Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Keywords: leadership, cultural responsiveness, social justice, critical self-reflection

What Is the Topic

Culturally responsive school leadership focuses on how school leaders and all educators can effectively serve students who have been historically marginalized in school and society. Research shows that students in the United States often learn within racially segregated environments, a consequence of systemic oppression. This segregation can detrimentally impact the academic achievement, long-term career prospects, and income levels of marginalized students. K-12 English learners (ELs) are often not exempt from systemic oppression. Various scholars contend that about 60% of ELs find themselves in predominantly English instructional environments with minimal adjustments for language proficiency and cultural diversity (Zehler et al., 2003). By embracing culturally responsive school leadership practices, school leaders and educators can contribute to dismantling inequities (often rooted in systemic barriers), and thus promote equity and social justice perspectives (Khalifa et al., 2016; Webb-Johnson, 2007). The leadership academy characterizes a culturally responsive school leader as someone who actively takes on the responsibility to mitigate, disrupt, and dismantle systemic oppression (Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2007). Below, we provide research and practice-based frameworks and recommendations for school districts to effectively engage with culturally responsive school leadership.

What Is the Evidence Base

Despite the presence of various education programs that support English learners (ELs), the opportunity gaps for this group persist and with them the disparity in their academic performance (Lee, et al., 2007). This may be exacerbated by intersectional, nuanced, and multilayered educational inequities. Additionally, ELs often experience higher rates of economic hardship, increased mobility, and are more likely to attend schools that are segregated, and underfunded (Kim and Garcia, 2014).

1. **Critical self-reflection Approach** serves as an expansion of critical thinking, prompting individuals to contemplate their actions and ideas by encouraging to examine our bias, power, and privilege which can allow us to build a deeper understanding of ourselves and others. Cummins (2001) contends that the use of critical self-reflection can help school leaders to:

- Learn how to challenge Whiteness and hegemonic epistemologies in education through deep examination of their biases and privileges.
- Locate and promote resources for reforming school environments and curricula to become more culturally responsive.
- Use school data to discover, track, and address disparities.

Studies such as the ones below, have demonstrated the positive impacts of critical self-reflection in educators and school leaders:

- Baxter et al. (2021) explored how school leaders and educators used critical reflection to analyze their roles and understand their potential biases and privileges. Participants engaged in group reflective sessions using critical self-reflection principles to understand the impact of personal biases and privileges. After engaging in reflective sessions, participants reported increased mutual support and validation from peers, and a deeper understanding of the values and assumptions that influenced their actions and reactions.
- Baecher et al. (2013) discuss how the use of critical self-reflection and equity focused approaches helped school leaders to better address the broader systemic inequities experienced by English learners. Findings show that participants moved from surface level issues they encounter in their work with ELs and their families, to deeper understanding and culturally responsive dialogs about relations of power in their schools.

2. **Social justice framework** in education (Figure 1) involves analyzing the structures that perpetuate oppression and developing the capacity to challenge these systems of hierarchy (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2009).This framework advocates for policies and practices that promote access to quality education, equitable distribution of resources, and culturally responsive teaching methods (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Multiple studies (Bogotch, 2002; Fullan, 2016; Murtadha & Watts, 2005) show that educators and school leaders who engage with culturally responsive school leadership using a social justice approach can effectively reflect on personal beliefs, biases, and behaviors; model student-centered beliefs grounded in equity; and develop cultural competence in interactions and decision-making.
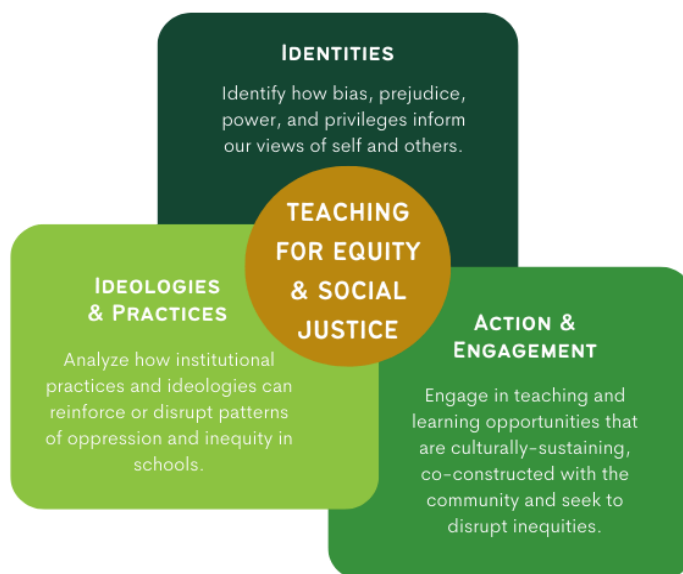

Figure 1. Social Justice Approach in Education

- Brooks et al. (2010) studied the impacts of "Project Alianza," a comprehensive professional development program grounded in culturally responsive principles and social justice perspectives aimed to increase the capacity of school leaders to serve the growing number of English learners (ELs) in Central Indiana. The authors found that as a result of the "Alianza" program, educators and administrators felt more confident to enact the theoretical aspects of what they learned in different trainings on equity, diversity, and inclusion, providing the tools to help them address the broader systemic inequities that impact ELs.
- Theoharis (2007) investigated how principals developed knowledge and methods to transform practices within their schools to better serve marginalized students through culturally responsive leadership principles and social justice approach. Principals promoted social justice through purposeful communication and led staff in examining issues of race and injustice. They sustained their efforts by prioritizing communication, building support networks, collaborating for change, and engaging in professional learning.

Summary

Review of relevant literature: Theoretical basis	Review of relevant literature: Support of identified research and practice	Empirical evidence on how it serves students and promotes systemic change
Critical self-reflection is an approach that helps contemplate actions and ideas by encouraging us to examine our bias, power, and privileges.	- Challenge Whiteness and hegemonic epistemologies through deep examination of personal biases and privileges. - Use school data to discover, track, and address disparities.	Baxter et al. (2021) found that critical self-reflection increased mutual support and validation from peers, and a deeper understanding of the values and assumptions that influenced actions and reactions of school leaders.
A social justice framework involves analyzing the structures that perpetuate oppression and developing the capacity to challenge these systems of hierarchy.	- Model student-centered beliefs grounded in equity. - Confront institutional biases and deficit-based schooling. - Establish equitable systems with a focus on marginalized populations.	Brooks et al. (2010) found that as a result of workshops on culturally responsiveness and social justice, educators and administrators felt more confident to enact the theoretical aspects of equity, diversity, and inclusion to address the broader systemic inequities that impact ELs.

Equity Considerations

Magno and Schiff (2010) contend that culturally responsive leadership is considered one of the best methods in integrating immigrant students. Immigrant students, who can be English learners, are often pressured into mainstream cultural norms (Jaffe-Walter, 2016). It is worth noting that while many immigrants are English learners (ELs), not all ELs are immigrants.

In Oregon, organizations like Somali American Council of Oregon foster solidarity within the Somali community and with mainstream society, promoting a supportive environment for Somali families. Articles such as Stories of Somali students in Oregon and Somali students/families need Somali educators and leaders shed light on the struggles experienced by Somali students in Oregon, including disparities in graduation rates and difficulties navigating the education system due to cultural barriers. School leaders can utilize this information by prioritizing the hiring of Somali teachers, as demonstrated by Portland (OR) Somali Program to provide culturally relevant support to Somali students and families.

> ***Example from the Field***
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> "Starting with social justice point of view facilitates building social and cultural capital and provides students with enhanced and deepened learning experiences that counteract the challenges of injustices. Successful leaders support educators to reflect on current practices and urgently improve those that do not work." Fostering Excellence through Social Justice Principles in Schools Serving English Learners

Considerations for Local Context: Strategy Selection

As we consider the optimal next steps for supporting school leaders and educators to establish culturally responsive leadership practices, a valuable source of information lies in the local context of the district and/or school. In this brief, by local context, we refer to the specific factors within the community that may impact the ways in which school leaders perceive the socio-cultural aspects of the communities and the needs of ELs and their families that should be considered when choosing strategies. One way of fostering school decisions that support appropriate and effective spending for EL students is to ensure that principals, or other chief administrators at the school site level, have the knowledge and training to identify high quality English learner instruction.

To support school leaders and educators in developing and establishing practices that are ongoing and culturally responsive, the questions below can serve as a guide:

1. What policies, practices, and structures hinder student success, and how can I create new ones that center the voices and experiences of historically marginalized groups, including ELs?
2. What strategies can I implement to ensure educators reflect on and improve instructional practices to meet the diverse needs of ELs, considering their cultural backgrounds?
3. As a culturally responsive leader, how can I assess existing policies and practices for signs of oppression and marginalization among students, staff, faculty, and the community?
4. Where in my budget can I allocate resources to support this work?
5. In what ways do I apply a social justice lens to promote equity and excellence for ELs and their families, honoring their cultural backgrounds and identities?
6. How can I engage families of ELs and community organizations as partners in creating a more inclusive educational environment?

What Can School Leaders and Educators Do: Strategies for Success

While educators and school leaders are engaging with culturally responsive school leadership perspectives, it is equally, and even more important to engage families to ensure that they are included, valued, and heard (Morita-Mullaney, 2021). The strategies below serve as examples of potential options rather than a definitive set of recommendations. The resources below can provide school leaders and educators with a better understanding of how to identify, adapt, and implement strategies according to the demographics and backgrounds of the communities, and ELs and their families. When looking at areas of learning or improving culturally responsive leadership practices, the following resources could be a good place to start:

- Oregon Educational Leadership Standards.
- Strategies for school administrators that can support the success of English learners.
- Resources that provide information on how to meet the needs of ELs by valuing their cultural diversity (p.8).
- Wallace Foundation offers a list of resources to promote culturally responsive school leadership for school principals.
- This blog describes three ways for school leaders to champion cultural responsiveness.

Strategy 1: Forming A Culturally Responsive Leadership Team
Primary Audience: administrators, educators, and staff
Description: This strategy focuses on empowering school leaders to cultivate a culturally responsive environment that prioritizes equity, inclusion, and academic achievement (Lopez, 2016).
How to use it?
Through a series of structured steps, administrators will first establish clear goals for fostering cultural responsiveness, garnering support from stakeholders across the school community. Next, they will assess the learning environment, particularly focusing on its effectiveness in supporting English Learners (ELs) through culturally and linguistically engaging practices. Finally, administrators will brainstorm strategies to promote critical thinking among staff, addressing any challenges or concerns along the way. By actively engaging in these steps, school leaders can drive meaningful change and enhance outcomes for English learners.
How is it beneficial? Who benefits from it?
By fostering a culturally responsive environment that promotes equity, inclusion, and academic achievement, administrators, educators, staff, students, and families all benefit from the enhanced support and opportunities provided.
How does it support changes in the systems?
By empowering administrators to establish clear goals, assess the learning environment, and promote critical thinking among staff, this activity supports systemic changes within the education system. It encourages a shift towards culturally responsive practices that prioritize the needs of English learners.

Known or potential cautions? What not to do?
Caution should be taken to avoid tokenism or superficial engagement with cultural responsiveness. It's important not to rush through the process or implement quick fixes without addressing underlying systemic issues.

Strategy 2: Critical Self-reflection Workshop

Primary Audience: administrators, educators, and staff
Description: Drawing from critically reflective leadership, the critical self-reflection workshop is a structured program designed to support school leaders in developing and implementing culturally responsive leadership skills (Baxter et al., 2016). This workshop emphasizes critical self-reflection, an approach that involves examining one's beliefs, actions, and privileges with a critical lens, acknowledging systemic inequities and working towards personal and collective transformation to challenge and dismantle oppressive structures and biases. As stated by Ash and Clayton (2009), without reflection, experience alone might cause us to "reinforce stereotypes…, offer simplistic solutions to complex problems and generalize inaccurately" (p.26).
How to use it? The workshop consists of facilitated sessions where school leaders engage in guided self-reflection exercises, group discussions, and action planning. Participants will explore their experiences, perspectives, and areas for growth related to culturally responsive practices.
How is it beneficial? Who benefits from it?
School leaders benefit from enhanced emotional intelligence, integrity, and confidence, enabling them to lead with empathy, integrity, and decisiveness.
Educators, staff, and students benefit from the improved leadership and inclusive school culture fostered by culturally responsive practices.
The broader school community benefits from increased accountability and support for academic success and equity.
How does it support changes in the systems?
By promoting critical self-reflection among school leaders, this strategy supports systemic changes by fostering a culture of continuous improvement and accountability for culturally responsive practices.
It encourages leaders to challenge and disrupt systemic oppression and biases within their schools, ultimately leading to more equitable outcomes for all students, particularly ELs.
Known or potential cautions? What not to do?
Ensure that self-reflection is approached with openness, honesty, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths about biases and privilege. Avoid superficial engagement with self-reflection and cultural responsiveness. Leaders should commit to ongoing learning and action beyond the workshop.

Implementation Considerations

As we embark on creating a plan and proceeding with implementation, it is useful to consider topic-specific aspects as well as general factors and guiding questions that can increase the likelihood for successful implementation. We recommend reviewing the Oregon Department of Education Equity

[Lens](#) as it can serve as a guide to inform the implementation of culturally responsive leadership strategies.

The questions below are grounded in best practices to assist educators and school leaders in navigating the process of identifying and integrating strategies aimed at fostering culturally responsive leadership, with a particular emphasis on supporting the academic success of English learners and can help school leaders assess regular and ongoing learning (Baecher et al., 2013; Khalifa et al., 1996).

- How will you ensure that EL families are actively engaged in the teaching and learning experiences of their kids and in school-decision making processes?
- How can school leaders integrate critical self-reflection into their ongoing professional development to enhance their capacity for culturally responsive leadership?
- How can ongoing learning opportunities for school leaders be structured to promote continuous improvement in addressing systemic inequities and possible biases?
- What strategies can be implemented to ensure that professional development initiatives for school leaders prioritize culturally responsive practices to support the academic success of English learners?

As educators and school leaders engage with culturally responsive school leadership practices, it is important to remember this is not something to do alone. None of the approaches and suggestions we provide in this brief can take place without collective action and care for one another.

Local Context

It is important to recognize that schools and school districts may adopt various approaches to initiatives promoting culturally responsive leadership, which may not always be explicitly labeled as such. These efforts may instead be framed within the contexts of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

The following resources offered by local education entities could be useful for educators and school leaders:
- [Oregon Department of Education Integrated Guidance for Student Success](#) (2025-2027)
- [Culturally Specific After School Learning Program](#)
- [Culturally Affirming Practices](#) (Oregon)

The questions below can serve as a guide to determine how the local contexts of the school, district, and community may impact the implementation of the strategies and approaches discussed in this brief:
- To what extent is the implementation plan sensitive to the unique local challenges and opportunities in promoting a culturally responsive school environment?
- What measures are in place to ensure the sustainability of the plan over time within schools and across the district?
- How consistent is the implementation of the plan—both within individual schools and across the entire district?

Also consider:
- Geographical Factors:How do the location and size of the district/school impact the practical aspects of plan implementation?
- Learning Mode: What considerations are needed based on the learning mode (in person/remote/hybrid/other) prevalent in the local context?
- Duration: How long is the plan designed to last, and what measures are in place for its continuous effectiveness?
- Reliability: Is the implementation plan reliable and realistic given the local context, and what factors contribute to its sustainability?

Implementation Plan and Process

The following questions can further enhance clarity and provide practical guidance for educators and school leaders as they navigate the implementation process and monitor progress effectively:

- **What is our capacity for implementation?**

First, we need to assess the readiness and cultural competency of educators and school leaders to embrace and effectively implement the plan. This involves evaluating their understanding of cultural diversity, their ability to adapt instructional approaches, and their willingness to engage in ongoing professional development. Second, we need to consider the availability of resources, both human and material, necessary to support the implementation process such as access to training programs, instructional materials, and support networks (e.g., local community organizations). Lastly, we need to examine the existing school culture and climate to identify any possible barriers or challenges that can impact the implementation process (Fullan, 2016).

- **How are families involved in the implementation of the plan?**

In the implementation plan, families need to be actively involved through various communication channels and collaborative partnerships. Principals play a crucial role in fostering these partnerships, ensuring that communication with families is established and ongoing, for example, through regular newsletters or emails and providing updates on school events. Additionally, principals can also facilitate culturally responsive parent-teacher conferences and champion the hosting of workshops and events specifically designed for EL families, covering topics such as understanding curriculum standards and supporting literacy at home (Magno & Schiff, 2010).

- **How will we know if the implementation is successful?**

The success of plan implementation can be addressed by tracking academic outcomes, such as graduation rates and standardized test scores, disaggregated by student demographics to identify disparities, for example for English learners. Additionally, we will gather feedback from stakeholders, including students, families, educators, and community members, through various means such as surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Regular check-ins and progress reviews will allow us to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement, enabling us to make data-informed adjustments to our implementation plan as needed (Khalifa, 2018).

- **What resources do we need to implement the program, plan, or strategies?**

Although funding is generally not required in the implementation of the strategies offered in this brief, we suggest educators and school leaders explore what funding opportunities may be available that could be useful. While funding may not always be readily available within school budgets, educators and school leaders can explore external funding opportunities. For instance, Oregon's Department of Education offers grants and funding opportunities, and organizations like National Association of Secondary School Principals may provide additional financial support. Additionally, fostering financial stewardship and involving District Equity Committees in the budgeting process can help prioritize resources based on student and community needs. Consider reviewing the Oregon Department of Education's Guideline to spending funds responsibly.

- **Are accessibility supports in place?**

Culturally responsive school leadership plays a vital role in identifying and addressing barriers to accessibility, such as language barriers and cultural differences. Principals and administrators can collaborate with educators and community stakeholders to incorporate culturally relevant materials and instructional approaches that accommodate diverse learning needs and honor students' linguistic and cultural assets.

Learn More

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