

## Exploring Aspiring K-12 School Leaders' Understanding of Culturally Responsive School Leadership

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## **Exploring Aspiring K-12 School Leaders' Understanding of Culturally Responsive School Leadership**

Muhammad S. Uddin and Thurman Bridges

### **Abstract**

This qualitative document analysis study analyzed 13 aspiring school leaders' assignments to explore their understanding of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL). A thematic analysis approach was used to analyze their papers, and five themes emerged. These were (1) leading by example, (2) showing care and support, (3) enhancing teachers' capacity, (4) ensuring culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and (5) building teacher-student relationships. The findings of this study showed that aspiring school leaders need more research-based strategies to lead their future schools using CRSL approaches. This study suggested that leadership preparation programs implement praxis-based learning and simulation to prepare future school leaders, arguing for collaborative work among school districts and leadership preparation programs in preparing CRSL.

Keywords: aspiring leader, culturally responsive school leadership, school leader

### **Introduction**

Society establishes schools to serve the purpose of educating children. During the colonial era in the United States, the occupiers established schools to teach their children the Bible and societal roles. Then they started formal schooling in the newly established colony, forcing Eurocentric education on the colonized people (May & McDermott, 2021). According to Powell (2019), when the U.S. became independent, one of the founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, promoted education to develop individuals to run the government and perform civic duties. Another founding father, Benjamin Franklin, encouraged education for running

businesses. Later, Horace Mann of Massachusetts advocated for a common school to educate all members of society. Thus, the purpose of education depends on societal needs (Goldin, 1999). The school leaders (i.e., principals/assistant principals) are the most critical individuals who can implement society's agenda in the schools.

The current school community demographics in the U.S. differ greatly from those in colonial times. Now schools have a more diverse student population who are different in race, gender, culture, language, and socioeconomic status (Nishina et al., 2019). According to the United States Census Bureau (2015), culturally and linguistically diverse students would increase by up to 50% by 2020. Then the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023a) student data showed that in 2021, 22.4 million students were White out of 49.4 million enrollments in K-12 schools. Therefore, more than 50% of students were from non-White ethnicities. But NCES (2023b) teacher data showed that in 2021, 80% of public-school teachers were White. The questions arise: How do these teachers serve students from various racial ethnicities? How do these teachers guide students in following those students' cultures? The school leaders need to guide these teachers to serve every single student, but the challenge is that the school leaders are still rooted in a Eurocentric academic paradigm (Khalifa et al., 2019).

Therefore, the leaders cannot help classroom teachers break the Eurocentric monocultural structure that has existed for centuries. As a result, the schools cannot effectively serve diverse students of the multicultural society. Students from non-White ethnicity find themselves inferior as the established system alienate them. The purpose of schooling does not work here as the schools' activities do not reflect the diverse school community. The structural inequality that exists for the racial, gender, and socioeconomic minority student populations, leads to unequal outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2013). These unequal academic outcomes have been increasing the

achievement gaps among students based on race as the school leaders fail to show just leadership for each student as research shows that poor leadership directly impacts students' academic achievement and performance (Day et al., 2020; Goddard et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020; Naidoo, 2019; Netolicky, 2020).

Gümüş et al. (2022) discovered reasons for the achievement gap between White and other students; they found that the school leaders could not show just leadership in a school, and thus students from marginalized backgrounds had poor outcomes in math, science, and reading. The underserved student population is deprived of equal education rights due to the school leaders' unjust leadership. Lash and Sanchez (2021) argued that school leaders should work with the community to meet the needs of each student to reduce the achievement gap. Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023) said that school leaders should remove structural barriers for the marginalized student population and implement Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to reduce the achievement gap in diverse schools.

School leadership matters for student achievement (Wu & Shen, 2022). To reduce the achievement gap, school leaders must remove the opportunity gap, change school culture, and break the structural inequalities to create safe and equal space for each student. Unfortunately, many school leaders are morally distressed as they know the right actions to take for their students but do not do them as they accept the external pressure to implement a particular group's agenda (Stelmach et al., 2021). As a result, students from diverse communities do not get the opportunity to learn in a safe and free environment. These students often consider themselves inferior because they do not feel valued and welcomed in school. To be a leader for all students at a school in a diverse community, leaders need to serve the diverse needs of the diverse students (Okilwa et al., 2021). The school leaders must be connected with the school

community and be a part of the community. Mayger and Provinzano (2022) identified school leaders as community leaders to show Culturally Responsive School leadership for the school and the community.

### **Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)**

The concept of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CSRL) encompasses a broad spectrum of leadership behaviors that influence school culture, structure, and teacher efficacy with the aim of enhancing student outcomes. Khalifa et al. (2016) describe CSRL as a form of leadership behavior that has an impact on school culture structure and teacher effectiveness to improve students' outcomes. Similarly, according to Arar et al. (2019), CSRL is characterized by a leadership style that upholds high standards for all students while empowering diverse and marginalized students and their families. In addition, Hollowell (2019) argues that CSRL involves the role of the school leader in fostering inclusive practices across racial and socio-economic differences. Meanwhile, Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) emphasize that CSRL promotes equity in racially and linguistically diverse schools through attentive care and the cultivation of relationships within the school community.

Similarly, Genao (2021) defined CSRL as actions of school leaders that equitably benefit teachers' and students' cultures in teaching and learning. This means that culturally responsive school leaders strive to integrate and respect diverse cultural backgrounds in educational practices to create an inclusive learning environment. Johnson (2006) found that school leaders who demonstrated CSRL acted as public intellectuals, curriculum innovators, and social activists within the school community. This involvement led to positive changes in the school community by addressing cultural and social issues, promoting innovative teaching methods, and advocating for social justice. Vilorio (2019) defined CSRL as a leadership practice that involves leveraging

student and community cultural wealth to impact students' success and foster their agency. This suggests that culturally responsive school leaders recognize and utilize the cultural assets present in students and their communities to promote academic achievement and empower students in their educational journey. In summary, Culturally Responsive School Leadership encompasses leadership behaviors that honor and leverage diverse cultural backgrounds, promote social activism and innovation in education, and empower students through the recognition of their cultural wealth.

Foster (2023) said that to understand each student and to show empathy and care, school leaders must embrace CRSL, and this kind of support can bring a positive result to underserved students' academic achievement. The school leader must be a leader for each student, teacher, staff, and parent. Leaders must understand and value students' individual cultures to create an inclusive school culture. When students from an underserved community feel loved and welcomed, this school culture will motivate each of them to engage in learning. Peterson (2022) found that school leaders must validate diverse students' cultures to meet their needs and give them equal opportunities to grow up academically and socially. As a school community member, each student deserves the appropriate opportunity to learn and thrive regardless of their identity. Encouraging each student and engaging their voices in the school community is essential to establish an inclusive school environment (Hollowell, 2019). Thus, it is essential for each school leader to show and implement CSRL in their schools.

People who aspire to be school leaders attend preservice leadership preparation programs in universities to earn a degree in school leadership for administrative (i.e., assistant principal/principal) certification. The programs teach them about school leadership styles, strategies, and implication policies. They then implement their learning during their tenure as

school leaders. Mette (2022) said preservice leadership preparation programs should develop aspiring leaders' sociocultural awareness to help them deal with culturally diverse school environments. Thus, leadership preparation programs can have a significant impact on school leadership. Yamashiro et al. (2022) argued that leadership preparation programs must develop Culturally Responsive School Leaders for the diverse student population.

### **Purpose Statement**

This study aimed to investigate how aspiring school leaders perceive and utilize culturally responsive and socially just leadership (CRSL) during their preparation for a leadership program. It delved into the strategies employed by aspiring leaders and their potential impact on future schools. The study's findings hold great promise for enhancing the training of aspiring leaders within the program. Additionally, the outcomes can play a crucial role in assisting school districts in establishing a leadership pipeline that prioritizes CRSL in their educational institutions. This study focused on aspiring leaders' CRSL strategies and their implications for their future schools. The findings of this study can be beneficial for the leadership preparation program faculty members as they prepare aspiring leaders. The results will also benefit school districts by creating a leadership pipeline focusing on CRSL for their schools.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Khalifa (2021) identified four basic principles of CRSL from his two-year ethnographic research, and these are (a) being critically self-reflective, (b) developing and sustaining culturally responsive teachers and curricula, (c) promoting inclusive and anti-oppressive school environments and (d) engaging parents and community contexts. Khalifa (2021) described critical self-reflection as a leader's critical analysis of their own work in school. The leader must

know who they are, about the people they serve and analyze how they are doing. The leaders must develop teachers' knowledge and skills of diverse cultures and culturally responsive pedagogy and incorporate various learning materials in curricula. Leaders must be aware of the structural inequalities that negatively affect the education of students of color and how to remove those barriers to promote an inclusive school environment. Khalifa (2021) emphasized home-school relationships. This means that leaders must recognize the family community as equal partners in students' learning to connect family and community in school activities. This study used Khalifa's (2021) four principles as a framework to examine whether the aspiring school leaders had an understanding of those areas to show CRSL.

**Research Question:**

What CRSL strategies or dispositions do the aspiring leaders identify, and how do they plan to implement them in their future schools?

**Method**

The data for this article was based on aspiring school leaders' written responses about CRSL. Thus, a Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) was used for this study. QDA is a systematic review of printed and/or electronic records to examine and interpret to infer meaning, develop understanding, and produce empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). Morgan (2022) identifies QDA as a reliable research method because it enables the researcher to analyze various types of documents to discover latent and explicit meanings from the studied documents. According to Wach and Ward (2013), QDA is a research method that systematically and rigorously analyzes written documents impartially and consistently. Mackieson et al. (2019) describe QDA as a more dependable method among the qualitative methods to conduct research where the researchers have a minimal scope to show bias. Wood et al. (2020) define QDA as a



qualitative approach that elicits meanings from documents using careful and structural reading of the documents. QDA was used as the sole research method, as its only source of data was documents.

### **Data Collection**

The data was originally a written assignment for a course in the Educational Administration and Supervision program (i.e., a K-12 school leadership preparation program) at a university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The program has two credential options: Master of Science Degree (36 credits) and Post-Master Certificate (18 credits). The candidates who aspire to be school administrators or leaders must have a teaching license and at least three years of classroom teaching experience to get admitted to this program. If the candidates already have a master's degree, they can do the Post-Master Certificate program. Upon successfully completing the program, the candidates earn Administration I certification (i.e., Assistant Principal) and need to take the Praxis II exam to be a principal.

The assignment was for a course about school leadership. The question was as follows: “Describe at least four leadership strategies with examples showing Culturally Responsive School Leadership practices. How will you motivate the teachers and staff in your school to practice your strategies?” The instructor provided resources such as Brown et al. (2022), Johnson (2007), Khalifa et al. (2016), Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012), and Rheaume et al. (2021). The candidates could use any resources and submitted their responses in the program’s Learning Management System. After the semester, one of the researcher’s course instructors earned Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and asked permission from the candidates to use their papers in research. Thirteen out of 15 candidates permitted use of their documents. The list of

candidates is given in Table 1 with their pseudonyms. All the candidates were in the Post-Master Certificate program. To keep their identities anonymous, pseudonyms were used.

Table 1

*Participant List*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Experience (Years)</b>
Amsterdam	21
Brasilia	14
Cairo	10
Dubai	13
Edinburgh	15
Fuji	27
Havana	14
Kyiv	23
London	27
Madrid	6
Manila	21
Panama	14
Sydney	12

**Data Analysis**

This study used QDA as a method, and documents were the only data source. Therefore, an inductive thematic analysis was used to finalize themes and infer generalizations from data.

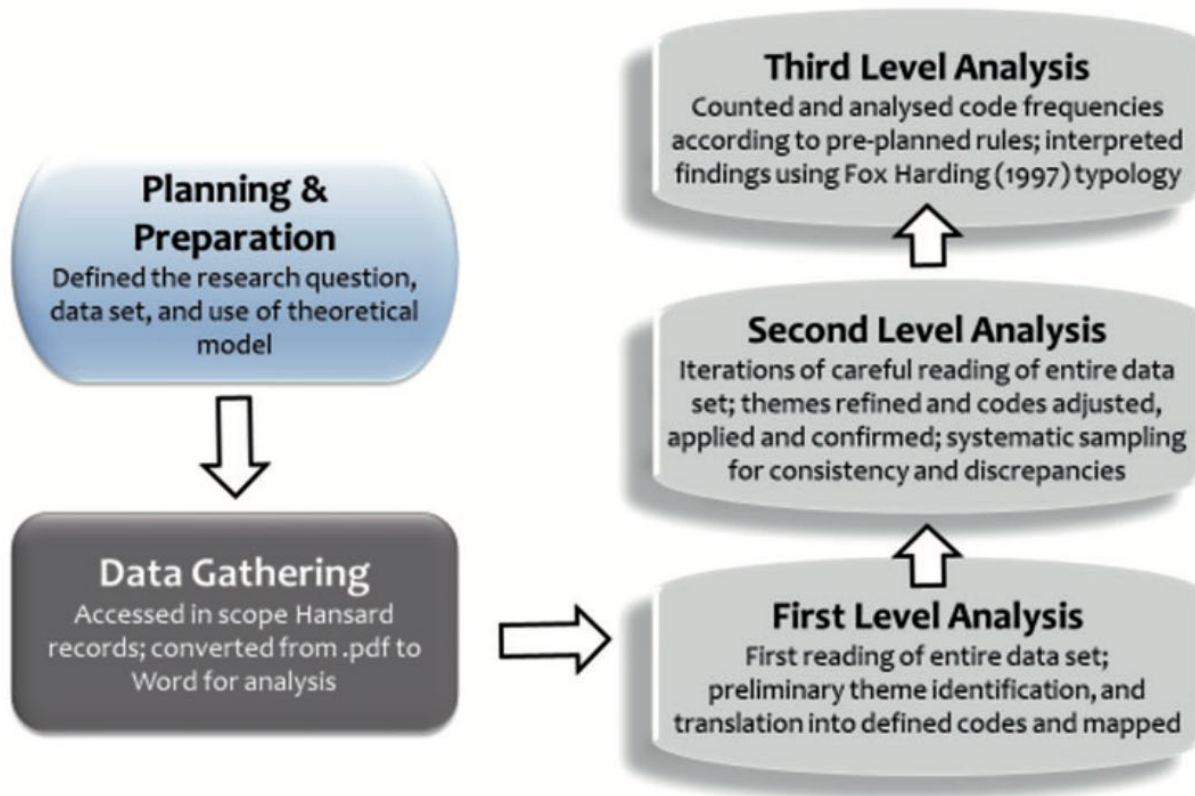
The researcher adopted Applied Thematics Analysis (ATA) from Mackieson et al. (2019).

Mackieson et al. (2019) originally developed the framework of ATA to analyze Victorian

Parliamentary debates. The framework is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

*Applied Thematic Analysis*



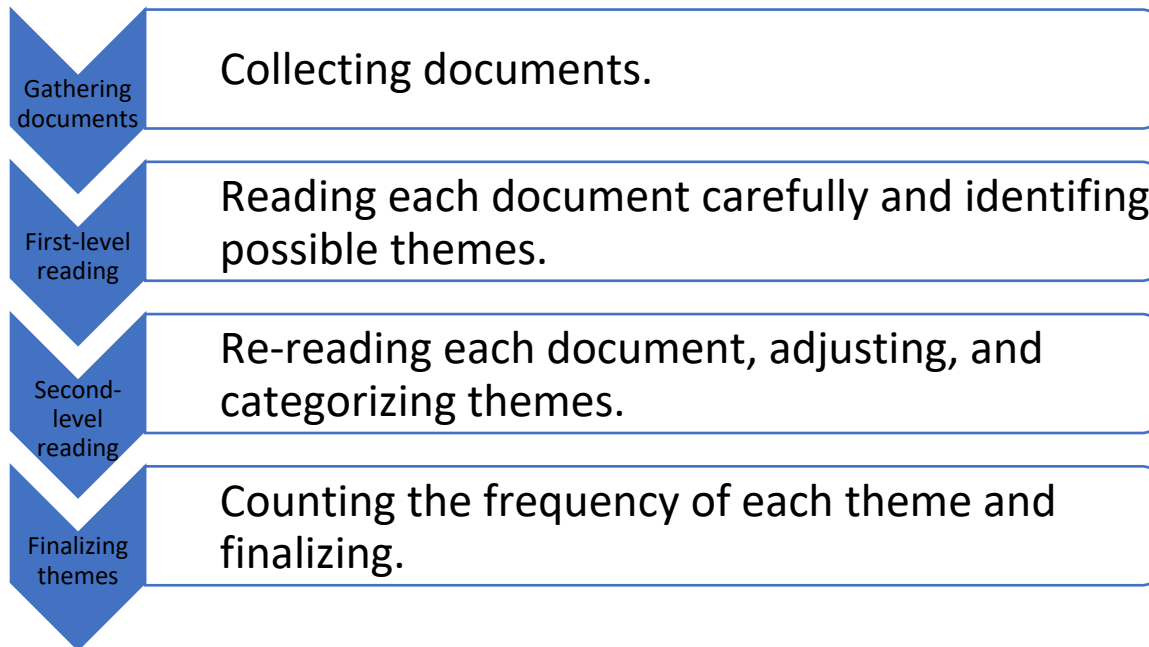
Source: Mackieson et al., 2019

The framework in Figure 1 shows a five-step process: planning and preparation (research design), data gathering (collecting documents), first-level analysis (identifying initial themes), second-level analysis (categorizing themes), and third-level analysis (finalizing themes).

Adopting this framework, the researcher developed a four-step framework to analyze the data and finalize themes. These were: gathering documents, first-level reading (identifying initial themes), second-level reading (categorizing themes), and finalizing themes (counting frequency).

Figure 2

*Finalizing Process of Themes*



After the thematic analysis, 11 themes emerged. The researcher intended to describe only the top four themes in the result section, as the assignment question was to show four CSRL strategies. However, one theme had seven frequencies, and four themes had six. Thus, the top five themes are discussed in the result section.

Table 2

*Themes and Their Frequencies*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Leading by example	7
Showing care and support	6
Enhancing teachers' capacities	6
Ensuring culturally responsive curriculum and instruction	6
Building teacher-student relationships	6
Connecting family and community	5
Promoting inclusive school climate	5

Visibility in the community	3
Self-reflection	3
Developing a shared vision	2
Promoting equity	1

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## Results

Five themes emerged from the data; these were (1) leading by example, (2) showing care and support, (3) enhancing teachers' capacities, (4) ensuring culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and (5) building teacher-student relationships. Each is discussed in the next section.

### Leading by Example

Leading by example was the top theme based on its frequency. Seven out of thirteen aspiring leaders wrote about it. They wanted to role model culturally responsive practices for their teachers and staff so that they could show the same to their students and community. Cairo said that she wanted to show her teachers and staff how to effectively remove bias: "As an administrator, it is my responsibility to model the behavior of acceptance that is expected from staff, students within the school environment. This requires one to relieve themselves from bias so they can be effective." Like Cairo, Manila also wanted to show her colleagues how to identify and remove bias to implement CRSL in school. She wrote:

School leaders must embrace their role in mitigating, disrupting and dismantling systematic oppression and embody what it means to work personally, interpersonally and institutionally. By modeling care, commitment, communication, and relationship building, culturally responsive school leaders can manipulate and facilitate staff to

achieve the vision of the school. Leaders must help teachers identify their own beliefs and biases.

Dubai shared her idea of modeling critical thinking at her future school to show CRSL. She wanted her teachers and staff to follow her and implement critical thinking in their teaching. As she said, “Another strategy that will support my leadership in culturally responsive teaching is supporting critical thinking. I will be sure to provide modeling to all staff members so that they can be culturally responsive in their teaching.” Edinburgh identified showing examples as an important task for the school leaders to motivate colleagues to practice CRSL. She said, “Modeling CRL is also a very important component of leadership in a school.” Havana mentioned modeling culturally responsive practices to enhance her colleagues’ skills in inclusive teaching approaches for diverse students. She said, “Modeling cultural responsiveness as a leader will help encourage staff to develop the skills necessary to successfully engage with a diverse group of students.”

Madrid went beyond merely showing examples. Along with her examples, she planned to include other teachers’ best practices to motivate all teachers and staff. She mentioned that “having a teacher share a best practice in department meetings is another great way to motivate teachers and to highlight something positive that the teacher is doing.” Sydney wanted to be a role model some practices of CRSL for her colleagues so that they would do the same in her school. She said, “To motivate the teachers to practice different strategies of CRSL, like empathy, communication, self-awareness, and relationship, I will first lead by example.”

### **Showing Care and Support**

Six out of 13 aspiring leaders identified “showing care and support” as an essential part of implementing CRSL in their schools; they specifically wrote about showing care and support

for their students. They had different strategies for doing this, like providing support for student learning, making the best decisions for students, giving students a feeling of care and welcome, providing opportunities for language-minority students, and showing empathy. As Amsterdam wrote, “The cultural and linguistic experience a student brings to the table means they may not learn like everyone else. As a leader, I need to provide support for teachers who cannot engage these learners.”

Cairo wrote about making sound decisions that would help every single student. She also wanted to show care, giving her students space to feel valued in the school community. She wrote, “I will show care being able to make sound decisions based on what is best for the students is the number one priority.” Edinburgh wrote about supporting and nurturing all stakeholders in her school. She also wanted to show care through her communication with students. She mentioned, “We must support and nurture all stakeholders. Having them feel they are cared for and appreciated makes all the difference. Caring for others also includes how we communicate with them.” Kyiv wanted to show her care and support in developing relationships with students and their families. She mentioned language minority students and family members who feel inferior due to their language barrier. She intended to show support by developing her school into a trustworthy place for them. She wrote:

Care must be shown for the relationship to flourish fully. Many minority students and families feel like they do not have a voice in school. Due to their language barriers and/or cultural differences, they often are apprehensive about allowing schools to help their children. As a leader, I will be responsible for showing these families that the school cares and can be trusted.

Milan wanted to show her care and support in developing relationships with every member of her building and community to encourage contribution to each student's success. She wrote, "A culturally responsive school leader has every person's best interest at heart, is supportive, and makes everyone feel welcome. They build relationships with every stakeholder that decreased anxiety, encouraged participation, and laid the foundation for success for all students." Sydney took a different strategy to showing care and support. She intended to visit students' families in the school community along with her colleagues. She wrote, "Knowing the students and their community will help create an empathetic leader. To accomplish this, I would have the staff do community tours or walks to allow the staff to see where our students are coming from."

### **Enhancing Teachers' Capacities**

The aspiring leaders were interested in enhancing their teachers' knowledge and skills in regards to culturally responsive practices. Different aspiring leaders had different strategies for doing so. One wanted to organize professional development (PD), one wanted their experienced teachers to teach new teachers, and others wanted to provide continuous feedback to the teachers about their skill development in culturally responsive practices. Like Brasilia said, "Leaders need to provide PD to teachers to learn how to use students' home experiences in their classrooms. Teachers need to learn how to meet students' needs." Fuji was very specific in developing her teachers' knowledge and skills in practicing culturally responsive practices. She intended to arrange PD for her teachers to analyze the dominant culture, learn about diverse cultures, and eliminate their bias. She wrote, "CRS leaders continually evaluate the extent of dominant cultural norms that are prompted in their school system and plan professional development



accordingly. Teachers' bias, fear, and lack of cultural awareness impede their ability to foster equitable learning environments."

London identified her school's diversity as a strength and intended to educate her teachers and staff about diverse cultures and culturally responsive pedagogy. She wrote, "Our differences make us stronger." Madrid also wanted to organize PD for her teachers. In addition, she planned to implement mandatory weekly and monthly meetings to ensure that teachers were consistently educated about culturally responsive practices. Manila focused on providing teachers with consistent feedback and recognition of their work regarding culturally responsive practices. She wrote, "Teachers become motivated to keep doing good things with consistent feedback, reinforcement, and recognition of their efforts." On the other hand, Panama took a different approach other than PD to develop teachers' knowledge about culturally responsive practices. She wanted her skilled and experienced teachers to guide her novice teachers in forming an internal collaborative approach. She wrote, "I will have new and tenured teachers work together to increase the knowledge of new teachers."

### **Ensuring Culturally Responsive Curriculum and Instruction**

The aspiring leaders also emphasized culturally responsive curricula and instruction. They preferred to include diverse cultural representation in the curricula so that students could see themselves as a part of the school community. Dubai shared her intention to include students' cultural and ethnic representation in the curriculum to make it more inclusive and culturally responsive. She shared examples of how to do it writing, "We cannot always have little white boys and girls in our clipart or picture books. It is critical that we provide students with books that they can relate to." Fuji went much deeper into her strategies for implementing culturally responsive curricula and instruction. She identified culture as a vehicle for students to learn and

emphasized incorporating social culture into the curriculum and instruction. She wrote, “Culturally responsive teaching goes beyond utilizing the students’ culture as a vehicle for learning. Multicultural education requires content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social culture.”

Havana mentioned educational changes and how to develop teachers’ skills in culturally responsive instruction. She was also interested in including diverse views in school curricula to show high expectations to all students. She wrote:

Attributes of culturally responsive teaching include educators having the capacity to invoke and bring about educational change, affirming the views of a variety of diverse students, having a greater understanding and the ability to engage in sociopolitical consciousness, encompassing deep compassion for students, especially those of marginalized groups, the belief that all students have the capacity to learn, thrive, and succeed.

Kyiv mentioned revisiting existing curricula to make sure that students could see themselves in the curricula and that teachers implemented culturally responsive classroom instruction. She wrote, “Equity audits on existing curricula require the persistence of the school’s leadership and staff members. Students need to be able to see themselves in the instruction being taught.” For culturally responsive teaching, London focused on hiring teachers from diverse backgrounds and communicating to local universities an emphasis on diversity in teaching and learning. Manila wrote about including students’ cultural representations in school curricula, and how teachers need preparation to use these curricula to ensure students’ success. She wrote, “The curriculum should incorporate the history, values, and culture of the school community; and the

curriculum must be relevant to students' lives, and teachers need to have access to professional learning on integrating culture with the curricula.”

### **Building Teacher-Student Relationships**

The aspiring leaders also identified the teacher-student relationship as an important aspect of culturally responsive practices at school. They understood that relationships between teachers and students would be beneficial to both by engaging in a more interactive teaching and learning process. Amsterdam said, “It is very important to require teachers to have morning circles where they not only build relationships with students but where they use social stories to help with behavior or cultural issues that may be happening in the classroom.” According to Brasilia, teacher-student relationships are essential to developing a better classroom environment for learning. She wrote, “I always say that relationships are the foundation of anything, let alone leadership. It is important to get into students' hearts.” For Dubai, a teacher-student relationship was essential to developing trust. This relationship gives teachers an opportunity to learn more about their students' cultures, and students, in turn, feel safe and valued. She wrote, “If teachers build strong relationships with students and their families, the rest of the interactions will be smooth because they are built on trust.”

Edinburgh also identified teacher-student relationships as essential to culturally responsive practices in schools. Helping teachers learn about students and their cultures can remove the cultural barriers between teachers and students. She said, “Building relationships reduces the anxiety of teachers and students, creates spaces that have a foundation built on trust and respect and knows where students come from and what they may have been through.” Similarly, Kyiv described teacher-student relationships as a safe space for students to share their backgrounds. She mentioned that conversation between teachers and students helps develop a

trusting relationship. She wrote, “It is essential for teachers to take time and talk to the students. Students appreciate when minor details are known about them. These tiny conversations will lead to trust.” Sydney said leaders’ relationships with students and school personnel were necessary to develop an inclusive school culture. She also shared some strategies to develop those relationships. She wrote, “To be inclusive, we could have an assembly, morning announcements, or use morning meetings to help connect the different cultures to develop relationships with our students.”

### **Discussion**

This study intended to explore K-12 aspiring leaders’ understanding of CRSL strategies. The research question was, “What CRSL strategies or dispositions do the aspiring leaders identify, and how will they implement them in their future schools?” The theoretical framework was Khalifa’s (2021) four basic principles for CRSL that he developed from his two-year ethnographic study on CRSL. These are (1) being critically self-reflective, (2) developing and sustaining culturally responsive teachers and curricula, (3) promoting inclusive and anti-oppressive school environments, and (4) engaging parents and community contexts. This study used aspiring leaders’ written assignment on CRSL as data that was analyzed using a thematic analyzing method. The final themes were (1) leading by example, (2) showing care and support, (3) enhancing teachers’ capacities, (4) ensuring culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and (5) building teacher-student relationships.

Khalifa (2021) identified school leaders’ self-reflection as the first principle for implementing CRSL practices. He described self-reflection as the foundation of CRSL and how a leader must use it in every aspect of schooling. A school leader must be self-reflective of their work and also of others’. Leaders need to analyze their own work to identify oppressive

structures like bias and deficit thinking about students of color and students from low socioeconomic status. The leaders can change their students' lives when they show the courage to alter bias and deficit thinking. Mun et al. (2020) found that teachers' deficit thinking about marginalized students led them to differentiate resources and implement unfair policies and practices for those students. Without being self-reflective, a school leader cannot identify those unfair and biased practices to give underserved students an equitable school culture for learning and growing up academically and socially. Therefore, school leaders must take the initiative because a school leader's leadership style significantly impacts school culture (Arif et al., 2019; Day et al., 2020; Kalkan et al., 2020).

The result showed that self-reflection was not a top theme because the aspiring leaders did not consider it and its importance. Only three out of thirteen aspiring leaders mentioned it in their paper, which suggests that some of them have an understanding of its importance. One of the aspiring leaders, Fuji, said, "Leaders must be able to reflect on their own beliefs and biases, make necessary adjustments and then model that belief system." Similarly, Panama said, "As a leader, I can start by asking myself what policies, practices, and structures prevent an equitable learning environment." Also, Sydney wrote, "We all come with biases, and to not have those biases affect how you interact with your students and staff, the biases need to be addressed." A school leader cannot develop an equitable learning environment for all students without analyzing and reflecting on bias and deficit thinking about marginalized students. It is essential for aspiring leaders to think about the "self-reflection" principle of CRSL to analyze and identify the invisible barriers in order to remove them from their schools to establish a sustainable, equitable school culture. From this study, it cannot be generalized that aspiring leaders have a

good understanding of the self-reflection principles of CSRL, as most of them did not write about it.

Khalifa (2021) identified “developing and sustaining culturally responsive teachers and curricula” as the second principle of CRSL. Likewise, this study found it as one of the top themes, with six out of thirteen aspiring leaders writing about it. Khalifa et al. (2016) said that school leaders must have the courage and knowledge to determine the inequitable school curricula patterns that lead to marginalized students' disenfranchisement. This study found that less than 50% of aspiring leaders understood this concept well. For example, Dubai wrote, “I will also ensure that the books in kids’ hands have characters that look like them. We cannot always have little white boys and girls in our clipart or picture books.” She talked about equal ethnic representation in the school curricula so that students feel included in the school.

The aspiring leaders wrote from their experiences what they saw in their schools and curricula. They noticed how a school leader could make a positive difference in equalizing curricula. Fuji, an aspiring leader with 27 years of experience, wrote, “Culturally responsive teaching goes beyond utilizing the students’ culture as a vehicle for learning. Multicultural education requires content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction.” Through her self-reflection, she realized the importance of culture in education. This suggests that aspiring leaders with years of classroom teaching experience have the real picture of unfair school curricula for marginalized students. As they have a deep realization of this fact, they are more likely to enact change in their future schools. Khalifa (2021) also said that creating community-based epistemology in the school curricula is a part of CRSL. However, the current study did not find any aspiring leaders who preferred community-based epistemology in school curricula.

Besides inclusive school curricula, culturally responsive teaching practices are similarly essential. Genao (2021) defines culturally responsive teaching as a practice that starts with the beginning of reflecting on teachers' own biases and committing to removing possible prejudices while teaching. A school leader should take the lead in implementing a strategy to eliminate teachers' bias in teaching. Less than 50% of the aspiring leaders wrote about the importance of culturally responsive instruction in their schools and leaders' role. Havana talked about the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices and developing teachers' capacity to implement culturally responsive approaches in their teaching. Khalifa et al. (2016) said culturally responsive teaching approaches could be achieved by recruiting and retaining culturally responsive teachers. Aspiring leader London echoed the same in hiring diverse teachers in her schools. She said, "A CRSL strategy I will begin with focuses on the recruiting and retention of a culturally aware and diverse staff." As such, the aspiring leaders had a good understanding of ensuring culturally responsive curricula and instructional approaches in their schools to give their diverse student body a safe space for learning. However, only six out of thirteen aspiring leaders wrote about this principle of CRSL.

Khalifa (2021) identified developing inclusive and anti-oppressive school environments as the third principle of CRSL. An inclusive school environment is a safe physical space for all students and a place of social and emotional safety for them. Kendall (2018) defined inclusive school culture as a school environment for all students to interact with each other and learn from each other's cultures. However, leaders' personal beliefs, values, and norms are essential to establishing an inclusive school culture (Bush, 2021). DeMatthews et al. (2021) stated that school leaders cannot create an inclusive school environment because of undue social influences from the dominant group. Therefore, leaders must be self-reflective to dismantle the oppressive

influence of the dominant culture. Khalifa (2021) said that a school leader must understand the power and privilege that exist in a school. The leader should not overlook the oppressive practices and must have the courage and honesty to confront and push back against such practices. Thus, aspiring leaders must have knowledge and skills on how to establish and sustain an inclusive environment.

This study did not find creating inclusive school culture a top theme, as only five out of 13 aspiring leaders wrote about it, but they wrote excellent strategies for creating an inclusive school environment. Fuji wrote about how a school leader could seek and use diverse perspectives and prioritize the needs of each student. London wrote about celebrating cultural diversity in school to enhance cultural awareness of all. Sydney wrote about cultural differences and how a leader could accommodate all differences and create an inclusive environment. Though some aspiring leaders shared their strategies for creating an inclusive environment, their thinking was not aligned with the research-based approaches mentioned in the previous paragraph; only 38% of aspiring leaders showed some knowledge about culturally responsive curricula and instructional practices.

Engaging family and community context in school was the fourth principle developed by Khalifa (2021). The author suggested a community-based epistemology to introduce community context and community-based issues in the curricula. A school leader cannot create a community-based epistemology without knowing and connecting to the school community. Family and community member should have free access to school leaders and should have the space to share their thoughts, culture, and history. Engaging family and community was not a top theme in this study, as only 38% of aspiring leaders shared their understanding of it. However, those that did shared very effective strategies to connect the community. Amsterdam shared an



event at her school where the parents and community members enjoyed dinner with the school leaders and teachers. She wrote, “Last week, our school hosted a family game night where family and community members enjoyed dinner and various games. When we have those fun together, memories and connections are built with the school community.”

Khalifa (2021) emphasized “establishing a social capital network” in the school community as part of connecting family and community. The author described the benefit of such a network, saying that this type of network is an encouragement for marginalized families to feel valued and accepted. One aspiring leader, Brasilia, wrote, “Many families do not feel welcome in schools. They see school as a building where their children go, not a place where families are valued.” Thus, leaders need to realize the truth about marginalized families’ feelings regarding school buildings and find a way to minimize the gap. Khalifa (2021) shared two examples from his ethnography. For one, he saw schools arrange monthly breakfasts for families where teachers and family members talked about social issues, stories, and culture instead of students’ academic performances. Another example he shared was when school leaders and teachers hand-delivered student report cards to their homes. School leaders need to find various ways to connect the school’s family and community members. However, this study found that most of the aspiring leaders of this study did not prioritize family and community context in their CSRL strategies.

Students’ academic advancement is the primary focus of schooling. Students, regardless of their background, deserve equal opportunities to thrive. School leaders need to create this opportunity for each student. As Choi et al. (2019) stated, school leadership practices matter for school culture and students’ academic performance. The findings of the current study explored aspiring school leaders’ understanding of CSRL for their future school culture, but the findings

showed that four out of five final themes did not follow the CSRL principles developed by Khalifa (2021). Only one theme—“ensuring culturally responsive curricula and instruction”—matched the author’s second principle, and yet only 46% of aspiring leaders prioritize it. Ultimately, it can be generalized that aspiring leaders need more research-based learning and practices to develop them as culturally responsive leaders.

### **Conclusion**

The four core principles of CRSL as defined by Khalifa (2021) were not reflected in the findings of this study. The first principle, “self-reflection,” was the foundation of CRSL. School leaders must be reflective in every aspect of schooling, like ensuring culturally responsive curricula. The leaders must identify the unequal cultural representation in the curricula and in teachers’ practices. Without a thorough equity audit, a leader cannot figure out the inequalities in the school curricula. A leader must be reflective on the student population and their culture to find out the gaps in the school curricula. Then, the leaders need courageous approaches to solving the problem. Without being self-reflective, leaders cannot identify biases and prejudices about students of color. Leaders must be reflective in connecting families and communities. They must analyze their practices in dealing with parents from underserved communities, like parents who cannot speak English and those who hesitate to come to the school building. Leaders must be critical in analyzing school culture to make it inclusive. They need to analyze the common practices and what is ideal, and how to bring the culture to an ideal environment. Therefore, leaders’ self-reflection is paramount, and yet was absent in the findings of this study.

This lack does not mean that the aspiring leaders had little knowledge about being self-reflective in every aspect of schooling. They had years of experience and reflections on their schools’ common practices. They also wrote about some good examples. Some of their analysis

and reflections were eye-opening and should be analyzed more deeply. However, their reflections were not as extensive as Khalifa (2021) described. They are preparing themselves to take charge as school leaders in the future and need some research-based knowledge and practices in their learning in the leadership preparation program. They also need praxis-based learning and simulation to enhance their skills in CRSL.

Aspiring leaders are in the leadership preparation program to get their license to be school leaders. So, the program must take the initiative in developing the candidates as culturally responsive leaders. The program faculty must be reflective and revisit their coursework and instructional practices. The course content must be research-based and practical. The faculty may need professional development to learn more about CRSL. Neighboring school districts and the leadership preparation program must work together to find out best practices and approaches for CSRL. The program faculty should visit nearby schools to learn more about the school culture and context. The school district and the leadership preparation program must put the K-12 students first to prepare Culturally Responsive School Leaders for every single student.

### **Limitations**

This study has some limitations. First, the data was limited as only the candidates' assignments were used for document analysis. Second, there was no opportunity to check whether the candidates wrote the assignments from their own experiences or whether they used other resources to complete the assignment. Third and finally, there was no observation of candidates' activity on CRSL.

### **Scope for Future Studies**

The findings have opened the scope for future studies. A qualitative case study could be conducted for the same group of aspiring leaders at the end of their program to check their

progress. Another qualitative case study may be beneficial to assess program faculty's effectiveness in developing culturally responsive school leaders. Finally, a quantitative descriptive study may be conducted in the neighboring schools to discover their common practices regarding CRSL.

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