

ENHANCING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
STUDY ON HOW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEADERS DEMONSTRATE CULTURAL  
PROFICIENCY IN TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

by

Dana Synora Jones

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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### **Abstract**

In education, a lack of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) may mute the success of students of color. A lack of culturally responsive pedagogy practices can drastically alter students' educational outcomes and their outlook on the value of education. This hermeneutic phenomenology explored the experiences of elementary school leaders on their mission to implement culturally responsive practices through teacher professional development. The theory guiding this study is Khalifa's theory on Culturally Responsive School Leadership which was developed to make teaching and the entire school environment responsive to the schooling needs of all demographics of children. This phenomenological study focused on teachers' and leaders' shared experiences implementing culturally responsive practices in our nation's most marginalized communities in an Eastern City. Through a hermeneutic framework, participants engaged in two forms of data collection: individual interviews and focus groups. The findings of this study highlighted a gap in both leaders' and teachers' understanding and development in CRP. As a result, self-development was the most common form of development used that varied in frequency and effectiveness. Recommendations for future studies should use quantitative data analysis to find the correlation between teachers' and leaders' cultural proficiency and teacher development to determine the organization's best approach to strengthening culturally responsive school practices.

*Keywords:* cultural responsiveness, practices, development, proficiency, elementary school

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to God, who gave me the unfathomable mental strength I needed to complete my dissertation.

I dedicate this to the memory of my father, who passed away but whose legacy of arduous work, determination, and perseverance flows through me.

To my mom, who gave me moral lessons on discipline from an earlier age and constantly encouraged me to reach my goals and to be the best person God has called me to be.

To my sister, who always dedicated time to be a thought partner, an editor, and a reviewer while I journeyed through each milestone of my dissertation.

To my friends and extended family that showed me grace and provided advice and encouragement along the way.

To my co-workers who provided different perspectives, insight, and motivation.

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I am grateful to my Chair, Dr. David Vacchi, for his continuous mentorship, guidance, and support throughout my dissertation journey. His mentorship and advice have challenged and propelled me to tackle a topic that is my passion and a study that can be transformative in school settings.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices (CRLP)

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)

Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL)

Community-Based Educational Systems (CBES)

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

*Cultural proficiency* is a continuous skill that all individuals in a school should exhibit to increase student achievement and engagement. Cultural proficiency can be taught through personal practices and teacher development in schools. An intentional shift to building cultural proficiency in educators involves developing leadership pedagogies, procedures, and policies that create inclusive schooling environments (Khalifa et al., 2016). This study will focus on the experiences of elementary school leaders and staff in their quest to implement proficient professional cultural practices through teacher development. Chapter 1 will provide an overview of the research problem, background information, situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, the significance of the study, research questions, and relevant definitions specific to this study. The following sections describe how each team will support the study's overall purpose and why this study is relevant in schools.

### Background

Over the years, quantitative research on culturally responsive leadership and student success has grown tremendously as educational researchers aim to address student achievement disparities. Many variables outline the differences among students in gender, race, socioeconomic status, parental unemployment, and more. Researchers' data has been instrumental in educators' ability to create extended- and short-term plans for their districts or organizations. However, quantitative data often limits our understanding of the significant achievement gap in the United States. Qualitative studies have been used to fill in those gaps that quantitative studies do not often capture by profoundly understanding the story behind the numbers in quantitative research. Behind the statistics, what narrative does each number

represent? How are those individuals' experiences being captured to make informed decisions? How can educational leaders replicate similar practices in their schools to achieve comparable results? This section will describe how culturally responsive techniques have evolved, social implications, and theoretical concepts or principles that support how monumental culturally responsive leadership can be in school settings.

### **Historical Context**

The United States educational system has endured significant opposition to creating equal opportunities for all students since the infamous *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) is a landmark case where the Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. (United States) laws establishing racial segregation in public schools are unconstitutional (Peters, 2019). Since the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling, the United States educational system has continued to push for equity and equality within public schools. In 1972, the Supreme Court refused to allow public school systems to avoid desegregation by creating new, mostly, or all-white splinter districts (*Wright v. Council of the City of Emporia; the United States v. Scotland Neck City Board of Education*) (Tillman, 2002). Later in 1995, the Supreme Court set a new goal for desegregation plans: to return schools to local control. It emphasizes again that judicial remedies were intended to be "limited in time and extent." (*Missouri v. Jenkins*) (Tillman, 2002).

However, amid racial desegregations in schools in 1990, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings challenged many scholars' views on what desegregation in schools means and how that impacts student achievement. Dr. Ladson-Billings coined the term culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) to help empower students to maintain cultural integrity while succeeding academically (Brion, 2019). Since her theory of CRP was developed, many researchers have used Dr. Ladson-Billings'



approach to conduct studies to revitalize teaching practices and student performance. Thousands of studies have used culturally responsive pedagogies as frameworks to perpetuate the need for more instructional shifts around non-Eurocentric cultures. Brown (2017) conducted a meta-synthesis study that examined 52 empirical articles on culturally relevant and responsive science education in K-12 settings to determine the nature and scope between culturally responsive and inquiry-based science practices in schools. Brown (2017) concluded that more studies highlight the implications of culturally responsive methods used in tandem with conceptual thinking in literacy and math.

In 2001, President George Bush's administration enacted the No Child Left Behind Act that mandated testing students in reading and math in grades 3-8 and again in high school. After 13 years of the No Child Left Behind Act, a new law called the "*Every Student Succeeds Act*" replaced the No Child Left Behind Act and the controversial problems it caused schools, families, students, and communities (Brown et al., 2018). It is essential to understand the historical context of the educational system in the United States, given that many laws have been established within the last 65 years. Because our country has been engrained in systemic racism in schools for decades, some policies, curricula, and teachings stem from similar ideologies. Nonetheless, many strides have been made in a positive direction that celebrates students and families of diverse backgrounds. However, significant work must be done to help standardize culturally responsive practices within schools (Esa et al., 2018).

### **Social Context**

Today, schools face the aftermath of segregation and systemic racism in their daily practices. History and previous studies highlight the disparities students in urban schools face as students struggle to graduate (DeRosa, 2017). Bae et al. (2020) highlight the magnitude of

student success gaps in urban schools compared to suburban schools. The average high school graduation rate in the nation's 50 largest cities was 53 percent, compared with 71 percent in the suburbs. However, data from 11,000 school districts studied by Sandford's researchers show that students' college rates steadily improved to 65 percent of the 2018 graduates (Wong, 2018). With the current demands of the economy and educational reform, it is imperative to improve student achievement even more. Mixed indicators are essential as educational leaders embark on the journey to find the key that repeatedly unlocks high student performance. With the current demand for culturally responsive teaching post-Brown v. Board of Education 66 years ago, it is essential to consider culturally sensitive leadership as a viable factor in student success. Leadership in urban schools creates the groundwork for principalship that fosters student success. Learning some strategic moves, educational leaders make to reduce inequities in education and create a culturally responsive system for all students and families is essential.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) is the baseline of what educators can do to ensure students obtain an equitable education. The pros of implementing a rigorous, culturally responsive education provide students with various skills to aid in communicating and receiving information and shaping their thinking process of groups and individuals (Ladson-Billings, 1994). However, a lack of CRP can have lasting impacts on minority students as it yields literacy gaps, inadequate health care, and opportunity gaps in the United States. The National Center for Education Statistics shows that 21% of adults in the United States (about 43 million) fall into the illiterate/functionally illiterate category. Two-thirds of fourth graders read below grade level, and the same number of graduates from high school are still reading below grade level (NCES, 2016). As educators aim to meet all students' needs, providing a multicultural educational experience that matches students' diverse backgrounds is necessary. Minority students continue

to perform below their White counterparts in reading, math, and standardized state testing (Wetzel et al., 2019), creating future opportunity gaps for minority students. Culturally responsive practices embedded in urban school systems can positively impact students' ability to increase brain processing motivation, cultivate critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and promote a sense of safety and belonging (Munez, 2019).

Unfortunately, opportunity gaps are another dominant factor in a lack of CRP. Students who cannot read and write often lose opportunities to go to college and be competitive in a work environment. This cycle of inequities can be traced back to a lack of a pluralistic school environment and literacy-rich classrooms. The social constructs that divide people create systemic barriers that continuously place illiterate individuals and minorities at a disadvantage. Educators promote one race over another through their teaching or hidden curriculum. Rather than viewing these students as deficient learners, culturally responsive pedagogy teaches students about their strengths while building bridges from home to school in meaningful ways (Koppelman, 2016). It sends subtle messages to students about the school's values and standards. When considering culturally responsive practices, diversifying schools' curricula can be additional way leaders commit to meeting all students' needs.

### **Theoretical Context**

Some modern theorists who have aided in rethinking cultural responsiveness and its implementation in various fields are Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Dr. Muhammad Khalifa. These theorists have created frameworks that support the academic movement that challenges American liberal approaches to racial justice. The theory of intersectionality (1991) and critical race theory (1989) by Kimberle Crenshaw continues to dominate many studies as they use each approach in tandem to support their research questions

(Agosto & Roland, 2018; Lomotey, 2019; Wetzel et al., 2019). Both theories examine how one political and social identity intersects and increases discrimination or privilege in various settings (Cho et al., 2013). However, the most prominent theory that seamlessly frames the purpose of this study is the theory of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) by Muhammad Khalifa. Within Khalifa's view, three premises focus on how school leaders can effectively serve marginalized students. Beliefs of CRSL are 1) cultural responsiveness is essential to successful school leadership, 2) cultural responsiveness will not flourish and succeed in schools without sustained efforts by school leaders to define and promote it, and 3) culturally responsive school leadership comprises several crucial leadership behaviors, which include critical self-reflection; the development of culturally responsive teachers; the promotion of inclusive, anti-oppressive school environments; and engagement with students' indigenous community contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Social interaction and human motivation are vital in scaffolding academics while interconnecting cultural proficiency. Several historical theories have examined direct foundational links to support understanding social interaction and human motivation. Some scholars have parallels in how social interaction and human motivation culturally propel responsiveness among individuals (Wetzel et al., 2019). Students learn through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1980), which aids in intrinsically motivating themselves or gaining motivation from peers and teachers. Chapter 2 will highlight more how social interaction aids in creating a culturally responsive classroom.

Additionally, the theory of human motivation (1943) suggests five basic needs to encourage individuals in the hierarchy of prepotency (Maslow & Press, 2019). The next higher need emerges when the most prepotent goal is realized (Maslow & Press, 2019). A precise

combination of intersecting motivation and self-actualization increases students' ability to succeed in various avenues (Hollins, 2006). Throughout this study, I will use the theory of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) as the theoretical framework for this study. Supplementary theories such as the theory of intersectionality, critical race theory, human motivation, and the theory of social interaction will emphasize the importance of teacher development while understanding how elementary school leaders embed cultural proficiency practices in teachers' development.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that a lack of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) may be muting the success of students of color. Teacher development around culturally responsive pedagogy often varies in frequency and authenticity, reflected in schools' curricula, policies, and future planning (Gaias et al., 2018). Unfortunately, culturally relevant practices are often simplified and relegated to little more than occasional group work or celebrating diverse cultures in ways that disregard individual interests and stereotype students (Byrd, 2016). Marginalized students are at a more significant disadvantage academically, socially, and economically in receiving equitable opportunities, and often the inequities they experience begin in their schools. Landa (2011) highlights the complexities in developing foundational knowledge about the nature of injustice and how it infests the educational experience of marginalized communities while bolstering access and opportunities for the privileged few.

### **Purpose Statement**

This hermeneutic phenomenology explores the experiences of elementary school leaders and teachers with implementing CRP in schools. Demographic data determines school location and predicts school performance and design. Within our nation's most powerful city, most Black

students are still underperforming compared to their White counterparts. This study examines Public Charter Schools within the Eastern City that were strategically placed and designed to close the achievement gap for Black and Brown students. Using a hermeneutic approach allows for participants' interpretations while highlighting the impact of CRP on educators' proficiency and student success.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study explores the experiences of elementary school leaders and teachers in ways they demonstrate cultural proficiency in schools. The findings of this study aid in suggesting teachers' educational practices and development throughout the year and support both long and short-term school goals. An empirical, theoretical, and practical significance will show what impact this study can have on future studies and how further to support our most marginalized students in urban areas.

### **Empirical Significance**

Significant quantitative studies highlight CRP's role in cultivating inclusive classroom environments and the correlation between student success and improving school climates. Qualitative studies have also shed light on how students, leaders, and teachers experience culturally responsive classroom practices. However, with significant research proving the effectiveness of CRP, there is a need for more studies on how effective CRP is in Charter Schools that were designed to close the achievement gap. Brion (2019) describes that the missing link to student success is proficiency around culturally responsive practices in schools. To ensure that all students have identity-affirming and engaging learning environments, schools must refer to what Khalifa (2016) calls a "critical consciousness." Critical consciousness within the CRSL Framework is an analytical self-reflection on school practices and commitments.

Charter schools in Eastern City have an extensive history of swiftly building new schools in urban areas to provide high-quality education for students (Mann et al., 2020). With the rapid increase of public charter schools in urban areas, schools often use teacher preparation programs that allow individuals without a degree to become teachers after their one-year residency program. Reducing the traditional four-year degree in education to a one-year residency program also reduces the skills and practices needed to support all students in urban cities, especially our most marginalized students. Charter schools have the autonomy to inflict change without navigating through red tape compared to traditional public schools. With the evolution of public charter schools on the rise and the charge for social reform, researchers must study the lack of CRP in schools and how it can mute student success.

### **Theoretical Significance**

Khalifa's (2016) framework on culturally responsive school leadership is the framework that guides this study. Within Khalifa's (2016) study, he provides in-depth attention to culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogies (Gay, 1994) from various theorists to challenge the idea that leadership in the postcolonial context is not relevant. Khalifa (2016) argues for a new and robust leadership approach incorporating appropriate strategies for school cultural issues (Khalifa et al., 2016). The premise that is stressed among scholars is that CRP begins with leadership. Within this study, my goal is to gather the experiences of both teachers and leaders on their quest to enact culturally responsive practices in schools and generate themes of their experiences. The articles generated from this study will add to existing literature and support schools' by bringing awareness to their current state of CRP and ways to strengthen or maximize their efforts in implementing CRP.

### **Practical Significance**

The Eastern City, unlike other US (United States) states and territories, strategically places most of its public charter schools in urban neighborhoods (Gulosino & Liebert, 2020). Within the Eastern City, Public Charter Schools continue to grow at an expedited rate to meet the needs of the students and communities. Statistically, public charter schools are placed in specific wards to fulfill their mission of closing the achievement gap (Gorski, 2016). Culturally responsive teachers can connect learning to students' lives while making meaningful connections with all students. This connection fosters a powerful sense of belonging and awareness of others that permeates the class and can translate to society. As teachers begin thinking about their student's future, it is equally important to consider the impact a culturally responsive education will provide. Providing diverse teaching and awareness to students will improve their ability to interact respectfully and ensure they gain knowledge and empathy for others. Culturally responsive leadership not only impacts technical school changes, but there is direct evidence of increased student achievement, teacher well-being, and organizational health (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). CRL's ripple effect continues to highlight positive outcomes. Nevertheless, the ability to replicate those strong practices needs to be clearly defined and outlined for other leaders to follow. We need to know more about the leadership strategies principals use to increase cultural proficiency in teachers to enact in different schools and programs.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions and sub-questions explored the problem of my study. Through participant interviews and focus groups, each research question will help guide the participants to provide additional perspectives on the phenomena.

#### **Central Research Question**



*What are the experiences of elementary charter school educators embedding a multicultural educational experience in school?* This question explores the experiences of both leaders and teachers as they strive to create an inclusive and anti-oppressive school environment (Khalifa et al., 2016).

### **Sub Question One**

*How do elementary school leaders develop teacher capacity for culturally responsive pedagogy in an academic and social context?* This question explores the practices and methods taught to teachers during teacher development to increase cultural proficiency (Khalifa et al., 2016).

### **Sub Question Two**

*How does the school environment promote a vision for inclusive instructional and behavioral practices?* This question explores the school's physical environment to encourage inclusivity that consciously reflects and celebrates all student backgrounds (Khalifa et al., 2016).

## **Definitions**

The following section provides definitions for terminology used in this study. Each term is defined and related to this study to develop a shared understanding of terms commonly used throughout this study.

1. *Achievement Gap*- unequal distribution of resources to schools and the impact of academic inequities on minority students, teachers, and schools (Gersten et al., 2020).
2. *Challenges*- an invitation or call to action on a specific barrier that impacts teachers, students, families, and the community (Carrol, 2017).
3. *Culturally Responsive Leadership*- leadership practices that emphasize lofty expectations for student achievement; incorporate the history, values, and cultural knowledge of

students' home communities in the school curriculum; and work to develop a critical consciousness among students and faculty to challenge inequities in the larger society. Culturally responsive leadership also creates inclusive organizational structures at the school and district level that empower students and parents from diverse racial and ethnic communities (Khalifa et al., 2016).

4. *Phenomenology*- A research tradition or strategy that focuses on the meaning of the lived experiences of several individuals about a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 57).
5. *Success* - teacher success is measured through many variables, such as instructional culture, instructional practice, student achievement, and collaboration (Carrol, 2017).

### **Summary**

This chapter highlights how culturally responsive practices should become standardized within our nation's most marginalized communities. The lack of normality in our most marginalized communities perpetuates the achievement gap in our nation country. This study aims to explore the experiences of elementary school leaders on their mission to implement cultural proficiency practices through teacher development. By profoundly understanding individuals' shared experiences around the phenomena, educators can use this qualitative data to inform their school culture and traditions. The following chapter will emphasize relevant literature supporting this study's purpose and identify gaps in past studies that advocate the need for this research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the experiences of elementary school leaders in their quest to implement cultural proficiency practices through teacher development. Chapter two encompasses a detailed overview of past and present literature that gradually evolved from the 1920s to present-day education reform. This chapter identifies gaps in the literature that seek more phenomenological data on the phenomena of systematizing culturally responsive practices, particularly in urban communities. Khalifa's theory of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) will be used to understand the research problem and guide the development, collection, and analysis of research in this study. Culturally responsive leadership and teacher development are critical to student success as teachers aim to embed specific practices into their daily routines. Byrd's (2016) research in an urban classroom on student success indicates that culturally relevant teaching elements were significantly associated with academic outcomes and ethnic-racial identity and development. Chapter two will provide an overview of the theoretical framework and related literature. I will outline CRSL and its relevance to the study within the theoretical overview. By incorporating similar concepts and principles, I will emphasize why CRSL is the most appropriate framework for this study. Subsequently, the following is the related literature section. Within this section, relevant literature will expose what is known and unknown about the phenomena. A detailed synthesis of each theme will be composed below.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study's theoretical framework is Khalifa's (2016) culturally responsive school leadership. Khalifa creates a framework that could cultivate highly effective school leaders by

strengthening their staff's self-awareness, inclusivity of all students, and family and student engagement in school (Khalifa, 2016). Khalifa (2016) strongly believes that behaviors can be taught and developed over time. These behaviors provide students with a robust multicultural education that ensures schools develop the whole child socially, emotionally, and academically. Each behavior of Khalifa's (2016) CRSL framework is designed to work in tandem with one another, building on the skills and practices of the previous behavior. The CRSL framework will guide the research problem and questions as leaders strive to produce a highly effective inclusive environment for all learners.

### **Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework**

Culturally responsive leadership has yielded substantial student achievement in Urban Schools (Hollins, 2006). To explain student achievement, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) in Washington, DC (District of Columbia) uses the 2020 DC School Report Card and STAR Framework to measure student achievement. OSSE uses a combination of many factors, such as academic achievement, academic growth, school environment, English language proficiency, graduation rate, and educational progress, to determine student achievement (OSSE, 2020). Unlike OSSE's (2020) approach to measuring student achievement, Boonk et al. (2018) consider parental involvement a leading indicator of student achievement and assert that parents' lofty expectations and ethnic/racial groups also determine the extent of student achievement. All factors will shape one's understanding of how students achieve and the various implications that support student growth, such as school leadership.

Khalifa's culturally responsive school leadership CRSL framework is the theoretical framework that will further explain why the research problem within this study exists. Khalifa's

CRSL framework has four essential components that Khalifa (2016) describes as leadership behaviors.

1. Critical Self-Reflection
2. The development of culturally responsive teachers
3. The promotion of inclusive and anti-oppressive school environments
4. Engagement with students' indigenous communities

Combining all four leadership behaviors yields culturally responsive classrooms and culturally proficient teachers (Khalifa, 2016). Each component of the CRSL framework will be taught and used to improve students' academic and social outcomes (Khalifa, 2016).

### **Critical Self-Reflection**

Critical self-reflection is the first behavior Khalifa describes in the CRSL framework. Within this behavior, leaders must understand that cultural competence is a continuous learning cycle that forces individuals to unlearn behaviors and assumptions and acknowledge biases about various cultures. The self-reflection that Khalifa (2016) describes must display a critical consciousness of practices in and out of school. To know if schools are meeting the goal of improving cultural proficiency, schools must also incorporate data-driven from families and students' families and drive to measure CRSL. Allowing families and students to voice their perspectives creates an opportunity to challenge Whiteness and hegemonic epistemologies in schools (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Through this transformative approach, leaders begin leading with courage and an intentional process toward building one's capacity for cultural competency.

### **The Development of Culturally Responsive Teachers**

Developing teachers' cultural competency is critical in CRSL as it supports teachers' development in finding new ways for teachers to be culturally responsive to the students they serve. Khalifa (2016) discusses the importance of developing teachers' capacity through professional development and explicit models. Yuan (2018) agrees that precise and detailed models catalyze evidence-based change in schools. Practical approaches promote teachers' pedagogical awareness and professional learning through effective modeling (Khalifa, 2016; Yuan, 2018). However, the CRSL framework creates culturally responsive professional development (PD) opportunities for teachers to practice and reflect on embedding culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in their daily instruction. While educators provide students with academic rigor and education, embedding opportunities for cultural connection can heighten students' experiences and deepen their understanding of academic skills (Khalifa, 2016).

### **Inclusive, Anti-Opressive School Environments**

The third behavior Khalifa describes is accepting indigenized and local identities, meaning that school programming should reflect the demographics of the students they serve. Traditionally schools have operated similarly by sharing similar approaches to designing curricula and instruction that do not reflect the demographics of their students (Khalifa, 2016; Khalifa, 2012). The opportunity to challenge exclusionary policies, teachers, and behaviors within this behavior is appropriate. Knowing the first behavior is designed around self-awareness, challenges focusing on exclusionary practices should be well accepted as schools aim to improve culturally responsive practices. Khalifa (2016) also emphasizes promoting a vision for inclusive and instructional behavioral practices. Embedding culturally responsive practices (CRP) in behavior management is what Kwok (2017) highlights as an indicator of improving student success. Racial biases play a role in determining the consequential actions of Black and

Brown students' behaviors at a higher rate than their White counterparts (Gibson et al., 2014). By strengthening teachers' and leaders' ability to create an inclusive school environment, schools' policies and structures must be challenged in ways that do promote CRP. To adequately measure school performance in achieving this goal, Khalifa (2016) recommends using school data to discover and track academic and disciplinary trend disparities.

### **Engages Students, Parents, and Indigenous Context**

The last behavior in Khalifa's CRSL framework focuses on how leaders can engage students, parents, and the indigenous context in cultivating meaningful, positive relationships with their community (Khalifa, 2016). Khalifa (2016) identifies that those leaders must find overlapping spaces for schools and districts to connect and collaborate. Often, schools serve students specifically in the community where the school resides and should create spaces for community-based causes in both school and the neighborhood community (Khalifa, 2016; Shelleby et al., 2018). The district serves as an informative space to develop a positive understanding of students and families that aids in building leaders' cultural awareness of their students. Through intentional engagement, leaders and teachers can build authentic relationships that allow students to feel seen, heard, and accepted by connecting directly with families and their community (Lomotey, 2019).

### **Operationalizing CRSL for this Study**

The CRSL framework will provide a baseline understanding of the phenomenon and future research needs throughout this study. CRSL will help inform my research and sub-research questions by exploring practices and methods used by leaders and teachers that implement culturally responsive practices (CRP) in schools. Generating research questions aligned to the CRSL's four tenants will streamline interview and focus group questions as I seek

to understand the phenomenon more. Furthermore, data analysis will later inform CRSL's tenants, precisely tenant one (critical self-reflection), tenant two (the development of culturally responsive teachers), and tenant three (the promotion of inclusive and anti-oppressive school environments) through clustering and thematizing participants' responses. Moustakas (1994) recommends clustering constituents' responses into thematic labels relevant to the study as a form of data analysis. Chapter five will present the findings of this study in an organized way by labeling each tenant to the themes generated from the interviews and focus groups.

### **Related Literature**

This section introduces a compilation of scholarly sources highlighting the need for continued research regarding culturally responsive practices in elementary schools. This section highlights how the U.S. educational system evolved from the 1920s to present-day education, beginning with a brief history of race and education. Bae et al. (2020), Brion (2019), and Wetzel et al. (2019) assert a need for continued research on how culturally responsive practices support minority students, particularly in elementary schools. Over time, many systems and laws were created to reduce the educational divide in America, but the gap continues to widen. Some scholars (Karada et al., 2015; Newcomer and Cowin, 2018) suggest that our educational system should be further regarding literacy rates, funding, educational resources, diversity of courses, and socioemotional student needs we are not. Going as far back as 1919, the National Center for Education (NCES) Report (1993) traces over 120 years of educational reform in the U.S., demonstrating why cultural proficiency practices matter and how it directly impacts minority students' academic outcomes.

### **History of Race and Education**



When scholars discuss race and education in America, it is often coupled with the infamous *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, case as the original act of change in the educational system. Nevertheless, a deeper dive into the history of race and education highlights a continuous evolution of change that exceeds over generations. Schools in America over 100 years ago were drastically different in many ways. Systems and laws were created to improve the education structure as time progressed. Going as far back as 1919, Cuban (1993) describes a standard classroom by highlighting the separation of students by gender, the disproportioned standards taught, and classrooms centered around religion. More recently, Karada et al. (2015) describe how the evolution of education has moved away from separation of gender to separation of race, which yields a more significant psychological and trauma-induced impact on minority students. Over the years, research on how the educational system began highlights a pattern of evolution reflecting social needs and a push for school equity. By striving towards equity, many changes to how leaders approached education shifted.

The first Department of Education, formerly the Office of Education or Bureau of Education, was established in 1867 to promote education's "condition and progress" in the United States (McGuinn, 2015). Before installing the Department of Education, educational attainment was not a priority; children worked from early childhood to adulthood. Education became a primary focus once the child labor laws forced many children out of harsh working conditions (Byrd, 2016). To further understand the evolution of education in America, a 1993 National Center for Education (NCES) Report documented 120 years of trends in U.S. education. This detailed report assessed race, gender, age, geography, enrollment rates, attainment levels, public and private schools, and elementary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions (McGuinn, 2015). From 1919 to 1920, NCES Report noted that approximately 60% of white

children and 50% of Black and other races were enrolled in schools. Schools were still separated by race during this era, which was the norm in America. Race or gender often separated students for generations. It was not until the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* that racial segregation became unconstitutional (McConnell, 1995).

During the era of segregation in America, race was the only factor for access. Access to education, jobs, housing, and funding were inadequacies emphasized even more during segregation. Such disparities widened the gap in the educational opportunities that black and brown students did not receive. The 1993 NCES Report shows only a 10% difference between 1919 and 1920 regarding student school enrollment. There was a 34-year difference from 1920 to 1954 when the *Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, was decided. The desire to seek equality widens the educational attainment gap at a greater rate post-*Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka*. After the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansa*, the hopes for the educational system were to remove race as a factor and focus on students as individuals (Brion, 2019). This legal victory did not improve the educational system overnight; racial segregation's implication on the educational system is still felt today. The educational outcomes for many minority students continue to depreciate post-1920s (Bielick & Chapman, 2003).

The goal of integration was to provide equal access to the same education that white students received. However, as schools began to integrate, cultural assimilation began to overcompensate for the idea of integration. *Integration* can be defined as ending race-based segregation in public and private schools (Swanson, 2017). In contrast, assimilation is often referred to as a minority group or culture resembling society's majority group or assuming the majority group's values, behaviors, and beliefs partially or fully (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2006). A

greater perspective of assimilation and its impact on cultures can be traced to the work of Robert Park, a sociologist at the University of Chicago from 1914 to 1936. Park (1914) explained how every society wants some degree of a melting pot of cultures where diverse groups can integrate into some capacity. However, Ghaffar-Kucher (2006) noted that even in communities where integration was a focus, minorities often had to assimilate into the majority's standard way of living to reduce inner turmoil, confusion, and hate for their culture. Subconsciously, integrated spaces would highlight the American standard of white and would perpetuate this standard through movies, commercials, toys, and more. Children would grow up knowing what was accepted by society and could determine whether they were a part of the norm (Eguia, 2017). As assimilation began to overcompensate, the desire for integration lessened as black and brown families tried to adopt the white standard that permeated all aspects of life. Assimilation is where one begins to see black girls altering their natural hair to adapt to cultural norms and alter how they speak to adjust.

Assimilation is a barrier that often gets mistaken for what integration should have been and can even cause our country's lack of growth toward reducing the educational gap. Minority students forced to conform to their White peers will always suffer at an extreme rate. At the same time, assimilation has always been a forceful tactic in the U.S. Berumen (2019) that deprives minorities of their cultures. In 2017, a public charter school in Boston, Massachusetts, banned hair extensions for Black girls because they were deemed distracting, while their White counterparts could wear hair extensions (Rushton, 2001). Programs and systems were created to ensure that Black and Brown students received a high-quality education despite the color of their skin. As race and education connect, many facets of schooling emerged to counteract the imbalance of educational attainment for minority students (Gulosino & Liebert, 2020).

## **Programs and Systems for Minority Students**

Many well-known organizations and programs have been created to support dismantling racial discrimination's legal basis in the educational system (Cummins, 2011). A few studies (Sizemore, 1983 and McGuinn, 2015) have examined minority-centered programs and systems' direct and indirect impact to decipher their effectiveness comparable to private intuitions in suburban neighborhoods. Sizemore's (1983) report investigated organizational factors important to producing quality education in three-high achieving elementary schools with predominately poor and black student populations. Sizemore's (1983) report found that an "anomaly" of success in schools began with an authoritarian principle that generated a climate of ambitious standards and expectations of students. However, Sanborn & Thyne's (2014) secondary analyses of 85 authoritarians indicated that education is most effective when democratization is a grounding principle of school success. As democratic practices began to ensue in the educational system, researchers began to consider ways to deviate from strict authoritarian regulations that studies continue to show are ineffective for black and brown students.

As the U.S. educational system slowly departed from its authoritarian ways, laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title VI protected people from discrimination based on race, color, or national origin (Kuo, 2015). Additionally, programs and activities that received federal assistance from the U.S. Department of Education were also covered by Title VI. Numerous organizations throughout the United States were created to support Black youth through educational opportunities. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children)) compiled an extensive list of educational organizations to address the African American achievement gap. Organizations that focus on various subjects from STEM, music, and safety to academics are

outlined on NAEYC's website depicting their role in cultural and academic development. Baldrige's (2020) case study studied the complexity of community-based educational spaces (CBES) and found that additional academic and social programs improve students' academic and social performance after school. However, the U.S. Department of Education recently named the challenge for U.S. schools to persistently close achievement gaps comparable to international competitors. Many countries have had tremendous success in closing the achievement gaps—which remain stubbornly wide in the United States. Structural barriers, including inequitable funding systems, impede our progress (Gibson et al., 2014). The U.S. Department of Education's (2015) expenditure report found that 45% of high-poverty schools received less state and local funding than other districts (Espinosa et al., n.d.). While many hope that low-income neighborhoods receive more state funding, that is unfortunately not true for many communities. We know that minority students traditionally attend college at a lower rate than their peers and are suspended, expelled, or dropped out at higher speeds (Minkos et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, both reports from Baldrige's (2020) case study and the U.S. Department of Education's (2015) expenditure report highlight a greater need for funding in poverty-stricken communities. Although the U.S. Department of Education's (2015) expenditure report and Baldrige's (2020) case study findings can be deemed inconsistent, it is essential to note that public schools in urban areas are where most students attend school and receive less funding compared to their White counterparts in adjacent neighborhoods. For this reason, charter schools are becoming a viable alternative to public schooling due to their unique design and school autonomy.

### **Evolution of Charter Schools**

The evolution of Public Charter schools in America has gained public acceptance and controversy over the last 20 years. Many scholars (Baude et al., 2020; Berends et al., 2018); (Mann et al., 2020) continue to debate the effectiveness of public charter schools as a viable option for students where public school is not the best fit; due to the realization that public Charter Schools are often concentrated in urban communities and more petite in affluent neighborhoods, their effectiveness is often discussed. In the U.S., most marginalized communities are being infiltrated by Public Charter schools at an alarming rate. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) report, Charter Schools exist in 43 states, including Guam, Puerto Rico, and Washington, DC (District of Columbia) (District Columbia). Nearly 74% of charter school students in urban areas are Black or Hispanic, and approximately 69% of charter schools in urban areas receive free or reduced lunch (Mahatmya et al., 2016). Many charter schools across the U.S. are coded as independent school districts because they operate autonomously from local education agencies (LEA) (Baude et al., 2020).

### ***School Autonomy in Public Charter Schools***

School autonomy is critical to Public Charter Schools' success (Fox & Buchanan, 2017). Some scholars attribute charter schools' successes to their ability to be autonomous in their structure. Nonetheless, autonomy allows charter schools flexibility regarding finance, personnel, curriculum, and instruction (Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017). Most charter schools use school autonomy when soliciting teachers to join instead of traditional public schools (Berends et al., 2018). Charter schools can choose and adjust curricula based on school trends and student data (Gleason, 2017). Shakeel's (2021) and Cheng's (2017) qualitative study measured the impact of public charter schools on student success. Many variables were used in the qualitative studies that highlight that a diverse and multicultural education created a rigorous environment for

students to learn. A few studies have examined the direct and indirect links between student achievement and school autonomy in public charter schools. In one of the earliest investigations on this topic, Reddy et al. (2020) showed that student achievement is correlated to numerous variables such as curriculum and instruction. Reddy et al.'s (2020) study collected data from public and public charter schools to measure academic and cultural achievement across kindergarten through third grade. Most researchers (Baker, 2018; Harrington et al., 2020; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2019) deem kindergarten through third-grade students' most critical years for developing readers. What is most intriguing about this study is that the researchers used the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which tests reading and math skills every year and pulled a sample from that data and showed an improvement of .31 standard deviation, equivalent to one year's worth of learning (Shakeel, 2021).

To explain the differences between public and charter schooling, Flanders (2017) uses the argument on economic theories to highlight the devolution of power to the lowest possible levels to produce gains in inefficiency. Flanders (2017) reiterates that those *on the ground* are more effective at monitoring expenditures and allocating resources that must be passed through less red tape. Student data highlights school autonomy as charter schools' most significant success in student achievement. By eliminating the red tape that traditional public schools must go through, administrators can be more responsive to student needs based on the demographics of their schools (DeAngelis & Barnard, 2021).

### ***Impact of Public Charter Schools in Urban Cities***

Over the years, research surrounding the effectiveness of charter schools continues to be a topic of debate amongst educational leaders and policymakers as charter schools continue to expand, predominately in urban communities. Mann et al. (2020) consider charter schools a form of gentrification and explore charter schools' impact on urban educational ecosystems. In Mann

et al.'s (2020) qualitative study, his findings describe why charter schools are highly concentrated in urban areas. Many factors arose, such as location, preference of philanthropists, and community demand, which were mentioned as viable reasons to build new charter schools. Gulosino & Liebert (2020) later describes charter schools in urban communities as a positive attribute, given that they outperform their suburban counterparts. Using student achievement as a primary data collection, it is evident that charter schools are great for urban communities. Charter schools continue to perform similarly to public schools, from their autonomy of curriculum and instruction to their discipline-heavy school cultures.

However, cultural proficiency questions tend to be the least discussed or argued amongst scholars. However, Coughlan (2018) and Wells et al. (2019) explore the impact of culturally responsive practices and proficiency in urban communities. Coughlan's (2018) and Wells et al.'s (2019) research show that teachers' firm commitments to culturally responsive teaching (CRT), understanding of behaviors, and a keen sense of efficacy in teaching diverse students create positive outcomes for students. Knowing that cultural proficiency is a specific attribute of student achievement and success, it is equally important to determine how this is conducive. Brown & Makris (2018) describe it as a prestige element. Schools that can increase academic rigors for all learners and provide a culturally proficient learning experience for all students have the prestige element that cultivates a positive educational environment.

Kwok (2017) used a mixed-method approach to deeply understand the correlation between new teacher preparedness and classroom management behavior. Kwok (2017) found that more than 90% of teachers incorporated more than one management belief system to understand better how each variable is interconnected. Less than 10% of teachers conceptualized classroom management as only one style focused on building student relationships. As a result of



charter schools rapidly increasing their dominance in urban communities, this study asks *why*? To what extent are leaders developing teachers' cultural proficiency if charter schools are predominantly in urban communities, and most charter schools permeate these schools with first-year teachers? Data suggests that different practices predict students' adverse outcomes, including repeat suspensions, dropouts, and incarceration (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). Flynn & Korcuska (2018) study revolved around behavior management skills through training and one-on-one coaching to reduce school behavior incidents. The role of race and racial bias in how behaviors of Black students are socially constructed as suspendable offenders are double that of their white counterparts (Gibson et al., 2014). Studies (Ockerman et al., 2015; Gulosino & Liebert, 2020; Mann et al., 2020) emphasize racial biases in black youths' behaviors and how they are more likely to be targeted and given longer and harsher punishments for disciplinary infractions. The need for more proficiency in understanding cultural awareness and student behaviors increases negative student behavior. Educators must be consistently and adequately trained in the diverse students in their class and how they manage them.

Nevertheless, strong, culturally responsive practices begin with leadership (Coughlan, 2018). Leaders must be culturally proficient in their administration, curriculum selection, and school culture to lead teachers on those skills in their classes. A deeper dive into culturally responsive leadership will heighten educators' awareness of increasing culturally responsive teaching.

### **Culturally Responsive Leadership**

To further explain culturally responsive leadership, recent studies suggest that a continuous cycle of learning and refinement proved successful in student achievement (Eric, 2011). It improves learning outcomes through teacher preparation and development. The

transforming practice in Urban schools' case study (2006) and the EPIC Leadership development program evaluation report (2011) provide various multicultural education perspectives on urban schools. Researchers identified a shift focusing on the "magic" of culturally responsive pedagogy and how teachers should critically prepare diverse classroom experiences (Phuntsog, 1999).

The emphasis on leadership and teacher development, student success, school systems, and practices in behavior management all impact the students' environment. Research continues to provide powerful outcomes of the related variables that ultimately lead to a need for a culturally responsive environment that fosters student success (Connolly et al., 2019). What current literature highlights (Brion, 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Minkos et al., 2017) is the ongoing need for cultural proficiency in the workplace and the continued push for integrating cultural awareness into lessons as students become more self-aware and aware of others around them. Leaders and teacher development must integrate similar practices to create an environment of inclusivity and diversity. Hillard (2015) suggests that a blended learning approach allows educators to personalize learning opportunities for everyone. Using Connolly et al.'s (2019) and Hillard's (2015) approach, all stakeholders can experience a learning environment that reflects the needs of all individuals, from classrooms to professional development.

### **Culturally Responsive Classrooms**

Culturally responsive classrooms reflect teachers' and leaders' cultural proficiency (Hall & Mahoney, 2013). It is how teachers and leaders embed cultural practices into their teaching and daily interactions with all students. Recent findings indicate an increase in minority students' suspension rates. Thomas-Alexander & Harper's (2017) research in urban classrooms investigates teachers' beliefs and confidence levels concerning working with diverse urban

students. They have traced some antecedents to teachers' beliefs and perceptions about their students to manage classroom behavior. Thomas-Alexander & Harper's (2017) and DeMatthews' (2016) studies share similar findings in tracing the disproportionate social policies back to teachers' knowledge around behavior management styles that are not principal-based but compliance-based. These two cases draw upon the critical race and social justice theories that explore multiple education and behavior management approaches that differ from traditional methods.

Multicultural education is often intertwined in conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) or culturally responsive teaching. The general topics addressed when discussing multicultural education can range from response to intervention plans to examining policy, culture, and leadership. Culturally responsive instruction has been associated with positive academic outcomes for students of color, including improved achievements, attitudes, and identities (Brown et al., 2018). For this reason, incorporating books and activities do not merely support the overall development of the whole child. DeMatthews (2016) argues that this approach limits students' understanding of a group of people to a simple activity that often rejects the ever-present issues, ideas, suffering, and problems they face. Unfortunately, this is the approach schools tend to take as they strive for a culturally responsive classroom. The recent finding indicates that a lack of understanding of culturally responsive practices limits class discussions and authentic knowledge of cultural groups while creating a false narrative of people and cultures (Brown et al., 2018). Not only do teachers in urban schools lack consistent development to implement culturally responsive practices, but it is equally evident how these gaps contribute to the disproportioned suspension rates of minority students. When the course fails to discuss multiculturalism regarding tolerance and color-blindness, they fail to provide

students with a compelling rationale or viable means to examine social justice and equity issues and, thereby, become inspired to take action against the social inequities they yield (Chaplin, 2019).

However, a transformation approach changes the curriculum structures to encourage students to gain a holistic view of culture by embedding diversity as a basic premise of instruction (Banks, 1999). This commitment to diversity shifts the narrative of people and holidays to understanding the importance of multiple cultures and their contributions to society. Teachers are instructors and role models who can shape the classroom climate by incorporating diversity (Abacioglu et al., 2019). When the curriculum embeds diversity seamlessly, it becomes part of daily conversations that allow students to understand many people and groups holistically. Nonetheless, teacher development must support the curriculum and policy changes to enable culturally responsive classrooms to emerge.

### **Leadership and Teacher Development**

Leadership styles impact how leaders exemplify diversity in their practices and school culture. In the effect of educational leadership on student achievement, a meta-analysis revealed that instructional leadership has a medium impact on student leadership (Karada et al., 2015). The meta-analysis results in correlate with Byrd's (2016) nationwide survey seeking student success in urban classrooms. Although these studies were a year apart, explaining the correlation between the two factors is critical. Byrd's (2016) analysis and the meta-analysis of Karada et al. (2015) indicate that leadership can shift the focus of teacher development and the impact leadership has on student success. Those two studies highlight the direct correlation, so we can predict that good leadership practices support teacher development and student success.

An extensive literature review on multicultural education highlights that expanding teacher development perpetuates an inclusive and equitable classroom where students of marginalized communities show higher rates of academic achievement (Parkhouse et al., 2019), motivation (Vygotsky, 1980), self-confidence, and self-efficacy. Students who have their basic needs met at the most basic level are motivated to achieve specific needs faster than those whose basic needs still need to be completed (Maslow, 1943). The need for love and belonging is the third stage in Maslow's hierarchy of needs model. The need for love and belonging is emphasized first at home and again in school. Abbas' (2020) study provides qualitative evidence from a student perspective using Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and found that relationships with people and social networking work simultaneously to build confidence and self-esteem. These skills can be taught and embedded into daily practice with planning. As leaders create their school plan for the upcoming year, they are often faced with questions regarding the *feel* of the school and how they want every person to feel entering their space. Educators are making strides towards inclusivity by intentionally planning activities and lessons around the community and belonging (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018). Exploring how emotional intelligence can support the organization's work culture and engagement within the above-mentioned high-level approaches is equally important. Milhem et al. (2019) highlight the importance of employee engagement and transformational leadership and their effect on employee engagement for the mediating role of emotional intelligence.

### **Diversity Equity and Inclusion Training and Development**

The standard view of diversity equity and inclusion (DEI) training programs in schools is widely accepted (Naidoo, 2017). Comprehensive training in DEI allows teachers and leaders to effectively meet students' behavioral, social, and academic needs. Teacher development supports

individuals in classrooms through instructional cultural practices that would enable students to identify their strengths and make a personal connection to a variety of lessons and skills. A comprehensive review of DEI training and development provides a comprehensive analysis of two broad questions. First, how do DEI training and development impact teachers and students? Second, what is the adverse effect of a lack of DEI training and development in teachers and students?

Recent studies (Mahatmya et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016) sought answers to both questions through various qualitative studies that examined policy, culture, and leadership. Matthews (2016) discussed the discipline and implementation of approaches disproportionately used against African American students and other marginalized groups when there was no DEI training for staff. Mathews (2016) also found gaps in the student discipline model among school leaders and how various understandings of the discipline models enhance the discipline gap among all students, especially minorities. In comparison, Mahatmya et al. (2016) investigated the responses from students and teachers and their perception of school connectedness, teachers' cultural awareness, and moderating effects of students' race. Both studies share findings that teachers' cultural awareness relates to teacher-student perceptions of school connectedness regarding educational attainment.

Data suggests that different approaches predict students' adverse outcomes, including repeat suspensions, dropouts, and incarceration. Furthermore, Naidoo (2017) emphasizes how professional development models can address exclusionary discipline practices in response to behavior management challenges in classrooms and schools. It is a general belief that DEI training is needed; however, the frequency and competency of teacher development are where many schools need to catch up (Marrun, 2018).

## **Teacher and Leader Cultural Competency**

Teacher and leader cultural competency begins with how teachers were developed (Khalifa, 2016). Some individuals may naturally have this skill, while others may take time to unlearn past behaviors and build new skills in their classrooms. As leaders strive to develop teachers' cultural competency, they must first acknowledge where their school and staff use a competency measure. The increase in diversity has urged teachers to cultivate their intercultural competence that supports their culturally competent schools (Naidoo, 2017; Hajisoteriou et al., 2019). Past literature (Kwok, 2017; Khalifa, 2016; Robinson et al., 2020) argues the need to develop teachers' ability to bridge the gap between academics and cultural awareness. Robinson et al. (2020) emphasize that teachers are responsible for cultivating and creating human rights education in their classrooms. One of the essential functions of education is the enlightenment of diverse perspectives that focuses on cultural exchanges (Frasineanu, 2014). Khalifa (2016) and Frasineanu (2014) argue that the responsibility to cultivate cultural competency begins with the school, but these two researchers differ on whose duty to build one's competency. Teachers' autonomy in developing their cultural competency could potentially create a variance in what skills are being developed. Additionally, the measure used to determine teacher competency would not yield accurate results, given that each approach could differ. Arguably, Harju-Luukkainen et al. (2019) place the responsibility on leaders to display a level of critical consciousness and development for teachers as it provides robust data to determine its effectiveness.

## **Alternative Teacher Preparation Programs**

The traditional path to becoming an educator has evolved. The need to enroll in an undergraduate program and obtain your bachelor's degree in education is one of many ways to

become a licensed educator. Public charter schools have a Teacher Training program that allows individuals to become teachers instead of enrolling in a traditional undergraduate program.

Teacher preparation programs are often interchanged with teacher residency programs catering to individuals who have acquired their undergraduate degrees but want to obtain teacher licensure (Whitford et al., 2018). One benefit of teacher residency programs is individuals' three-year commitment when enrolling. It is common for Public Charter schools to have their teacher residency program or to receive first-year teachers in public charter schools due to low teacher retention rates. The Department of Education recently authored an alarming article highlighting that 50% of teachers leave education within the first five years (Gulosino & Liebert, 2020).

The year-long program that teaches residents to engage in often leaves teachers unprepared and equipped to provide high-quality education to their students. Antecol et al. (2013) and Kwok (2017) emphasize the relationship between instructional quality and classroom management for beginning urban schoolteachers. Kwok's (2017) mixed-methods study focuses on new teacher preparedness in behavior management and classroom management in Urban schools and found how unprepared first-year teachers feel before the beginning of the school year. Gulosino & Liebert (2020) and Kwok (2017) described how many first-year teachers focus on behavior and academics when managing their classrooms. The correlation between the two, academics and behavior, primarily impacts student success in school. It has been suggested that teacher residency programs differ in how non-traditional educators obtain their licensures based on their program of choice (Van Overschelde & Wiggins, 2020). The problem is that many first-year teachers from teaching residency programs begin their trajectory in urban charter schools. Unprepared educators lead our nation's most vulnerable populations with minimal cultural competency around the students they teach. The National Center for Education Statics (2018)



presented data that shared that only 50% of public charter school educators must have their licensure. Public schools tend to attract more experienced teachers due to the stability that charter schools do not have.

### **CRSL's Influence on Behavior Management Systems**

Proactive behavior management and culturally responsive teaching significantly impact student behavior and engagement (Larson et al., 2018). A few studies correlate with behavior (Bae et al., 2020) management and culturally responsive teaching and how essential it has become for educator training to teach about implicit biases and how they are unconsciously translated into the classroom. Mandatory implicit bias training will allow staff time to unlearn their behaviors and attitudes, as their experiences may unconsciously impact their students' perceptions. This training will also enable teachers to understand better the backgrounds of students from different races and cultures.

Behavior management systems are in dire need of being culturally responsive. Studies show how Black students continue to be disproportionally represented in exclusionary disciplinary actions such as office referrals, suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to the office and school counselors for disruptive behavior (Larson et al., 2018). Although disciplinary methods such as suspension and expulsion have not been associated with reducing student problem behaviors, they are still extensively used among African American students in Urban Schools (Johnson et al., 2018).

### **Leadership Systems and Practices**

Leadership systems and practices ensure a positive classroom environment and school culture. The findings from previous studies show the importance of instructional leadership principals managing change (Connolly et al., 2019; Esa et al., 2018; Goodman-Scott et al.,

2018). Educators are the heart of the school that embodies the core values and principles upon which the school is built. The terms systems and practices should interconnect the two variables when considering principal leadership and student success. Researchers attest that educational leadership influences others in educational settings to achieve goals that necessitate actions of some kind (Connolly et al., 2017). Some scholars refer to this paradigm in the familiar African Proverb, “It takes a village” (Monye, 1992). A recent Case study focuses on how positive leadership systems support urban middle schools. The case study included positive school outcomes and the emergence of four themes: the importance of administrative leadership, creating consistency, building community, and school counselor integration (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018). The key to student success encompasses many interchangeable variables that work seamlessly to support the whole child. Transformational leadership is the ability of a leader to identify a need and create a vision to guide others through the image to execute the change within their organization (Bryman et al., 2011). Researchers within this study focus on conflict management styles, problem-solving, and employee engagement to implement change.

### **Principal Influence on Systems and Practices**

Culturally responsive principal leadership sets the standard that other leaders and teachers follow. Principals' intentionality in fostering an equitable learning environment for all students will yield student success. Effective principals can aid in bridging the gap between theory and practice to show the vital work that can be done to help teachers and leaders examine their views on racial and socioeconomic factors that impact the instruction of students and school culture (Mette et al., 2016). Sarah Newcomer and Kathleen Cowin (2018) refer to this idea as a socially just leader. Principal influence has powerful outcomes in students' lives and the families they serve. It is the idea of being a social justice leader (Newcomer & Cowin, 2018) and advocating

for students by bringing awareness to teachers to unpack their unconscious biases. The systemic changes that leaders can make begin within the school, starting with the adults in the building. Mette et al. (2016) suggest that future research shows the impact leadership can have on culturally responsive practices. Teachers and students benefit from incorporating an inclusive classroom due to the inclusivity of multicultural lessons embedded within teacher practices and curricula. While aware of the multiple methods and skills teachers must incorporate into their daily routines, educators must also note the intersectionality of those leading to specific development.

### **Culturally Responsive Leadership in Curriculum and Instruction**

A recent review of Baker's (2018) case study on multicultural education focuses on teachers, leaders, and school districts dedicated to ensuring students in urban city schools have outstanding academic leadership that perpetuates graduation rates, college acceptance, and workforce-ready compliance. Public Charter schools are uniquely designed to allow leaders in their network to create a school with more autonomy compared to public schools. To tackle the most recent academic achievement phenomenon in urban schools, researchers must identify barriers that hinder students' success and the overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage known as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) coined the term intersectionality to describe how interconnected social categorizations are imposed on people, especially those in urban neighborhoods. Students rarely achieve prominent self-actualization with race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and class (Maslow & Press, 2019). Crenshaw (1991) denotes that intersectionality is not catered to one specific race. Still, it is when the interconnection of social categorizations, often regarding minority groups, places individuals or a group of people at a disadvantage. Over the years,

research has shown how intersectionality impeded the traditional school setting for minority students. Robinson et al. (2016) explore the gap between the theory of intersectionality and the practice of implementing both approaches within various groups. Robinson et al. (2016) study found that applying an intersectionality lens to education yields a greater success rate than Abdulrahim & Orosco (2020) among minorities.

Public Charter schools are designed uniquely, allowing the creation of curriculum and instruction to be influenced by the demographics of the students they serve. Santone (2018) argues that charter schools' autonomy is essential to student success. Khalifa (2016) expresses how school leadership must model how to improve culturally responsive practices. By considering all barriers students face and determining strategic ways to support academic learning in schools, students begin to feel more connected and appreciated in their education (Santone, 2018).

### **Student Success**

A few studies have examined the direct and indirect links between principal behaviors and student and teacher outcomes. David D. Liebowitz and Lorna Porter of the University of Oregon (2019) published the most recent study linking the two variables. This meta-analysis finds direct evidence of the relationship between principal behaviors and student achievement, with a standard deviation ranging from 0.08–to 0.16 SD (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). Given the high demand for urban school student achievement, this data is a precursor for student achievement. Typically, these institutions are often the most difficult to lead, given the less trained teachers, the numerous social and health issues, the revolving door for teachers, and much more, including socioeconomic issues, unemployment issues, the prison pipeline, drugs, and an opportunity gap experienced by students in these schools (Lomotey, 2019). So,

leadership's principal effect on student achievement in urban schools is often demanding on leaders, teachers, and students. Some researchers refer to this desire as the "Urban Factor." Mainstream media often propagates two dichotomous depictions of urban education. At times, urban is either *good* or *bad*, or *Black* or *White*; conversely, it is also both/and exists in a gray area (Farinde-Wu, 2018). Despite urban schools' persistent challenges, the leaders who integrate robust leadership systems and teacher leadership into student outcomes tend to find the most successful (Sebastian et al., 2017).

School leadership's importance and commitment to increasing diversity and promoting a culturally rich environment will impact student success. However, studies show only a moderate attribution rate. Examining the impact of student success and its varying factors can ensure that all students succeed in rural and urban neighborhoods. Researchers are primary attributes in student achievement: a balance of intentional leadership, robust curriculum, and student motivation. Studies show the disparities between students in urban and suburban schools, and the educational divide is still apparent (Khalifa et al., 2016). Often, urban schools face disproportionately allocated resources' most significant challenges and impact. Because of the widespread educational divide, we are failing our students as educational leaders. Our lack of effect on closing the range and allocating more resources and structures to our failing schools hinders student success.

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Over the years, research has grown tremendously in educational leaders' quest to prepare students for college and the workforce. Because school funding heavily revolves around student success and school culture, educational leaders must cognize of explicit attributes of student success and how to implement them. Cultural proficiency in teacher development can help yield student success. Spiess and Cooper (2020) emphasized the importance of developing more effective ways to predict and support cultural proficiency development as a necessary step to take in efforts to improve student outcomes. Brion (2019) often refers to cultural proficiency as the missing link to student success. In both studies, Spiess & Cooper (2020) and Brion (2019) discuss how a lack of training around cultural awareness among school leaders significantly impacts student achievement and success.

History and previous studies highlight the disparities students in urban schools face as students struggle to graduate (DeRosa, 2017). Leu et al. (2015) emphasize the magnitude of student success gaps in urban schools compared to suburban schools. The average high school graduation rate in the nation's 50 largest cities was 53 percent, compared with 71 percent in the suburbs (Dillon, 2009). However, data from 11,000 school districts studied by Sandford's researchers show how students' college rates steadily improved to 65 percent of 2018 graduates (Wong, 2018).

The educational divide in the United States continues to evolve. As of 2012, the white-black and white-Hispanic achievement gaps were 30-40% smaller than in the 1970s. Nonetheless, the holes are huge, ranging from 0.5 to 0.9 standard deviations, and continue to evolve given the digital divide (NCES, 2020). The lack of resources, funding, staff, licensed professionals, and family engagement are external factors contributing to educational equity's demise. This future study will focus on internal shifts to ensure schools' leadership prepares to support teachers and staff in navigating external challenges while improving student outcomes. Measurable outcomes will include graduation rates, teacher and student satisfaction, attendance, and student social and emotional growth. Although my study is not the key to unlocking all student success, it will create a platform that contains the most recent and relevant research on the educational divide in the United States. Our work as educational leaders is never-ending; internal school support focusing on intersectionality and principalship will support students in urban schools to achieve academic success. Leaders must make essential parallels between culturally responsive principalship and intersectionality.

With the current demands of the economy and educational reform, it is imperative to improve student achievement even more. Mixed indicators are essential as educational leaders embark on the journey to find the key that repeatedly unlocks high student performance. With the current demand for culturally responsive teaching post-Brown v. Board of Education (1954), 66 years ago, it is essential to consider culturally sensitive leadership as a viable factor in student success. Leadership in urban schools creates the groundwork for principalship that fosters student success. Hinton et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of educational leaders embarking on their quest to promote student growth; ensuring that students feel both seen and known is a critical component in achieving various school milestones.

## **Hidden Curriculum in Elementary Schools**

Educational developers play a critical role as change agents when writing school curricula. Curricular writing is an intensive process in which faculty constantly strive to find improved ways to teach different skills to students (Alsubaie, 2015). This critical role of the curriculum developers aids in shaping instructional programs and systems within a school, thus forming the groundwork for all teachers' lesson plans to implement cultural relevancy within each domain. Recent studies have examined the impact of curricular change and teachers' perceptions of the change process (Bens et al., 2020; Grobler et al., 2017). Researchers argue that school leadership directly informs teachers' competency on curriculum changes and how they should implement specific changes in their classes (Bens et al., 2020); (Burritt, 2020; Grobler et al., 2017). According to Alsubaie (2016), the biggest threat to curriculum changes is teachers' lack of awareness around specific changes that ultimately lead to hidden expectations, skills, knowledge, and social processes that can help or hinder student success. Over time, the racial gaps between teachers and students have widened as more young people of color enroll in schools (Grobler et al., 2017). Unfortunately, the percentage of teachers of color remains stagnant (NCES, 2020).

In recent years, hidden curricula have become increasingly controversial, often grounded in assumptions, beliefs, biases, and expectations that are not formally communicated (Bens et al., 2020). Several studies address hidden curricula and their impact on student success, explicitly focusing on schools in urban communities. For example, Cornbleth (1984) found that different elements, such as teachers, students, society, knowledge, and awareness, shape the hidden curriculum. In a recent autoethnography, Bergeron (2017) notes that hidden curricula surface in schools' norms, values, and beliefs. These skills and lessons are unspoken rules and expectations,



not openly taught. When White teachers permeate urban communities, it can increase the reality that hidden curricula can become present in schools and lessons, thus affecting Black and Brown students the most (Burritt, 2020).

### **Principal Leadership and Organizational Commitment**

Principal leadership has been regarded as an essential antecedent of teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Brion, 2019). Principals' leadership sets the standard and bar to lead teachers and staff toward a common goal. When considering the impact of principal leadership and the organization, it is often considered essential to teacher development and success. In future studies, Karada et al.'s (2015) meta-analysis recommends examining leadership's effect on other parts of schools and shareholders. Organizational systems are vital to improving an organization's overall functionality and success. Systems theory aids an organization's success through input, throughput, and output.

School leadership's importance and commitment to increasing diversity and promoting a culturally rich environment will impact student and staff achievement. Researchers are remarkable in student achievement because of a balance of intentional leadership, robust curriculum, and student motivation. Often, urban schools face disproportionately allocated resources' most significant challenges and impact. Because of the widespread educational divide, we fail our students and staff as educational leaders. Our lack of effect on closing the range and allocating more resources and structures to our failing schools hinders student success.

### **Summary**

Culturally responsive school leadership has become necessary as schools have developed since the early 1920s. Khalifa's (2016) CRSL framework describes the four behaviors in which school leaders should embed cultural competency into their daily practices. The CRSL

framework will provide a lens for this study by seeking more knowledge about the research question and problem. Beginning with a shared understanding of where the United States has come in education reform, it becomes evident that educators must continue to take strides to fully reach the goal of diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools. Research narrowing the focus to chartered schools shows the growth students and teachers can make, given their autonomy in curriculum and instruction. Quantitative data highlights student achievement and success in schools but does not account for the perspectives of individuals constructing those changes. This study aims to deepen readers' understanding of teachers' and leaders' preceptive on cultural competency and how teachers are being developed.

Additionally, this study will highlight the need to enhance practices and systems in how teachers and leaders are developed as it directly supports student success. As educators seek a strategic plan to help urban city schools succeed, improving principal leadership on culturally responsive teaching is essential. When principals become confidently versed in diverse cultures, curricula, experiences, and content, teachers and students will follow their lead.

As the nation embarks on a current awakening of the disparities occurring towards students, educators must ensure that the content of their curriculum and the environment of their schools produces a culturally relevant education that is equitable for all students. There is a need for more qualitative studies around culturally responsive practices and how they are embedded into daily practice routines within schools. The focus should be on what Tillman (2002) calls culturally sensitive research approaches. A culturally sensitive research approach allows researchers to utilize their experiences, cultural awareness, and expertise to design culturally appropriate research schemes (Tillman, 2002; Lomotey, 2019). Relevant research reiterates the lack of standardized culturally responsive practices in schools. This literature review seeks more

research that connects the newness of this topic to foster a deeper understanding of culturally responsive principalship and its ability to promote student success.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

This hermeneutic phenomenology explored the experiences of elementary school leaders on their mission to implement culturally responsive practices through teacher professional development. Chapter three describes this study's research and design methods and explores leader and teacher experiences through data collection and analysis. To capture leader and teacher experiences, participants engaged in two forms of data collection: individual interviews and a focus group. Personal interviews and focus groups have adequately captured participants' experiences and supported theme development through analysis. Through a phenomenological approach, this study used the hermeneutic framework to interpret and reflect on multiple perspectives of the same phenomena to generate themes to shed light on culturally responsive practices in an elementary school context. This chapter overviews my research design, setting, participants, procedures, researcher's role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. The following sections describe each component and its use in tandem as I seek to answer the research questions.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research is most appropriate when the study aims to explain individuals' practices based on the perceptions of their experiences in each context (Stake, 2010). This hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on several individuals' shared experiences as teachers and leaders in an urban city school. A qualitative method allows the participants to share their lived experiences, the current reality of culturally responsive teaching, and how it is implemented throughout their school through their leadership, training, and practices (Minkos et al., 2017).

Van Manen (1997) defines hermeneutic phenomenology as identifying a phenomenon to study from one's experience, collecting data from others with similar experiences, and then combining joint statements across data to develop themes. Qualitative research allows me to identify the assumptions associated with the phenomenon of the study, collect data from individuals through in-depth interviews, generate themes based on the data collected, develop descriptions of what the participants experienced, and later report the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Phenomenological research is heavily used in social and health sciences to find individual commonalities (Check & Schutt, 2012). Phenomenological analysis has a solid philosophical background and draws on German mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Hermeneutic phenomenology draws on the data and analysis procedures of Van Kaam (1966) and Colaizzi (1978) that consist of identifying a phenomenon and bracketing one's own experiences from several individuals that experienced similar phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This study used the hermeneutic framework to explore leader and teacher experiences implementing culturally responsive practices across disclosed Public-School Charter networks.

### **Research Questions**

This chapter's multiple data collection forms will seek to answer the following central research questions and sub-questions.

#### **Central Research Question**

*What are the experiences of elementary charter school educators embedding a multicultural educational experience in school?*

#### **Sub Question One**

*How do elementary school leaders develop teacher capacity for culturally responsive pedagogy in an academic and social context?*

### **Sub Question Two**

*How does the school environment promote a vision for inclusive instructional and behavioral practices?*

### **Setting and Participants**

The setting and participants are critical to ensuring I conduct this study meaningfully. This section will delineate the selection of the environment and participants that will yield the most impactful results through the research design. Participants in Eastern City will be strategically selected based on the criteria for the investigation to grasp their experiences and connections to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

#### **Setting**

The Eastern City is one of the most affluent cities in the country yet harbors some of the most impoverished communities where children are academically and socially disadvantaged. Even with this small city's power, many students bear similar conditions to large urban cities across the United States. Eastern City is composed of eight wards. Within those wards, social status and economic class distinctly separate the wealthy, middle, and lower classes from one another.

The Eastern City is an ideal setting for research on cultural competencies in educators' development because it strategically places most public charter schools in urban neighborhoods, unlike other U.S. states and territories (Gulosino & Liebert, 2020). Within Eastern City are 123 public charter schools, most of which are in three wards. Student populations in general and public charter schools in the United States have become increasingly diverse economically but

not ethnically or racially diverse (Minkos et al., 2017). According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) (2020), 77% of students enrolled in public charter schools are Black, 11.4% are Hispanic, 7% are White, 2.9% other, and less than 2% are Asian/Pacific Islander. However, we can expect a significant non-White population in public charter schools to take advantage of educators' wider latitude.

The site for this study is a growing public charter school that has established its presence in the city for 15 years. This school organization has expanded to serve students from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade. The site within this study is Panther Prep Public Charter School. This school follows a traditional organizational structure with a clear hierarchy and boundaries for which employees and departments are responsible for a specific task. Similar to conventional public charter school organizations, Panther Prep has a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Academic Officer (CAO), academic directors, human resource team, talent team, and school staff (principal, assistant principals, dean of student support, behavior technicians, educational specialist, school counselor, one school psychologist per campus, approximately 35 teachers, 12 assistant teachers, and five educational aids). As this school continues to grow, the positions within the organization also shift to create a responsive school structure that represents the demand of the school.

## **Participants**

Participants of this study were selected through purposive sampling, intentionally choosing individuals who can offer the most insight into the research problem based on their own experiences with the topic being investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Participants were selected from the same organization but may work at separate locations in wards five, seven, and eight. Based on purposive sampling, participants have experienced the phenomenon and can

articulate their lived experiences through interviews and focus groups. I interviewed 11 school staff, composed of leaders and teachers, for this study to collect qualitative data for insight into the phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2016). For this study, a leader will be defined as an individual who currently has the role of principal, assistant/vice principal, dean, academic instructional coach, or any other individual that oversees or leads other educators. Each leader participant must have over one year of leadership experience in any leadership role in their current or previous school. Teachers for this study are defined as general education teachers or special education teachers. Teachers for this study have more than one year of teaching experience in an in-person school setting. Using purposive sampling, each prospective participant completed a questionnaire that collected their demographics, current career, general views, and beliefs on CRP and teacher development. Phenomenological research practices regarding the appropriate number of participants vary; however, recommended sample sizes include three to ten participants (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). With a combination of teachers and leaders, this sample size provided interview and focus group data on eliciting themes and trends among shared experiences (Boppre & Reed, 2021). Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure each met the study's criteria.

Although Eastern City has an extensive public charter school network, this sample size selected participants from three wards. These wards have been historically identified as the Eastern City's most deprived regarding education, income, and housing (Government of Eastern City, 2019). I used purposive sampling to solicit educators from one charter school network with schools in all three wards because they serve Eastern City's most vulnerable population. For this study, age, ethnicity, and gender are not dominant factors in participants; however, those



demographics will be included to comprehensively understand each participant's background and how it relates to their experience.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As the researcher conducting this study, there are several factors and biases that I may bring to data analysis. I am a literacy department chair and a rising assistant principal in a public charter school in Eastern City. As a department chair, I coach literacy teachers for all elementary grade levels and provide support and guidance to all teachers across our school's network.

Given that I work in a public charter school and in the wards where this study will be conducted, I may know some of the participants indirectly. Nonetheless, participants from this study will not be direct associates of mine. I want to remain impartial to ensure that the data collected is not skewed or interpreted, negatively impacting the study's credibility. In addition to my professional background, my background also guides my approach to data analysis. My Christian faith, tied to my firm belief in social justice, race, and equity, are vital to consider when collecting and analyzing data.

### **Interpretive Framework**

The lens through which this study was conducted was social constructivism, a learning theory developed by psychologist Lev Vygotsky that emphasizes the relationship between social and cultural context (Prawat, 1999). Within social constructivism, Vygotsky believed that learning occurs primarily in social and cultural settings, which can be applied to adults and children. One construct of Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The area of proximal development is the space between what a learner can do supported and what they can do unsupported with guidance from someone with skill or expertise (Prawat, 1999). Throughout this study, the emphasis on enhancing educators' cultural

proficiency will be seen through social constructivism. The social constructivism paradigm will highlight the gaps between what educators can do to support their students and what educators can do with proper guidance and support from skilled leaders around cultural development amongst staff. With continuous advice and support, according to ZPD, learners will slowly navigate from being dependent to now independent learners. However, for these shifts to occur, a consistent level of support must aid educators in becoming independent and self-sufficient in their quest to become culturally proficient.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

In all studies, a researcher brings a particular set of beliefs to the investigation as they navigate one's thoughts and understanding of theories and phenomena. My values and ideas will appear throughout this study as I strive to answer my research questions. Nonetheless, the assumptions and beliefs I bring to this study must be outlined and articulated as they are vital in collecting and interpreting data. Within a hermeneutic analysis, Moustakas (1994) believes that there are no moral phenomena but only a moral interpretation of the phenomena. Moustakas (1994) claims that researchers must correct their prejudices or set them aside when conducting a qualitative study. The sections below will articulate my positionality on the philosophical assumptions through which I view the world and how I approach this research.

#### ***Ontological Assumption***

With ontological assumptions in qualitative research, the researcher must embrace the idea of multiple realities since the individuals in the study all have different perspectives and that reality is subjective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, without departing from my Christian faith, the ontological assumption in this study is a fixed and measurable form of universal reality. By seeking responses to what can be known, I adopt a realistic ontology in a physical world that

recognizes that people have their thoughts, beliefs, interpretations, and meanings. Moreover, using a fixed ontological approach, data will be analyzed through my firm belief in God's reality. The study participants will share their perspectives and assumptions based on their experiences without my beliefs interfering with or dominating their perspectives or backgrounds. As I interpret the meaning of the collected data, I recognize that my interpretation is limited by my view of reality and Christian beliefs. To deeply understand the experiences of each participant, I must create an atmosphere in which they feel comfortable sharing their experiences without my personal views or biases impacting their beliefs. Instead, I will deeply understand how each perspective, meaning, and belief are connected in a broader context of reality through an ontological lens.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

Epistemological assumptions describe one's knowledge and how knowledge came about. In a phenomenological study, epistemological assumptions are vital, given that learning can be subjective and based on experience. To deeply understand participants, I will become an insider into each participant's shared experience by reducing the distance between the researcher and the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) claim that the researcher can ultimately know what the participant knows through their intimacy with the research and during individual interviews. My relationship with the subject matter is familiar, given my past and present roles in elementary school education settings. I am familiar with working as a teacher, leader, and administrator at an elementary school level which heightens my awareness of the research. Conversely, this intimacy of my role as the researcher can present a group of biases and assumptions within this study that I will minimize through various forms of data analysis.

### **Axiological Assumption**

Creswell and Poth (2016) describe the importance of the researcher openly discussing the values that shape the study's narrative and their interpretation of participant responses. My professional commitments ignite my passion for this field, my age group, and the professional development of teachers. Equity, relationships, and partnerships are the professional obligations that cultivate my passion for education. All students should receive a high-quality, equitable education that prepares them for the workforce, college, and beyond. An equitable education can be achieved through continuous partnerships between family and community. The relationships built throughout a student's educational trajectory have a lasting effect on their engagement and outlook on education (Abacioglu et al., 2019).

The desire to culturally enhance responsiveness practices in teacher development is not only a need in education (Khalifa et al., 2016) but a passion for perpetuating change as our world simultaneously evolves. My commitment to growth and achievement is also present in this study. Qualitative research can incorporate specific biases (Galdas, 2017). However, by bracketing my biases into groups, I can openly share my relation to this study and how my values can shape the narrative (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Researcher's Role**

As the researcher in this study, I bring a level of beliefs and assumptions as the human instrument. Since purposive sampling is used to select participants strategically, I will not personally know or work with the participants in this study. There will be no known relationship that could impede this study. My current employer's personal information will be confidential as a human instrument. Participants will see the purpose of this study and my role in education. I will disclose my past and current educational positions and future career goals.

The assumptions I bring to this study are grounded in the literature gap highlighting a need for culturally responsive school practices. The literature gap suggests we need more CRP in schools, given the strong correlation between culturally responsive leadership and student success in public schools (cite). However, in cities where public charter schools dominate urban neighborhoods and whose mission is to close the achievement gap, students are still significantly below their White counterparts in affluent areas with public charter schools. CRP alone cannot complete the achievement gap but can navigate leaders and teachers to determine how cultural proficiency impacts student achievement and success.

I assume that schools conduct diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training at the beginning of the year to *check a box* without revisiting the implications of cultural responsiveness throughout the year. In fact, through interviews, document analysis, and focus groups, I will seek teachers' experiences on their development and if it is aligned with the demographics of the students they serve.

Considering the research setting, problem, and design, I must identify my role and the biases or assumptions I bring to this study. I will act solely as the interviewer or moderator through each data collection form. My thoughts and feelings will not be discussed before, during, or after data collection to allow the participants to share their experiences comfortably without my influence. Nonetheless, horizontalization and triangulation in data analysis will reduce biases I may bring to this study and allow the participants' experiences to be expressed adequately.

### **Procedures**

Using psychologist Moustakas's (1994) approach for conducting a phenomenological study will involve systematic steps in data collection. Appendix A will encompass the International Review Board (IRB) application and later approval letter to conduct this study. To

begin data collection, approval from the IRB is required to complete any study using human participants. The recruitment flyer was emailed and shared amongst educators in Eastern City (Appendix B). After IRB approval and site permissions, recruitment for participants will begin. The criteria for ideal candidates will be explicitly stated on the recruitment flyer.

Once approved, data collection will begin. Participants will be recruited through fliers, emails, social media platforms, and word-of-mouth. Confirmed participants will first engage in individual interviews. The interview questions are crafted around the CRSL Framework to yield the most impactful responses. After each participant has been involved in individual discussions, participants will be invited to engage in an hour-long focus group divided into two or three sessions, given participants' availability. A minimum of four participants will be needed during each session to engage in the discussion (Robinson, 2020). Following each interview and focus group, I will generate themes from participants' responses using a qualitative data analysis software called NVivo. Through data analysis of individual interviews and focus groups, I will achieve triangulation by using multiple sources of data collection to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Triangulation will be conducted in this study using individual interviews and focus groups. Triangulation can be achieved when the researcher uses two or more methods or data sources to comprehensively understand the phenomenon (Carter et al., 2014). At the end of data collection and analysis, I will have the needed information to report the phenomenon's essence in written form. Data collection involves meticulous detail and consideration to conduct a research study ethically. Necessary site permissions will be obtained from Eastern City public charter school networks, where most of their schools are in the city's most impoverished wards (5,7,8). Appendix C encompasses the permission form I will send to

the Public Charter School networks. The permissions documents outline the participant criteria, research procedures, and completion time.

### **Permissions**

In this section, all necessary permissions are explained and documented as appropriate. For example, to conduct an ethical research study, approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) will be needed to commence this study. The IRB ensures that ethical standards are upheld when conducting research. Appendix A will include my IRB application and approval letter to conduct research using human participants. Additional permissions from research sites within the Eastern City's Public Charter School network will be required to interview ideal candidates actively. The consent request can be found in Appendix C and updated with the approval letter from each site.

### **Recruitment Plan**

The recruitment plan in this study is designed to seek the most qualified participants to yield the best data for this study. Phenomenological research practices regarding the appropriate number of participants vary; however, recommended sample sizes include a minimum of 10 participants (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). The sample size for this study will range from 10 to 15 participants. Using purposive sampling to select the participants of this study will allow highly qualified individuals to understand better the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Permissions from three Eastern City Public Charter Schools sites will be obtained using the Permission to the Request form in Appendix B to seek qualified individuals. Informed consent by the school and participants will be voluntary, with complete information about what it means to participate in this study. Information regarding confidentiality, ethical considerations,

and removal of the research study will also be discussed and emphasized before participants volunteer to engage in the research study. Appendix C highlights the recruitment email that will be shared with eligible candidates.

The sampling procedure will begin with a flyer eliciting participants posted on various educational groups on Facebook and LinkedIn (Appendix D). Interviews and focus groups will be conducted over six weeks to obtain the essence of each participant's experience adequately. Next, a recruitment e-mail will be sent to leaders and teachers working in Public Charter Schools, specifically Wards 5,7 and 8, that responded to the flyer volunteering to participate. Once leaders and teachers have confirmed their participation in this study, I will seek permission to conduct my study at various schools.

### **Data Collection Plan**

A phenomenological study requires a researcher to accurately convey participants' experiences through their study research (Smith, 2017). This study will collect data in two ways to obtain each participant's experiences regarding the phenomenon. The primary data collection methods are individual interviews and focus groups. Each technique will allow participants to convey their experiences openly through a series of questions and prompts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Questions and prompts for each data collection form are outlined in this chapter's interview and focus group sections. The data collection approaches are summarized below and integrate strategic data analysis plans for each data collection form.

#### **Individual Interviews (Data Collection Approach #1)**

Interviews will be the core data collection method of this study. As no research interview lacks structure, most qualitative research interviews are semi-structured, lightly structured, or in-



depth (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To deeply understand participants' experiences, an in-depth interview will be used in this study. A combination of open-ended questions that supports a discovery-oriented technique will extract the essence of each participant's experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Each question is written to build on one another while maintaining intentionality in the conversation (Smith, 2017). This intimate approach allows the participants and me to fully understand their position and role as educators in an urban city school.

Below are interview questions that will help participants walk through their journeys as educators and their experiences embedding culturally responsive practices.

### ***Individual Interview Questions***

1. Please describe your educational background and career in your current position. CRQ
2. Describe your learning development around cultural proficiency practices in school from an academic and social perspective. SQ1
3. Describe how you define culturally responsive practices in schools.
4. How do you describe culturally responsive leadership practices in school?
5. Describe how you have received culturally responsive development
6. Describe your teaching approach in teaching/leading after receiving in-school development around culturally responsive practices. SQ1
7. What impact do you think culturally responsive teaching has on students? CRQ
8. What impact do you believe culturally responsive leadership has on teachers? CRQ
9. What impact do you think culturally responsive teaching has on staff? CRQ
10. How do you measure leader cultural proficiency in teacher development? SQ1
11. How do you measure teachers' artistic ability in their classrooms? SQ1
12. In what ways would you strengthen culturally responsive practices in your school? SQ1

13. Has your capacity for implementing culturally responsive procedures changed since joining your school's teaching/leadership staff? SQ1
14. What does cultural responsiveness look and feel like in your school? SQ2
15. How does your student population's demographics affect how you lead teachers and staff? SQ2
16. Is the vision for culturally responsive practices engrained throughout the building for students, staff, and families to connect with daily? SQ2
17. How are students' backgrounds reflected in the physical environment of your school? SQ2

The questions above are generated from the Culturally Responsive School Leadership framework by Muhammad A. Khalifa (2018). Each question is designed to allow the participant to reflect on their journey as an educator and identify ways to develop the capacity and skills of teachers and staff to ensure the educational equity of the students they serve. Allowing the participants to think critically about the role of culturally responsive leadership and how it can influence the part of the school staff will enable each participant to identify ways to enhance current practices in their setting.

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan (Data Analysis Plan #1)***

Each participant will be carefully selected through purposeful sampling. This data collection method allows the researcher to carefully target specific participants that fit a criterion and share a particular phenomenon. Before interviewing each participant, I will create a questionnaire establishing credibility in this study. The questionnaire will identify ideal participants based on their responses to the questions. Various forms of soliciting will seek ideal candidates through social media groups, email, local professional networking events, phone

calls, and recommendations once individuals have answered the questionnaire. I will then select a range of 10 to 15 participants to engage in data collection forms for this study.

The individual interviews will be conducted through an online video conferencing platform such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Zoom, or Skype. This form of interviewing will allow the participants' interview to be recorded while giving the participant the preference to be on or off-camera during the interview. To analyze each interview, I will use the process of clustering and thematizing to dissect each participant's response to the interview questions. Participants' responses will be thematized and clustered based on similar or alike phrases or words used in their responses to the same questions. Moustakas (1994) recommends clustering constituents' responses into thematic labels relevant to the study.

Using the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data, popularized by Moustakas (1994), there are seven steps to data analysis.

1. Listing and preliminary grouping (Horizontalization)
2. Reduction and elimination through assessing each expression
3. Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents
4. Final identification of the invariant branch and themes
5. Create individual textual descriptions for each participant
6. Create a personal structural characterization of the experience based on the textual description and imaginative variation
7. Construct an essence of the experience for each participant incorporating the themes

By following each step outlined in the Van Kaam method in its written order, I will adequately analyze each response to generate articles. Although Creswell and Poth (2018) note

that intensive interviewing can be a data collection method, this study will involve multiple data collection forms to achieve triangulation.

### **Focus Groups Data Collection Approach**

Focus groups are a form of qualitative research where people will be asked about their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes toward the study phenomena (O. Nyumba et al., 2018). The focus groups in his research will allow the participants to join on a virtual recording platform such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, or Skype to discuss the focus and problem of the study. Using virtual focus groups in qualitative research has similar benefits to interviews as it allows for a recording of the discussion and the opportunity for the researcher to act as a moderator. At the same time, the participants discuss openly (Guest et al., 2017).

Within the focus groups, the participants who gave individual interviews will be asked to join the focus groups with other educators in Washington, DC. Ideally, the goal is to schedule all participants on the focus group day. However, focus groups can still be successful when minimum gathers four to ten participants discuss their thoughts and experiences outlined by the researcher (Robinson, 2020). In conjunction with individual interviews and document analysis, focus groups will offer an additional layer of understanding regarding the phenomenon of the study. Robinson (2020) conveys that the success of a focus group relates to the stimulation and engagement of the participants and moderator to introduce topics appropriately and contribute to the discussions as fully as possible. The focus group will take up to one hour to fully engage in the debate if multiple focus groups need to occur following the initial meeting outlined in the study. Nonetheless, the same questions will be asked during all focus group meetings. The following open-ended questions will be asked to all participants with probing or follow-up questions designed to get more information from a given query.

### ***Focus Group Questions***

1. Can everyone introduce themselves and the grade levels they have taught? CRQ
2. Discuss the trajectory of your leadership roles in your current or previous organization and why you chose to transition into leadership. CRQ
3. Discuss the focus of professional development throughout the year for teachers and how it surfaces in classrooms. CRQ
4. Discuss your leadership development and how it guides your work with teachers. CRQ
5. Let us talk about the current curriculum in schools. Discuss your school's curriculum (academic, social-emotional, and more) and how it promotes student achievement. SQ1
6. Reflect on student representation. How do students connect with curriculum text? SQ2
7. In what ways are students represented throughout the school? SQ2
8. How can CRP improve the student experience at school? CRQ
9. Studies highlight the disparities in behavioral consequences between Black and Brown students to their white counterparts. Talk about your behavior systems. SQ2
10. In what ways do you see CRP embedded in your behavior systems? SQ2
11. How can CRP improve behavioral outcomes? SQ2
12. Now that we have talked about CRP from an academic and behavioral perspective. Do you think CRP is a skill that can be taught? SQ2
13. How are leaders and teachers strengthening their best practices for instructional development? SQ1
14. Describe how leaders and teachers implement strong CRP practices. CRQ
15. Discuss how the implementation of solid CRP practices can support student achievement. SQ2

### ***Focus Group Data Analysis Plan***

The focus group analysis will be remarkably like the individual interview analysis. Using the same Van Kaam method, I can cluster and thematize participants' responses into various groups and categories. While acting as the moderator in the focus group session, I plan to jot down my initial thoughts, reactions, and critical ideas during the discussion with the participants, which will separate my thoughts and feelings from those of the participants. Using the same qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, I can transcribe recorded conversations and generate themes to analyze data further. Rabiee (2004) emphasizes that the central aim of data analysis for focus groups is to reduce data. An hour of focus group conversations can quickly produce five to six hours of data. The advantage of the Van Kaam approach while using NVivo software is that it allows for transparent steps of data analysis that could help future researchers follow similar steps to reduce the influx of data generated from a focus group.

### **Data Synthesis**

With several data analysis methods available to qualitative researchers, which method to choose is often discussed. Hermeneutic phenomenological research studies use data analysis methods from Moustakas (1994) to organize and analyze data. Analyzing data is the heart of a hermeneutic phenomenological study. Data analysis allows the researcher to use various methods to identify themes among participants (Check & Schutt, 2012). Interpretation of data is complex and often referred to as an *art form* or *dance* by some researchers (Check & Schutt, 2012). The *dance* of qualitative research captures the alternations between immersions in the text to identify meaning and to edit the text to create categories and codes—check and Schutt (2012). For example, in this study, data analysis will highlight the process of the researcher shifting their interpretation between what is happening, reflexively and interpretively. This study uses two data collection methods to create detailed descriptions of themes while increasing credibility.

Moustakas (1994) outlined the following steps that will be used as I analyze participants' responses to generate articles.

1. Listing and preliminary grouping (Horizontalization)
2. Reduction and elimination through assessing each expression
3. Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents
4. Final identification of the invariant branch and themes
5. Create individual textual descriptions for each participant
6. Create a unique structural characterization of the experience based on the textual description and imaginative variation
7. Construct an essence of the experience for each participant incorporating the themes.

### **Horizontalization**

Horizontalization is part of the phenomenological analysis process, whereby the researcher gives equal value to all the participants' statements (Moustakas, 1994). I will read and reread the participants' interview transcription (step one) to horizontalize the data. While reading participants' interviews, I will list relevant expressions connected to their experiences Moustakas (1994). For example, step one may appear as the original transcription of participant interviews and primary document sources from the data collection. A thorough review of each transcription and source will allow me to familiarize myself with the data, capture additional notes, and begin reduction and elimination.

### **Reduction and Elimination**

Phenomenological reduction or bracketing is defined as reviewing the data in the form presented to the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher will remove all repetitive statements that do not relate to the research questions (Duncan, 2020). Within this data analysis

step, the researcher must test each expression for two requirements, relevancy/ necessity and if it is possible to label the face (p. 121). Moustakas (1994) suggests two eliminating conditions to help the researcher remove repetitive, vague, or overlapping expressions. This study's reduction and elimination may appear as using the phrase "consistent communication" to represent repeated sentences such as "Our school leaders always sent our agenda to us the day before the development." The label "consistent communication" allows for ease when clustering and thematizing participant responses.

### **Clustering and Thematizing**

Clustering and thematizing is the next step in analyzing phenomenological data. Now that participant transcriptions are condensed, and repetitive or vague phrases and sentences are eliminated, Moustakas (1994) recommends clustering constituents' responses into thematic labels relevant to the study. For my research, I will incorporate the NVivo software to aid in sorting and arranging data. NVivo software allows users to classify, sort, and organize information; examine relationships in the data; and combine analysis with linking, shaping, searching, and modeling (Zamawe, 2015). I will download the free NVivo application to my computer and connect it to Microsoft Office for my study. NVivo can support different media sources to simplify data conversion, despite the format. Since this study will use interviews and documents (lesson plans, agendas, presentations, and more), NVivo will act as an additional form of analysis to generate themes.

### **Final Identification of Themes by Application**

The final identification of themes allows for additional step invalidity. Within this step, Moustakas (1994) suggests we ask ourselves three questions, 1) are the themes expressed explicitly in the complete transcription? 2) Are the themes compatible if they are not explicitly



expressed? 3) They should be deleted if they are not explicit or compatible. Identifying and refining essential concepts is a vital part of the iterative process of qualitative research (Check & Schutt, 2012). Within this study, I may review the matrix from NVivo and realize that a theme may not be compatible or explicitly convey the participants' experience and need to remove it as needed.

### **Individual Textual Descriptions**

Once I have validated themes, I must construct a textual description of each participant's experience. Using descriptive text, the researcher can create an impression of an event, person, place, or thing because of the detailed descriptions. This step allows the researcher to write a complete report of individual experiences to portray their lived experience related to the phenomena (Check & Schutt, 2012). An example of individual text descriptions of this study can include verbatim examples from the transcribed interview (Moustakas, 1994). Eldh et al. (2020) emphasize that quotations from interviews or similar data sources often accompany solid qualitative studies. For this study, direct quotes will be embedded to add connection and authenticity to the participant.

### **Individual Structural Description**

Individual structural description allows the researcher to construct narratives of the participants' experiences based on the textual description and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). Examining relationships is the centerpiece of the analytic process. It allows the researcher to move from simply describing the people and settings to explaining why things happened as they did with the study's other participants (Check & Schutt, 2012). Examining relationships can be captured in the NVivo matrix as a separate table to rank frequency to a specific level.

### **The Essence of the Experiment**

Now that the analysis of the phenomenological study has been completed, as outlined by Moustakas (1994), the researcher must generate the meanings and essence of the experience. Dahlberg (2006) reiterates Moustakas's (1994) last point that essences *are* their phenomena; the phenomena *are* their essences. Phenomenology shows that everything is experienced *as something* and impacts individuals in unique ways. While capturing the essence of the phenomena, the research understands a person's way of being and how they experienced life. The researcher, the wonders, and the participants must not be separated in the analysis phase. The researcher must not divide the phenomena and participants in the analysis phase. Moreover, we cannot talk about an essence without discussing the participants in the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

There will be a combination of strategies for validation to establish credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability within the study. From the researcher's lens, clarifying researcher bias within the study will create credibility by outlining any external factors and preferences that could alter any research component. Participants will also be partners throughout the study to ensure that their experiences are conveyed authentically. Their collaboration ensures that their experiences are given authentically, representing their impact and school.

### **Credibility**

Credibility within this study will be achieved through triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. Lincoln & Guba (1985) identifies seven techniques to help the researcher achieve credibility in their study. Based on the forms of data collection, these three techniques (triangulation, peer-debriefing, and member-checking) will aid in developing the *truth* of the study the most through its emphasis on participant and peer analysis. Creswell & Poth (2016)

acknowledge that there are many types of qualitative validation and that researchers should be clear on which kind and term they are most comfortable with within their study. Triangulation will be the first technique I use to establish credibility.

Triangulation involves using multiple data sources in an investigation to produce understanding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Individual interviews and focus groups will work together to understand the findings better. Triangulation will also allow me to examine the level of consistency among each data source to ensure a robust and comprehensive study. The next level of credibility will arise in data analysis through peer debriefing. Peer debriefing is exposing oneself to an unbiased peer to explore aspects of the study that might remain only implicit in the researchers' minds (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through peer debriefing, I may become aware of my posture toward data analysis and can use the opportunity to amend data analysis as needed. The final technique of credibility I will use is member-checking. Member checks will be a necessary form of data analysis to allow this study's participants to assess the data's adequacy and confirm specific aspects to ensure their responses were captured correctly (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although member checks have many positive attributes, some researchers (Angen, 2000; Morse, 2002) argue that member checks can create opportunities for different members to view the same data differently. The participants and I may have other ideas. To proactively eliminate negative drawbacks, (Lincoln & Guba 1985) suggests creating the opportunity to summarize preliminary findings with the participants and allow them to amend any errors from their interview or focus group discussion.

### **Transferability**

The transferability of qualitative research is critical, given its unique ability for findings from the context of your study to be applied to another context or within the same context at

another time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick descriptions are a way to achieve a form of external validity. *Thick description* is a term used by Lincoln & Guba (1985) that describes a phenomenon in sufficient detail to evaluate if the extent to which the conclusions are drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people. In this study, a thick description will be identifiable in the language used to outline voices, feelings, actions, and meanings that allow the reader to *walk* with the participants in their experience. By including thick descriptions, I will not only describe the phenomena and their findings, but I will be able to add rich details that convey the complexity and significance of the study. It is essential to note that thick descriptions will create conditions for transferability but cannot assure it.

### **Dependability**

Dependability strengthens the trustworthiness of a study when the findings are consistent. Dependability in this study will be accomplished through the consistency of the results and the degree to which one can follow and audit the research process (Sandelowski 1986, Polit et al. 2006, Streubert 2007). Liberty University's dependability is accomplished through a thorough review of the process and the research products by the dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director. Inquiry audits are done to confirm the accuracy of the findings and are supported by the data collected.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability of this study is the degree to which the study's findings can be confirmed by the participants and their responses to the multiple data collection methods (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The techniques for establishing confirmability within this study will include triangulation and reflexivity. Triangulation refers to the multiple data sources used to understand the phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Triangulation will be achieved through individual

interviews and focus groups to allow the participants multiple opportunities to share their experiences. Each form of data collection will increase the validity and credibility of the study through "cross-checking" data. The triangulation technique also allows the researcher to identify any irregularities in the data that may not have surfaced through one form of data collection.

The reflexivity techniques strengthen the study by describing how the researcher interacts with the subjects in the field and the problems they encounter (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Memoing is another form of reflexivity that allows the researcher to jot down ideas following a consultation quickly. Additionally, the technique of reflexivity will be seen through my collection of anecdotal notes and comments from individual interviews. The confirmability of this study provides transparency among the researcher, participants, and readers to deeply understand the phenomena and establish credibility in the output of the research study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Gathering participants' responses and experiences is critical to addressing this study's research questions. If any potential issues arise, such as a breach of data and confidentiality, participants will be notified immediately and informed of the following steps, according to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Data collection will be saved and stored on a password-protected USB drive for electronic transcriptions of interviews and surveys to keep their responses confidential and secure. Data will be collected and held on a secure site to respect individuals' rights to privacy even if they choose to withdraw from the study. Participants' work locations and names will be kept confidential using pseudonyms throughout this study. Using pseudonyms will allow participants to fully disclose their experiences leading urban city schools without their reflections negatively impacting their work and working relationships.

## Summary

This research study uses a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to thoroughly capture the essence of teachers' and leaders' experiences using culturally responsive practices in teacher development. Chapter 3 outlines the methods used to capture participants' experiences as they reflect on their practices. Combining individual interviews and focus groups provides an in-depth understanding of what each individual experienced and how it shaped their roles in the school. Multiple forms of data collection increase the trustworthiness of the study through triangulation. The interviews and focus groups are centered around open-ended questions allowing participants to share their perceptions fully. The data synthesis process will help achieve the essence of participants' responses through horizontalization, clustering, thematizing, and textual and structural descriptions. After the data analysis, this section will identify major themes. The next chapter will present the findings of this study based on the interviews and focus groups done with the participants.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

This hermeneutic phenomenological explored the experiences of elementary school leaders and teachers with implementing culturally responsive practices (CRP) in schools. Chapter four discusses data collection findings highlighting essential themes generated from participant responses. Participants engaged in two forms of data collection: individual interviews and focus groups. Chapter four will expound on results from both data collection forms, which capture participants' authentic experiences. As chapter four unfolds, each section will gradually reveal how each theme lends itself to developing the essence of this study. This chapter will include participant descriptions, results including generating articles and outlier data and findings, and research question responses.

### Participants

Participants for this study were selected through purposive sampling to achieve a diverse participant pool. 11 participants completed both the individual interviews and focus groups. In the table below, the participants of this study are identified, the number of years they have been in their current position, their highest degree earned, their current role in their organization, and if they held a leadership or teaching role.

Table 1

*c*

<b>Teacher Participant</b>	<b>Years in position</b>	<b>Highest Degree Earned</b>	<b>Current Role</b>	<b>Leader/Teacher</b>
<b>Shayla</b>	13	Masters	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher	Teacher
<b>Kendra</b>	10	Masters	Assistant Principal	Leader
<b>Kandace</b>	0	Masters	Kindergarten Teacher	Leader
<b>Madison</b>	5	Bachelors	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher	Teacher

<b>Sean</b>	7	Masters	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher	Teacher
<b>Jade</b>	9	PhD	Assistant Principal	Leader
<b>Charles</b>	2	Bachelors	Kindergarten Teacher	Teacher
<b>Tyler</b>	13	Masters	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher	Teacher
<b>Cortez</b>	10	Masters	2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher	Teacher
<b>Ashley</b>	5	Bachelors	Licensed Clinician	Leader
<b>Brian</b>	3	Bachelors	Dean of Students	Leader

## **Results**

Data analysis of participant interviews reveals several themes and subthemes from interviews and focus group questions. The themes were developed based on similar participant responses to interview and focus group questions. Each section provides an in-depth view of participants' experiences regarding culturally responsive practices in schools. Participants had the opportunity to engage in member-checking, and six out of eleven participants were able to strengthen the validity of this study. Themes and subthemes were generated based on the frequency of participant responses to interviews and research questions. Three main themes surfaced during data analysis, and several supporting subthemes help reveal the true essence of the phenomenon of this study.

### **Teacher Self-Development**

Teacher self-development can be interpreted as self-learning or self-discovery throughout this analysis. All participants agreed they received professional development from their schools, from content development to trauma-informed practices. When asked to describe their self-development, groans, mostly from our most experienced participants, permeated the interview. Some shared that the CRP development that they practiced in their classrooms was self-taught. Shalya, a 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade teacher with over ten years of teaching experience, described her



development as “an annual DEI training that occurs once at the beginning of the school year, and now as an asynchronous training.” Shayla’s tone shifted as she spoke about the limited training she received from her school and throughout her tenure as an educator. While other participants could not quickly recall any direct activity, many paused and thought about the self-work they had done to adjust the course. Charles, the least experienced in this study, referred to his schooling as an undergrad and spoke about a few sociology courses he took before becoming an educator saying, “education as a whole has changed since we were in elementary school, the traditional way of thinking and teaching is not getting to the kids like before.” I asked Charles to explain what he meant regarding traditional teaching and thinking. Charles expounded his thoughts with much to share, concluding that “we must get our students to care, to believe in something bigger than them. The same books and stories stifle our students; they do not feel connected”. While participants spoke in depth about their self-development, I highlighted *connection* as a keyword that became a prominent driver in the discussion. As I listened to the focus group discussion, participants began elaborating on recognizing student needs.

### ***Recognizing Student Needs***

*Teaching is my superpower* is a quote often broadcasted and displayed on many teacher gifts, shirts, posters, and more. The power behind identifying teaching as the work of a superhero is critical in deepening one's understanding of a day in the life of an educator. Like familiar superheroes, teachers lend support, love, care, and concern to all students as a superhero would to a community in need. With teachers' days starting as early as 6 am to ending roughly around 7 pm daily, educators continue working tirelessly to target students' needs. Brian and Madison spent some time reflecting on how building connections and recognizing students' needs were critical to “starting the year strong.” Madison shared, “student relationships are important to ensuring students feel comfortable and safe in a space they are in for eight hours a day.” Building

connection is the act that participants discussed as an art form. Connection is a way to deeply understand who a person is, their likes and dislikes, their strengths and weakness, and how to capitalize on one's strengths to guide them into strengthening other areas of life. Elementary school is no longer the repetition of basic literacy skills and math but an opportunity for students to be hand on and engage with learning while developing their critical skills to engage in robust discussions with their peers and teachers.

During the focus group, participants needed minor facilitation tactics when asked how students connect with curriculum and text; participants chuckled as if there was an unspoken shared response that had yet to surface. Participants paused before confronting the question with their experiences. After the first minute, I knew they all agreed that there needed to be more student connection with the text and curriculum provided. As each participant respectfully built upon the idea of connection, it was Jade, the assistant principal, whose response slightly shifted the conversation by providing an alternative lens to approach the question. Although Jade was not the only leader in this focus group, Jade was the only leader to provide a leadership perspective on why students lack connection to text and curriculum. Jade shared, "changing curriculum is not as easy as one may think. A lot of research, standard alignment, and resources must go into making a huge shift." Jade reiterated that she agrees school curriculum should be updated; however, she continued to share that schools must pilot specific programs and conduct an in-depth program evaluation, which in Jade's words, "takes a very long time."

Nonetheless, participants felt highly passionate about including specific curriculum shifts and could agree that those shifts cannot solely be grounded upon connection. Still, it is reevaluating students' needs and how they align with their values and mission as schools prepare students for high school and beyond. Culturally responsive school practices and leadership can

unconsciously become a blanket term that merely skims the surface that organizational constraints, funding, and resources directly impact. With the limited autonomy leaders and teachers have, they must find creative approaches to target student needs and reflect the current demographic they serve.

### ***Responding to Student Demographics***

Student demographics should play a critical role in educational leaders' policymaking. Policies that range from academics to behaviors all stem from educational leaders and the research they have done to ensure each policy services the needs of all students. The participants within this study all stem from the same community where African American and black and brown students are the dominant demographics. Second to this population are Hispanic and Latino students, with less than 25% representation. The interview and focus group questions touch on how student demographics impact how leaders respond to students and how teachers educate students. Knowing the environment in which the participants work helps build clarity on how participants respond to questions. Participants shared that their school has recently leaned toward a less punitive approach to behaviors due to the community they serve. For example, Charles discussed how changing the approach, and the word "detention" has shifted students' mindsets. Charles shared his childhood connection to detention and how it negatively impacted his fondness for school. Charles stated, "detentions were terrible; I distinctly remember detentions growing up. I may not remember every detail of school, but I remember those and their insignificant impact on my behavior." Charles discusses how his school uses community restorative practices to engage in corrective teaching, not punitive disciplinary acts, and how it has helped black and brown students the most. This shift that Charles refers to is one example of how school organizations identify the demographics of students they serve, deeply understand

their community, and alter their responses to become restorative in a society that experiences generational trauma.

Responding to students' demographics from an academic perspective can vary depending on the organization's proficiency regarding cultural competency. Earlier in the focus group, participants shared their self-role in the development and began to talk about ways their product shows up in their practices. The leaders in this focus group had a distinct perspective from the teachers. For the first time, the focus groups felt divided based on the educators' role, which their views derived from during questions regarding development. Leaders harped on the belief that being culturally responsive can be challenging when developing teachers, so the story strictly focuses on academic rigor and deepening their conceptual understanding of content. Teachers discussed how finding articles, texts, and field trips directly influenced their students' interests. One could conclude that teachers' self-development is the driving force in creating a culturally responsive school for students, not leaders. An inverted pyramid could visually represent the discussion from the teacher's perspective.

Madison stated, "Teachers should inform school policy far more than leaders. We are on the frontline," Madison exclaimed as she readjusted her positioning on the screen. Participants paused, allowing Madison to finish her thoughts, unconsciously revealing an aversion from teachers to leadership that had not surfaced before. Tyler, Cortez, and Ashley shook their heads in silence as a silent pause interrupted the discussion. Ashley, the clinician, named, "our problem is that teachers and leaders disagree on how we should support our students. Leaders think about funding, growth, and achievement, whereas teachers are next to students daily, combating behavioral challenges, academic gaps, and more." Participants agree that there is little

collaborative work as schools plan for students and that teachers are the most qualified educators to provide those suggestions.

### **Impact of Educator Turnover**

Teacher retention and turnover infiltrated the focus group and interviews when discussing change and impact. Both leaders and teachers discussed retention's impact on their school organization and how it impacts staff, students, and families. Shalya, a veteran teacher, discussed the challenges of creating a new team each year and shared, “students thrive off of consistency, and every year we get new staff; it feels like we are starting over every year.” Other participants nodded in agreement and shared their insight on why a mass exit of educators is occurring.

The most common reasons participants thought educators chose to leave the profession were school policy, salaries, work-life balance, and student behaviors. Tyler, a third-grade veteran teacher, named, “when teachers leave, we do not get more veteran teachers; we often get teachers with weaker qualifications who need more development.” The influx of novice teachers is needed, but how impactful and transformative are they with the odds against them? Some may ask, what are the odds? Odds can be defined as joining a teaching team with little or no experience, no teaching certification, and proper development on how to support students and families within our nation's most vulnerable community. Jade and Brain agreed, adding, “the work is hard for seasoned teachers; I know it is more difficult for new teachers.” When asked if they think CRP is a skill that can be taught, there was a pause among participants as they allowed silence to create space for new voices to be heard. Kandace was the first participant to answer this question and said, “CRP can be taught, but it is more than teaching; it is the conscious act of reflecting and refining, learning, and unlearning, practicing, and practicing again.” The critical understanding is not that CRP is a skill that cannot be taught but a skill that consistently requires

self-reflection and practice and that of the organization. Novice teachers may not have the expert skill and knowledge level, but many desire to learn as they enter the field of education, which is desirable to schools.

### *Novice Teachers*

Becoming an educator has altered as new school systems emerged. Families can choose a variety of schools (public, charter, private, homeschooling, and more) to meet the needs of their children. The traditional route educators embark on often begins after completing a rigorous educational program to prepare candidates for state licensure. Prospective teachers have alternative routes to embark upon if they want to teach. The shortened approach to becoming an educator often leaves individuals needing more skills to succeed in their first year, thus muting students' success due to a lack of development. Educator turnover inherently produces novice teachers every year. The problem is that schools quickly fill vacancies to keep school doors open regardless of teacher preparation.

Brian, Charles, and Madison are the most novice participants who identified as teachers and shared their journey to becoming teachers. Both participants disclosed having a degree in education; these participants are holders of Political Science, Science, and Mass Communications degrees. All degrees are reputable, but do they require necessary courses to prepare teachers? Charles said, "I did not have an educational background; I had to start from Ground Zero." A first-year teacher entering an elementary school where the foundational blocks are established named that they were unprepared. When considering the impact elementary schools have on students' foundational knowledge, it should be imperative that the educators leading our most malleable students are prepared and well-equipped with the skills needed to support students academically and social-emotionally.

Participants in this study completed a screening questionnaire before being selected, which gave me a high-level insight into each participant. There were 11 participants, and only six had updated licensures. Two participants chose not to renew their licensure because it was optional. Nonetheless, there were four individuals, composed of both leaders and teachers, who were leading and teaching solely based on the development of the school staff. With leaders training and developing teachers based on their organizational programming, the effectiveness of teacher development can appear limited. Cortez shared, “we see it all the time, novice teachers grow into novice leaders, and I have seen it happen at our organization.” Participants echoing in agreement continued to build on the idea regarding development and how critical it can be when focused on relevant topics to students and staff.

### ***All Stakeholders are Responsible***

Most participants agreed that cultural proficiency is critical to student academic, social-emotional, and behavioral success in schools. However, when I asked participants to describe what cultural proficiency is in their own words, I received a variety of definitions that emphasized (Bennett et al., 2018) rhetoric regarding how surface-level educators can be when using cultural backgrounds to inform policies and practices within schools. Ashley is the only License Clinician in this study, and her insight regarding cultural proficiency was closely aligned with Khalifa’s (2016) definition of culturally responsive school leadership. I asked, “Can you describe any development you received around culturally responsive practices?” Ashley responded, “What is unique to early childhood mental health consultation is that cultural significance is a big part of the work because different things affect different communities. If you do not know the people and cultures you serve, you could do damage to the people you support.” Ashley confidently shared her insight regarding cultural proficiency in her field and how yearly development is required to maintain licensure as a practicing clinician. However, the varying

definitions from teachers and leaders who work closely with students share diverse definitions. Some phrases mentioned were, “it knows who your students are” to “I am not sure what you mean.” The ambiguity of the skill and its practice became alarming, knowing the impact CRP can have on students of color. As the participants grappled with the question while adding little words in hopes of disclosing their understanding of CRP, Tyler shifted the conversation to naming the organizational constraints that impede one's development and practice.

### **Organizational Constraints**

Participants come from the same organization, a Public Charter school. Organizational constraints in a public charter school are steeped in structure and systems to support the organization's overall mission. Specific policies regarding uniforms, attendance, professional expectations, and communication must be upheld daily to provide equity and balance in service of the high academic rigor. Public charter networks are designed to have more autonomy but are equally under pressure to perform at or above their public school counterparts. Sean shared, “Our schools’ curriculum scripts out what we should say when teaching, from the types of questions we ask students to our model... everything is scripted.” With the pressure of the organization to produce high achievement, which directly impacts funding, it becomes apparent why there are many organizational constraints on what teachers can do and say. Ashley shared, “you see more veteran teachers who can naturally embed specific practices while sticking with the curriculum, but it takes familiarity with the curriculum, standards, and lessons. That would be hard for a first-year teacher to do so.” Although many may think Public Charter Schools have more autonomy than public schools, the organization's policymakers hold power, not the school-based leaders or teachers. The organization's school-based leaders and teachers are the most constricted, given the lofty academic goals students must achieve for the organization to receive funding and support.



Brian said, “sometimes it is easier to stick to the script; at least if students do not reach their goals, it is due to the provided curriculum and not something I created.” Some teachers agreed in feeling stifled, while the veteran teachers used language like, “I pick and choose what needs to be taught, and I still have strong results in class.” When Sean asked, “How did you learn to be comfortable doing that?” Tyler responded, “It takes years of knowing the organization, curriculum, lessons, and students to adapt as needed.” Unfortunately, the less experienced teachers feel less compelled to make changes given the stress of high performance that they must endure students.

Organizations survive from funding, and public charter schools receive funding in many ways. Funding from the state, grants, and donations keep schools afloat. The constraints participants discussed were in place to keep funding high so students could attend a competitive school. Participants disclosed many benefits of the limitations and the negative impact those constraints have on teacher autonomy and students. All pieces of the organization are intricately connected and can simultaneously serve and limit student learning. The dialogue from the veteran teachers highlights what one can achieve when one deeply knows their students, standard, and content. In contrast, the discussion from novice teachers is grounded heavily in guidance from the leadership team, which participants disclosed as surface-level. To dive deeper into an academic or social context of embedding a multicultural educational experience, leaders and teachers must go the extra mile to develop age-appropriate content while ensuring students meet their overall academic goals.

### ***School-based Work Fatigue***

There is a mass exit of educators leaving the school and profession. Work-based fatigue repeatedly surfaced in discussion as participants discussed the intricacies of their job, the number of tasks to complete daily, supporting student behavior, and the restraints. There was a

unanimous agreement that each participant is a victim of work fatigue in school. Despite their role in the school, you could see in their body language and tone that they were tired. When asked what more could be done to provide students with a multicultural education that they all agreed students needed, their response was coupled with answers like, “there is not enough time to do all the things” or “we take on so much as a team, can the leadership make those changes within the structure we have?” As desirable as cultural competency is, teachers felt they could only manage surface-level teaching related unless they were skilled enough to adjust like the veteran teachers.

Work fatigue hinders how teachers and leaders view additional tasks regardless of whether they believe they are needed. This study found that schools should make necessary adjustments to ensure students receive relevant and affirming instruction rather than at the cost of increasing their workload. Change should be within their current systems and curriculum and not solely rely on teachers and leaders to enact on a school level. The participants in this study agree that change must occur within an organization's central office and require outsourcing to provide equity in instruction and to the students being serviced.

### **Research Question Responses**

This study's central research and interview questions were derived from the Culturally Responsive School Leadership theoretical (CRSL) framework (Khalifa, 2016). Participants engaged in individual interviews and a focus group to share their experiences regarding the following research and sub-research questions. These are synthesized to produce concise responses with direct quotes from the interviews.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of elementary charter school educators embedding a multicultural educational experience in school? The participants believe that embedding a multicultural educational experience stems from their self-development. Participants agreed that embedding multicultural experience wavers based on the students in their school and the parameters set by leadership. Cortez said, “I had to go seek out ways in which I can find things that they could connect to as well as meet expectations for the fourth by the school.” Teachers want to provide exposure to many walks of life through education, but it is not always well-defined as one may hope. As educators continue to unlearn their past biases, this increases the challenge for educators to teach students information that some teachers may not know or believe. Ashley said, “I can do more.” This powerful phrase indicates that schools are not yet meeting the goal of being culturally proficient. Brian and Kandace agreed that their current organization is moving in the right direction and that change happens incrementally.

With much controversy surrounding race, diversity, equity, and inclusion, many leaders fear the backlash that has flooded news media regarding critical race theory. However, the leaders in this study discussed their work around behavioral support more than curriculum changes. Jade and Kendra shared that their work is not to change the curriculum but to ensure all teachers deeply understand students' targets and ways to help them reach their full potential. Leaders on the school level discussed how curriculum changes are outside their scope but how they can provide additional resources and tools to help teachers. Kendra shared, “at the beginning of every school year, we purchase books rooted in diversity to be used as a read-aloud or library text.”

### **Sub Question One**

How do elementary school leaders develop teacher capacity for culturally responsive pedagogy in an academic and social context? The perspective of both leaders and teachers varied and heavily stemmed from the idea of self-development. Teachers undoubtedly believe that their development has impacted their classrooms most significantly. Charles stated, “I incorporate specific text and class discussions because I know it is my responsibility to prepare them for the real world.” Tyler shared, “our students live in a community where everyone looks like them; that is not real life.” Teachers felt most compelled to ensure that they develop students in a social context as the parameters for academic teaching are narrow.

Nonetheless, leaders and teachers agree that development first stems from interest and an individual willing to go the extra mile to create age-appropriate resources for elementary school students. While the organization superficially keeps a multicultural educational experience, teachers directly influence what students experience daily and what they choose to teach or omit throughout the year. Cortez’s response is evidence of his self-development and knowing the needs of his students to ensure they have exposure to their cultures than their own. Cortez was the only teacher who spoke about a month-long learning task his class engaged in during National Hispanic Heritage Month. Cortez said, “I only had one Hispanic student in my class, and he told me how ostracized he felt. We celebrated National Hispanic Month daily through songs, videos, books, and even had his mom come in to teach us about their traditions.” Cortez named how transformative celebrating National Heritage Month was for his student. Cortez said the feeling of inclusiveness, confidence, and joy surfaced and made a lasting impact.

### **Sub Question Two**

How does the school environment promote a vision for inclusive instructional and behavioral practices? The perspective of teachers and leaders is that their school represents the

students they serve. From an, *All Lives Matter* mural with student faces painted in each letter to student work on display through each hallway and classroom. The physical environment appears to be the quickest adjustment to appear that schools are making critical changes. However, this is still a superficial change that does not reach the depths of the impact that students need to feel connected to their learning and the world around them. Madison shared, “physical spaces reflect the incremental change; I am excited to see where this organization is years from now.”

Participants agreed that the physical space is a start to reflect inclusivity and student ownership.

Regarding behavioral practices, teachers agreed that much had been done to shift from punitive consequences to restorative practices (Johnson et al., 2018). Charles said, “We provide corrective teaching so that our students can begin to ask themselves if they are making the right decision before they act. We know the world will not give them second chances, but while we can provide them multiple chances, we must teach them what to do and what not to do.” Leaders shared that their behavioral structures reflect the students and community they serve. If educators are not cognizant of the students they serve, they can unconsciously perpetuate unsafety and harm in schools.

### **Summary**

The findings of this study produced three themes (teacher self-development, impact of educator turnover, and organizational constraints) and several subthemes based on the frequency and consistency of participant responses. After participants engaged in two forms of data collection to disclose their experiences, six participants engaged in member-checking to increase the validity of the findings. In all, the results of this study show that providing students with multicultural education is derived from teacher-self-development, merely to be significantly impacted by teacher turnover and educational constraints. Most veteran teachers who believed

that their cultural competency supported student achievement were able to amend daily lesson planning to tailor it to student needs. In contrast, most novice teachers maintained the surface-level teachings that the school provided. As teachers work to balance many tasks while meeting school academic goals, leaders agreed that teachers have the most impact on including relevant and affirming content to students.

As equity in education continues to be a priority, this study highlights the need for organizational curriculum change to provide a costumed approach to what is taught and to ensure that all students receive similar instruction. The scope of this study pulled participants from an elementary school and revealed the diminutive access school leaders must inflict profound change that passes surface-level teaching of students' demographics. The theme that permeated conversations the most was steeped in the self-work and teachings wither teachers and leaders enacted individually, not from the organization. Although some novice teachers could not provide suitable lessons tailored to students' identities, they all agreed that students must be affirmed and relate to their teaching content. School-based leaders must focus solely on ensuring teachers and students meet the goals of each standard and only deviate from the lessons if the network provides a streamlined curriculum that includes identity-affirming studies with development opportunities for teachers and leaders to deepen their understanding and practice.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

This hermeneutic phenomenology explores the experiences of elementary school leaders and teachers with implementing CRP in schools. Throughout this study, participants engaged in an interview and focus group to highlight their experiences from this study, which generated three major themes and several subthemes. The contents of chapter five will interpret the findings outlined in chapter four by focusing on implications, limitations, and recommendations. Chapter five will include the following sections, interpretation of findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

Data analysis in chapter four reveals three major themes within this study to highlight participants' responses regarding CRP. The three themes are teacher self-development, the impact of educator turnover, and organizational constraints. Each theme was generated due to the frequency, relevancy, and intensity of the conversation from each participant. Throughout the discussion section, I will uniquely discuss the findings to highlight my voice regarding the findings of this study in five significant subsections: an interpretation of findings, implications for policy, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Participants of this study agreed that teacher-self-development was the driving force behind their cultural proficiency and how they chose to embed it in schools. While participants agreed that CRP is necessary to support an inclusive school environment, participants also

agreed that educator turnover continues to widen the gap in skill level amongst novice and skilled educators and leaders. Individuals who can implement CRP in schools tend to have the most experience and stray from organizational guidelines. In contrast, most novice teachers focus more on learning systems to ensure students receive a quality education during their first years of teaching. The skills needed to adapt schedules, lessons, and text comes with experience and knowledge. As teachers and leaders leave the field of education at a mass rate due to organizational constraints, novice teachers and leaders outweigh the most experienced, which continues to lessen one's cultural proficiency and how it is exemplified in leadership and, subsequently, in teacher development.

### ***Summary of Thematic Findings***

The three themes of this study (teacher self-development, educator turnover, and organizational constraints) are interconnected. As participants engaged in individual interviews and focus groups, I used a memoing technique to elaborate on concepts and themes identified in data analysis outside of data collection. Memoing is a technique that allows the researcher to separate their interpretations and biases from participant responses to increasing the validity of the raw data collected (Razaghi et al., 2020). Below are my interpretations of each central theme in this study derived from memoing and how it helps create a cohesive story of the explored phenomena.

**Intrinsically Connected.** Participants spoke vividly about their experiences regarding their self-development, but they all agreed that there was not just one person whose responsibility was to ensure teacher and leader proficiency. When participants talked about commitment, there was an underlining agreement that all stakeholders are responsible for developing themselves, staff, and students. It is not solely on the leadership team to strengthen



teachers' capacity; it is both teachers and leaders working in tandem to create an inclusive environment. When participants highlighted self-development, I wrote down the word “silos” to highlight the disconnection of individuals in a school.

Schools are complex organizations that are most efficient when all parts work cohesively to service students, but self-development is an example of a silo. Self-development is necessary for any field, but when self-development lacks normalcy, it can generate gaps within a system, such as a school. Therefore, the difference between novice leaders' and teachers' skills become evident as the gap widens. Leaders and teachers are not required to do any additional work outside of the constraints of the organization; thus, any additional work one chooses to do, whether it is altering a lesson or reading a new text, produces a level of inequity within an organization. Although all stakeholders are responsible, self-development should be required with a shared standard of what development should encompass. A lack of requirements and a shared standard can perpetuate the lack of CRP in schools.

**An Escalator or Revolving Door.** Without a normed standard of CRP in schools, the escalator educators once used that led Educators into retirement has diminished to a revolving door that does not produce experts in the field. Educator turnover is a current problem within the field of education. Educators nationwide are participating in a mass exit of the field as they search for improved work-life balance, increased pay, respect, and much more. With that, the cycle of educators entering leadership, or the classroom, mimics a revolving door. The progression that used to be ingrained in education slows down around year five, and a new cycle of novice teachers enters the field (Walker, 2022). Although novice teachers bring much knowledge and skill to the profession, expert teachers offer experiences coupled with a skill that all individuals should aspire to reach. However, when leaders and teachers leave the school, the

escalator of success reduces to becoming a revolving door where minimal progression occurs in experience, skill, and expertise. We want and need teachers with the desire and passion for teaching our youth; we need them to stay in the field to help close the inequity gaps within schools. Many organizations seek ways to keep good employees in their careers longer and adjust benefits, programs, and policies. However, the desire to stay expert educators is not a priority; given the influx of new teachers and leaders, one can train each year to fill their spot.

**Red Tape.** Despite this study selecting educators from a public charter school, one must endure many regulations and formalities to seek change. Formalities and excessive bureaucracy elongate processes for suitable change. Participants discussed organizational constraints and how they hinder them from creating the space and time needed to develop a culturally responsive staff and school. When participants began discussing change on a school and organizational level, I thought about the challenges participants faced to see minor changes often occurring the following school year if approved. I interpreted the barriers that participants discussed as red tape. Even public charter schools have countless formalities for educators to enact change in their classrooms. When Cortez spoke about the process to alter the implementation of units, I was shocked. His school did not change the units; they altered the sequence teachers taught them. However, for this change to occur, teachers and leaders had to engage in an intensive monthly task force that required extensive research, discussion groups, and presentations to the entire organization about this change. Although the literature review in this study highlights charter schools' autonomy, it merely represents the selectiveness in policy rather than in practice.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings of this study result in implications for both policy and practice that supports the need for CRP in schools. Within this section, I will use the findings of this section to make

recommendations for both policy and practice within the Eastern City's Public Charter School to enhance its current efforts in implementing CRP. While considering the organization's demographics and structure, I will make recommendations that address the three themes generated in this study.

### ***Implications for Policy***

Public research on the school's current structure regarding how one chooses curriculum and what development looks like monthly and yearly is not accessible to the public. However, the recommendations provided should enhance current or new policies within the public charter school as it aids in closing the educational divide in Eastern City. Currently, the governing body that oversees all public charter schools within Eastern City is the Office of State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). OSSE's vision statement is to "close the achievement gap and ensure all people of all ages and backgrounds are prepared to succeed" (OSSE, 2022). With OSSE's vision mirroring the public charter schools under its realm, its policies should reflect the approaches to implementing its lofty goals. After extensive research on OSSE's 2018-2023 strategic plan, a language clearly emphasizes the steps to ensure students' academic success increases on average; 6,700 students meet or exceed state assessments, but no clear guidance regarding how they will achieve equity in ensuring academic success. As the governing body of Public Charter schools in Eastern City ends its' five-year strategic plan this year, I would recommend more language regarding how schools should work towards achieving equity and inclusivity in their organizational practices.

OSSE also hosts monthly professional development opportunities for all educators hosted by their Teaching and Learning (TAL) development team. Currently, there are no development opportunities for culturally responsive practices, but there is a point of contact to submit any

inquiries and questions. Again, the vagueness of CRP on a governing and organizational level trickles into omission or inequity on a school level. District policies should set the precedence for equity for closing the achievement gap so that the public charter schools under the same standards can follow.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Implications for practices can be evident in school leadership first. School leaders on all levels should normalize what CRP looks like in their schools to ensure the standard is equitable and transferable on all levels. Although CRP is a skill that educators agree is necessary, it is only a practice implemented once awareness of the need and impact is recognized in schools. For cultural proficiency to occur, policies from the governing body, OSSE, should provide clear directives for organizations to follow. As organizations begin planning for the school year ahead, it may be effective for organizations to plan how equity in closing the achievement gap can look over a period. Priorities regarding curriculum planning and design should be standardized as schools revisit curriculum and its effectiveness on student success.

As school reassess their current performance every year and begin to create a school plan, it may help to plan what professional development opportunities will support teachers' proficiency in CRP over the year. A quantitative number can help schools identify where there is a lack of development or sufficient development in schools. Khalifa (2016) uses this to describe the CRSL Framework in four tenants. It could be impactful for schools to begin with the four tenants of the CRSL framework to begin planning different professional development sessions as each tenant builds on the consciousness of another. Using a framework as a guiding principle can be transferable to other school components, such as projects, family events, and more. As

schools continue to aim toward closing the achievement gap, a systematic plan and practice regarding equity may determine its effectiveness when implemented similarly.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

This section addresses the study's theoretical and empirical implications and how this study's current research adds to or diverges from previous research. Chapter one highlights previous research's theoretical and practical implications using Khalifa's (2016) Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) framework. This section will revisit the same theoretical framework and past literature to decipher how this study enhances the field of education in its quest to improve students of color's success in schools.

### ***Empirical Findings***

The empirical findings of this study extend previous research by adding an alternative lens from public schools to public charter schools. The Eastern City houses many public charter schools in the city's most impoverished communities without having direct development plans on how CRP impacts student achievement in schools. The findings of this study emphasize the need for organizations to decide if CRP will be a normed focus for the organization and how educators should implement CRP in age-appropriate ways. Unbound Education, Inc., is a national organization that closely broadcasts what CRP can look like through its GLEAM approach. GLEAM is the acronym for grade-level, engaging, affirming, and meaningful (Unbounded, INC., 2022). Within this approach, educators use the GLEAM acronym to inform how they lead and teach students in an engaging and affirming way that represents all students in their schools. As Public Charter schools continue to grow, focusing on closing the achievement gap, schools must consider multiple ways to reduce the educational gap. The charge for social reform is evident as schools realize that traditional teaching methods are not reaching all students. While considering alternative approaches to teaching in a culturally responsive way,

online programs should also be used to quickly adapt based on student's learning styles, interests, and relevancy to themselves and their community. Educators must adjust to the current need of students and the communities we serve. The lack of CRP in schools can mute student success when it is not normalized across organizations in its implementation and approach.

### ***Theoretical Findings***

This study selected participants from a Charter School lens that emphasizes the need to cultivate inclusive school environments through school leadership and development. The theoretical findings of this study corroborate all four tenants of the CRSL theoretical framework and add to the first three tenants specifically; 1. Critical Self-Reflection 2. The Development of Culturally Responsive Teachers, and 3. The promotion of inclusive school environments.

The first tenant of the CRSL framework examines the critical self-reflection role in one's approach to leadership and teaching. Within this tenant, this study adds that skilled educators and leaders tend to have a larger capacity to engage in critical self-reflection due to their familiarity with the organizations, standards, and systems. While critical self-reflection is a necessary skill that all participants agreed one needs, the capacity to implement it varies based on one's individual and skill level.

The second tenant of the CRSL framework highlights the development of culturally responsive teachers. To add to this tenant, one must address the development of leaders and teachers. For constant development to occur, leaders and teachers must stay within their organization for change to occur. When leaders and teachers exit at an alarming rate each year, assessing CRP's impact on teachers, leaders, and students becomes challenging. Brion (2019) describes that the missing link to student success is proficiency in culturally responsive school practices. This study expands on Brion's (2019) research and adds that the educational gap continues to widen when schools do not mandate all adults to implement practices. Although

Charter schools have more autonomy in cultivating their school mission and design, they have less authority over what teachers and leaders can do within those constraints.

The last tenant that CRSL's framework builds upon is the promotion of inclusive school environments. This study found that an inclusive school environment ensures student representation is apparent and provides clarity and guidance on what inclusivity looks like in a school. The findings of this study reveal that educators from the same organization varied in their definition of CRP and what it looks like in a school. One can deduce that the varying definitions can also equate to the different levels and styles of implementation.

Ultimately, this study adds to the CRSL framework by providing an additional lens from Public Charter Schools to this study, as many public charter schools in the Eastern city aim to close the educational divide. With creativity and intentionality through a systematic approach, organizations can begin to make internal shifts every year as they work towards achieving their mission.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations are uncontrolled elements that impact the scope of the study. Within this study, there was a form of data collection I could not obtain from the organization. This phenomenological study's most potent data collection form was interviews, focus groups, and record reviews. However, records of staff agendas and meetings were data I could not obtain from the organization when I was permitted to conduct the study. The added information would have highlighted a connection to their school's mission, teacher development, and cultural competency.

In contrast, quantitative research may be able to capture responses from a larger pool of qualified participants without the in-depth responses from participants that this qualitative study

captured. Another limitation of this study is the sample size. In qualitative research, sample sizes can be limited to prevent saturation, where the same themes reproduce due to the participants of the study (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). This research study captured the experiences of 11 participants, which does not fully reflect the experiences of all individuals in the Eastern City; however, it captures vital information about individuals' experiences regarding the same phenomenon.

Delimitations of this study are intentional decisions that I made that limit the scope of the study. Within the education field, a conscious political war revolves around the Critical Race Theory (CRT). Although elements of the critical race theory can be apparent within this study, I chose to use the Theory of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), which closely aligns with this study and creates avenues of success for teachers and leaders. Additionally, I was very selective in choosing ideal participants for this study to capture various experiences from novice to expert levels. To get a robust pool of participants, participants engaged in a questionnaire at the beginning that allowed me to select participants based on specific qualifications such as the participants' years of experience, certification, and more. After choosing the most qualified participants that provided a vast range for this study, I conducted the research. Another delimitation of this study was the timeframe. Data were collected at the semester's end for teachers in December, before their Winter Break, when teachers and leaders had ample time to engage in interviews and focus groups, as opposed to the start of the school year.

Furthermore, I chose hermeneutic research, given my relationship with the overall topic and the closeness of the phenomena. Additionally, this study is a hermeneutic and not a transcendental phenomenology, allowing my interpretations and biases of the study to be



highlighted separately from the study's findings. These delimitations are essential as they inform the readers of the potential biases of this study and how they are intentionally separated from the results.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Considering the study findings, limitations, and delimitations placed on the study, future research should explore the same phenomenon in public schools, as this study only focused on the experiences of public charter school teachers and leaders. Future research should understand the methods organizations use when selecting curricula and how that curriculum supports teachers' proficiency in CRP. A deeper dive into understanding specific qualifications organizations look for and how the curriculum introduces complex topics in an age-appropriate way while meeting state standards would help organizations decide if they are aligned with fulfilling the DEI mission of the school.

Additionally, when considering staff training and development, procedures, and processes should evolve as schools evolve. Schools must invest in their leader development or hire a third-party consulting firm to support CRP improvement throughout the year, especially schools whose mission is to close the educational divide. Predominantly inner-city schools share similar tasks but lack alignment in narrowing the gap through a focus on CRP. This study's literature review and findings highlight the need to support students holistically instead of just in academics. The lack of CRP may be the key indicator that is muting the success of students of color and how they learn best.

Furthermore, past research emphasizes that students perform best in a culturally diverse school instead of schools composed of one majority race (DeMatthews, 2016). While DeMatthews's (2016) study indicates a strong correlation between student success and a diverse

learning environment, it also sheds little light on CRP and how its aided student success. Continued research in qualitative and quantitative studies should consider what additional supports educators can put in place to help students of color and what that support looks like from a teacher, leader, and organizational standpoint.

Also, as we find the right niche for teachers, leaders, and students keeping online learning open as a viable option for students of color should be considered. As time continues to change, the traditional way of school should also plan to accommodate distinctive learning and engagement styles. When participants discussed behavioral approaches, conversations around “long school days” surfaced and how some students labeled “disruptive” performed better during the COVID-19 pandemic, given that school was virtual. Schools did not have to focus specifically on building student relationships as they did previously because their focus was learning how to instruct elementary students virtually in an innovative way. Broadening the scope of virtual learning for students and families should continue to be a viable option as the curriculum expands to online platforms.

### **Conclusion**

Past literature studied CRP's impact on Public Schools through qualitative and quantitative approaches. This study identified a need for research within public charter schools, given their mission to close the achievement gap and their intentional placement in cities' most impoverished communities. The mission of the public charter schools made schools desirable for families to choose from, given their comparable achievement rates to public schools in the same district. However, unfortunately, they are still below their White counterparts in neighboring communities. This study selected participants from different elementary school backgrounds, from leaders to teachers and from novice to expert level, to determine CRP's impact on student

success. This study found a gap in knowledge and implementation of CRP among participants in this study and found that the individuals who are the most experienced professionals in their roles implement CRP closely aligned with Khalifa's CRSL (2016) framework. Unfortunately, the revolving cycle of educator retention prevents the likelihood of one becoming an expert in their role. The most significant takeaway from this study is within an organization's practice. Creating a systematic approach to how organizations plan to implement CRP will ensure that the approach can be normalized across schools to ensure all students receive inclusive and affirming instruction, not just students with the most experienced teachers. As schools seek ways to close the educational divide and increase access to all students, CRP may be an institutional solution that yields significant growth for all students.

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## Appendix A

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

November 1, 2022

Dana Jones

David Vacchi

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-1208 ENHANCING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON HOW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEADERS  
DEMONSTRATE CULTURAL PROFICIENCY IN TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Dear Dana Jones, David Vacchi,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(?).

**Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*

**Research Ethics Office**

# Research Participants Needed

## ENHANCING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON HOW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEADERS DEMONSTRATE CULTURAL PROFICIENCY IN TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

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### Criteria

- Are you a current public charter school educator in Wards 5, 7, or 8?
- Have you taught in a public charter school for at least one year and have one year minimum of teaching experience?
- Are you a full-time general education or special education teacher or elementary school leader?

If you answered **yes** to any of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a research study. Please complete the screening survey by clicking the link [here](#) to participate. Eligible participants will be contacted to schedule the interview and focus group.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of elementary school leaders and teachers with implementing Culturally Responsive Practices (CRP) in schools. Participants will be asked to participate in an individual interview and focus group (both conducted through online video platforms), approximately 45-60 minutes each.

### **Online participation only.**

The study will be conducted online through Microsoft Teams.

Dana Jones, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Please contact Dana Jones for more information.**

**Appendix C**  
**Permission to Request**

November 25, 2022

Dear Blake Johnson, CEO,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am researching to understand better Culturally Responsive Practices amongst teachers and leaders in an elementary charter school setting. The title of my research project is Enhancing Culturally Responsive Practices: A Phenomenological Study on How Elementary School Leaders Demonstrate Cultural Proficiency in Teacher Development. This hermeneutic phenomenology aims to explore the experiences of elementary school leaders and teachers with implementing culturally responsive practices in schools.

I want your permission to contact members of your organization to invite them to participate in my research study. I will solicit participants through purposive sampling based on the participant response responded to a brief questionnaire they will complete once they express interest as a volunteer.

Participants will be asked to complete the attached questionnaire to determine eligibility for this study. I will then contact them to schedule an interview based on their responses. Participants will be presented with informed consent information before participating. This study is entirely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation.

School permission should be on approved letterhead with the appropriate signature(s) for education research. Thank you for considering my request. Please provide a signed statement on official paper indicating your approval if you grant permission. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Dana S. Jones  
Candidate, Ph.D. Education Leadership