

**EXAMINING CULTURALLY RELEVANT LEADERSHIP  
BEST PRACTICES IN DIFFERENT EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS**

Michael L. Washington  
*California State University, Sacramento*

**EDITOR NOTE**

*Sadly, this article is being published posthumously as the author passed away prior to having the opportunity to integrate the feedback from editors and reviewers after the manuscript was accepted during the early stages of screening manuscripts. Special thanks go to Dr. Ricardo Stanton-Salazar and Dr. Gilberto Conchas as well as the JLER editorial team that the article was revised and re-written to reflect the late Dr. Washington's thinking, albeit that JLER is not responsible for any errors of fact or judgement that may exist in the article.*

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**ABSTRACT**

Though culturally relevant educational leadership has been practiced for more than 20 years, marginalized students from culturally diverse communities continue to be underserved. Additionally, other educational programs outside of traditional K-12 school environments are far less likely to have educational administrators who have any experience or training in culturally relevant leadership, begging the question, "Do we really understand what effective culturally relevant leadership best practices are, and if so, how can we improve them in all educational settings, and not just K-12 education?" This research project focuses on answering the following questions: 1.) What best practices are utilized by culturally relevant educational administrators?; 2.) What best practices are utilized by culturally relevant educational administrators who come from different cultural or racial backgrounds?; and 3.) What best practices are utilized by culturally relevant administrators from different types of educational institutions or environments? A qualitative multiple-case study design was utilized to explore the best practices of four randomly selected educational administrators in California, from different cultural backgrounds and from different school environments, with considerable experience and success in teaching and educational administration. Results from the study indicate that despite some differences in their approaches and their respective educational programs, there were common factors that were instrumental in the record of success experienced by these research participants. Key among these factors were (I.) Positive Relationships with the local community; (II.) Principal or Administrative Mentoring Programs; and (III.) Shared Decision Making. These, and other factors were vital for professional development, improved student academic performance, retention, and engagement, especially for marginalized populations in culturally diverse schools.

**Keywords:** Cultural Relevant Leadership, Best Practices, Social Consciousness, Shared Decision Making

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### Introduction

There are a number of issues that our educational systems are facing that hinder the actualization of equal and equitable educational opportunities. Among those issues are standardized testing (Banks & Banks, 2006; Thompson, 2007), Common Core standards, (Polikoff, 2017; Rycik, 2014), changes in the effectiveness of teachers' unions (Giroux, 2015), unqualified teachers working in low-literacy environments (Nieto, 2004; Thompson, 2007), the lack of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) administrators in leadership positions (Beachum & Obiakor, 2005; Brooks, 2009; Capper, 1993; Castro et al., 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Nieto, 2007), the lack of social and academic support to CLD students, and ineffective inclusive governance in a variety of educational environments. Some of these issues are endemic in the entire educational system, such as standardized testing. However, general systemic challenges, whatever they may be, are exacerbated in educational environments with culturally diverse student populations that also lack effective culturally relevant leadership and support.

It's an unfortunate reality that inadequate and ineffective educational programs and schools and ill prepared educators and administrators lacking either the knowledge, the ability, or sometimes just the will to implement cultural relevancy in their profession, contribute to the economic, social, and generational demise of marginalized and culturally diverse students and schools. However, studies also reveal that teachers and administrators who are culturally competent, committed to their students, faculty, staff, and school vision, and are willing and able to embrace and implement culturally relevant approaches to teaching and leadership, can counter or avoid many of these negative academic and socioeconomic outcomes (Beachum, 2011; Duncan-Andrade, 2007, 2009; Freire, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Howard, 2016; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Noguera, 2003; Ogbu, 1978). If culturally responsive approaches to teaching and leadership already have a proven track record, why are there still so many education programs that fail to implement them, and why are they de-emphasized outside of traditional K-12 settings?

Much of the rationale for developing and instituting culturally relevant best practices in schools serving CLD students has been consistent since Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. With regard to teaching and learning, Goldston (2017) notes that culturally relevant instruction "allows educators to address social barriers that cause disparities in student achievement; by tailoring instruction to be mindful of these barriers, educators can help students overcome obstacles and succeed." She adds that "responsive classrooms also mitigate the effects of negative cultural stereotypes on student performance." While culturally responsive instruction has made some headway, culturally responsive or relevant educational leadership lags way behind. It is true that some progress has taken place in some educational settings, in some places and spaces, sometimes. However, we are not living in a post racial, or post cultural era. There is a vast difference between progress, adequacy, and effectiveness. Though K-12 teachers and college professors are often exposed to practitioners of cultural relevancy, school administrators, principals, coordinators, directors, and deans are often not included or provided similar training (Capper, 1993; Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Thompson, 2007). Outside of occasional training sessions in "diversity" — which are not focused on either teaching or leadership —, it is arguable that educational administrators in general receive little to no training in culturally relevant approaches

to teaching and leadership, for most, if not all, of their professional careers. As a result, students exposed to culturally engaging K-12 education may find this component missing as they further their education in college, adult education, or vocational education, which can increase disinterest in continuing educational pursuits, or reduce student engagement and retention in postsecondary or alternative education (Washington, 2013; Wood, 2011).

Considering the magnitude of challenges facing education today, especially during a pandemic that accentuates socioeconomic and academic achievement gaps, it is understandable why there are so many disgruntled teachers, frustrated administrators, and increasing suspension rates among marginalized student populations. The lack of effective culturally responsive leadership is a major contributing factor to what often appears to be a never-ending cycle of educational failure at all levels (Brooks, 2009; Gay, 2002, 2010; hooks, 2003; Kozol, 2005; Thompson, 2007). The implementation of effective culturally relevant leadership practices is one way to create a more equitable learning environment that supports both students and educators alike. However, these engaging and culturally responsive approaches need to continue throughout the educational journey of marginalized students in particular. The need for such supports should not dissipate with each step up in grade or with the transition to postsecondary education or alternative education. Yet, this is exactly what happens, and why retention and engagement efforts for marginalized students in education, nationwide, have been challenging and inconsistent (Capper, 1993; Harper & Quayle, 2014; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Strayhorn, 2014; Toldson, 2008).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Several reforms and culturally responsive approaches to education have developed over the years, most of which focus on pedagogy, or the practice and process of teaching and learning. However, the focus has been primarily on K-12 education. Though these reforms and practices continue to develop a more equitable learning environments or more effective leadership policies, very little has changed in the way administration or leadership is practiced; “top-down” approaches to leadership continue to predominate (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Furthermore, serious consideration for other educational options outside of K-12 education continues to be lacking. Disproportionate numbers of marginalized students from educational institutions at all levels are still prevalent in statistical reports describing significant dropout rates, low acceptance rates, poor graduation rates, and the “cradle to prison pipeline” in K-12 education. Not only does the need for best practices in culturally relevant education leadership still exist (Khalifa et al., 2016; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Santamaría & Santamariia, 2011), these practices must continue in all avenues of education if we wish to continue to provide support and engagement for marginalized students—beginning with preschool through graduate school, or if appropriate, vocational school. It seems clear that an effective resolution would require not only improved best practices in culturally relevant leadership, but also for such leadership to be extended beyond the limitations of the traditional K-12 environment. This implementation of culturally relevant leadership is based on *practice*, not *content* (Beauchum, 2009; Castro et al., 2018; Fullan, 2001). Therefore, *leadership practice* was the basis of this research project.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine educational leadership best practices that utilize a culturally relevant perspective or approach. Using case studies, this examination identified the best practices being implemented by experienced and effective educational administrators from different social, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, as well as

administrators who also work in different educational environments. Effective educational leadership refers to leadership that has a positive influence on the academic performance of students in primary, secondary, alternative, and postsecondary education, especially those students identified as marginalized.

### **Significance of the Study**

Based on current literature (Beauchum, 2011; Fullan, 2001; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2011), this study contributes to the re-examination of school management from a cultural lens and puts forth a more effective and culturally relevant approach to leadership practices. In particular, this study examines how culturally relevant best practices are implemented across different educational environments and programs (K-12 education, adult education, career and technical education, higher education, correctional education, continuation schools, remedial education, distance learning, or any marginalized environment that influences academic outcomes). Addressing these challenges at the classroom level is simply not enough, (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Gay, 2002, 2010 Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009, Feinberg & Soltis, 2004. Overall, this study on culturally relevant leadership best practices also contributes to what works, regarding leadership in different educational environments, and it contributes to the general body of knowledge in the field educational leadership.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The study examines the exploration of culturally relevant practices utilized by effective educational leaders and administrators. Therefore, two related theoretical frameworks were selected for this study. Gloria Ladson-Billings' foundational framework for *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (1994, 1995) established the basis for general applications of cultural relevancy as it applies to students, instruction, faculty, support, curriculum, values, and embracing an inclusive lens. The construct of *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* is applicable for determining best practices in educational leadership that are based on the following dimensions:

1. Institutional—refers to the institutional administrative values, policies, and practices.
2. Personal—refers to cognitive and emotional processes educators and leaders must engage in to promote and practice a culturally responsive pedagogy.
3. Instructional-- includes the concepts, strategies, activities, and assessment practices that form the basis of instruction and actualize a culturally responsive pedagogy.

The second theoretical framework utilized for this research study was the *Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework* (Khalifa et al., 2016). This framework encompasses some of the concepts of Ladson-Billings' work, but it focuses specifically on leadership practices that undermine deficit theoretical perspectives while simultaneously validating the social and cultural capital required for marginalized students require to develop. This framework also relies on the critical self-reflection of the administrator who must examine their own internal biases as part of the process of effective and socially conscious leadership.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching question of the study asks: *What best practices are utilized by four selected culturally relevant educational administrators/leaders from different cultural backgrounds and educational environments?* To answer this main question, three sub-questions are asked:

1. What best practices are utilized by culturally relevant educational administrators?
2. What best practices are utilized by culturally relevant educational administrators who come from different cultural or racial backgrounds?
3. What best practices are utilized by culturally relevant administrators from different types of educational institutions or environments?

### **Best Practices**

For the purposes of this study, Eugene Bardach (2011) defines a “best practice” as a method, technique, or process that consistently provides superior outcomes compared to results achieved through other means. Once this pattern is established, it is often referred to as a *benchmark* or *standard* (Bardach, 2011).

*Best practice* is also known as a form of program evaluation in public policy. It is the process of reviewing policy alternatives that have been effective in addressing similar issues in the past and could be applied to a current problem. Determining "best" or "smart" practices to address a particular policy problem is a commonly used but little understood tool of analysis (Bardach, 2011).

Caroline Munro (2005) refers to best practices in terms of a new paradigm in teaching and learning that “acknowledge the transformational nature of teaching and learning, and equips educators with the tools to proactively and continuously adapt to change” (p.?).

According to Anthony DiBella (2001), "a practice that is valued in one setting will be valued differently in another setting where there are different constraints, limitations, and circumstances" (p. 123). Additionally, he states that "how we learn and what we learn must shift as the context for learning changes" (p. 126). Therefore, a best practice is a dynamic application, not a static application.

### **Administration vs. Leadership**

Educational administration is defined as a process of working with and through others to accomplish school goals efficiently (Sergiovanni, 1991). The essential roles and tasks of an educational administrator include planning, organizing, leading, and controlling educational environments. An educational leader or manager is also concerned with tasks such as planning, coordinating, directing, defining objectives, supporting the work of others, and evaluating performance. In terms of these essential roles, there are no clear distinctions between the two titles.

Administrators are almost always appointed and usually exercise a management style that is directive and relies on a system of reward and punish. Their ability to influence subordinates is based on the formal authority inherent in their positions (Blase & Blase, 2006; Gooden, 2012; Santamaría, 2013). In contrast, leaders may either be appointed or emerge from within a group. Their management style often encourages others to perform beyond the actions dictated by formal authority. In this sense, managers/administrators can get other people to act, whereas leaders get other people to want to act, (Blase & Blase, 2006; Gooden, 2012; Santamaría, 2013; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012).

Unless otherwise specified, the terms “educational administration” and “educational leadership” will be used interchangeably. Though they are specifically different concepts, for the purpose of determining best practices, this difference is not directly applicable.

### **Leadership in Addressing Societal Challenges**

Since learning occurs in a social setting (Khalifa, et al. 2016; Nieto, 2004; Thompson, 2007) influenced by our individual cultures, it's important to acknowledge societal challenges. In order to address societal challenges within school environments, *transformational* education programs based on the concept of cultural relevancy drive school leadership and the curriculum in a way that contextualizes teaching and leadership practices (Banks & Banks, 2006 Fullan, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2004). Many experienced scholars and administrators have determined which character or personality traits are most effective and prevalent in socially congruent culturally relevant educational leaders.

Educational administrators who see the big picture can understand how social factors such as family, poverty, employment, and the community can positively or negatively influence a student's ability and desire to learn. Thus, teacher preparation and educational leadership credential programs need to utilize cultural perspectives that can be more empowering than past traditional approaches. Culturally relevant leaders do not separate themselves from their community, their teachers, or students; they embrace them through intercultural and inclusive practices (Fullan, 2008 Howard, 2016 Khalifa et al., 2016; Nieto, 2004).

### **Methods**

In an effort to give voice to this study and focus on the lived experiences of the research participants, a qualitative research study was developed using a multiple case study approach to document the behaviors and practices of four selected educational leaders. Based on the benefits of face-to-face interaction, dialogue, and observation, the case study design is recommended by Yin (2009) and Krathwohl (1998).

A case study approach is also best suited for exploring the process and intricacies of effective educational leadership (best practices) across different education platforms, or unexplained phenomenon that may not be as evident utilizing quantitative methods or other qualitative research designs that rely less on the social and cultural input possible with a qualitative multiple case study approach. The unit of analysis for each case is its individual administrator, each from a different cultural background and different educational settings in order to achieve as much diversity and variety as possible.

### **Data Collection**

**Case Studies.** In this study, data were collected from all case study participants using multiple interviews and multiple field observations from all four research participants, each from different educational environments in the state of California. All interviews were digitally recorded with consent and confidentiality and were transcribed for analysis. Data were collected utilizing semi-structured interviews, and field observations were also conducted of the four selected case study participants in their institutional settings. The data collection process took approximately five months. It took an additional six weeks to sort, code, and recode the data into contrasting themes.

**Semi-Structured Interviews(Questions).** Four semi-structured interviews were conducted at the respective work sites of each participant. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. The average duration was approximately fifty minutes per interview. Each participant was given the same set of seventeen questions to answer.

**Non-participatory field observations.** All participants were observed individually, on three separate occasions for a minimum of three hours each session while engaged in their daily

administrative activities specific to educational administration. This included being present during meetings with students, staff, educators, counselors, technicians, peace officers, recruiters, clergy, social workers, and other administrators, as well as parents, spouses, or significant others when and where applicable, unless it was deemed inappropriate, against school or educational policy or legal standard, or potentially put another person at risk physically, emotionally, financially, culturally, or socially (Creswell, 1998; Krathwohl, 1998). In many instances, this also included accompanying participants in their daily business travels to offsite locations, district offices, other educational institutions, campuses, or government agencies, as well as community organizations with which they were affiliated.

**Matrix for Assessing Culturally Relevant Leadership**

Using a modified version of Beachum’s (2011) matrix for examining culturally relevant leadership, two opposing approaches are presented. The first is a deficit-based approach (Table 1), and the second is based on a culturally relevant approach. The constant indicators are *Social Consciousness*, *Affirming Perspective*, and *Educator as Change Agent* in describing the differences between social dysconsciousness and social consciousness. The ideological poles described in this matrix are as follows:

- *Social Dysconsciousness vs. Social and Emancipatory Critical Consciousness*
- *Deficit Perspective vs. Affirming Perspective*
- *Educator as Technician vs. Educator as Change Agent*
- *Inequitably vs. Equality Insight--focuses on the educators’ attitude towards students*
- *Un-reflective Practice vs. Reflexive Practice--views student-teacher-administrator ways on reflecting on conditions and events that shape positive or negative outcomes and with positive leading to forms of educational praxis (action)*

To operationalize the ideological markers, two approaches are presented—the deficit-based perspective (functionalist) and the culturally relevant perspective (socio-constructivist) as outlined in Table 1 (culturally deficient leadership) and Table 2 (culturally relevant leadership).

**Table 1: Culturally Deficient Leadership Matrix**

Educational Agent	<i>Social Consciousness</i>	<i>Affirming Perspective</i>	<i>Educator as Change</i>
Social Dysconsciousness	<b>Un-critical State of Mind</b>		
Deficit Perspective		<b>Disregards equality</b>	
Educator as Technician			<b>Un-Reflexive Practice that follows the status quo</b>

Dysconsciousness is an uncritical state of mind (perceptions, attitudes, beliefs), that justifies inequality and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things (Table 1). King (1991) used the term “Dysconscious Racism” as meaning the uncritical habit of mind (i.e., perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given. The opposing leadership matrix that is driven by culturally relevant

leadership seeks empowerment for the individual and organization—creating access to opportunity. In an ethnically and linguistically diverse environment, the need for a Culturally Relevant Leadership model (Table 2) is supported by many leading advocates of diversity and inclusion (Banks & Banks, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Feinberg & Soltis, 2004 Fullan, 2008; hooks, 2003; Gallo & Beachum, 2020; Howard, 2016 Ladson-Billings, 2002; Nieto, 2004; Noguera, 2003; Salisbury, 2020).

**Table 2: Culturally Relevant Leadership Matrix**

Educational Agent	<i>Social Consciousness</i>	<i>Affirming Perspective</i>	<i>Educator as Change</i>
Emancipatory Consciousness	<b>Critical State of Mind</b>		
Empowering Perspective		<b>Works for Equality &amp; Fairness &amp; Access</b>	
Emancipatory Consciousness			<b>Reflexive Practice that seeks access to opportunity &amp; development</b>

**Sociological Perspectives for Analyzing Culturally Relevant Leadership**

To add to the two matrices described in Table 1 and 2, four sociological perspectives are introduced as a means of examining different leadership approaches using culturally relevant practices by educational leaders from different educational settings. The purpose was to compare effective culturally relevant best practices in educational leadership in various educational institutions and environments in order to explore how they may differ. These four theoretical perspectives provide a more detailed examination of leadership and educational best practices (Feinberg & Soltis, 2004; Ochoa, 2012). The respective theories are:

- I. **Functionalism (Anglo Conformity)** views leadership as a social control to maintain social solidarity through the control of socio-political power. Functionalists also use their position of preference to maintain social status and privilege.
- II. **Structural Functionalism (Assimilationist)** views leadership through a set of values that tolerate cultural diversity and individual uniqueness. Assimilationists recognize universal rights of expression, privacy, due process and movement, and the importance of maintaining social cohesion and harmony.
- III. **Interpretivist or Symbolic Interactionist (Cultural Pluralism)** views leadership through the encouragement of the qualitative expansion of existing ethnic cultures and their incorporation, or assimilation into the *mainstream* of American socioeconomic and political life. They support explorations in alternative and emerging lifestyles and the encouragement of multiculturalism, multilingualism, and multialectism.
- IV. **Conflict Theory (Constructivist)** views leadership as the development and nurturing of social consciousness and social responsibility through the recognition and development of democratic values of society and socio-political responsibilities that support culture, leisure, and interpersonal relations.



These four sociological lenses yield different types of leadership, each one viewing leadership from a different perspective towards defining alternative best practices in various educational programs and institutions.

Using the research literature, for this study, the Culturally Relevant Leadership Matrix will be used for examining the best practices of selected educational leaders who utilized culturally relevant educational leadership.

#### **Participant leadership selection criterion:**

- Be at least 35 years of age (maturity standard)
- Have at least 7 years of experience as an administrator (experience standard)
- Have a master's degree in administration or related field (academic standard)
- Have experience in developing or implementing policy on a regular basis (policy skills standard)
- Have a teaching credential as well as an administrative credential where required (teaching knowledge & skills standard)
- Have evidence of their role in improving an academic or enrollment standard (accountability standard)
- Employed by a school or program where 50% or more of their enrollment are Students of Color who are culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (diversity standard)
- Represented an ethnically diverse background and gender, race, school environment, location, or leadership, as well as encompassing different sociological perspectives

#### **Participant Selection**

The criteria for selecting four educational administrators for this study called for a proven work history and skill set that supports their leadership. An independent group of six middle- and upper-level educational administrators throughout California, from different educational programs and school districts, were asked to act as a committee of experts on educational leadership. All six administrators on this committee were selected based on over 7 years of educational leadership and administrative experience. It was the responsibility of this committee to use a series of *stratified random sampling* to ultimately select four research participants from a pool of 55 volunteers around the state of California who responded to a request to participate posted on Facebook. Using the selection criterion required for this study, this process produced four educational administrators from four different cultures to participate in this study.

**Table 3: Profile of participants (cases)**

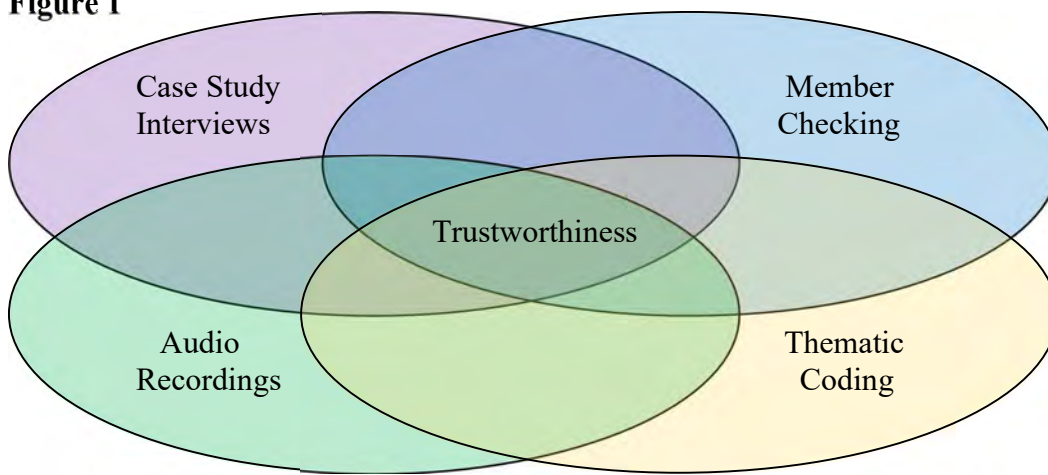
Participant (pseudonyms)	Level of Educational Engagement	7+ Yrs. Of Leadership Experience	Ethnicity	Worked in at least 50% Ethnically Diverse Educational Setting
Dr. Jones	Adult/ CTE or Alternative Education	YES 7 of 15yrs.	African-American	YES Over 75%
Ms. Lerner	K-12 Education	YES 21 of 21 yrs.	European-American	YES Over 50%

Dr. Reyes	College/ Higher Education	YES 15 of 28 yrs.	Latino- American	YES Over 50%
Ms. Li	K-12 Education	YES 13 of 25 yrs.	Asian- American	YES Over 50%

**Data Analysis**

As this was a qualitative case study, specific analytical processes were used to establish *trustworthiness* (Creswell, 1998). The data collected through interviews, onsite-observations, memos, field notes, and transcriptions from audio recordings were collected, coded, and re-coded into categories and sub-categories until common themes began to emerge. Member checking and methodological triangulation were also utilized in this multiple case analysis.

**Figure 1**



**Case Study Findings**

**Case 1: Dr. Jones**

Dr. Jones is an adult and alternative education administrator who has been involved in education for over 15 years. He has worked in educational leadership positions for over 12 years. Dr. Jones is an African American male who perceives himself as being progressive and engaged with the people under his supervision. He also perceives himself as having an instructional leadership style that is interactive and appropriate for the type of students that he is responsible to in an adult-correctional education program. Dr. Jones is in his early 50s and has been a lead assistant principal at a continuation school for five years and planning to retire in another five years. He received his educational doctoral degree in administrative leadership from a public California university.

**Overview of Dr. Jones interview**

- He stated that he was responsible for dealing with adult students who faced many academic, social, and psychological needs.
- He described himself as always being respectful, humane, and presenting students with options for addressing their academic and personal needs.

- As a researcher, he used data to present his supervisors with alternatives to policy practices that did not impact students' personal and academic development.
- Using data and the analysis of behavioral trends was Dr. Jones' approach to being a change agent.
- He also used local, state, and national data to understand the sociocultural trends and backgrounds of his students, who were predominantly ethnically diverse.
- He saw many of his colleagues disrespecting adult students to gain authority and making uninformed assumptions about their abilities and academic and social skills.
- The correctional setting was described as a setting where authoritarianism prevailed.

Regarding culturally relevant leadership practices, Dr. Jones mentioned that the inclusion of adult student voices was essential in dealing with a problem, or how an idea or concept could be explained. He also mentioned that such processes are developmental and are based on creating and valuing the lives of his students and valuing their experiences and voices.

Dr. Jones described his leadership style as “*negotiator and mediator*,” or the ability to understand a situation and seek options to a problem. His advice for those individuals wanting to prepare for a leadership position was to: (1) engage with the community of the school community; (2) understand the demands of the institution; (3) have clarity of one's values; (4) know why they are entering a leadership position; (5) focus on the development of people; and (6) have at least five years of teaching experience.

### **Leadership Style**

Based on interviews and observations, Dr. Jones is an *Interpretivist* who embraces and encourages culturally relevant pedagogy in negotiating the daily practices in his work setting. While he is effective in negotiating access to opportunity at his work site, he has not advanced such educational practices outside the correctional context of his work site.

### **Case 2: Ms. Lerner**

Ms. Lerner is a traditional K-12 educator who has been involved in education for more than 21 years. She is a white, European American of Jewish heritage who views herself as a moderate who is semi-engaged (<sup>1</sup>managing campus) with her staff and educators. She practices compartmentalization as part of her management approach at a suburban high school and views her leadership style as administrative delegation—each department and personnel having designated responsibilities. She viewed this approach to be appropriate for managing K-12 students at the high school level where she has been the principal for 11 years. Ms. Lerner is in her early 60s and is bilingual in Spanish. She was a social worker for the county before she attended college in preparation for a career in education. She has her administrative credential and was six units shy of getting her master's degree in educational leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> APA: Racial and ethnic groups are designated by proper nouns and are capitalized. Therefore, use “Black” and “White” instead of “black” and “white” (do not use colors to refer to other human groups; doing so is considered pejorative).  
<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/racial-ethnic-minorities>

**Overview of Ms. Lerner's interview**

- Ms. Lerner stated that her most meaningful previous experience in educational supervision was as an assistant superintendent for six years.
- As superintendent, she felt that she was an effective leader, but stated that she preferred to manage a single high school where she had more influence on the day-to-day events under her guidance.
- She stated that her previous responsibilities rarely allowed her to meet with or interact with the students themselves and that she missed this type of relationship.
- She stated that her leadership style is to delegate responsibilities to appropriate personnel, especially her assistant principal, whom she is grooming to replace her within a year.
- Ms. Lerner interacts with an ethnically diverse adolescent student population as well as a diverse group of teachers and support staff.
- Ms. Lerner takes pride in her work and views herself as a manager of people and resources.
- She doesn't focus as much on economic or psycho-social perspectives; however, she does believe in loyalty.
- Ms. Lerner is, by her own admittance, from "the old school" and relies on her connections and reports from her staff more than computer driven evidence-based data.
- She never referred to herself as a change agent, even when asked, however she often described herself as an administrator or "leader of the band."

When asked what professional practices make an educational administrator more effective, Ms. Lerner described practices that included an extensive familiarity with the education code of California as well as experience at budgeting and applying social skills where appropriate. The school setting was described as a bureaucratic environment where there is an established hierarchy that is at the heart of her management style.

For Ms. Lerner, culturally relevant teaching and administrative practices have focused on teaching fairly and respecting the culture and ethnicity of the school's student population. She felt that the core of most school issues was not based on culture, race, or ethnicity. Though she does believe that there are inequities at all schools.

Ms. Lerner relies heavily on her assistant principal to act as the liaison between her and the student body. This, in effect, makes the assistant principal accountable for the students' sense of well-being, while she assumes responsibility for the school's management.

**Leadership Style**

Based on interviews and observations, Ms. Lerner's management style is best suited for the *functionalist* approach. She has an administrative leadership style where she balances her educational environment through organizational management skills.

**Case 3: Dr. Reyes**

Dr. Reyes is an educational administrator and professor in higher education for more than 25 years. Dr. Reyes is a Latino male who describes himself as being a socially conscious and liberal educator and describes his leadership approach as collegial. He describes his approach to leadership as transformative, or a style that is vision centered and collaborative. Dr. Reyes is in his late 50s and is an Associate Dean at a California public institution of higher education where he has served for over fifteen years. He received his PhD in Sociology.

### Overview of Dr. Reyes' interview

- Dr. Reyes describes his most meaningful previous experience in supervision, management, and administration through his work as a director of a diversity-based department at another college where he was responsible for addressing issues related to institutional practices that contribute to inequality that negatively impact Students of Color.
- He described his leadership approach as humanitarian and opening access to opportunity for Students of Color.
- Dr. Reyes also mentioned his interest in connecting the higher education institution with the at-large community. He is against the privatization and corporatization of higher education that rely heavily on data that systematically closes access to low-income populations.
- Dr. Reyes stated that he used to be a change agent, but now his current position describes him as being more of an advocate for change rather than at the front lines.
- He stated that there is no one way to be an effective administrator.
- Dr. Reyes stated that an effective administrator “is true to herself/himself and surrounds herself/himself with well-meaning and qualified personnel who will share the same philosophy while providing genuine and honest feedback.”

Dr. Reyes states that part of the problem in education is that most issues are covert, not overt. According to Dr. Reyes, culturally relevant teaching practices are focused on meeting students where they are culturally and making a connection between what is being taught and what the student values in their own reality.

Dr. Reyes describes his leadership style as being a “team player.”

His advice for those that decide to prepare for a leadership position is as follows: (1) Don't be afraid to make a commitment; (2) Value understanding more than being understood; (3) Don't be afraid to “rock the boat”, (after you are tenured, of course); (4) Constantly provide and offer support, as people need to know that they are not alone in their struggle; (5) Be patient; and (6) Network, network, network!

### Leadership Style

Based on the interviews and observations, Dr. Reyes would be described as a *conflict theorist*. He utilizes many aspects of *transformational leadership* that are based on collaborative leadership while proving encouragement and seeking the feedback of those he serves.

### Case 4: Ms. Li

Ms. Li has been a principal at a public middle school for the past 13 years and has worked in education for over 25 years. She is in her late 40s and works in an urban school community that is culturally diverse. Ms. Li views herself as having an instructional-oriented leadership style. She is also multilingual, speaking English, Mandarin, and Spanish. Prior to becoming an administrator, Ms. Li was a special education teacher. She has a master's degree in special education and educational administration from a private institution.

**Overview of Ms. Li's interview**

- One of Ms. Li's most rewarding and meaningful experiences, prior to becoming a principal, was when she was a coordinator for bilingual education and second language learners for her school district, where she was able to interact with students, staff, administrators, the community, and other personnel that had a direct impact on her students and community.
- Many of the students at her school were from marginalized communities and from families living below the poverty line.
- According to Ms. Li, she was able to diffuse tense situations because she was not viewed as a threat by her students, staff, or administration.
- Her interactive leadership style provided an unusually high degree of trust among her students, staff, and peers.
- Ms. Li's approach to being a change agent was to illicit change from within the communities and classrooms more so than in the administrative offices or her own office.
- She demonstrated a "hands-on" form of leadership that made her approachable.

When asked what professional practices make an educational administrator more effective, she described practices that were evidence-based and rich in theory. She believes that the biggest challenges that she witnesses in her profession are the egos of administrators who are far more interested in improving their income than improving the academic and social conditions that exist within their respective schools.

For Ms. Li, culturally relevant teaching practices involve the process of engaging with students and learning what their needs are--that often may not be evident at first glance. Ms. Li states that the leadership credential programs themselves need to be revamped to include more diversity training and culturally responsive approaches to teaching, learning, and leading. The lack of these attributes within school districts leads to ongoing culturally unresponsive leadership. She also states that student concerns can be better addressed by the students and teachers themselves if they are provided the resources and permitted to engage rather than follow leaders who lack cultural responsiveness and insight.

When asked what the one word was that best describes her leadership style, she stated that she would use the term "gardener" because she feels that she's constantly trying to nurture sensitive plants that are constantly being undermined by ravenous weeds and pests.

Her advice for individuals wanting to prepare for a leadership position was to: (1) Eliminate as many distractions in your life as possible before you begin training; (2) Establish a support system early on; (3) Always remember that your greatest assets and resources are people; and (4) Establish a relationship with community and non-profit organizations in order to develop mutually beneficial relationships over the long haul.

**Leadership Style**

Based on the interviews and observations, Ms. Li fits the characteristics of a *Socio-Constructivist* with an instructional leadership style. Though she incorporates culturally relevant strategies in her approach to leadership, she also avoids or downplays conflict and excessive

controversy and seems to find some comfort in the calm school climate that exists within her school district.

### Findings

After an in-depth analysis of each case study, the findings did reveal that culturally relevant leadership can be effective in different educational settings and programs. Additionally, the data collected from our culturally diverse research participants also suggested that there is a significant lack of culturally relevant leadership strategies being implemented outside of traditional K-12 educational settings, and that this absence is a contributing factor in the continuing existence of graduation gaps, dropout rates, and differences in academic performance, especially among marginalized populations. This means that some students who utilized or needed culturally relevant leadership and teaching strategies to navigate K-12 educational systems were now on their own or facing more challenges finding appropriate support that was both relatable and effective for them.

For this particular study, successful practices of educational leadership were defined as any form of educational leadership that consistently resulted in a school, university department, or an education program exceeding the performance or accountability standards for their respective school, university department, or program. Though this research study was qualitative, to give voice and to express firsthand personal experiences, the standards by which all four research participants and educational administrators were measured in their respective professions are generally quantitative in nature.

In K-12 education, these standards are numerous, and based primarily on school, program, or student assessments such as *Common Core*, the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP), the *California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (CPSEL), the *California Administrator Performance Assessment* (CalAPA), *California Administrator Performance Expectations* (CAPE), the *California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress* (CAASPP) System, the *School Accountability Report Card* (SARC), the *Local Educational Agency* (LEA) *Accountability Report Card*, the now defunct *Academic Performance Index* (API), and the current *California School Dashboard*.

In alternative education, the assessments generally used to evaluate school administrators and their schools or programs are the *Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System* (CASAS) and the *California Standards for Career Ready Practice*.

In higher education, *performance evaluations* are required for both faculty and administration that cover several areas of competency related to leadership, vision, accountability, governance, people management, creativity, communication and interpersonal skills, productivity, quality of work, health, safety, and diversity.

Because of the difference in schools, program objectives, student populations, campus climate, and communities, different approaches were utilized by each research participant. The findings of this research project addressed the following research questions and served as the basis of this multiple case study:

1. What best practices are utilized by culturally relevant educational administrators?
2. What best practices are utilized by culturally relevant educational administrators who come from different cultural or racial backgrounds?
3. What best practices are utilized by culturally relevant administrators from different types of educational institutions or environments?

### Summary of Salient Approaches Used by Culturally Relevant Educational Leaders and their Best Practices applied to Different Educational Settings or Programs

The following characteristics highlight the salient best practices of the four selected administrators and their leadership approach, as outlined in Tables 4 through 11. These practices were organized in tables to list the specific practices utilized by each research participant in their respective leadership positions. Based on the responses and interviews with the research participants, these best practices are not limited to just K-12 schools and can be applied to other educational settings or institutions such as higher education, adult education, correctional education, or vocational education programs, where they may also be equally relevant and effective.

**Table 4: Self- Described Administrative Approach**

<b>Dr. Jones</b>	<b>Ms. Lerner</b>	<b>Mr. Reyes</b>	<b>Ms. Li</b>
Negotiator/ Mediator	Delegator/ Organizer	Team player/ Partner	Hands on/ "Gardner"

**Table 5: Best Practices for Student Engagement**

<b>Dr. Jones</b>	<b>Ms. Lerner</b>	<b>Mr. Reyes</b>	<b>Ms. Li</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respecting voices, interacting and learning from students</li> <li>• Delegating responsibility to student for self-governance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interacting and learning from students</li> <li>• Establishing a student council with real influence on the activities of the campus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in a collegial decision-making process and supporting student affairs staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting with students on a regular basis to discuss, observe, and identify concerns and school perceptions on school climate</li> </ul>

**Table 6: Best Practices for Faculty and Staff**

<b>Dr. Jones</b>	<b>Ms. Lerner</b>	<b>Mr. Reyes</b>	<b>Ms. Li</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusion-- interacting and involving faculty in school policies impacting student development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous professional development on school-oriented program issues and practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delegating to faculty &amp; staff to find best practices for students and empowering faculty to act</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating partnerships with faculty, students, and community</li> </ul>

**Table 7: Best Practices for Community Relations**

<b>Dr. Jones</b>	<b>Ms. Lerner</b>	<b>Mr. Reyes</b>	<b>Ms. Li</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging families in the decisions impacting youth</li> <li>• Collaborating with stakeholders on student well-being</li> <li>• Understanding services of local agencies and networking with the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect &amp; collaborate with community resources (e.g., library, community center, recreational facilities, employment agencies for teens) to service school community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect &amp; collaborate with community businesses, as well as other community resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a network with other schools in and outside of district to share resources and develop district and school unity for students and faculty</li> </ul>



**Table 8: Best Practices Acknowledging Culture & Heritage**

<b>Dr. Jones</b>	<b>Ms. Lerner</b>	<b>Mr. Reyes</b>	<b>Ms. Li</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School personnel understands the sociocultural characteristics of school community</li> <li>• School curriculum is multicultural / inclusive</li> <li>• Faculty are familiar with multicultural teaching approaches that reflect the students' diversity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide training for cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy and validate application of cross-cultural sensitivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet with cultural organizations on campus regularly to discuss student needs</li> <li>• Develop a task force to provide support to close achievement gaps</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure inclusion at all levels of school activities</li> <li>• Validate that faculty are culturally competent</li> <li>• Ensure that curriculum is multicultural and inclusive</li> </ul>

**Table 9: Best Practices regarding Parents**

<b>Dr. Jones</b>	<b>Ms. Lerner</b>	<b>Mr. Reyes</b>	<b>Ms. Li</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents are informed &amp; engaged with school &amp; community agencies to support the academic and personal development of the students'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet parents monthly to assess school climate and circumvent potential problems or concerns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher education campus provides open access to parents to interact in the educational environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet with parents monthly to prepare them to work with students at home and support through additional academic tutorials</li> </ul>

**Table 10: Best Practices regarding Assessments & Evaluations**

<b>Dr. Jones</b>	<b>Ms. Lerner</b>	<b>Mr. Reyes</b>	<b>Ms. Li</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social &amp; academic development are the focus of student growth</li> <li>• Multiple use of culturally sensitive assessments to identify student strengths &amp; needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop preparatory and mentoring programs for students who are challenged by standardized tests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rely less on program standards and assessments and utilize personal feedback in meetings using multiple means of assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide multiple ways of assessing learning</li> <li>• Emphasize multicultural curriculum that is student-centered</li> </ul>

**Table 11: Best Practices regarding Discipline**

<b>Dr. Jones</b>	<b>Ms. Lerner</b>	<b>Mr. Reyes</b>	<b>Ms. Li</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discipline handled by 3rd party other than principal to provide due process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilizes a conflict management team of trained student peers for early intervention guided by Education Code relating to discipline issues &amp; procedures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disciplinary issues are based on academic rather than behavioral issues. Adult centered expectations in regulating behavior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish fair expectations for all students</li> <li>• Establish collaboration between students</li> <li>• Promote student integration</li> </ul>

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

After careful analysis of the data of this exploratory study, several themes began to emerge from the transcriptions, interviews, and observations. The primary objective of this study was to

determine which educational administration best practices were utilized by our case study subjects and were culturally relevant and effective.

### **Most Common Themes for Best Practices utilized by our Research Participants**

#### ***Best Practices for Students***

**Best Practices for Acknowledging Culture and Heritage.** When school leaders acknowledge the culture and heritage of their students, faculty, and staff, this encourages them to become active participants in their own future. With a sense of inclusion also comes a sense of buy in, which increases motivation as well as self-esteem. Ethnicity and race don't have to be mutual, as long as the acceptance and desire to understand different cultures is genuinely present.

**Best Practices for Encouraging Curriculum Development based on How Students Actually Learn.** Focusing more on process and less on content allows culturally relevant leaders to examine the different ways and methods that are effective for individual students. Being open to different modes of learning provides students with more options to express themselves.

**Best Practices for Involving Students in Decision-Making Practices.** Encourage students to participate in their own outcome by encouraging decision-making and accountability. This allows students to improve their critical thinking skills while providing school leaders with a clear perspective of student thinking processes. Encouraging student decision-making also instills trust between administrators and students.

#### ***Best Practices for Faculty and Staff***

**Best Practices for Defining and Refining Mission and Vision Statements.** The vision of a school program is the foundation for practically every aspect of leadership or governance within an institution. As school climate and culture change and the needs of the school, staff, and students continue to evolve, so too must the school's mission and vision. This is not an outright overhaul of these principles, but rather a clarification, re-emphasis, and reminder of how everyone's role in their position should also speak to this shared vision and school mission.

**Best Practices for Ensuring that Teachers Do Not Work in Isolation from One Another, but Work Collaboratively.** By collaborating with other administrators, teachers, staff, and students, administrators and staff are better supported and have a means to exchange ideas and information. By minimizing or eliminating self-isolation, teachers and staff also eliminate misunderstandings or miscommunications and can make informed decisions that rely on collaborative groups rather than individuals.

#### **Encourage Social Networking and Responsible Use of Technology.**

Practically everyone has some sort of digital device, whether it be a laptop, smartphone, work email, or tablet. This has become part of our real world as we communicate with our children, meet with friends for coffee, update our calendars, and send texts to our spouse. It seems only logical that we bring our school environments into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by better utilizing these services on campus with educators, staff, and administrators alike. Culturally speaking, this is the language and preferred method of communication outside of education, and as a social network phenomenon, it is already an existing sub-culture within a larger media group.

#### ***Best Practices for Community Relations.***

By collaborating and cooperating with various organizations, businesses, non-profit organizations, peace officers, public libraries, community centers, religious organizations, neighborhood watch

programs, veteran's administrations, recreation centers, social justice groups, non-profit organizations, and stakeholders, a network can be developed that is mutually beneficial to all participants. This occurs through transparency, empowerment, support, and giving voice to both students and community members previously unheard. How effective this network can become depends on the strength and values of its participants.

### ***Best Practices for Acknowledging Culture & Heritage***

**Diversity training.** This provides administrators with a means of learning the nuances and customs of different cultures; however, it is not actually necessary to learn specific details of a given culture in order to embrace diversity. Diversity training, as described by our cases, involves a process of open dialogue, sharing information, and meaning making without judgment. Instead of learning about Black and Latino cultures, the participants in this study recommended a process of learning about people first before applying a cultural lens.

### **Cultural competence assessments.**

As Gary Howard (2016) stated, "You can't teach what you don't know," however, you can assess it. Whether administrators utilize standard cultural competence tests, or whether the school itself designs such a test, the point is that faculty and staff should be assessed on a semi-regular basis in order to establish and maintain cultural integrity.

### **Recommendations**

Several recommendations for best practices were provided by the four research participants in this study that are informative and have proven to be effective for the research participants in their own experiences as educational administrators. However, there were three recommendations that all four research participants agreed on, and they included the implementation of *administrative mentoring programs* that prepare principals and other educational leaders for the demands of being an administrator in a diverse educational environment; *developing positive relationships with the local community*; and implementing *shared decision-making*, where students, faculty, parents, and other stakeholders, can take part in the decisions that impact them directly, indirectly, or impact the community. This empowers everyone who participates in this approach regardless of whether they're a student, teacher, counselor, college professor, school vice principal, or program director. It's also important to make the distinction that this is different from accountability, or the individual responsibilities associated with being a student, faculty, or administrator.

### ***Principal or Administrative Mentoring Programs.***

Mentoring programs already exist in some school districts that help to train and produce educational administrators for leadership positions by capitalizing on the expertise of senior administrators as mentors. This goes beyond education and preparing for administrative credentials. These programs are designed for administrators that are already in the field, but who want to improve their skills as well as their understanding of the faculty they serve, the community of which they are a part, and the students who depend on them.

Long after these administrators have been training to better understand external aspects of educational leadership, these programs help experienced administrators to rethink and re-examine how they view students, faculty, staff, schools, and communities. What's even more important is that these programs help administrators face their own cultural biases, challenge their worldviews, and helps administrators re-commit themselves as more culturally conscious leaders of the

communities they serve, and not just as figure heads and task masters of learners and school campuses. By utilizing Principal or Administrative Educational Leadership Mentoring Programs rooted in culturally relevant ideologies, mentors can help their protégés fulfill unmet needs at schools that may have previously gone unnoticed.

***Positive Relationships with the Local Community.***

The research participants in this study all agree that utilizing their connections to their respective communities provides a source of ideas, support, protection, and even family. School administrators who develop relationships with their communities enhance their chances of getting better public support, which shouldn't be underestimated. Unfortunately, school administrators are often at the receiving end of phone calls regarding issues that might have been avoided had a relationship been established with members of the community beforehand.

Instead of waiting for problems to arise, proactive school administrators reach out to members of the community beforehand. These community members and organizations can include parents; police officers; local businesses looking for new employees; feeder schools who want to improve their students' transition between schools; religious organizations; nonprofit organizations; and neighborhood watch organizations that help minimize drug trafficking, gang activity, domestic violence, bullying, theft, and vandalism. Some businesses, especially non-profit organizations, offer free services such as food banks, used clothes, tutoring services, fitness programs, and a variety of useful services. These efforts have already increased significantly since the start of the pandemic, especially among marginalized populations in historically underserved communities.

***Shared Decision-Making (SDM).***

SDM is an elusive concept to grasp (Allen & Glickman, 1992). It involves fundamental changes in the way schools are managed and alterations in the roles and relationships of everyone in the school community. Thus, SDM is a process of making educational decisions in a collaborative manner at the school level. Thus, this process is ongoing and cannot be done once and then forgotten (Meadows, 1990). The purpose of SDM is to improve school effectiveness and student learning by increasing staff commitment and ensuring that schools are more responsive to the needs of their students and community. Student success and achievement must be kept in the forefront of our thinking as the reason to implement site-based, shared decision making (Lange, 1993).

Additionally, using SDM to shift accountability or abolish a top-heavy central office staff will simply make SDM another buzzword (Lange, 1993). Accountability is a key component as well. It is leadership that typically directs, guides, and models the behaviors we wish to see in our schools. It is this same leadership that typically provides support to students and teachers who are practicing effective pedagogy and other socially just practices that are effective at all levels and in all educational environments. This suggests that we must at least invest as much in developing more effective leadership practices as we do our pedagogy if we are to change this cycle of educational systematic failure.

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