strengths, modeling cultural responsiveness, and knowing the learning styles of diverse students (Brown, 2007; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). One important characteristic of culturally responsive leaders (CRL) is that they evaluate how students of color are being served in educational settings. Unfortunately, several school factors such as achievement gaps, deficit thinking, overrepresentation in special education programs, and unfair school discipline practices continue to have a negative impact on students of color. Culturally responsive leaders identify and challenge these barriers that effect students of color.

Achievement Gaps

Choosing to ignore the realities and need for cultural responsiveness perpetuates the stigma associated with minority students and low academic performance. Khalifa et al. (2016) find that "closing the racialized achievement (opportunity) gap has been one of the central issues in education research studies and debates, particularly in the United States" (p. 1279). To better understand the achievement gap, the National Association for Educational Statistics provides data surrounding K-12 enrollment summaries, graduation rates, and reading and math proficiency for students in secondary settings.

Figure 1 is representative of the percentage of high school graduates between 1970 to 2015. Data shows that Black and Hispanic students were graduating at lower rates than their White peers. Hispanic students had a significant increase in their dropout rate between the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, while Black students had a decrease in their dropout rate. Although the gap has been closed significantly since that time, Black and Hispanic students continue to drop out of high school at higher rates than their White peers.

The National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) monitors the trends in data in reading, math, science, and writing for students in grades three through twelve. Most educators refer to this data as the "Nation's Report Card" (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.) This information shows whether schools make adequate yearly progress (AYP) and illustrates the percentages of students who are college and career ready. If a school fails to make AYP, it is possible they could undergo restructuring of staff and loss of funding; the pressures related to accountability contribute to stress for many school leaders (Viloria, 2019).

Figure 1. High School Dropout Rate 1970–2015

High school dropout rate
By race/ethnicity
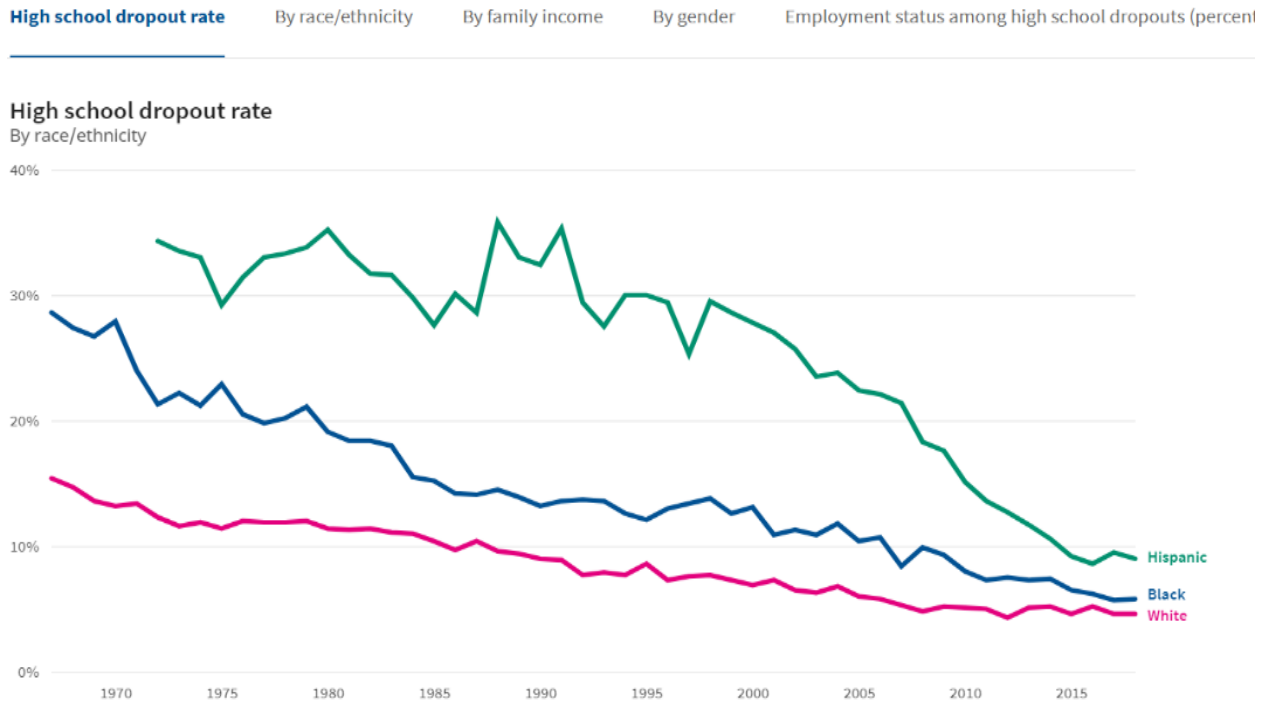
According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, there are over 1.4 million students enrolled in public schools in the state. Approximately 600,000 of those are students from historically marginalized populations. The chart below represents 2018-2019 college and career readiness by racial subgroups in North Carolina. Based on ACT performance in 2019, there were 70.3% of White students who met achievement benchmarks for college and career readiness versus 64% American Indian, 40.2% Hispanic and 32.0% Black students who did not. This data tells us that a high percentage of historically marginalized students are not prepared for post-secondary education and training.

Figure 2. North Carolina State Report Card
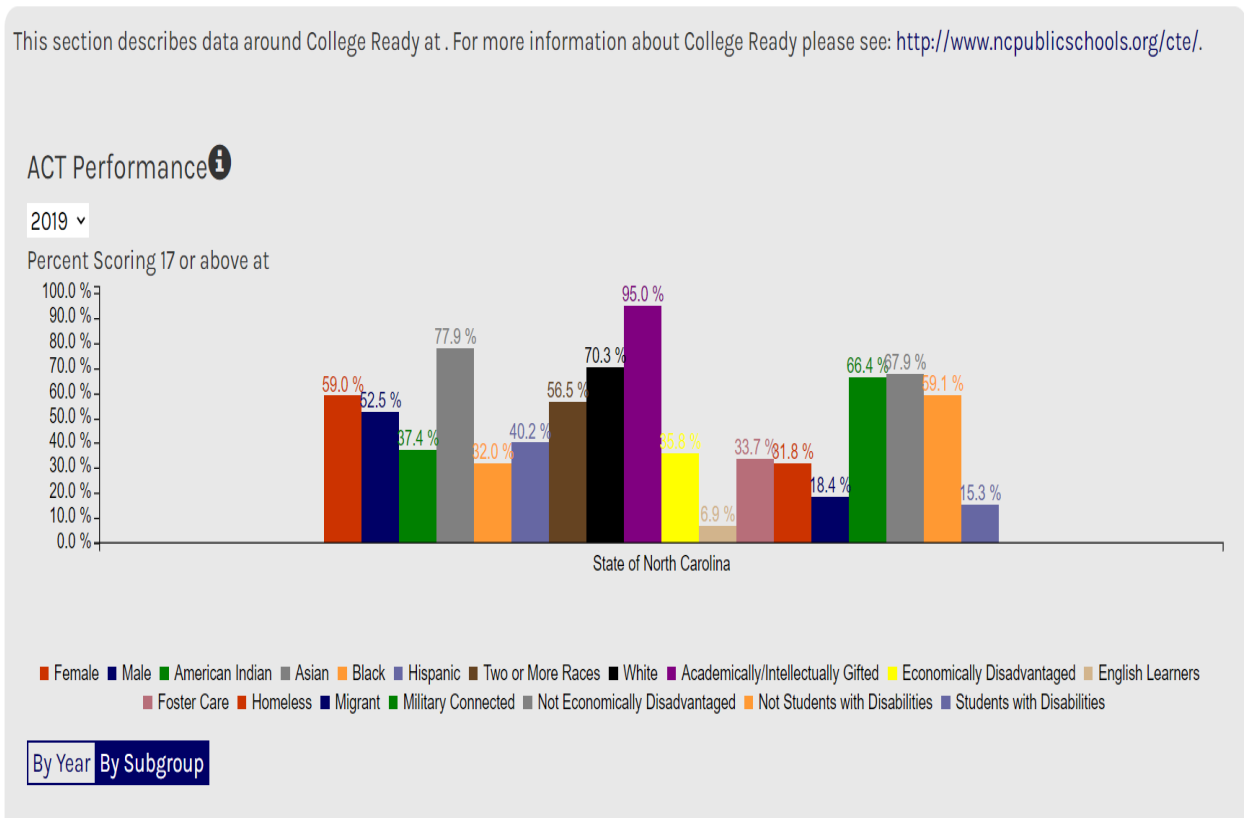
With only 6.9% of English Learners being college and career ready, Dessel (2010) notes that "educating children of immigrants whose first language is not English is a challenge to traditional instruction methods" (p. 408). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2020) reported the following data for English Language Learners (ELL) in U.S. Public Schools:

Spanish was the home language of 3.7 million ELL public school students in fall 2017, representing 74.8 percent of all ELL students and 7.6 percent of all public K–12 students. Arabic and Chinese were the next most reported home languages (spoken by 136,500 and 106,500 students, respectively). English was the fourth most common home language for ELL students (94,900 students), which may reflect students who live in multilingual households or students adopted from other countries who were raised speaking another language but currently live-in households where English is spoken. Vietnamese (77,800

students), Somali (41,300 students), Russian (36,800 students), Portuguese (33,300 students), Haitian (32,700 students), and Hmong (32,200 students) were the next most commonly reported home languages of ELL students in fall 2017.

Research tells us that schools continuously strive to make education attainable for every student. Even though schools in the United States have made gains in addressing racial academic achievement disparities, the U.S. has not achieved the success that is needed to address these disparities (Gay, 2015). The importance of meeting accountability standards based on high stakes testing impacts school leadership practices.

Jacobson and Ylimaki (2013) argue that decentralization of schools across the country (due to state mandated sanctions for failure to make AYP), along with the increase in Latinx students, have heightened the need for socially just school leaders with backgrounds in culturally responsive practices.

Deficit Thinking

The pervasiveness of deficit thinking among educators and educational leaders is one of the reasons we need more culturally responsive approaches to leadership. White middle-class norms lead to deficit approaches that inhibit students of color from embracing the cultural strengths, assets, and languages that are present in their communities (Paris, 2012). The experiences of Black and Brown students, the resegregation of schools, and the disregard of minority students' cultural practices (while forcing them to align with the dominant culture) also contributes to deficit thinking (Ladson-Billings, 2018; Paris, 2012).

Research strategies suggest educators can counteract deficit thinking through self-reflection (Khalifa, 2018; Lopez, 2015), curriculum changes, and positive behavior incentives for students (Dungan et al., 2012). Dugan et al. (2012) followed a culturally responsive principal

who repaired a broken relationship between the school and community by changing negative perspectives of the local Tribal community, while addressing low academic performance. They found that implementation of culturally relevant leadership, through understanding students' culture and customs, built trust among the community and school leaders and decreased deficit thinking. Furthermore, teaching students through a strength perspective in lieu of a deficit perspective (Gay 2013; Webb-Johnson, 2006) changed the trajectory of academic outcomes.

Minority Students and Special Programs

As educators work to provide the best educational experience for students, thousands of African American children are labeled unfairly, often based on behavior and communication patterns (Voltz et al., 2003), which results in referrals to special education services that do not help them academically (Webb-Johnson, 2006). In fact, "teachers' beliefs about ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity determine their instructional behaviors" (Gay, 2015, p. 126). To support educational attainment for all students, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was introduced to U.S. schools in 2002. It was a legislative action designed to provide structures to ensure that all students have access to high quality learning and that students in all schools make adequate yearly progress.

According to Webb-Johnson (2006), NCLB pushes school leaders to review data and highlight the systemic lack of academic success in underserved populations, specifically Black students. Sadly, when learning style differences among minority students are not recognized nor addressed, this is too often understood as an inability to learn and could result in a referral to special education services (Voltz et al., 2003). Furthermore, Banks (2017) argues that many African American males continue to be labeled as learning disabled, in addition to racism being widespread in schools and society (Andrews & Gutwein, 2020).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) governs the policies and procedures related to students with disabilities. Webb-Johnson (2006) argues that school leaders are key facilitators in leading change to close the gap among students of color in special education, but many school leaders do not understand their role in the process. School leaders who work to understand the profound issues that affect students of color include cultural responsiveness as "an equal education opportunity that accepts differences among ethnic groups, individuals, and cultures as normative to the human condition and valuable to society and personal development" (Gay, 2013, p. 50).

Discipline Practices

Unfair discipline practices continue to have a negative effect on students of color. Research indicates students of color receive more punitive consequences at higher rates than their White counterparts (Andrews & Gutwein, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2018; Minkos et al., 2017). Therefore, school leaders must take a race-explicit approach to addressing systemic racism while attending to educational inequities (Honig & Honsa, 2020). In addition, they must evaluate their commitment to preparing students and appreciate social identities across diverse groups (Beachum, 2011) to disrupt the pattern of excessively disciplining minority students at greater rates compared to their white counterparts. Table 1 represents North Carolina discipline data of special education students for 2018-2019 categorized by race and the total days of suspensions. Approximately 59% of Black/African American students were suspended 10 days or more, versus 25% of White students.

Table 1 shows the disproportionate discipline practices imposed on students of color, particularly African American students who have the highest suspension rate during the 2018-2019 school year. All things considered, understanding one's position, cultural identity, implicit

bias, and privilege are important aspects of culturally responsive leadership. According to Irby (2018) when "teachers engaged in racial learning through co-constructing a different reality than what many teachers initially considered plausible, the problem with their school's discipline, culture, and climate was in reality a problem of race and racism" (p. 718).

Table 1. North Carolina 2018-2019 Suspension Data

Race	1 day or less	2 through 10 days	Greater than 10 days	Grand Total
American Indian or Alaska Native	132	355	114	601
Asian	41	74	13	128
Black or African American	3443	9719	4048	17210
Hispanic/Latino	1257	2566	582	4405
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	7	13	5	25
Two or more races	499	1162	366	2027
White	3991	7486	1719	13196
Grand Total	9370	21375	6847	37592

This data is pulled from the EdFacts Reporting system for the 2018-19 School year. Disability Category (IDEA), Removal Length (IDEA)

Culturally Responsive Leadership Behaviors

The public-school system has undergone many changes throughout decades, including in how we educate children. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that public schools must desegregate in 1954 in the *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka* case. Ladson-Billings (2018) argues that despite this ruling, there is white resistance to integration and frequent removal of African American school administrators. In addition, Beachum (2011) notes that American schools are reverting back to segregated practices and that schools are increasingly segregated yet again. In

U.S. schools, most teachers are white middle-class females, while the student population consists of increasingly ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse students who live in poverty (Gay, 2013; Minkos et al., 2017). Mansfield and Newcomb (2015) maintain that effective school leaders implement a framework that encompasses justice, care, and critique, in addition to leading in culturally responsive ways, which are all crucial to the fabric of schools, especially if we are to educate all students well. In what follows, I discuss some of the most important behaviors of culturally responsive leaders in relation to issues of equity, school principal standards, leadership principles, and social justice.

Equity

Gay (2015) argues that "no ethnic group should have exclusive power or total cultural control over others, even in a numerical majority" (p. 125). This makes sense, and thus it is imperative that school leaders work to recognize the need for "excellence and equity in education" (Beachum, 2011, p. 32) while focusing on inclusive environments, advocacy, and social justice. Educational policy and discussions centered on equitable practices have caused division in many U.S. schools (de Silva et al., 2018). With that in mind, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) assert that it is our duty to interrupt the negative thought processes that hinder equitable education for all races of people. Khalifa (2018) argues that a comprehensive equity audit must be the starting point for CRL, and he identifies five components for examination: equity trends, survey data, policy analysis, culturally responsive leadership practices, and curriculum and pedagogy.

In their research on an urban school district's approach to address leadership, climate, instructional practices, and disproportionate discipline in ten of their lowest performing schools, Meyers et al.'s (2019) illustrate that school-wide equity initiatives are sustainable when the entire

school district makes a commitment to equitable practices. Instead of looking for short-term solutions, school leaders must focus their efforts on reshaping the entire school district to improve its lowest-performing schools. Furthermore, organizational change, social justice, and anti-racist leadership are significant factors in sustaining equity work (Irby et al., 2020).

School Principal Standards

Standards for school leadership are developed by a plethora of organizations that guide school districts in keeping with policies for accreditation. In North Carolina, standard five defines an accomplished principal in ways that indicate the importance of cultural responsiveness (NC DPI, 2010):

Accomplished principals respect the cultural differences in a global society and make diversity a means for enriching the culture of the learning community. They work to establish a culture in which students find relevancy and are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to succeed. In the learning communities of accomplished principals, diversity is celebrated as a strength and as a tool for learning and growing. Accomplished principals analyze and monitor classroom activities and assignments for cultural sensitivity and relevance. Accomplished principals respect elements of student culture that support and are relevant to the learning environment. For example, they recognize that students may use multiple forms of technology for building relationships, communicating, and learning. These principals encourage taking responsibility and provide opportunities for bridging the differences among students' culture, parents' culture, and staff members' culture for the betterment of the learning environment.

School principals are charged with leading diverse and equitable schools, while also increasing instructional leadership practices and teacher effectiveness, but have little time

available to focus on tackling biases that hinder positive student performance. Minkos et al. (2017) maintain that school leaders should be advocates for training and support for first-year teachers, largely due to pre-service teacher preparation programs providing training in curriculum and planning, while many teacher candidates are ill-equipped to meet the needs of minority students (Honig & Honsa, 2020; Voltz et al., 2003). Through increasing awareness, providing opportunities for open discussions, and ensuring a student-centered approach, school leaders can implement effective changes for students of color.

Leadership Principles

School leaders must understand the intersection of structural and relational inequities, race, and culture (Irby, 2018; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Rust, 2019). When school leaders stress the importance of relationship building, develop relationships through mentoring and communities of practice, and act as culturally responsive change agents, students' academic performance improves (Beachum, 2011; Honig & Honsa, 2020; Webb-Johnson, 2006). Furthermore, "enhancing students personal, social, and cultural development" (Gay, 2015, p. 124) involves "academic and non-academic successes" that are "evident inside and outside the classroom" (Fraise & Brooks, 2015, p. 15). Based upon research, Khalifa (2018) argues "if cultural responsiveness is present and sustainable in schools, it must be foremost and consistently promoted by school leaders" (p. 13).

Researchers also focus their studies on social constructivism and transformational leadership as important aspects of cultural responsiveness. These involve the attempt to "understand how people in a particular setting construct their reality and beliefs, and how their behaviors affect those with whom they interact" (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012, p. 178). Cooper (2009) studied African American principals in underserved communities in North Carolina. She

argues that transformative leaders gain an understanding of who their audience is, which are the students they serve. Mertens (2009) asserts that transformative leaders focus on the strength behind the community rather than deficit perspectives. Furthermore, school leaders challenge the status quo through shifting paradigms to favor cultural responsiveness.

Social Justice Leadership and CRL

Leadership for social justice and culturally responsive leadership are closely related. Social justice can be seen as a broad umbrella under which cultural responsiveness is an essential element. Reed and Swaminathan (2016) offer that "social justice leadership requires a leader to take actions to increase equitable practices and structures within schools" (p. 1103). In their study of the social justice literature, Hytten and Bettez (2011) describe five strands that help to characterize the meaning of social justice and its importance. They found many practical examples of social justice that challenges inequities in schools, however, they acknowledge that "it is hard to see how to translate examples from one place to the specific situations in which people find themselves, or how to create the momentum and support for such change in climates where there is not already a shared vision of working toward social justice" (p. 14).

Tackling issues of inequality is an essential component of social justice work. Several researchers acknowledge that educational leadership for social justice involves recognizing unequal resources and opportunities for marginalized groups and creating opportunities to eliminate inequalities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Rust, 2019). Some examples include "unequal student access to school-based resources, structural and relational inequities, racism, and low competency for handling racial conflict, and a culture of poor communication" (Irby, 2018, p. 703).

Themes that emerge throughout the literature on leadership for social justice include the need for caring relationships, cultural responsiveness, leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and change (Rust, 2019). At the same time, culturally responsive leaders must investigate resources and school programs through an equity lens. Reed and Swaminathan (2016) explain that true social justice leadership "does not focus on the student as the problem but focuses on the structures and services as the means to better address the needs of students" (p. 1102). Carpenter et al., (2017) argue that social justice leaders ensure equitable distribution of resources and allow marginalized groups to choose to fully participate in the decisions that affect them.

Researchers noted that the marginalization of certain populations in education, including students with disabilities and students of color, is one of the central reasons for incorporating social justice leadership in schools. Theoharis (2010) researched six school leaders and how they enact socially just practices in their schools. He found that the resistance from school staff to create more "just" and "equitable" schools was "enormous," "never ceasing," and "unbearable" (p. 339). However, the leaders he worked with were able to fight back against this resistance and continue to create more equitable opportunities for all students. While CRL is not easy, "often met with several challenges, leaders must remain steadfast to enact social justice" (Reed & Swaminathan, 2016, p. 1103).

Culturally Responsive Strategies in Educational Settings

Students who attend schools in urban settings have continued to be negatively impacted by inequalities that have led to increased concerns for school success. Brown (2007) and Griffin (2002) show how students' negative self-perceptions and low self-esteem can cause them to disidentify and leave school prematurely. On the other hand, positive school climates, teacher

awareness and understanding cultural influences, along with shared ideas between school leaders and staff, have a positive effect on student success (Schellenberg & Grothaus, 2009).

Heightened awareness and intentionality about the treatment of students of color can lessen problematic and stereotypical negative teacher perceptions. In addition, when school leaders openly acknowledge their own biases and create safe spaces for dialogue, they can counteract microaggressions (Minkos et al., 2017). DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2020) find recognizing one's flaws and (sub)conscious biases, while cultivating responsive assessments and instruction, are beneficial to diverse student groups.

School leaders should be race-conscious and willing to look at issues through multiple lenses, listening carefully to their marginalized students while trying to understand their experiences in schools. A positive, inclusive, and welcoming school climate is vital in keeping all individuals on the path to success. When leaders and teachers evaluate teaching strategies, stay focused on professional development, and make connections between the school and community, they are modeling "culturally relevant leadership that closes the gap between education rhetoric and reality" (Beachum, 2011, p. 34). Overall, the purpose of education is to provide a setting in which all students are provided a foundation to be successful in life.

Teaching Strategies

Being culturally responsive is more than teaching curriculum standards related to various cultures. School leaders have the authority to set the tone for how schools integrate cultural responsiveness. Honig and Honsa (2020) find that system-focused equity leadership involves tackling systemic barriers and is best achieved through ongoing practice by leaders in school settings. This practice includes increasing advocacy about issues of equity and diversity, while also engaging in innovative approaches to schooling (Lopez, 2015).

The need to evaluate the curriculum standards to include multicultural educational content is a challenge for many U.S. school leaders (Jacobson & Ylimaki, 2013). Gay (2002), Ladson-Billings (2000), and Morrison et al. (2008) suggest that "cultural scaffolding," which is using students' own culture and experiences, creates reciprocity in the classroom and the climate needed for marginalized students to thrive. When done well, students and teachers develop a partnership, while expanding their intellectual horizons (Gay, 2002).

Likewise, it is important for educators to highlight the achievements of various racial and ethnic groups. Typically, representation of diverse groups in the school curriculum, courses, and instructional material is lacking (Gay, 2013). As a matter of fact, Gay (2002) finds that teachers do not know enough about the significant contributions of ethnic groups in science, technology, engineering, math, and the social sciences. For this reason, the educators should revise the academic curriculum to respond to changes in culture that affect the school and the community it serves (Fraise & Brooks, 2015).

School and district leaders are needed to provide support and strategies for how to ensure that we educate students from marginalized groups and various cultural backgrounds well. Many school leaders are challenged with how to help children who are from diverse groups, while merging home and community cultures with school culture (Carpenter et al., 2017; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Rust, 2019).

Professional Development

To incorporate CRL in classroom settings, professional development (PD), along with support from school leaders contribute to improving school climates. Beachum (2011) recommends "continuous diversity based professional development as a means to raise the consciousness levels" of educators (p. 33). Honig and Honsa's (2020) goal in their research study

was to prepare current doctoral students, who work as school and district leaders, to be equity-focused on their approach to supporting Latinx and historically marginalized students. Over 3 years, participants worked with university advisors to identify a problem in their school/district, select a framework to address the issue, and develop a plan to support their diverse student body. Over the course of this multi-year project, participants deviated from promoting specific school interventions, such as curriculum changes, to providing teachers with real-world, ongoing professional development that set structures in place to support historically marginalized students.

Additional research stresses the importance of incorporating professional learning communities (PLCs) within schools. These communities provide a means for collaboration among teachers to prevent working in isolation while obtaining measurable goals. Reed and Swaminathan (2016) find that maintaining a "constant focus on learning" and providing access to "relevant data" (p. 1101) are important elements of successful PLCs. Furthermore, it is beneficial for policies and practices that support multicultural initiatives to be evaluated continuously and available to staff in a variety of formats (Minkos et al., 2017).

Providing opportunities for educators to participate in PD offerings also influences how they approach and respond to cultural differences (Voltz, 2003) while also advocating for curriculum changes (Dugan et al., 2012). Jacobson and Ylimaki (2013) maintain that many U.S. school leadership programs do not emphasize culturally responsive professional development, however some content standards include social justice and advocacy. Reevaluating school resources, developing leadership teams, and engaging in culturally responsive teaching must be consistently included in professional development (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Family and Community Engagement

When students become disengaged, their school progress can be negatively impacted and oftentimes it inhibits their ability to be more active in the school community. Culturally responsive leaders work continuously to ensure diverse students are represented in the curriculum and feel connected to the school (Lopez, 2015). Unifying communities and schools through shared decision-making, developing the school vision, and valuing indigenous cultural and social capital are strategies that promote responsive and inclusive school environments (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Minkos et al., 2017). School leaders making deliberate efforts to welcome families' input through surveys, class field trips, and volunteer opportunities builds camaraderie. It is crucial that school leaders are intentional in making connections between school cultures and students' out-of-school lives (Brown, 2007; Gay, 2013; Lopez, 2015).

There are several factors, such as work schedules and family commitments, which may hinder parents from attending school activities. Culturally responsive school leaders are creative in their attempts to increase opportunities for community involvement. In Lopez's (2015) interview and questionnaire-based research of the leadership practices of six self-identified culturally responsive school leaders working to increase attention to diversity in their schools, she provides an example of a leader who created a parent book club which included library books in various languages and invited parents into the school to read books with their children. DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2020) recognize that culturally responsive schools require meaningful parental involvement, while also requiring all educators to believe in students and capitalize on their assets.

Considering relationship building occurs beyond a typical school day, DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2020) find that there is a wide range of additional activities that promote positive

school culture and community engagement. School leaders and teachers develop meaningful relationships through home visits, supporting bilingual education, and providing referrals for families in need of community resources. Ultimately, attempts to connect schools with the community ideally result in an environment where families are treated with respect and it is more likely that student, faculty, staff, and parent interactions will be positive (Minkos et al., 2017; Morrison et al., 2008).

Examples of Culturally Responsive Leadership Programs

The unexpected impact of COVID-19 pushed school districts to swiftly find ways to educate students remotely. School districts in the U.S. received funding to purchase items to help keep teachers teaching. Several media outlets in North Carolina reported that schools purchased electronic devices for students. Initially, I believe school leaders thought that the biggest hurdle had been jumped when students had computers at home. Despite the quick distribution of computer devices and Wi-Fi hot spots, school districts still had low participation and engagement from some of the nation's most vulnerable communities. In my experience, we continue to struggle with connecting students back to the school community.

To address the needs of students of color, various school districts across the nation are seeking resources to implement anti-bias and equity initiatives. As I mentioned in chapter one, my research data collection activities included document analysis. To better understand the development of culturally responsive documents used in public schools, I reviewed three CRL programs: Harvard Reimagining Integration: Diverse and Equitable Schools Project (RIDES), The Leadership Academy, and the District Leadership Design Lab (DL2). I selected these three organizations based on their commitment to supporting current public-school leaders and their connection to universities that support the ongoing work of cultural responsiveness and equity.

Five and one half years ago, the Harvard University School of Education started an initiative, Harvard RIDES, that provides resources to schools in the form of equity surveys along with professional development. When districts complete these surveys, the results provide insight as to how participants view equality, inclusion, and support for historically marginalized students. Over the last 18 years, The Leadership Academy has focused its efforts on providing support to school principals who lead ethnically diverse schools in the northeast of the United States. Since 2014, The University of Washington has worked in conjunction with the District Leadership Design Lab (DL2) to help school districts support principals in successfully reaching district-wide equity goals.

Harvard Reimagining Integration: Diverse and Equitable Schools Project

To accomplish desired outcomes for equality and diversity, Harvard RIDES outlines four themes (ABCD's) and provides a Systemic Improvement Map for districts to use. The ABCD's and the Systemic Improvement Map are used as tools to coach school leaders in thinking deeply about their equity work and to highlight promising practices (Harvard RIDES, n.d.). The statements below represent the ABCD's of Harvard RIDES:

1. Academics: All students have strong academic preparation, capitalizing on and connecting to students of all backgrounds, with high levels of knowledge and skills.
2. Belonging: All students have a strong sense and appreciation of their own culture and heritage, as well as of those of their diverse classmates.
3. Commitment to dismantling racism and oppression: All students understand the role that institutional racism and other forms of oppression play in our society and have the skills, vision, and courage to dismantle them.

4. Diversity: All students appreciate and value different perspectives, thoughts, and people and have friendships and collaborative working relationships with students and adults from different racial and economic backgrounds.

The Systemic Improvement Map includes seven distinct categories: Students, Teachers, Curriculum, Leadership, Family and Community Partnerships, Systems and Structures, and Culture. The core of the seven categories is the work that happens within the classroom setting. School leaders must be "committed," "courageous", and "capable" of challenging systems that continue to have a negative impact on students of color. Through school partnerships with Harvard RIDES and ongoing action-oriented resources, school leaders are equipped to provide better educational outcomes for all students (Harvard RIDES, n.d.).

The Leadership Academy

The Leadership Academy (TLA) was founded in New York City in 2003 and has trained approximately 600 school leaders (mostly women of color) through their Aspiring Principals Program. Since then, they have expanded to include school districts and leaders who want to break barriers that impede students of color from being successful in schools. Through culturally responsive leadership practices, they have focused their work using the following mission and vision statement as a guide (Leadership Academy, 2021):

Vision: We envision a nation where every school and school system is intentionally built to ensure children of every race, ethnicity, language, and other identity characteristics have what they need to achieve academic, social, and emotional success.

Mission: We build the capacity of educational leaders at every level of the system to disrupt systemic inequities and create the conditions necessary for all students to thrive.

The Leadership Academy prepares school leaders for equity work through three main components: school system equity self-assessments, equity audits, and strategic equity planning. They encourage school leaders to review routine procedures and district policies that play an integral role in CRL implementation. Taking a closer look at various factors of how school leaders' approach CRL, Figure 3 identifies eight features that are important to leading change based on The Leadership Academy's framework.

Figure 3. The Leadership Academy Framework
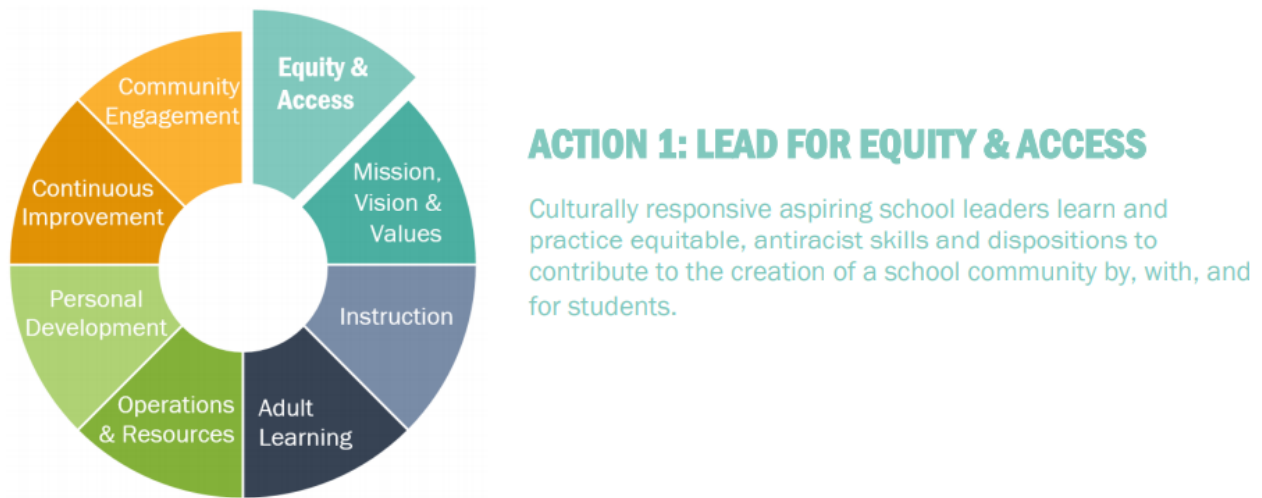
District Leadership Design Lab

To best serve students who are historically marginalized, the District Leadership Design Lab (DL2), located in Seattle Washington at the University of Washington, focuses their work on increasing district central office leaders' capacity to incorporate equity work while supporting school principals. Researchers who work in DL2 identify their focus for equitable district initiatives as (2012):

Strengths-based: We study central offices where leaders are trying to do what research and experience suggest is the right work to realize educational equity. We aim not to evaluate but to understand what they are doing, what results they achieve, and what

conditions help or hinder their efforts. With this strengths-based approach, we aim to

shine new light on the promises and challenges of central office leadership.

Systems Focused: Research shows that the success of any one central office

function–be it Teaching and Learning, Principal Supervision, Human Resources,

or Operations–depends on aligned changes across the school system. We seek to

uncover these interdependencies and identify what specific practices and systems

within and across each of these functions we can associate with improved support

for equitable learning.

For and with practitioners: We use design-based research methods adapted to

systems leadership settings to partner with practitioners to identify research

questions of scholarly importance and high relevance to educational leaders;

develop strategies to improve leadership practices and systems in real time; and

learn from the process.

Providing resources to educational leaders to evaluate "policy-making assessments,

teaching materials, and instructional engagement" (Gay, 2015, p. 124) coupled with regularly

assessing "teachers beliefs about ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity" (Ladson-Billings, 2018, p.

126) are foundational to supporting students of color. The District Leadership Design Lab and

The Leadership Academy emphasize the role of school leaders in policy development, while all

three programs focus on the importance of equality in schools. Fraise and Brooks (2015) remind

us that it is important for the school community to take a collective approach in developing new

strategies and processes to improve student outcomes through culturally relevant practices.

Chapter Summary

As I began to read more about culturally responsive leadership, it became evident that there is much work to be done still in schools in translating theory into practice. As a woman of color with personal experiences of racial inequities in school settings, I have experienced first-hand how discussions of cultural responsiveness can move individuals from their comfort zones, resulting in resistance and hesitation that is associated with embracing change (Brown, 2007; Gay, 2013; Lopez, 2015). My review of the research on cultural responsiveness definitely increased my knowledge of cultural awareness. However, much of the literature is about culturally responsive leadership in theory; there is far less research that describes how school principals enact CRL in their everyday practice while leading culturally responsive schools.

A common theme from my literature review is that equity is the foundation for culturally responsive leadership. Rather than being single focused in believing we have one issue to overcome in creating equitable schools, we must recognize there are many moving parts which "cannot be fully understood via a single lens like gender, race, or class alone" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 175). Culturally responsive leadership also requires team-centered approaches to restructuring curriculum, increasing family and student engagement, teacher support, and professional development.

We may rightly ask, "What does cultural responsiveness look like when it is carried out?" "How do culturally responsive leaders measure the success of culturally responsive school initiatives?" and "How do culturally responsive leaders become change agents who continuously seek improvements to serve historically marginalized students?" These are questions that I pose in my study. In my next chapter, I describe in detail my research questions, data collection methods, and the design of my qualitative research study.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

As I stated in chapter one, the purposes of my study are to understand how educational leaders define and enact culturally responsive leadership and identify the typical challenges and successes they experienced engaging in CRL in practice. In this chapter, I describe in detail the methods I used to conduct this study. I start by discussing a pilot study I conducted as I was narrowing down the contours of my study. I focus on what I learned from that pilot that helped me shape my dissertation study. I then discuss basic qualitative research as a research methodology, my sample population, data collection methods, data analysis, positionality, trustworthiness, and limitations.

Pilot Study

To help me better understand practices of culturally responsive leaders in school settings, I conducted a two-part, small-scale pilot study involving the observation of a CRL webinar and an interview with a school leader who centers cultural responsiveness in her work. I observed a webinar led by The Leadership Academy titled "Culturally Responsive Leadership K-12 Schools #HowILeadfor Equity." The presenters in this webinar discussed their journeys to become culturally responsive leaders and ways they are leading in their current roles. I revisited the recorded webinar and took detailed notes. Considering the themes that emerged from the panelists, which included a focus on educational equity and the importance of school leaders' lived experiences as they relate to their CRL advocacy, I developed some additional interview questions for my research participants to add to those that I had already created. These additional questions ideally could help participants to be as open and honest about their culturally responsive practices as possible.

Throughout the webinar there were discussion topics that directly support the analysis of the research that I described throughout my literature review chapter. The presenters discussed disparities among historically marginalized students that include the lack of access to resources, higher suspension rates, underrepresentation of minorities in advanced classes, and school districts lack of community/family inclusion in policy and practice. I noticed that based on data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, the same areas are concerning in local schools. I was saddened to hear that these issues are not isolated problems, however, the webinar increased my desire to learn more about CRL.

Observation

The webinar started with each panelist introducing him or herself. I was immediately drawn to each participant's background stories. Two presenters identified themselves as Latinx, using the terms "mi Familia" and "Chicana" to make connections to their culture. While listening to them, I reflected on my upbringing as a Black person in the south and how my relatives and I define our culture. For me, proudly acknowledging who I am contributes to my thoughts of self-worth and my place in society.

In response to the challenges historically marginalized students are facing during the global pandemic and remote learning obstacles, The Leadership Academy developed a document titled *The Culturally Responsive Remote Learning Observation Guide.* The guide was referred to often throughout the webinar and the panelists encouraged listeners to reference this guide in their work.

Describing the challenges of CRL during a pandemic, first, the presenters noted curriculum changes as crucial to dismantling inequities in schools. The presenters also referred to the low number of students of color in advanced classes compared to their White peers. This is

consistent with Mansfield's (2016) research on Academically and Intellectually Gifted programs. She identified problems with unbalanced and biased recommendations for advanced course placement and AIG labels, arguing that placement methods must be re-examined for them to be equitable and inclusive.

Secondly, the panel spoke often about beliefs, values, and the importance of educators knowing themselves as a culturally responsive leader. One of the presenters mentioned that cultural responsiveness requires inner work and may become political at times. In my experience, cultural responsiveness is not an easy or surface level topic. As I mentioned in my literature review, many educational leaders experience resistance from school staff when they try to engage in the discussion around the topics of race, equity, and culture. I became curious about how my participants have navigated political challenges and resistance, adding probes to my developing interview guides.

Lastly, the presenters stressed the importance of teamwork, time for implementation of CRL, and self-care as necessary components to support culturally responsive leaders. They argued that with any uncharted territory, there will be uncertainties and resistance. Ultimately, however, I left the webinar empowered to dig more deeply into research on CRL. It made me confident that this was my area of research interest. This was further confirmed when I conducted an interview with a school leader who works to be culturally responsive.

Interview

I interviewed a school leader who I refer to as Tasha Holly. I reached out to Ms. Holly as a pilot research participant because of her background in cultural responsiveness and because of the concerns her school district has struggled with regarding racial segregation. The school district where she works has yet to fully address the aftermath of a desegregation lawsuit that

originated in the 1960s. Ms. Holly has been a school administrator for less than 5 years. She is an African American woman in her fifties who leads a school with around 50 staff members. She has worked in the same school district for her entire teaching and administrative career.

I conducted the interview virtually via google chat, due to the impact of COVID-19 which has limited face-to-face meetings. Ms. Holly provided verbal consent for me to record the interview before I began. I started by telling Ms. Holly about the purpose of my research, which was to study culturally responsive leadership in educational settings. I mentioned that participation was voluntary, I would be using her interview as part of my pilot study, while working to identify good interview questions, and narrow the scope of my research.

Prior to the interview, I researched the school district to become familiar with initiatives they are using to support diverse student populations. I examined archived school board meeting minutes that list a few goals of their equity task force. Two programs that were in the initial phases of implementation were Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) and Restorative Practices. Surprisingly, both programs are not offered district wide. Having prior knowledge of them, I was interested in Ms. Holly's perspective of how culturally responsive leadership supports these two programs. Hearing her responses and practicing my interview protocol helped me to narrow the contours of this dissertation study and to become a more confident researcher.

Modifications Based on the Pilot Study

Conducting the pilot observation and interview helped me to refine my data collection methods. Through conducting the pilot interview, I gained a better understanding of the significance of district wide programs and the challenges in leading diverse schools. As a result, I added additional questions to my interview guide to help me to understand how school

principals recognize the need for culturally responsive leadership in their schools and how they assess their impact.

Furthermore, I realized the need to include document analysis in my study. I appreciated that Ms. Holly was open and honest with me about her interactions with students of different ethnic groups; however, when I asked Ms. Holly about current initiatives and policies within her district that support culturally responsive leadership, she did not mention either of the programs (ACES or Restorative Practices), nor did she mention the equity task force. I found this surprising. I wondered if I asked about her sharing documents related to her work, if I would have learned more about these programs. After learning more about CRL through the webinar, and interviewing an educational leader, I created some additional interview questions and added document analysis to my data collection methods.

Research Questions

My research study was guided by three questions:

1. How do educational leaders define and enact culturally responsive leadership in their schools?

2. What challenges do school leaders face in implementing culturally responsive practices and how do they navigate these challenges?

3. What successes have school leaders experienced and how do they assess the impact of their culturally responsive leadership?

Methodology

I conducted a basic qualitative study using interviews and document analysis. Qualitative research is driven by individual interest in a topic and aimed at creating a rich, thick description of a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). While document analysis supports researchers in

developing deep understanding of the context in which people work (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), this data collection method has been "underused in qualitative studies" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 180). For my study, I decided on a combination of interviews and document analysis. Documents analyzed from public websites provided a nice complement to the descriptions the principals provided about their practices.

A qualitative methodology best suited my study because I wanted to understand how educational leaders define their work and experiences as culturally responsive leaders. It was also important that I reflected on my own experiences as they influenced how I made sense of the data I collected. Patton (2015) reminds qualitative researchers about how their positionality impacts their research, writing that "reflection on how your data collection and interpretation are affected by who you are, what's going on in your life, what you care about, how you view the world, and how you've chosen to study what interest you are a part of qualitative methodology" (p. 40).

Sample Population

I interviewed eight school principals who attempt to center cultural responsiveness in their practice. These principals all work in Christmas County school district, a diverse, primarily rural community located just outside of a major urban city in North Carolina. Criteria for participation included job title and location, superintendent nomination, as well as an interest in discussing the connection between minority student achievement and culturally responsive education. Participants had to be a current school principal located in North Carolina. Solely focusing on school principals helped me to analyze data more effectively, particularly in terms of the responsibilities of school leaders. I gathered my initial list of research participants based on recommendations from the superintendent of the district in which I conducted this study; she

made the recommendations based on her experience and interactions with each of the principals and their diverse student body. To increase the number of participants for this study, I contacted additional principals in Christmas County and provided a brief email introducing myself, which also helped to gauge their interests in the research study.

In conjunction with the interviews, I reviewed school district websites, school vision and mission statements, the North Carolina School Report Card data, and the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey for the schools where each of the principals I selected worked. I also asked participants to provide any documents that help illustrate cultural responsiveness. This information gave me insight into school and district level culturally responsive initiatives.

Data Collection

I used two data collection methods: interviews and document analysis. At the start of my research, most schools were slowly reopening after providing virtual instruction during the pandemic. In order to be allowed to interview participants face-to-face, I adhered to COVID-19 protocols which included wearing face masks and socially distancing.

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight principals who center culturally responsive leadership in their work. I asked for permission from the participants to record interviews, which I then transcribed for analysis using an online platform. I began the interviews by collecting some background demographic information, including age, years of experience, race, gender, and current position. I then asked about the educational background and experiences of each participant. Next, I asked questions about how they define and practice culturally responsive leadership.

After learning about their understanding of CRL, I explored the challenges they face and their successes with CRL implementation. I wanted to know how school leaders assess the impact of their efforts and their successes as culturally responsive leaders. The interview questions are listed below:

1. How many years have you been in a school leadership position?

2. What is your age range? 20s? 30s? 40s? 50s? 60s and up?

3. What race do you identify with?

4. What gender do you identify with?

5. What is your educational background (college major/degree)?

6. Describe your previous job title (classroom teacher, school counselor, etc.) before becoming a school administrator?

7. How long did you serve in that position?

8. Why did you choose to become a school principal?

9. What is your definition of culturally responsive leadership? What comes to mind?

10. Tell me how your experiences or personal beliefs affect you (your cultural responsiveness) as a culturally responsive leader? And/or lead you to embrace this approach?

11. How do/would you begin to center cultural responsiveness in your work?

CRL in practice:

12. The impact of COVID-19 pushed us into virtual learning: Is there anything that affected your outlook on how we support/respond to ethnically diverse student needs?

13. How do you assess the needs of diverse students in your school?

14. How do you communicate those needs to your school staff? Discuss some examples of what this looks like in your school.

15. How do you incorporate CRL in your everyday practice?

16. How do you engage with students and families from diverse backgrounds and cultures?

17. Can you share any evidence of CRL in practice? Does your school have culturally responsive leadership policies/initiatives? If not, do you think there is a need for CRL policies/initiatives?

18. What tools do you use to measure the success of CRL policy/initiatives/practices?

19. What supports are needed for school leaders to establish CRL practices?

20. Who, if anyone, is responsible for making sure CRL policies/initiatives are implemented?

Challenges and Successes:

21. What impacts do you think CRL has had on student achievement?

22. What are some of the challenges in leading CRL in your school?

23. What are some of the successes of cultural responsiveness in your school?

24. How did you become a change agent who continuously seeks improvements to serve ethnically diverse students?

Document Analysis:

25. Do you have any documents that you can share that helps to illustrate your school's commitment to cultural responsiveness?

After each interview, I allowed participants to share any additional information that they thought might be relevant to my study and to ask me any questions. The interviews each took

between 60 and 90 minutes. My participants were open and honest with me about their individual lived experiences and the challenges in leading diverse student populations. I shared their interview transcripts with them and encouraged them to elaborate on anything in the transcript or to follow up with more information. Having a background as a former school counselor was beneficial during participant debriefing.

To protect the identity of participants, I used pseudonyms to identify them and their schools. I also followed the ethical principles of the Institutional Review Board, which include respect, beneficence, and justice (Mertens, 2009). I introduce each of the participants in more detail in the following chapter.

According to Taylor-Power and Renner (2003), qualitative data collection and analysis requires creativity, discipline, and a systematic approach. I devoted time relistening to the recordings and taking substantive notes while coding for key ideas and themes. The interviews gave insight into each participant's culturally responsive leadership advocacy and practices.

Document Analysis

To assess the impact of culturally responsive leadership, my second data collection method was document analysis. According to Bowen (2009), documents relevant to research can include but are not limited to "advertisements, agendas, attendance registers, minutes of meetings, manuals, event programs, letters, newspapers, press releases, program proposals, survey data, and various public records" (pp. 27–28). I reviewed school district websites, school board policies, strategic plans, and school mission and vision statements for evidence of culturally responsive practices. I also asked each principal for copies of any additional materials that they thought were relevant to their efforts to be culturally responsive in their schools.

School improvement plans (SIP) are a resource that can be easily located on school websites. School principals are required to develop a school improvement team and meet with them two times a month. School improvement team members are selected through anonymous voting; each school staff member is provided a voting ballot. Once the team is established, they create a SIP that represents the school's mission and vision, in addition to outlining goals to meet student needs. For my research study, I reviewed these plans as one piece of evidence that could help me to understand if/how culturally responsive school principals outline goals to support culturally responsive school environments. Unfortunately, none of the principals in this study included language in their SIP's that supported or described culturally responsive leadership practices.

I also asked interview participants to share any documents that they thought helped to illustrate school and district level commitment to cultural responsiveness. Table 2 lists documents that I explored from public websites:

Table 2. Document Analysis to Support Interview Questions

Questions	Potential Documents to Analyze
1. Does your school district have culturally responsive leadership policies/initiatives? If not, do you think there is a need for CRL policies/initiatives?	District strategic plans Mission and vision statements Board Policies School Improvement Plans
2. What tools are used or should be used to measure the success of CRL policies/initiatives?	North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Surveys North Carolina School Report Cards
3. Do CRL policies/initiatives have a positive effect, minimal effect, or no effect at all on student achievement? How do you know?	Discipline Data Graduation Rates Student Enrollment in Advanced Courses by race and ethnicity Placement in Special Programs (AIG, IEP, etc.)

Data Analysis

I recorded, transcribed (using a transcription service for the initial transcription; I listened again and updated the transcript for accuracy), and analyzed interview data for themes and patterns. For example, school principals' years of experience, their current school level (elementary, middle, or high school), the support or resistance from school staff, in addition to their attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives, were all contributors to various themes across each participant's responses. Document analysis of each school's academic performance, graduation rates, federal funding (Title I schools), school demographics, and district policies supported my analysis of the initiatives participants discussed in their interviews.

Researcher Positionality

I am an African American woman and I have been an educator for over 15 years. I am also a mother of two boys and a girl; all three identify as African American. Having grown up in the Southeastern United States, I have experienced racial tensions and academic inequalities during my K-12 years in public school settings. My lived experiences from my own childhood, as well some negative interactions supporting my children in schools, increased my desire to learn about culturally responsive school leadership.

I started this research journey as a first-year assistant principal. When thinking about selecting participants, the question that came to mind is "Who will I interview?" At the start of my dissertation process, I was offered the opportunity to conduct focus groups with an established school district equity team for my research. After I began to develop my literature review and draft my proposal, I was informed that this group would no longer be available to me. In fact, I was told "they are simply not ready to discuss this topic." I was truly devastated and confused. In my opinion, a major part of the work school administrators perform should address

disparities among students in K-12 settings; it is crucial in their development as contributing members of society. For this reason, I could not understand why a team of educational leaders would not be willing to participate, especially as I am trying to understand challenges as well as successes. Despite this setback, I vowed to continue with the topic of CRL.

My background as a former school counselor helped me to remain open-minded, unbiased, and a good listener. I am aware that discussions of social justice and equity often push faculty and students outside of their comfort zones (Mansfield & Newcomb, 2015). However, there is a need to have difficult conversations centered on oppression, exclusion, marginalization, and injustice in order to ensure all students are successful in schools. In addition, culturally responsive leaders must discuss important topics that adversely affect African American boys and girls, as well as Latino boys (Irby, 2018; Mansfield, 2015).

Trustworthiness

I used three key strategies to ensure trustworthiness: member checking, multiple data sources, and reflexivity. Mertler (2020) explains that member checking increases the rigor of qualitative research. I gave participants the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and through email communication, I followed-up with them to see if they had any feedback. The principals did not provide any feedback, however, during our debriefing conversations they reiterated the importance of supporting their diverse student populations. As a result, one principal was motivated to meet with her staff to review discipline data during their next whole-group meeting. It is important to note that in qualitative studies, Merriam & Tisdell (2015) argue that researchers should acknowledge their "biases and assumptions" (p. 249). To help me capture my initial thoughts about their responses and observations I made during the interviews, I also kept a journal which I referred to as I listened to the interview recordings.

All the participants were thankful for the opportunity to participate in my study and one principal sent additional documents that I later analyzed. I had two methods of data collection – interviews and document analyses. Bowen (2009) notes that "by examining information collected through different methods the researchers can corroborate findings across data sets and reduce the impact of potential biases that exist in a single study" (p. 28).

Limitations

The major limitation to this study is the scope. My qualitative research study included eight principals who work in North Carolina; their experiences are not representative of all principals. Furthermore, the impact of COVID-19 has placed limitations on face-to-face gatherings along with revisions to school health and safety guidelines. This meant I could not visit them in their schools or do any observations that might go along with their interview responses. The challenges of the global pandemic also shifted the priorities of many principals away from cultural responsiveness and towards keeping students safe and engaged while navigating disruptions to face-to-face learning.

The other limitation to this study is that I based participant selection on superintendent nomination and self-report of cultural responsiveness. My participants all saw themselves as culturally responsive leaders, at least on some level. However, some of the struggled to define what this meant or to describe in detail how they translated their understanding of CRL into practice. Based upon my interviews, I realized that some were more advanced on the CRL journeys than others, and some may not have been good representatives of this orientation toward leadership, despite their self-assessment. That is, being a culturally responsive leader was more of an aspirational than a lived identity.

Summary

In this chapter, I described my pilot study, methodology, population, and data collection methods. In the next chapter, I first introduce my research participants and then I use my research questions as a guide to analyze the findings from the data I collected. To identify my findings, I examined the interview responses for similarities and differences in describing and enacting cultural responsiveness, as well as in depth information about how this theory is translated into specific policies and practices in schools. I also reviewed school policies, public documents, and school-wide programs/initiatives to explore how they support school principals culturally responsive practices. Finally, I discuss the themes that emerged as a result of the interviews and documents analyzed.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I share my research findings from interviews with eight school principals in Christmas County School district which is in a rural community in the Southeastern part of the United States. I start with descriptions of the research participants, including general demographic and educational background information. I then share themes that cut across their experiences of working to integrate cultural responsiveness into their leadership and their schools.

To identify key topics, I organize the remaining parts of the chapter into three categories using the results from the interview transcripts and documents I analyzed from public websites. First, I describe how critical self-reflection impacts their definitions of culturally responsive leadership. Next, I will discuss how they work to develop culturally responsive teachers. Then, I explain the impact of culturally responsive leadership on inclusive school environments.

Participant Introductions

I asked participants to discuss their educational background and the path each of them took to become school leaders. Seven of the eight school leaders began their school administrator positions as assistant principals within Christmas County School district. Seven identify themselves as females and one identifies as a male. Three participants identify as white and the remaining five identify as Black/African American. I interviewed school principals from all three levels: three of the participants are elementary school principals, three are middle school principals, and the remaining two are high school principals. I collected additional data about their educational license from public websites. Table 3 lists the pseudonyms I used for each participant, the level each of them lead, their gender, race, and licensure areas.

Table 3. School Principal Demographics and Licensure Information

Principal	Level	Gender	Race	Licensure	Principal Experience
Alpha	High School	F	Black	School Administrator: Principal	10 years
Kim	High School	F	White	School Administrator: Principal	12 years
Barney	Middle School	M	White	Elementary Education (K-6) School Administrator: Principal	5 years
Brenda	Middle School	F	White	Language Arts 6-9 English 9-12 Reading K-12 School Administrator: Principal	1 ½ years
Kendall	Middle School	F	Black	Behaviorally and Emotionally Disabled K-12 Exceptional Children Program Administrator School Administrator: Principal	3 years
Erica	Elementary School	F	Black	School Administrator: Principal Elementary Education (K-6) Academically or Intellectually Gifted Mathematics 9-12 Mathematics 6-9	2 years
Heaven	Elementary School	F	Black	Elementary Education (K-6) Language Arts (6-9) English (9-12) School Administrator: Principal School Administrator: Superintendent	11 years

Principal	Level	Gender	Race	Licensure	Principal Experience
Tracy	Elementary School	F	Black	Elementary Education (K-6) School Administrator: Principal	6 years

Principal Alpha

Alpha is a Black female in her forties. She is a high school principal with 10 years of experience. During her undergraduate studies, she attended a Historically Black College and majored in English communication with plans to become a lawyer. Prior to graduation, Alpha discovered an educational program called Teach for America and chose to pursue this opportunity. After receiving initial training, she began teaching at a Title I school that was labeled as low performing. After seeing an increase in students' academic success, she realized her passion for education. Therefore, she remained at that school beyond her 2-year commitment while working to meet the requirements to become a certified teacher. After four years there, Alpha began to work for the Teach for America corporate office and began to collaborate with school principals daily. She recalled working with some great administrators and some who she believed were ineffective. As a result, she made the decision to return to college and get a master's degree in school administration. Alpha notes, "during this non-traditional route, I found my calling, realized my purpose for life, and increased my love for education."

Principal Kim

Kim has been a school principal for a total of 12 years and a principal in Christmas County Schools for 3 years. She is a White female in her 50s. Kim took the traditional route to the profession and majored in business education as an undergraduate student. Once she began teaching, she completed the requirements to become a Nationally Certified Teacher. Kim

originally had no plans to become a school administrator. In fact, she taught business classes for 19 years and was satisfied with her career choice. It was her former principal who convinced her to pursue principal licensure. We both laughed when Kim said, "I agreed to do it [get the degree] for the master's pay, but I'm never going to do this job." After more convincing, Kim decided to pursue a school administrator position and now she happily tells people "I found my dream job and I love it."

Principal Barney

Barney is in his fifth year as a school principal. He identifies as a white male in his late forties. Like Principal Alpha, he had planned to become a lawyer and studied history as an undergraduate student. During his senior year, he worked at a women's shelter as the daycare teacher. It was at this time that Barney discovered how rewarding it is to work with children. He later obtained a teaching license, moved to the southeast, and began his teaching career in an elementary school. Barney has experience as a special education teacher and Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS) coach. Barney's love for the curriculum opened the door for a position as the curriculum resource teacher. That is when he was given the opportunity to carry out leadership tasks and responsibilities. As Barney looked towards the ceiling he said, "I never wanted to be a principal. My school was going through changes and with my added responsibilities, becoming a school administrator was the next natural step." He went on to say, "when you get into administration, sometimes the curriculum stuff goes sideways; you become more of a manager than you do an educational leader."

Principal Brenda

Brenda identifies as a white female in her early 50s. She enrolled in college after working as a grocery clerk for many years. Her undergraduate degree is in English education. Brenda

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worked in residential facilities with teenagers for 12 years and later became a classroom teacher and literacy coach. As a classroom teacher, Brenda felt that she was surrounded by "negative" and "burned out" teachers. Instead of complaining, she became more active in her school and began to collaborate closely with school administrators. Encouraged by her former principal, Brenda applied and was accepted into a principal fellow's program. She completed that program and is now currently working on her educational specialist degree at a nearby university.

Principal Kendall

Kendall has been a school principal in Christmas County since the start of the 2018 school year. She identifies as a Black female in her forties. Kendall's undergraduate degree is in psychology; given her study in this area, she did not take the traditional route to become a certified teacher. Soon after graduation, giving back to her community became a priority and with that passion to serve, Kendall returned to school and obtained a Master of Arts in Teaching with a focus in special education. After teaching for a few years, Kendall was accepted into a principal fellow's program where she received a second master's degree in school administration. It was important to her to show students in her hometown that someone who looks like them can achieve educational success. Kendall continued to pursue higher education and has since graduated with a Doctor of Education degree.

Principal Erica

Erica has been a school principal since 2019; she identifies as a black female between 40 to 50 years old. Her undergraduate degree is in math, and without having an educator license, Erica was hired as a lateral entry teacher. To become a certified teacher, Erica completed courses in middle grades math education in addition to Academically Intellectually Gifted (AIG) certification coursework. She credits her classroom success to her abilities to differentiate to

meet the needs of all students. Erica wanted to "make a greater impact" through becoming a school principal. Erica finds that "it's not just about the title, it's about making the entire school her classroom."

Principal Heaven

Heaven identifies as a Black female in her early fifties. She always dreamed of becoming a teacher. After high school graduation, Heaven attended a local college and majored in English education. She has taught at various middle and high schools throughout the state. As a middle school English teacher, Heaven recalled seeing "bad teachers, people who did not think it was important to build relationships with students." As a result, she wanted to be in a role where she could make an even greater difference in the lives of students. Heaven eventually resigned from her position as a classroom teacher and accepted a role as an education director. She provided professional development at different schools. Even though she enjoyed this role, she believed there was a need for great school leaders. Therefore, Heaven returned to teaching and then enrolled in a Master of Education program in School Administration. She continued her studies and later graduated with a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree in Educational Leadership.

Principal Tracy

Tracy has over 20 years of experience as an educator at the same school within Christmas County. She is in her mid-40s and identifies as a Black female. Like Heaven, Tracy knew she wanted to focus her career on teaching. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education. After teaching third- and fifth-grade students for 8 years, Tracy transitioned to an instructional coach position. It was not until her former principal encouraged her to attend a series of workshops titled Growing Future Leaders, that she became interested in becoming a

school administrator. Through that experience, Tracy's passion for leadership flourished. She later enrolled in a local university and received a master's degree in educational leadership.

Themes

As I discussed in chapter two, Khalifa et al. (2016) outline four distinct behaviors of culturally responsive school leaders. These are critical self-reflection, developing culturally responsive teachers, creating inclusive school environments, and engaging the community. Using these leadership behaviors as my theoretical framework, in the following sections I describe how culturally responsive educational leaders move from theory into practice. I organized the data by coding each research participant's responses and identifying key points. From there, I grouped the codes into several areas that aligned with Khalifa et al.'s (2016) description of culturally responsive leadership. As I began to identify processes in leading in culturally responsive ways, it became evident that culturally responsive leadership is an emergent and flexible practice that entails critically self-reflecting, developing culturally responsive teachers, and creating inclusive environments. I explore each of these issues in the sections that follow.

Critical Self-Reflection

While most of the participants did not start their careers with the goal of becoming school principals, they were influenced by their school environments to pursue leadership roles. As they spoke about how they have come to embrace culturally responsive leadership, their individual experiences played a role in their choice to become teachers, which eventually lead to becoming school principals.

Gardiner and Enomoto (2006) conducted a cross-case analysis with six school principals in an urban school district that was becoming more culturally and ethnically diverse. They found that "when school principals examine their own ethnic background, traditions, and values" (p.

580) they are more likely to be aware and responsive to their diverse student needs. Considering that my research participants do not all self-identify as culturally responsive leaders but are leading diverse schools and were identified by their superintendent as culturally responsive, "impactful critical self-reflection that involves personal reflections" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 63) is important to understanding how principals meet the needs of their ethnically diverse student populations. In the following sections, I describe how self-reflection of their individual lived experiences influenced their definitions of cultural responsiveness.

Lived Experiences

Six of the principal's self-reflections about how they came to be educational leaders committed to social and racial justice started with an explanation of events that they faced as K-12 students and their family dynamics. For example, in response to a question about how their experiences or personal beliefs affect them as a culturally responsive leader and/or lead them to embrace this approach, Principal Kim smiled and said, "my family is diverse, we have mixed-marriages on both sides, I have raised my children to be proud of diversity." Similarly, Principal Brenda shared that she has two adopted siblings, one Black and one Hispanic, as well as four White siblings. She referred to her family as a rainbow with many obstacles such as poverty, abuse, and neglect.

Principal Erica had support from her parents and a stable home environment, however there were financial obstacles; in our interview she discussed a "lack of the finer things" while she was growing up. Reflecting on her own family struggles, she felt that her personal obstacles made her more compassionate towards students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Principal Heaven and Principal Tracy recalled the lack of diversity in their former schools; often they were the only students of color in their classrooms. At times, the feeling of isolation resulted in

Principal Tracy "acting out" and caused Principal Heaven to be "looked over" for advanced

placement opportunities. Given the circumstances, Principal Heaven credits her culturally

responsive leadership (CRL) approach to making sure students are appropriately placed in

academic courses. In her experience, negative "perceptions about students and cultures will stop

them [teachers] from really serving them [students] the best way possible."

Principal Alpha's reflection on what lead her to becoming a culturally responsive

principal centered around life-changing ordeals as a young adult; she credits her CRL approach

to being resilient and offering grace to students. She noted, "I want my students to know how to

pick up the pieces if they are faced with a tragedy." To my surprise, Principal Barney and

Principal Kendall were slightly more reserved and did not share information about how their

lived experiences influenced how they lead in culturally responsive ways.

Participants Definitions of Cultural Responsiveness

How school principals define culturally responsive leadership is important to

understanding their views about the challenges that historically marginalized students encounter.

When I asked Principal Kim to define culturally responsive leadership she said, "it's not just

about race but also gender and the socioeconomic aspect. You can be one race but have many

cultures within that race." Based on the latest demographic data collected in February 2020,

Principal Kim's school consists of 50.3% male, 49.7% female, 33.7% Black, 20.5% Hispanic,

41.7% White, and 2.9% of students who identify as one or more races. To keep CRL as a core

practice, she continuously asks herself "Am I meeting the needs of my diverse student body?"

Principal Erica shared that "sometimes I feel as though I have three different schools

within this one school because we are getting more diverse socioeconomically, and with ethnic

backgrounds." State report card data shows that Principal Erica's school has over 70% of

students who are considered economically disadvantaged which includes 40.6% Black, 21.3% Hispanic, 27.3% White, and 10% of students who identify as more than one racial background. Based on the demographics of her students, Principal Erica noted that she is intentional in recognizing her student's cultural backgrounds and experiences. She understands that one pedagogical strategy may work with a particular group of students but have a different impact on a separate group.

Principal Barney and Principal Kendall's definitions of cultural responsiveness focused on having structures in place to help teachers become aware of the needs of historically marginalized students. Principal Barney strives to promote a shared vision and recognizes how his teacher's backgrounds and "baggage" affect the culture of the school. Similarly, Principal Kendall's approach in centering cultural responsiveness involves helping to improve teacher's perceptions of diverse students, specifically Black males. She believes that it is important to promote fair decision making and increase staff awareness of family dynamics, such as financial stresses and social class, and how they can impact student's classroom performances. Even though Principal Barney and Principal Kendall explained the importance of addressing these factors with teachers, I did not notice language related to culturally responsive approaches or practices in their school's mission and vision statements.

Principal Brenda sees the definition of cultural responsiveness as what we [educators] should be doing anyway. She explained,

> It is a very vague term for what we can do, right? People will usually say something like. "Oh, I teach books from other cultures." I feel like culturally responsive education is so much more than that, but it is not something that is so difficult. It is nothing that you need a degree in.

Principal Heaven and Principal Alpha add to the definition of CRL, suggesting it entailed understanding the background of students and making connections with them however they identify in terms of their race, sex, and gender identification. Principal Alpha stated that "we [school leaders] must be fully aware of our surroundings and make a conscious effort to not just think of one group of people, but everyone." Principal Tracy suggested that we address students' academic and nonacademic needs when they walk into our schools.

Each principal's firsthand experiences contributed to their definitions of cultural responsiveness, but Gooden and Dantley (2012) maintain that "self-reflection without transformative action is useless" (p. 242). Therefore, I used their self-reflections as a tool to examine how they explained the lens in which they view the needs of their diverse student populations. One consistent theme in their interview responses was that addressing the topics of socioeconomic needs, as well as race and gender, are essential in tackling the challenges students of color face in K-12 settings.

Developing Culturally Responsive Teachers

The ability to create collaborative and culturally informed school environments helps to increase cultural responsiveness and prevents school principals from working in isolation. Based on the research participants responses, I learned how important it is to evaluate how school staff understand student's needs to ensure fair discipline practices and increase equality in education. In the following sections, I describe how school leaders communicate the needs of students, especially with their teachers, and how they began to center culturally responsive practices in their work. I also look at issues related to school discipline and equity, particularly as they relate to developing culturally responsive school staff.

Understanding Student Needs

As I mentioned in chapter one, at the start of my research journey there were social justice movements, including Black Lives Matter (BLM) marches, occurring around the world. At that time, many schools across the country were educating students remotely due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Initially school leaders in Christmas County did not address how the impact of these movements could affect students and school staff. Principal Heaven recalled wanting to speak out about her support of BLM, but she was nervous about possible backlash. She stated, "for a long time, I played it safe as a school leader." However, she felt empowered to speak up once her superintendent publicly acknowledged the BLM movement. Principal Heaven explained,

> Normally I would send out just a Monday memo to my staff; but I remember that morning, I felt the need to do something different. I did take a stand on some things, and I did not make it about Black Lives Matter. I made it about so much more than that. But I said enough that they understood where I was coming from.

Along with electronic communication to her staff, to help them further understand the needs of their students, Principal Heaven took teachers on tours of the neighborhoods where the students in her school reside. Her staff was able to see first-hand where some of the lower socioeconomic students lived. She also led several conversations with staff about engaging students of color. After these efforts, she took note of teachers who she felt were not displaying the changes that would meet students' needs. In fact, she conferenced with a teacher who expressed that she did not have previous experience working with Black students and only knew what she had seen on television. Principal Heaven realized there was more work to be done

along with consistent and crucial conversations about how cultural differences impact student needs.

To help further assess the needs of students of color, Principal Heaven began conducting more classroom walkthroughs. This process involved collecting classroom data on teacher and student engagement, along with evaluating how teachers provide high-quality inclusive academic instruction. Principal Heaven would also have her assistant principal observe classrooms weekly. Together, they provided immediate feedback to teachers to increase their awareness of the issues that were still prevalent in their classrooms.

There is a saying "people fail from the lack of knowledge." Principal Tracy found that to be true based on results from a required biennial school-wide survey she recently administered. She was shocked to learn that a larger percentage of her staff did not know that food insecurity was an issue for many of their students. Taking into consideration the fact that her school receives federal funding through Title I and 80% of the student population receives free and reduced lunch, she was surprised. This eye-opening experience changed how Principal Tracy began to impose consequences on students for negative behaviors. In fact, she began collaborating with teachers on how to reduce office referrals that result in student suspensions, especially because school may be one of the safer and more supportive spaces in many students lives. Principal Tracy explained that "I needed the teachers to understand. They always want to send the kid's home; my goal was never to. What kids who misbehaved need is for someone to say to them, 'Here's what you did. Here is why it was wrong. Now, how do you fix it? We had to rethink, and I had to then go back and teach them [teachers] how to rethink."

While some of the principals started to discover that teachers were unaware of student needs, Principal Alpha's staff were more cognizant. She has a small school with approximately

eleven teachers. Principal Alpha described how her school has a team mentality, and the teachers always collaborate on how they support diverse students. Her biggest challenge is the lack of resources. She noted, "it's definitely a lot to do with funding, but it's also a lot to do with how we budget as a district." With a small staff and approximately 60-70 students enrolled in her school, Principal Alpha believes resources are not always distributed equitably among her students. If additional district funding were available, Principal Alpha would like to have a full-time school social worker and an assistant principal. She noted, "I do not have an assistant principal because of the size of my school, and I share a school social worker with three other schools." Principal Alpha believes that the lack of additional support staff prevents her from being able to address the mental health and socioeconomic needs of her students.

Support from the community also contributes to how effective her school is in meeting student's needs. While most schools have a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), Principal Alpha's school struggles to get parents involved. She hosts virtual meetings because of the low attendance in face-to-face meetings and school events. She feels that a PTA would help urge other parents to be more active at the school and with their presence, her school staff could build a stronger connection with their student body. She thinks if funding and parent support increased, she could be even more effective as a culturally responsive leader.

School Discipline

Over half of the principals mentioned that issues of unfair discipline practices have caused divisiveness among teachers and school administration. Irby (2018) explains that if teachers use racial conflict avoidance as a routine practice with Black students, it lays the groundwork for low expectations for Black students as well as disproportionate disciplinary referrals. Therefore, it was important for me to explore how school leaders discussed the

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obstacles associated with biased and unfair discipline consequences, as well as how they used their knowledge of culturally responsive practices to disrupt problematic practices.

Three of the participants felt that the teacher's responses to school discipline had changed since the start of the pandemic. When schools were given the option to return to face-to-face learning, Principal Barney described his in-person students as the majority White, middle- or upper-middle-class boys. He explained, "I did not have a lot of African American or Hispanic students return to face-to-face learning and suspensions went down. That is some interesting data." Even though he noticed this trend, Principal Barney struggled with how or if he would address the disparities with his staff.

Principal Kendall's student population mirrors the demographics in Principal Barney's school and her teachers continue to struggle with building relationships with students of color. She noted,

> Currently, our highest number of [discipline] referrals are given to Black students and Hispanic students. Considering the number of White [the dominate culture in the school], Black, and Hispanic students that we have, it is still a high majority of Black students and the Hispanic students that are having some type of exclusionary measure given to them.

Principal Kendall regularly draws attention to these findings through faculty meetings, school improvement team meetings, and weekly small group professional learning teams. She has also introduced various trainings, such as Restorative Practices and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) at her school with the goal of helping her staff reflect on how their lack of cultural awareness excludes Black and Latinx students from the classroom.

Likewise, Principal Tracy also meets with her entire staff, stressing how their racial identity may or may not help them understand historically underserved students. Currently the

school staff does not mirror the socioeconomic status and race of the students. Therefore, Principal Tracy wants her teachers to consider the reason behind some of the behaviors exhibited by students. For example, she told them,

> This is not about me pointing out that you are White, it's just me pointing out that your background alone may keep you from understanding where these students are coming from. If a child steals something, well, they are stealing because there is a need. What is it? Or they are stealing because they are trying to tell you something. Not that I condone it, but when you are looking at these students who constantly do so, they are just trying to tell us that something is wrong.

At the start of her leadership role, Principal Brenda remembers how several students were either suspended or sent to in-school suspension (ISS) as a regular discipline practice. She remembers questioning "Why are we shuffling kids around campus?" and "What is it going to get us [teachers] when we send these students out of the educational environment?" Principal Brenda did not stop there, she continued to analyze discipline data and looked for the "highflyers" which resulted in tough conversations with teachers. She explained,

> I've sat down with teachers and said, "I am not accusing you of being racist or anything. That is not what it is. But I want you to take a step back and say, if there is [sic] four kids doing something, who's the kid that I'm going to pick out first to send out of class? Because sometimes that ends up being the darker-skinned kid in the group. And I am not okay with that."

It is notable that six of the eight principals recognize inconsistent discipline practices among students, however only four of them put systems in place to help teachers recognize the disproportionate rates of suspensions and consequences given to students of color. Christmas

County has a discipline matrix located in the student handbook which outlines consequences for student discipline referrals. For example, students who exhibit behaviors that cause a disruption to the school environment, will serve a maximum of two days in in-school suspension (ISS). The matrix is designed to support school administrators in determining appropriate and unbiased consequences, however, when hearing that there are frequent discrepancies in consequences, it causes me to question if the matrix is effective. It also makes me wonder if more professional development and support is needed to create more socially just and culturally responsive approaches to discipline.

Equity

During the interviews, principals discussed how they measure the success of CRL as well as how equity influences their leadership styles. Principal Erica distinguished between equity and equality when she stated, "it's not always about equality because what I give this one [student], I may not need to give that to the other [student]."

Principal Kim served on a district level equity task force and believed that a school equity task force would support her student population by decreasing student discipline referrals and increasing academic successes. Results from their state teacher working conditions survey show that only 58% of staff agree that school rules are applied equitably to all students. To increase that percentage, Principal Kim decided to spearhead a school equity task force and emailed staff for input. To her disbelief, some teachers were not on board with the idea of working to reduce disproportionate disciplinary referrals. She remembers getting email responses from staff that included, "this is not going to work, and you are making excuses for student behavior." However, with the negative responses also came a wave of supportive staff; this support gave Principal Kim the confidence to move forward with her plan to create a school equity task force.

To recruit team members, she emailed a google survey to the entire staff. Teachers who had a

strong interest in learning more about students' needs and how they can support their diverse

student body signed up for the yearlong commitment. Table 4 is an example of the agenda for the

first equity task force meeting.

Table 4. Agenda for School Lead Equity Task Force

Agenda Items	Notes
Getting to know you activity Here are two things you may not know about me:	
Establishing Our Norms How we would like to interact with each other	• Be respectful of other people's experiences, perceptions, and thoughts • Be honest about your experiences and thoughts • Actively listen and hear other people • Maintain group privacy within the group • Be vulnerable • Always think of students first
Our why – Let's talk about our why	Why did you choose to serve on this task force?
Defining Equity and Equality According to the Center for Public Education **Equality** in education is achieved when students are all treated the same and have access to similar resources. **Equity** in education is achieved when all students receive the resources, they need so they graduate prepared for success after high school. 	What does Equity look like? What Does Equality look like?

Agenda Items	Notes
https://youtu.be/yqkAlwGsxwE	

EQUALITY VERSUS EQUITY

In the first image, it is assumed that everyone will benefit from the same supports. They are being treated equally.

In the second image, individuals are given different supports to make it possible for them to have equal access to the game. They are being treated equitably.

In the third image, all three can see the game without any supports or accommodations because the cause of the inequity was addressed. The systemic barrier has been removed.

| What are some areas where we see inequity at our school? | |
| Moving forward and thoughts for today | |

Currently, the team meets monthly and has received additional support from various staff which has led to increasing committee members. In the future, Principal Kim plans to include students on the task force.

At Principal Alpha's high school, there are students who struggle with basic needs such as transportation. Considering her students are selected from the other three high schools in the district (through a magnet application lottery), Principal Alpha is baffled as to why they are not provided with transportation to and from after school activities, such as football practice. She recalls speaking up in a leadership meeting with the superintendent and questioning "Why are we not providing transportation? They need athletics for their physical health. Is this being equitable?" Sadly, these questions did not result in any changes to address her concerns.

One interesting issue that came up among the principals in my study related to CRL was gender identity. When students returned to school during the spring of 2020, Principal Barney

remembers the topic of gender identity was often spoken about among the students. He had an increase in students who he felt needed teachers, counselors, and administrators to support them in navigating this important part of their lives. As Principal Barney tried to determine steps to support students, particularly those who identify as non-binary or gender non-conforming, there was resistance from the district level on the best approach. However, Principal Barney shared with his staff, "We operate from a premise that each child deserves love and respect when they come to school, and we do that equitably. Even if a teacher does not understand or does not particularly agree, that is still someone's kid, and they deserve love and respect."

All the participants in some form agreed that working toward equity in all dimensions of school life is a critical component to supporting diverse student populations. In addition to just and fair treatment, they described how it was important to recognize student's values and beliefs and how they play a role in positive school experiences.

Creating Inclusive Environments

When I asked how school leaders to discuss examples of how they lead in culturally responsive ways, several of the participants referred to incorporating inclusive school-wide initiatives and challenging the thought processes that have a negative impact on historically marginalized students. In the following sections, I describe how principals are meeting the social and emotional needs of students, which is an important part of being culturally responsive. I also discuss teaching practices and school-wide programs that help to create inclusive classroom environments and the importance of culturally responsive leaders acting as change agents in their districts and schools.

Social and Emotional Support

   Given that I was collecting my research data during a global pandemic, I would be remiss if I did not ask school leaders about the challenges of creating inclusive classroom environments during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the uncertainty surrounding face-to-face schooling influenced their orientation toward culturally responsive leadership. Many of the principals stated that the impact of COVID-19 has caused them to realize the growing need for mental health support for students. Generational poverty, the lack of access to resources, and low parental involvement are a few examples of the challenges that drew attention to educational disparities in communities of color. As a result, principals looked for strategies to support minority students.

   To initiate change, support the district-wide strategic plan, and to attend to educational disparities, each school developed a statement in their school improvement plans to address success indicator A4.06. The indicator states "All teachers are attentive to students' emotional states, guide students in managing their emotions, and arrange for supports and interventions when necessary" (Academic Development Institute, 2020).

   To bridge the gap between indicator A4.06 and cultural responsiveness, Principal Kim and her staff participated in a discussion about creating a school culture of compassion, respect, and high expectations. Principal Kim noted that "they [students] come into our building, and we don't know what's happened the night before or what they [students] are worried about." Furthermore, culturally responsive leaders model behaviors (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012) that help to improve outcomes for students of color, Principal Kim explained,

Staff need to understand other perspectives, understand that often a student's behavior is driven by emotions outside of school, and that we as a staff should model how we want our students to respond to both negative and positive situations.

All school principals acknowledged that relationship building has been a challenge during the pandemic and discussed how some students returned to school with few strategies to deal with conflict that occurs between them and their teachers. Principal Alpha explained that "before we can teach them, they must know that you care. They must feel like it's a loving environment." She knows that students are under more academic stress while they are balancing their personal lives and school expectations in such uncertain times. Sadly, she has seen an increase in suicidal ideations among her high school students. Principal Alpha strives daily to promote a nurturing school climate that meets the social emotional needs and academic requirements of her students.

In a case study of a high school principal who centered cultural responsiveness in her daily work, Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) found that CRL along with relationship building helps to improve students' social and emotional well-being by reducing anxiety among minority students. Through classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis, the researchers found that "young minority students avoid participating in social interactions from the fear of being humiliated in front of their peers" (p. 187). When school leaders work to create environments where students feel safe and welcomed, they are more likely to become engaged in learning.

Principal Barney believed leaders should consider how staff bring their "whole self" into the classroom and reflect on the nature of their struggles with making connections with students. He explained,

There is always a reason for a kid acting the way they do. I have met very few children that come to school just to cut up. It is a response to something. And a lot of time it is attention; it is the lack of safety. In my experience, some of our best teachers provide a safe environment. Kids crave safety; they crave a teacher that fills the room with his or her presence. Regardless of the cultural background, the kids need to know they come into the classroom with a person that cares about me regardless of my background.

Recently, mental health needs began to overshadow academic needs in Principal Erica's school. She explained, "we are trying to fix the mental health piece." Before Principal Erica began her leadership role there, her student population was mainly those who identify as African American. Her school has experienced a shift in demographics and is more diverse now than it has been in years passed. Erica's school now includes students from various countries, so it is important that her staff learns how to meet the needs of ethnically diverse students. Principal Erica is working toward increasing global awareness through a grant-funded school-wide initiative. Her school staff participated in a global awareness professional development training; I explain this in more detail later in this chapter.

Creating inclusive school environments goes beyond the strategies that take place at the school level; district leaders and families also play an important role. To increase my knowledge of district level processes, I reviewed Christmas County's strategic plan. The 5-year plan was created by a team of district employees and community members. One segment of the plan describes the necessary steps to address the need for additional social and emotional support for students. The district notes that additional funds will be available to allow for additional positions for school social workers and counselors. The plans also explain the desire to develop additional community partnerships with local agencies that provide mental health counseling.

It is important for culturally responsive leaders to build relationships (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012) and promote inclusivity for minoritized students who have experienced "emotional abuse" through exclusionary practices (Khalifa, 2018, p. 85). As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Principal Alpha expressed the need for a full-time social worker for her school. Currently, district leaders have yet to fulfill this portion of the strategic plan.

Quality Instruction with CRL in Mind

Christmas County teachers are expected to meet weekly during teacher planning periods. The designated day is referred to as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Teachers are grouped by grade level in elementary and middle schools, and by content areas in high schools. During this time, teachers typically discuss curriculum standards, and how they are assisting students in meeting learning goals and objectives. Schools across the country continue to grapple with how and if students are making academic growth. To support PLCs, school leaders are tasked with ensuring teachers have the resources they need, along with providing them with feedback to improve instruction.

To better understand how CRL and student achievement are connected, principals explained what they perceived as successful strategies for integrating cultural responsiveness into lessons. They discussed the importance of access to resources, exposure to new programs, critical thinking around special education, and access to gifted and talented programs.

Access to Resources

Principal Erica shared that along with the socioeconomic challenges her students encounter, she also understands that several of her parents do not have careers that allow flexibility in their work schedules, and thus it is a challenge for them to participate in school-related activities as well as sometimes to support their kids learning outside of the classroom. In

her experiences, parents are supportive but many of them are not as involved in their children's learning as we might hope they would be. In fact, during the months of virtual learning brought on by the pandemic, many of her parents had to leave their child in the care of an older sibling. This was not always the ideal situation for her students, and as a result she noticed several of them struggled academically. Based on state data from the End-of-Grade exams taken in the spring of 2021, only 19% of her students are college and career ready. As she explored options and worked to find solutions, Principal Erica relied on her school counselor and school social worker to help families find local resources that provide afterschool tutoring and additional academic support.

To help increase student achievement and access to school resources throughout the school district, all students enrolled within Christmas County received Chromebook to support virtual learning. Principal Kim discussed how a considerable amount of her high school students could not afford to pay their Chromebook fees. She stated, "I would try to get the fees taking care of and if I knew specifics, I would go and speak with their teachers. Sometimes I would say if they had an outburst in your class, I want you to know that something is going on."

Another strategy that Principal Kim uses to enhance student learning is to provide more individualized and direct support for students who struggle. To further support students academically, at the end of each quarter students who have a D or F in a core subject are assigned to an academic team leader. Students meet with their team leader bi-weekly to discuss grades and how to navigate obstacles that could potentially hinder them from being successful. Principal Kim believes that students who can make connections with a trusting adult within the school are better equipped to excel in the classroom. Principal Kim also shared how grateful she is to have a bilingual assistant principal. She stated, "one of my assistant principals has made a

huge impact on our Hispanic population. Because she is fluent in Spanish, they [Spanish speaking students] are more open to discussing academic concerns."

Exposure to New Programs

Another strategy that principals used is introducing innovative programs to expose historically marginalized students to Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) careers. For example, Principal Brenda works closely with the local United Way and the Boys and Girls Club. Through these partnerships, she was able to design a new STEM lab in her school. During the summer months, the lab is open to students and families. There are hands-on activities available to help heighten students' interest in careers where minorities are underrepresented.

Principal Erica partnered with her staff and was awarded a grant that would help them become a global school. Through this initiative, the teacher's complete modules centered around global awareness activities, which results in lessons that allow students to become exposed to various cultural systems and increases their knowledge of diversity. Principal Erica noted, "the global piece helps them [students] realize that one culture is not dominant to others."

Special Education and AIG

In chapter two, I explain how historically marginalized students are referred more often than their white counterparts to special education programs that often do not seem to help them succeed academically. Knowing this, Principal Barney tried a different strategy with one of his students who was initially being referred for special education testing; he instead felt the student needed a greater challenge and placed them into higher level reading and math classes. To his surprise, the student excelled and scored at the same level as students who were identified as Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG). He explained that "The expectations were raised.

Looking at your own bias and recognizing that everybody has bias. We must ask ourselves, are we being fair?"

Principal Heaven recalls how the criteria for placement in AIG programs often deny students of color the eligibility to participate in the program. She remembers being a high school teacher and witnessing Black and Hispanic students being "left behind." With that in mind, Principal Heaven believes "we are doing a disservice when we measure them [students] by our culture instead of their culture. I have seen the power of pulling in the history of people and places so that students see that they have a seat at the table."

Currently, Principal Heaven works with the AIG teacher at her school to help "nurture" students who are yet to be identified as academically and intellectually gifted. One nurturing strategy includes, the AIG teacher conducting whole-group lessons that prompt students to think critically to solve problems. From there, the AIG teacher collaborates with the classroom teacher to identify students to work in small groups that meet once a month. Lastly, the AIG teacher helps those students prepare for the state assessments; these assessments are used as a top identifier for the AIG program. Under Principal Heaven's leadership, the number of minority students in the AIG program has increased from 12 to 27 in the past 2 years.

As I was coding the interview transcripts of research participants, it became clear to me that the school climate is vital in keeping all individuals on the path to success. At the same time, cultural responsiveness is an important component of a positive and supportive school climate. To close the achievement gap among minority students, school leaders must be culture and race-conscious and willing to look at issues through multiple lenses. When leaders and teachers help minority students develop positive self-worth, a cycle of disengagement and low academic performance can be broken (Whiting, 2009).

School-Based Programs

As part of addressing issues related to SEL, the Christmas County School District strategic plan also focuses on addressing the challenges that are keeping students from being fully immersed in school. One goal has been to increase the quality of relationships that students have with teachers, other adults in the school, and their peers. A few of the school leaders have started individual programs for students while district leaders selected a few other of the principals in my study to pilot specific programs. These include trauma informed approaches, restorative practices, book studies, and other support that comes from Title 1 funding.

ACES and Restorative Practices

Christmas County selected four schools to participate in Restorative Practices and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) professional development trainings. Restorative Practices involve seeking to address the harms caused by a disciplinary infraction with discussion, healing, and community building, as opposed to simply relying on punishment. Restorative approaches to discipline and climate were introduced to the staff as an effective strategy to reduce office referrals and to look for ways to make connections with and among students. Principal Kendall's staff started to participate in Restorative Practices training during the 2019-2020 school year. They were selected to pilot the initiative and model these practices for other schools. Principal Kendall thinks teacher buy-in was the most challenging aspect of trying to get this program off the ground and functioning well in her school. Teachers were comfortable with sending students out of their classrooms for misbehaving and reluctant to try other means of redirecting the negative behaviors.

Principal Barney's school was also selected to pilot Restorative Practices, while Principal Brenda's school was a pilot for ACES. Principal Barney admits that his school staff has not yet

had the opportunity to "dig into" what restorative practices looks like for them. He believes that his diverse office staff tries to "be fair and responsive to students," though he seems to acknowledge that there is still much work to do to ensure buy in and thoughtful implementation of restorative practices. On the other hand, Principal Brenda uses academic and discipline data to help her teachers understand how trauma, the foundation of the ACES program, affects students in the classroom. She stated, "I do not want to inflict more damage on a kid, I want to learn from them." All four principals who piloted ACES and Restorative Practices believe there is still a great deal of work that is needed to fully implement these programs and see the long-lasting positive effects, even as they felt like both programs could be important supplements to other culturally responsive leadership strategies.

Book Study

Principal Tracy's staff started ACES and Restorative Practices training during the 2020-2021 school year. With training being offered virtually to staff due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they have not had the opportunity to really understand these practices or integrate them into the everyday educational strategies in their schools. Alongside these trainings, and to help meet the needs of her diverse students, Principal Tracy had her teachers participate in a book study. They read *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind: Practical Strategies for Raising Achievement,* written by Eric Jensen. Principal Tracy has been a teacher, assistant principal, and now principal at the school she leads; she has been there for over 21 years. She stated,

> I realized that I had a building full of well-meaning White women who wanted to make
> sure my Black and Brown students achieved, but they didn't always understand that there
> were things that stop them from making progress, which could be simple things to major
> things or just even understanding.

When her teachers become frustrated with students, whether it be behaviorally or their struggles to grow academically, she continues to remind them that they must recognize what students "bring to the table" and she often refers to strategies discussed during the book study.

Principal Kendall also conducted a book study with her staff. They read a book that described how to effectively conduct restorative circles. She assigned one chapter a month and best practices were shared through grade level meetings. Principal Kendall asked her staff to focus on the key questions that were outlined in the book when they were addressing students for misbehaving. If a students' behavior could possibly result in an office referral, teachers give students a refocus form first as a strategy to address the behavior. The form lists the following questions from the book study:

1. What happened, and what were you thinking at the time of the incident?
2. What have you thought about since?
3. Who has been affected by what happened, and how?
4. What about this has been the hardest for you?
5. What do you think needs to be done to make things as right as possible?

Currently, she and teachers in her school are still concerned about the increasingly high number of Black and Latinx student discipline referrals. However, Principal Kendall strongly believes that if teachers continue using these key questions, over time they will be more apt to use less punitive strategies to handle discipline issues.

Title I

Six of the eight schools where the principals in this study work receive Title I funding. The U.S. Department of Education (2019) provides Title I funds to ensure that all students are provided a "fair, equitable and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement

gaps." The funds are disbursed to local schools with at least 40% or more students who receive free or reduced lunch. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, Principal Tracy, Principal Alpha, and Principal Kendall use this data to help guide their approach to the academic and social emotional needs of their students, paying particular attention to the academic and SEL needs of students who come from poverty.

Principal Kim's school does not receive Title I funds; however, she has learned through conversations with her students that they have academic, social, and personal needs that have gone unmet. Principal Kim explained, "It can be difficult to meet their [students] needs and never make them feel any sort of way. But also, not to let other kids know. If you are culturally responsive, you do not want kids who identify differently, who come from poor backgrounds, or from a different race to have to deal with bullying." As an advocate for change, she started a food and clothing pantry to help address issues related to resource deprivation. Students can anonymously shop for items they need. Principal Kim is grateful for the donations she received from her school staff and friends that generously give to the pantry.

Becoming A Change Agent

As I stated in my literature review, culturally responsive leadership takes time and commitment. I thought it was important to find out how principals continuously keep CRL in mind as an everyday practice. When I asked Principal Alpha how to be a change agent she said,

> Voicing my opinion. I have learned being silent does not always get you what you need, and I'm still learning that. And even with voicing that opinion, you must be mindful of how you do it. It's almost like the timing just needs to be right.

Principal Heaven believes you should

Educate yourself first by knowing what words are appropriate to say, which words are not, know about good strategies, know about the positives and the negatives, if there are any, know what the opposition might be so that you can address that.

To continue this work, Principal Tracy also takes a proactive approach to learning. Offering advice to others who aspire to be more culturally responsive in their practice, she explained, "Do not wait for directions from district leaders to guide your practice, leaders must take the first step." Principal Erica illustrates her commitment to CRL through communication with staff. Alternatively, Principal Kim sees power in collaboration with other principals. She likes to learn from other people and will not "reinvent the wheel" when there could be successful processes she can mirror.

Principal Brenda shared that she is driven to be a change agent because of her previous experiences as a little girl and seeing how members of her family were mistreated in school. She believes that tough conversations with school staff are important to the improvement of the educational experiences of all students. She explained,

I am not going to keep my mouth shut, and I am always going to say something. You are not allowed to look at a child and make an assumption based on the color of their skin, their living situation, or anything else. That is not your job.

All the school principals agreed that being transparent about the needs of their students, working together to meet those needs, and believing that students can meet academic expectations sets the tone for school success. They also were emphatic that it is crucial for school leaders to understand and recognize varying cultural beliefs and values. Positive relationships among school personnel, parents, students, and the community also contribute to cultural responsiveness.

Summary

The research participants in this study all were expressly committed to, and working towards creating, culturally responsive school environments. There were common practices among all eight school leaders that contribute to supporting historically underserved populations, such as identifying and working to meet the social and emotional needs of students, developing new school programs, and supporting their teachers in developing a range of strategies and practices to support their diverse student populations. They were also clear that culturally responsive leadership is one way to change the narratives that contribute to higher suspension rates and underrepresentation in advanced classes for historically marginalized students.

In the next chapter, I bring together these findings to directly answer my research questions and discuss the implications of this study. I also offer recommendations for practice and future study of culturally responsive leadership and share some of my final thoughts as I come to the end of this dissertation.

CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I conducted this basic qualitative study on culturally responsive leadership with eight principals in a school district located in North Carolina. My data collection included individual interviews and documents analysis from public websites and materials shared with me by the principals in the study with the intent to identify unique challenges and opportunities associated with culturally responsive leadership. The experiences from the eight school principals were valuable in understanding how they work to center culturally responsive leadership in their everyday practices as well as navigate challenges, especially in the context of a global pandemic. In this chapter, first I explore my findings while answering each of my research questions directly. Next, I explain the implications of my study and put my findings in conversation with the literature I reviewed as a foundation for the study. Then I offer some recommendations for practice and for future research on culturally responsive leadership. I close with some final thoughts as I come to the end of this study.

Research Questions Answered

The first research question is: *How do educational leaders define and enact culturally responsive leadership in their schools or districts?*

I developed this question because I wanted to know more about how principals understand the meaning of cultural responsiveness and how their lived experiences contribute to understanding the needs of their diverse students. As I stated previously, there were seven females and one male who participated in this study. Five identified as Black/African American and three identified as White. Gathering background information, such as the number of years they have been a school principal, their race, and age was the first step in learning more about them as individuals. In addition, I was also interested in understanding why participants chose to

become school principals and how they began to center culturally responsive practices in their work.

As I described in my opening chapter and throughout this study, culturally responsive leadership is an emergent and flexible practice. With that in mind, each participant had their own unique definition in which they explained how they strive to be more intentional in their approach to supporting historically underserved and marginalized students. Many of the principals based their definitions of CRL on the dynamics of race, gender, and the socioeconomic status of their students, while also describing how their personal experiences lead them to a focus on equity and social justice. I found that compassion and empathy were major factors in how participants related to students in their buildings.

In addition to issues related to race, each of the principals mentioned and reflected on the social class of students and how it impacted their efforts and success in the classroom. To explore this topic further, especially to better understand the nature of the inequities, I reviewed data from the area in which Christmas County School district is located. According to the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau, there are approximately 68,000 residents and 21% of the population is 18 years old or younger. Additional data gathered between 2015- 2019 shows that 12% of the population lives in poverty. The North Carolina School Report Card (2019) notes that "students from economically disadvantaged families face additional challenges" as compared to those students who come from middle- and upper-class families. To further demonstrate the socioeconomic needs of the schools in this study, the chart below represents the percentage of economically disadvantaged students from each of the eight schools.

Figure 4. Demographic Information for Economically Disadvantaged Populations by School
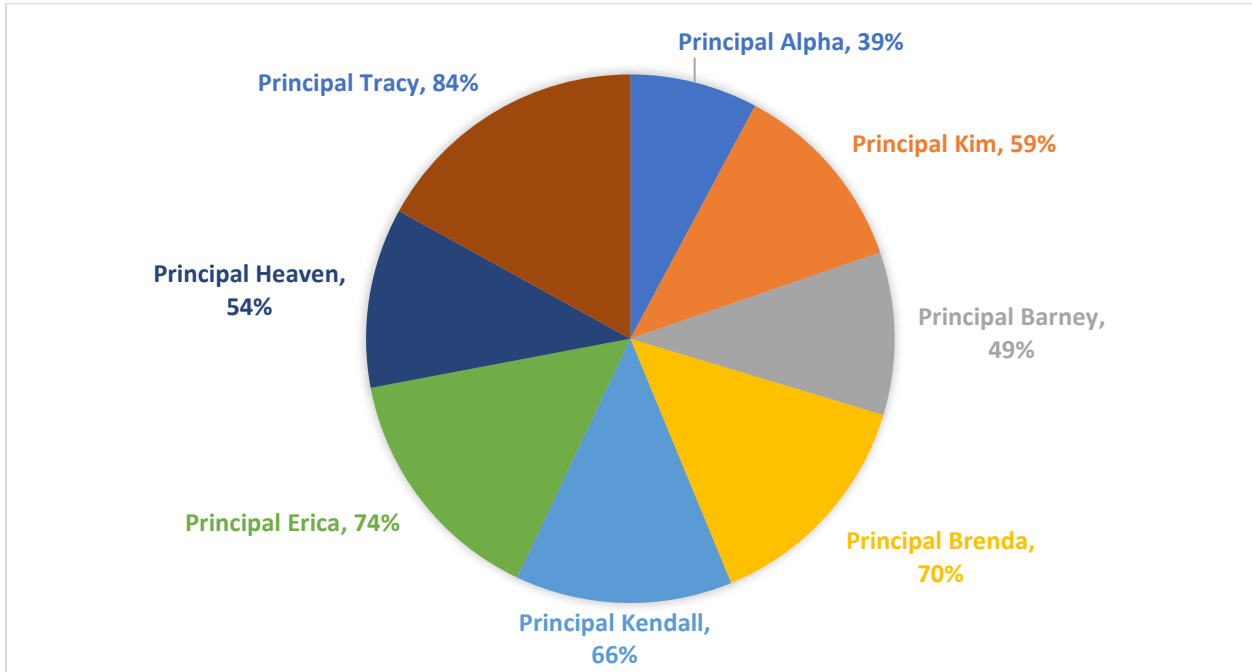
Based on the interview responses, it is clear that each participant worked to understand the backgrounds and needs of their student populations, especially in light of their demographics. They certainly had good intentions to support all students in their schools, though I was a bit surprised that they did not talk more about the extensive literature on culturally responsive education when describing their practices. Gooden and Dantley (2012) remind us that culturally responsive leaders "display a critical consciousness on practice in and out of school" through critical self-reflection. All of the principals in this study were concerned about equitable access and student success, though some seemed to be more comfortable identifying themselves as culturally responsive leaders, as well as advocating for the kids in their schools. Moreover, some were more critically self-reflective than others.

The second research question is: *What are the typical challenges they face in implementing culturally responsive practices in their context and how did they overcome these challenges?*

In chapter three, I provided details about the opposition that I initially faced as I approached potential participants for this study. I planned to conduct focus groups with a school districts equity task force, however once I began to develop and share possible interview questions, I was informed that this group was no longer interested in participating. As a result of that experience, I developed this research question to examine how or if any resistance from school staff or district leaders contributed to challenges school principals faced as culturally responsive leaders. I wanted to better understand how they overcome challenges, how they gauge the needs of historically marginalized students, and how those needs are communicated to the school staff. Developing culturally responsive teachers is one of the leadership behaviors Khalifa et. al. (2016) described as an integral part of leading with CRL in mind.

While addressing the challenges they face, most of the principals discussed how their teacher's approach to school discipline and equity issues impact historically marginalized students. Participant responses led me to analyze North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey results from each school. This statewide survey is conducted every 2 years as a tool to give teachers a voice in school leadership operations, as well as share their perspectives of community support, equity, and discipline. The following table captures the responses from each school.

Table 5. Teacher Working Conditions Survey Results: Equity

Principal	This School Emphasizes Respect for all Students Cultural Beliefs	This School Provides Instructional Materials that Reflect the Diverse Backgrounds of our Students and Community	All students are Treated Equitably, Justly, and Fairly	Total Percentage of Respondents
Principal Kim	88%	79%	86%	100%
Principal Alpha	100%	71%	86%	88%
Principal Barney	97%	79%	79%	100%
Principal Brenda	95%	58%	47%	100%
Principal Kendall	81%	65%	45%	73%
Principal Erica	97%	89%	89%	100%
Principal Heaven	91%	85%	82%	100%
Principal Tracy	86%	62%	65%	100%

Note. Source: Teacher Working Conditions Survey 2020

The target score for each category is 70% or higher. Based on the scoring provided from the state department of education, when responses meet this mark school leaders consider these areas as successful. When this survey was administered during the 2019-2020 school year, Principal Brenda and Principal Kendall had the least amount of experience as principals. They were also in their first year as leaders at their current schools. This information can help contextualize why they scored the lowest in category three (all students are treated equitably, justly, and fairly).

During Principal Brenda's first year, suspension rates were high due to teachers sending students out of the classrooms rather than finding solutions to help them remain in the classroom. She was met with resistance from staff when she had conversations with them about students of color having a significant amount of discipline referrals. Principal Brenda understood that some

of her students had experienced trauma in their lives and "not understanding those things and not taking those things into consideration" reduces educator's opportunities to help students cope with outside influences that may have a negative impact on schooling and creates a level of distrust that prevents students from seeing school staff as advocates for them.

Principal Kendall introduced new programs since this survey was administered and once her staff has time to implement additional strategies to handle discipline concerns, she thinks they will move towards increasing the percentage of students who are treated equitably. It is important to note that the equity section of the survey was added in 2020. Therefore, there is no previous data from which to compare findings over time.

As I mentioned previously, Christmas County is in a rural area. Researchers have shown that students of color who live in rural areas tend to have additional academic challenges as compared to their white counterparts. For example, in their qualitative research study on Latinx families in rural school communities, Johnson and Anguiano (2004) found that additional barriers such as "the lack of resources, too few interpreters, and recruiting and maintaining bilingual educators" (p. 31) results in school leaders' inability to fully support the educational needs of Latinx families. Furthermore, Galindo (2021) describes U.S. schools as being ill-prepared and lacking in knowledge of Latinx student's experiences in educational settings.

Christmas County has six English Language Learner (ELL) teachers, one full-time ELL instructional coach, and two part-time interpreters who speak Spanish and Mandarin Chinese. Even though five of the eight schools met the target score of 70% for the category labeled "instructional materials that reflect the diverse backgrounds of our students and community," none of the school principals provided evidence to support that claim. Principal Kendall explained that it is understood that teachers take a more informal approach to including diverse

educational materials into their lesson plans. Her response leads me to wonder why she does not

communicate the expectation of a more culturally diverse curriculum. It could be because she is

concerned about possible backlash from teachers and district leaders. Principal Kendall stated

she would like more support and transparency from district leaders when issues of race and

equality are called into question.

Principal Brenda thinks it takes more than teachers providing students with books on

various cultures to create a culturally responsive climate in her school. In fact, researchers argue

that culturally responsive school leaders should develop a team of school staff who are willing to

review data, analyze processes, model CRL, and provide professional development opportunities

for teachers to understand how to incorporate cultural responsiveness in their classrooms

(Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Khalifa, 2018; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Voltz et al., 2003).

My final research question is: *What successes have they experienced and how do they*

assess the impact of their culturally responsive leadership?

When I started this study, I was expecting to be able to answer this research question by

analyzing documents principals used at their individual schools, in conjunction with the

information I gathered from public websites. However, only one participant provided individual

documentation as evidence of culturally responsive leadership. All eight participants explained

that conversations with staff (both formally and informally), along with introducing culturally

responsive school programs that are geared toward their diverse student populations are how

they measure the success of CRL initiatives. In chapter four, I explained the school programs in

detail, however, the connection between these programs and culturally responsive leadership was

not always clear, even though most of the participants in this study viewed themselves as

culturally responsive and accomplished school leaders.

In Christmas County, school principals are evaluated by the school superintendent throughout the school year and are expected to meet the proficiency standards of an accomplished principal. Standard three describes an accomplished principal as a leader who "Honors the culture of the students, adults, and larger community, demonstrating respect for diversity and ensuring equity. They create and maintain a trusting, safe environment that promotes effective adult practice and student learning" (NCDPI, 2010). The school principals in this study disclosed that they have been rated at least proficient and above during their evaluations, which leads them to believe they have a positive impact on their school's culture and climate.

The school principals in this study did not necessarily self-identify as culturally responsive leaders but volunteered to participate based on the recommendation from the school superintendent. As I re-read the interview transcripts to make sense of my findings, it is evident that the school principals would like to think they are creating school cultures that embody the behaviors of a culturally responsive school leader. However, sometimes they answered specific questions about CRL with vague generalities rather than clear evidence of their approach to CRL. This leads me to wonder about the potential value of a district-wide initiative related to cultural responsiveness. This might support principals in taking more chances and advocating more explicitly for resources, professional development, and programs that center cultural responsiveness.

Discussion

As a current assistant principal, I hear talks of state assessments and teaching curriculum standards as the most important factors in determining if students are meeting grade level expectations. Although these are both important, I wonder why we in education seem to push

topics of social injustice and the need for cultural responsiveness to the bottom of our lists? And how often do school leaders consider how their views and everyday practices either support or inflict harm on students of color? Khalifa (2019) argues that "cultural responsiveness is a necessary component of effective school leadership" (p. 13). While the participants in my study would agree, it was challenging to get them to describe specific examples of practices that they center as part of being culturally responsive or to discuss in rich detail how they prepare their teachers to be culturally responsive. They felt that they were culturally responsive and were able to talk in broad ways about what this means. Yet reflecting back on the study, I think there is still much room for growth in this district.

Additional components of my research study included wanting to know more about how culturally responsive leadership aligns with school leader roles and how culturally responsive school leaders work to close gaps in student achievement? While these questions were secondary to my main research objectives, they are relevant to understanding more innovative ways school principals move from theory into practice. Throughout my literature review, I described school factors that impact the experiences of students of color. The following sections gives insight into how the lack of support principals received from district leaders prevented them from being confident when addressing academic achievement gaps while also attempting to be more culturally responsive to meet the needs of their minority students.

Supporting Culturally Responsive Leaders

Looking across the eight interview transcripts, the principal's responses did not fully align with the behaviors of a culturally responsive leader based on Khalifa et al.'s (2016) research, which I used as my theoretical framework. Most of their perspectives of culturally responsive leadership practices were somewhat surface level behaviors rather than thinking

critically about how they address the issues that historically marginalized students faced along with engaging in the courageous leadership that is needed to challenge the disparities in their schools. As participants explained the skills that culturally responsive leaders possess, topics of racial identity, district policies, and trust were among the top three challenges. Despite the wide range of leadership experiences among the eight principals, there were similarities in how they view their roles as culturally responsive leaders.

Racial Identity

Three of the eight principals discussed how racial identity impacts how district leaders either support or question their leadership abilities. Principal Alpha wonders if her presence at the school hinders students from getting the resources they need. She stated that, "Being an advocate for students is not easy and as a Black female, I feel like I'm sometimes at the bottom of the totem pole. I question if my presence is holding the school back." Similarly, there were instances when Principal Heaven believed her advocacy for students of color was seen as biased, she explained,

> Being an African American female, there are some people who look at me a little bit differently sometimes when I mention certain things because they think I'm trying to make it all about me and my culture when it's really about students – resources, education, support, and listening ears [are needed].

Being a culturally responsive leader is no easy task, while leading as a person color adds an extra layer of challenges. Looking at the time span from 1993 to 2017, Lomotey (2019) reviewed a total of 57 research articles on Black female principals with the goal of finding out how or if their leadership helps to close achievement gaps of Black children in K-12 settings. He found that many Black female school leaders face opposition because of their race, gender, and

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age, making it more challenging for them to address the academic needs of Black students. Participants in my study hinted at this challenge as well, though they did not delve into it deeply. This is an area where more research would be valuable.

Policy

In chapter two, I discussed ways that some school districts have redesigned district policies to promote equity and inclusion. Principal Kendall would like more transparency in policies and procedures that govern disciplinary consequences in Christmas County. She sometimes thinks her decision-making capabilities are questioned regarding how she handles student discipline. She recalled a time when she made a discipline recommendation for a student that was ultimately overturned by district leadership. Naturally, she asked for clarification. Despite her multiple attempts to get more information, her questions were ignored by district leadership. Principal Kendall explained that she lacked "support or even explaining the thought process behind why some students [suspensions] were upheld because they look a certain way, versus other students [who may look a different way], had theirs modified." The lack of trust has caused Principal Kendall to wonder if the decisions she makes as principal are valuable. It is worth noting that all the principals in my study believed that school policies and practices should focus on inclusivity, equity, and positive school climates.

Trust

The prerequisite to support for culturally responsive leadership is developing trusting relationships. Principal Kim shared that "I need the district to trust me. I want to introduce new programs. I am not going to hurt the students; I want to introduce new ways to help them." Principal Barney explained, it "takes courage to communicate your needs to district leadership, they are playing at a different level than we are." It was evident that school principals think that

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there is sometimes a disconnect between the level of trust they expect and the level in which district leaders give them space to make decisions. Half of the research participants believed that the lack of trust from district leadership prohibits them from being more culturally responsive.

School leaders need support to work effectively with teachers in their buildings to implement culturally responsive practices. Khalifa (2018) asserts that the traits of a culturally responsive leader include the courage to make leadership decisions in spite of possible backlash, the ability to recognize the aspirations of the school community, and the drive to continuously seek ways to shift school policies that oppress students of color.

Gaps in Student Achievement

In Chapter two, I described research studies that support the need for more culturally responsive leaders who work to implement strategies that close achievement gaps for historically marginalized students. In my study, the research participants responses to the obstacles of leading in culturally responsive schools aligned with many of the experiences that other school leaders encounter across the country. Just as I described in reviewing the literature, for my participants, achievement gaps, deficit thinking, overidentification in special education programs, and biased discipline practices continue to have a negative impact on students of color.

In her research, Gay (2013) found that the most distinct feature that contributes to achievement gaps is racial inequities. During my interviews, I asked participants for strategies that they thought could help to address achievement gaps for underserved populations. I present the key strategies each principal mentioned in the table below. One thing I noticed when reading across these is that their responses were rather vague and broad – especially compared to previous research on what culturally responsive leadership looks like in schools. It is crucial that

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culturally responsive school leaders provide spaces for teachers to engage in meaningful

conversations that increase their knowledge of culturally responsive practices. Research shows

that culturally responsive pedagogical discussions coupled with professional development helps

to develop culturally responsive teachers (Khalifa et al., 2016; Voltz, 2003).

Table 6. Strategies to Improve Achievement Gaps of Underserved Populations

Principal	Strategies to Improve Achievement Gaps of Underserved populations
Principal Alpha	"We got to take a step back and really reflect and think about what we're doing, and what does education really mean in 2021? And stop trying to give education like it was in the '70s, because those days are long gone."
Principal Kim	"If they feel safe, if they feel accepted, then this becomes a safe place for them where they can take chances and where they want to do well. And I think all of that, ultimately, is going to improve student achievement."
Principal Barney	"Hey, what do these kids need? I think if we keep having those conversations it'll help to connect the dots."
Principal Brenda	"I have a lot more parent communication. Parents know that they can ask, they can call the school, they can get answers."
Principal Kendall	"It has to be a conscious effort for these students. If I can get every teacher to think about what they can do every single day to keep every student in their classroom learning, then I feel like I'm doing my job."
Principal Erica	"Be consistent with the expectation that all students can succeed."
Principal Heaven	"I think students feel more at home in the classroom when they see that the things that are important to them are also important to that teacher. And I think the more comfortable the child feels, the better the child will do."
Principal Tracy	"Understanding how to address their needs, academics and non-academics. Really just knowing how to reach all types of cultures, and backgrounds."

As a current assistant principal and former school counselor, I believe that educators want

to be seen as individuals who purposely seek ways to help all students overcome challenges. It

became evident during this study that the lack of preparation in school administration programs

and support from district leadership prevented principals from fully attempting to enact cultural responsiveness and social justice in educational settings. The fear of going against traditional ways of schooling affected how much research participants were willing to introduce new strategies that support cultural responsiveness. I believe each participant had good intentions; however, they did not always present concrete strategies nor completely seem to understand what culturally leadership practices entail. At the same time, they were open to learning more and seemed to really want the knowledge and support to be more culturally responsive in their schools.

Recommendations for Practice

There are several options available for future school administrators to obtain licensure. Aspiring principals can earn a master's degree in school administration by attending brick and mortar universities, completing online programs, or a combination of both. There are also other options for individuals who earned a master's degree in a different educational field. They can enroll in post-master certification programs that result in an add-on licensure in school administration, and there are lateral entry routes to school leadership as well. Whatever the route that is taken, becoming a school administrator is not a job for the faint of heart. The ability to multitask, make tough decisions, be firm but flexible, be knowledgeable, and build rapport are only a few of the daily tasks of a school leader. Working to integrate and center cultural responsiveness as part of these practices makes the job even more complicated. In the next few sections, I summarize recommendations shared by my participants, and generated by my analysis of their interviews and documents, to help current and future principals increase their knowledge of, and capacity to engage in, culturally responsive school leadership.

Principal Preparation

During my interviews with principals, I asked them to provide information about their educational backgrounds and how they learned to embrace culturally responsive leadership. None of them mentioned explicit training or education in culturally responsive school leadership during their principal preparation programs. In fact, one of the participants explained that he had to google the term "cultural responsiveness" to understand if he would consider himself a culturally responsive leader. Many of the school principal strategies and ideas were formulated through what they learned on the job and their personal beliefs. I was relieved to find out that all eight of my participants were in some ways culturally responsive without having formal training to prepare them to lead diverse schools. However, their lack of more formal and sustained preparation and professional development in this area is reflected in their sometimes very general descriptions of what being culturally responsive entails. I wonder how much more effective they might be if the importance of cultural responsiveness was central in their principal preparation programs, if they received guidance and mentorship in this area, and if the district more explicitly valued this approach to leadership.

Based on the very general understanding my participants had of culturally responsive leadership, even given their strong commitment to it as a value, I argue that principal preparation programs should include much more explicit focus on issues of culture, diversity, inclusion, social justice, equity, and democracy. I do understand why some people might perceive that these topics are unnecessary or even a distraction from the work of helping students to meet academic standards, but as the literature I reviewed in chapter two shows, cultural responsiveness is an important component to educating all students well. Moreover, we cannot ignore how recent social and racial justice movements (as well as the opposition to them, for

example in the recent controversies around critical race theory) have caused a considerable amount of tension across schools in the United States. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students are certainly impacted by how educators choose to address or ignore the realities of the world we live in and the experiences of our students. Given the changing demographics in the student population, alongside well-documented disparities in educational outcomes and experiences in schools, it is imperative that cultural responsiveness is more central in all leadership preparation programs.

District Leadership Support

If you take the time to read online biographies of district leaders, many of them have experience as school principals. For example, in Christmas County, the director of human resources, the director of professional development, the director of student discipline, and the superintendent have all held previous positions as school principals. Given their previous experiences, I am intrigued by the fact that so many of the principals I talked to in the district did not feel fully trusted or supported in making decisions related to integrating culturally responsive strategies, practices, and policies into their everyday practice. This lack of trust and support for principals contributes to self-doubt and confidence in their capabilities to lead diverse schools. In many ways, the district leaders seemed far removed from the everyday challenges that arise in schools. I wonder if their focus is too-often strictly on overall test scores rather than on meeting the needs of their most underserved populations.

Fraise and Brooks (2015) argue that students feel safe in schools where their culture is celebrated and valued. Students who are connected to the school environment, whether it's through strong relationships, trust, or being valued as an individual, tend to thrive and be more successful in K-12 settings. It is imperative that district leaders remember that it is not "enough

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for school leaders to be instructional leaders and transformational leaders" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 137), they must also be culturally responsive. They must consider the lenses with which they look through to address race, gender, ability, socioeconomic status, and culture, while working to see diversity as a strength and student's cultures as assets not detriments to learning.

Recommendations for Future Research

Christmas County has initiated two programs to help support students who struggle, Adverse Childhood Experiences and Restorative Practices, which are also being introduced in other districts within North Carolina. Based on the feedback from school principals in Christmas County, there are only two of the eight pilot schools in the district that are implementing these programs with fidelity. The idea behind new and innovative programs sounds good on paper, but the lack of data collection to show the positive outcomes of implementation leaves school districts investing professional development training and time into what could wind up to be ineffective work. Both of these programs have elements that are related to cultural responsiveness, especially as they are geared toward supporting historically marginalized students in schools.

To expand research on cultural responsiveness, I would suggest following a pilot school that is using the Restorative Practices and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) model, in part to see how cultural responsiveness is centered in these programs or not. A qualitative study that includes observations, interviews, and/or focus groups would capture the perspectives of students, teachers, assistant principals, principals, and other stakeholders. The findings would also be beneficial for other educational settings who are interested in the impact these programs have on student discipline, achievement, and the culture and climate of schools.

My second recommendation includes additional research about the addition of the equity section in the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey. The biennial statewide NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey will be sent to educators during the spring semester of the 2021-2022 school year. As I mentioned earlier, the equity section of the survey was introduced during the 2019-2020 school year. Future researchers could look for trends in data from the 2019-2020 survey results and evaluate how the results compare over the next several years, especially in light of any programs or interventions aimed at increasing equity.

Building on this previous recommendation, it would be interesting to know if the school-based equity task force led by Principal Kim, as well as other initiatives started by the principals in the study, influenced how school staff rated equitable practices and respect for students' cultural beliefs. Considering school leaders are expected to use the results of the NC Teacher Working Conditions survey to improve school environments, this data could also help principals redesign their school's mission and vision statements to reflect how they work to address educational disparities among students of color and.

<h2 style="text-align:center">Limitations</h2>

I began this study with the intent to interview school principals who self-identify as culturally responsive leaders; however, they worked in more than one school district in North Carolina, which posed a significant challenge in getting approval to conduct this research. I had already identified five school leaders who were willing to participate, and I planned to continue to locate more principals through snowballing. Once I submitted my proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) however, I was instructed to obtain district approval to conduct my research. That meant getting approval from multiple districts during a time in which the pandemic had disrupted the daily operations of school. This proved almost impossible as I was

no longer able to use the previous five participants. Instead, I was fortunate to be able to get approval in one district, so I solely focused on principals within that district.

I scheduled a meeting with the superintendent in Christmas County. She was onboard with my research topic and believed that there were school principals in the district who would give great insight into this work. This resulted in a small sample size of eight school leaders who did not all self-identify as culturally responsive school leaders but perceived themselves as attentive to the needs of students of color and open to discussing this topic. I interviewed each of them and followed-up with emails regarding documents to support their work as culturally responsive leaders. I learned a lot from these participants, though the information they shared did not shed as much light on the meaning and practice of cultural responsiveness as I had initially hoped. At the same time, however, I came to understand how important it is to have a district level commitment, as well as support and professional development, to support principals in their work to create more culturally responsive schools.

Final Thoughts

Through this study, I learned that being a culturally responsive leader takes courage, time, and commitment. Sadly, in my experience, this work can appear to be threatening to school district leaders and challenging for those who want to lead the charge in addressing the educational disparities that have a negative impact on students of color. For example, during the interviews, some of the research participants would purposely pause before responding; I took this to mean that they wanted to make sure their responses were worded in way that is politically correct. I was not surprised by this as researchers who study race, equity, diversity, and culture in schools remind us of the resistance that comes with addressing these in schools.

Considering that culturally responsive school leaders are expected to model implementation strategies, it would have been beneficial for my research participants to have engaged in more targeted information about CRL. Unfortunately, none of them have received formal training on culturally responsive leadership. Less than half of the participants used data results, such as the disproportionate suspension rates of minority students, to help their school staff reflect on how their actions have had a negative impact on students. Khalifa (2018) argues that equity audits and self-reflection that includes "school data (student, teacher, program, and schoolwide data) and community data (parent, community, and student voice)" (p. 61) can be used to assess the levels in which biases are ingrained in school policies and practices. Moving forward, I think the district would be well served by conducting a district level equity audit while also supporting the principals to do the same in their schools.

Even though I was unable to interview participants who strongly self-identify as culturally responsive leaders, the research I reviewed, observations in my pilot study, and courses I have taken throughout my graduate studies has given me the tools to think more critically about CRL. I am committed to culturally responsive leadership as an intentional practice, and I am working to incorporate strategies that address the needs of historically underserved and marginalized populations. As I stated in earlier chapters, this topic was a personal choice to help me better understand how to develop culturally responsive school staff so that minoritized student populations can experience success in schools. I have learned to critically self-reflect, continue to build trusting relationships, and to strive for ways to help teachers to evaluate the lens in which they view cultural differences as a benefit in classroom settings rather than a distraction.

If I had the opportunity to expand my research study, I would have liked to complete observations and focus groups. There are district-wide programs in Christmas County that have been introduced for the purpose of addressing discipline and educational disparities that effect minority students. I would like to know if and how these programs are working. I would be interested in observing how teachers use these programs in everyday practice and organize focus groups as a safe space for dialogue about these practices.

As I conducted this study, I could relate to the challenges students of color face in K-12 settings. I often thought of my own experiences as a Black female and instances when I felt that my teachers were not culturally responsive and instead seemed to be colorblind. I started chapter one by offering a definition of the American dream. As humans, we set goals for ourselves based on our hopes and dreams for the future. As an educational leader, I think all students' dreams are important, but they are especially important for those who have been denied access to their right to pursue their dreams. The U.S. government refers to a DREAMer "as a person living in the United States without legal status who arrived as the child of someone who did not have the documentation required for legal entry or residence" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020). In support of DREAMers and the opportunities afforded to them, there have been many demonstrations around the country on the protection that the government should provide for them. Building on the theme of dreams, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic "I Have a Dream" speech offered a pivotal moment in history that gives hope to historically marginalized populations that one day race would not define who they are or limit their opportunities to pursue their dreams. Until that time, however, educators need to understand the experiences, challenges, enablers, and strengths of their historically marginalized students and work tirelessly to ensure they receive the same quality education as their white counterparts.

Whether you identify with the U.S. government definition of a DREAMer or like me, you were a little Black girl with a dream of earning a doctorate degree, we all should be provided with equal opportunities and resources to accomplish our dreams. I hope that my research, the participants in this study, the students, and communities of parents I interact with will always see the work I do to be culturally responsive and an advocate for best practices that support CRL implementation.

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APPENDIX A: PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Principal Interview Protocol

Date: _____

Level: Elementary_____   Middle: _____   High School: _____

Start Time: _____   End Time: _____

Introduction: My name is Jamie Davis-Burgins and I am a doctoral candidate at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am conducting a study with school principals on culturally responsive leadership. With my findings, I hope to provide more innovative ways for school principals to enact culturally responsive leadership in their schools. Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. Your experiences are important and valuable to me. You are free to be open and honest. Your responses will be kept confidential, and your participation is voluntary.

   Do you have any questions before we begin?

Participant Demographic Information

   1. How many years have you been in a school leadership position? 1 to 5, 6 to 10, 11 to 15, 16 to 20, 21 or more years

   2. What is your age range? 20s? 30s? 40s? 50s? 60s and up?

   3. What race do you identify with? Black/African American, White/European American, Latinx/Latino/Latina/Hispanic American, Indigenous American, Asian American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander American, Other?

   4. What gender do you identify with?

   5. What is your educational background (college major/degree)?

6. Describe your previous job title (classroom teacher, school counselor, etc.) before becoming a school administrator?

7. How long did you serve in that position?

8. Why did you choose to become a school principal?

9. What is your definition of culturally responsive leadership? What comes to mind?

10. Tell me how your experiences or personal beliefs affect you (your cultural responsiveness) as a culturally responsive leader? And/or lead you to embrace this approach?

11. How do/would you begin to center cultural responsiveness in your work?

CRL in practice:

1. The impact of COVID-19 pushed us into virtual learning: Is there anything that affected your outlook on how we support/respond to ethnically diverse student needs?

2. How do you assess the needs of diverse students in your school?

3. How do you communicate those needs to your school staff? Discuss some examples of what this looks like in your school.

4. How do you incorporate CRL in your everyday practice?

5. How do you engage with students and families from diverse backgrounds and cultures?

Evidence of CRL:

1. Does your school have culturally responsive leadership policies/initiatives? If not, do you think there is a need for CRL policies/initiatives?

2. What tools do you use to measure the success of CRL policy/initiatives/practices?

3. What support is needed for school leaders to establish CRL practices?

4. Who, if anyone, is responsible for making sure CRL policies/initiatives are implemented?

Challenges & Successes:

1. What impacts do you think CRL has had on student achievement?

2. What are some of the challenges in leading CRL in your school?

3. What are some of the successes of cultural responsiveness in your school?

4. How did you become a change agent who continuously seeks improvements to serve ethnically diverse students?

Document Analysis:

1. Do you have any documents that you can share that helps to illustrate your school's commitment to cultural responsiveness?

Closing Statement: This concludes our interview. Are there any questions you would like to ask me? You will receive a copy of your interview transcript in the coming weeks for your review. If you would like to share any additional information or have questions, I can be reached by email or phone. Thank you again for your participation.

APPENDIX B: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

Document Analysis Protocol

Rubric for Analyzing Documents:

- What type of document is this (board policy, school report card, school district strategic

  plan, teacher working conditions survey, etc.)?

- How long has this policy/document been established?

- When was the last time this policy, document, program, etc. was updated?

- What are three key elements that stand-out in support of CRL?

  1.

  2.

  3.

- What is this document trying to say? Why is it important?

- Who is the target audience?

- Does this document give insight into how school leaders implement CRL?

- Is this document representative or supportive of the student population/demographics?

- How does this document address the needs of historically marginalized student groups?

- Does this document provide evidence of the effects on student achievement in response

  to culturally responsive practices?