Original Research Article

UC EA University Council for Educational Administration

Promoting District-Level Culturally Responsive Practices

Educational Administration Quarterly
2023, Vol. 59(3) 471–506

DOI: 10.1177/0013161X231161041
journals.sagepub.com/home/eaq

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Abstract

Purpose: For culturally responsive practices (CRPs) in schools to be successful, educational leaders must look outside of the school and consider school, district, and system-level policies and practices that influence the sustainability of culturally responsive classrooms. The purpose of our study was to conduct a comparative case study and explore how four district leaders promoted CRPs throughout each of their districts. **Research Design:** Situated in the Midwest, we used a comparative case study to explore the

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approaches of four Black women school district leaders. Data included a focus group interview with the leaders; four individual, follow-up interviews; and artifacts or documents provided by the leaders. The data collected was analyzed using the Culturally Responsive School Leadership analytical framework. **Results and Discussion:** Findings discuss school district leadership's responsibility to promote CRPs; district leaders' ability to foster trusting relationships with educators; and district-wide efforts to engage in purposeful teacher retention practices. A discussion and conclusion include implications considering how district leadership can influence the implementation of CRPs in schools and classrooms.

Keywords
educational leadership, culturally responsive leadership, school district leadership, culturally responsive practices, culturally responsive school leadership

Introduction

U.S. schools today are undeniably diverse. In 2019, over 50% of children aged 16 years and younger identified as coming from a racially or ethnically minoritized[1] population (Frey, 2020). The teacher workforce in the U.S. has similarly diversified at an overall faster rate than students since the late 1980s (Ingersoll, et al., 2021). Even with this progress, the teacher workforce does not align with students' rate of diversification (Chapman & Brown, 2020). There is a persistent and stark contrast between students that fill U.S. classrooms and the educators who teach them, with 79% of teachers being identified as white in the 2017-2018 school year (NCES, 2021). Concerns about teacher and student demographic disparity stems from research that has found racially and ethnically minoritized students to benefit from having teachers that have similar racial and ethnic identities to themselves (Redding, 2019). While attempting to recruit and retain teachers of color more effectively is one important approach often used to address these concerns (La Salle et al., 2020), an additional strategy focuses on improving the classroom practices of the teacher workforce already in schools through the implementation of Culturally Responsive Practices (CRPs: Bottiani et al., 2018).

CRPs are typically understood as classroom-based pedagogical practices that replace deficit-oriented approaches with those that center and legitimize the knowledge and skills students bring into the classroom (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). When implemented by professionals, research has

found a link between CRPs and students' of color achievement (Howard, 2002), engagement, and psychological and emotional well-being (Cholewa et al., 2014).

For CRPs to be successful, educational leaders must also look outside of the classroom and consider school, district, and system-level policies and practices that influence the sustainability and influence of culturally responsive classrooms (Kozleski & Huber, 2012). Khalifa et al. (2016) conducted a comprehensive literature review to identify how building-level leaders can create a culturally responsive school environment that will better serve racially minoritized students and teachers. They proposed the Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) framework composed of four tenets: (a) critical self-awareness, (b) culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, (c) culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and (d) engaging students and parents in community contexts. Khalifa et al. (2016) developed the CRSL framework for school leaders practicing in urban settings based on a large collection of scholarly sources. A similar body of literature, however, has not been developed for district-level leaders with a specific focus on CRPs. While studies have been conducted on the role of the superintendent in promoting equity and culturally responsive work across their district (e.g., Kruse et al., 2018; Maxwell et al., 2013; Whitt et al., 2015), research is missing that showcases the efforts of district leaders tasked with the role of specifically promoting CRPs.

The purpose of our study is to address this gap in the literature by conducting a qualitative comparative case study of four district leaders charged with implementing CRPs throughout each of their respective districts. In this study, the term educational leader and district leader is used to refer to the district administrators of this study who worked to implement CRPs in diverse schools (e.g., Crawford et al., 2019). The guiding research question for this study was: How do district leaders promote CRPs in their school district? The four leaders, located in districts across a Midwestern state, had each been tasked with promoting equity-driven, culturally responsive work in their school districts. From data collected in interviews, a focus group discussion, documents, and artifacts provided by the district leaders, we utilized Khalifa et al.'s (2016) CRSL framework to investigate how these four leaders promoted CRPs at the district level. We first provide a review of the literature on culturally responsive teaching and leadership, followed by an overview of our conceptual framework. Next, we describe our methodology before outlining the study's primary findings. This paper concludes with a discussion that includes implications for practitioners and researchers considering how district leadership can influence the implementation of CRPs in schools and classrooms.

Literature Review

Our literature review focuses on CRPs in the classroom, along with CRPs in school and district leadership. We discuss the different types of CRPs deemed as necessary for teachers and school leaders. In our review of the literature, we found a shift has occurred in the fields of teacher education and educational leadership that contend hegemonic and neutral stances as perpetuating academic inequities in the classroom and overall school system (Alemán, 2007; Ishimaru, 2013). To avoid a neutral stance regarding culturally responsiveness, we share Khalifa et al.'s (2016) sentiment that CRPs must adhere to "celebrat[ing] the entirety of the children [educators] serve—including their languages and literacies, spiritual universes, cultures, racial proclivities, behaviors, knowledges, critical thought, and appearances" (Khalifa et al., 2016, pp. 1277-1278). Our literature review, and henceforth our study, utilizes the term culturally responsive to signal an action-laden, urgent-centered immediacy required by all educators when working with our diversifying student body.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Over four decades, scholars have suggested a milieu of CRP strategies to assist teachers in overcoming academic disparities occurring in racially and ethnically minoritized student groups (Au & Jordan, 1981; Gutiérrez et al., 2003; Paris, 2012). Such a plethora of strategies indicates a shift in pedagogy as the undercurrent in schools, leading to a focus that aims to promote students' culture (Gay, 2010). Educators and scholars have considered CRP in different formats to (a) ensure educators integrate students' familial knowledge-based and learning practices (Au & Jordan, 1981); (b) tackle barriers that produce inequities between student and school (Villegas, 1988); (c) consider students' cultural background as a form of knowledge-production (Gutiérrez et al., 2003); and (d) expand educators' knowledge-base of students' cultural funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2005). Paris (2012) advised for culturally sustaining pedagogy to demand a more political and policy-laden need to ensure inclusion of our schools' changing demographic. Regardless of the focus, culturally responsive strategies prioritize students' culture to improve school-wide policies, diversify classroom practices, and target students' needs.

A typical application of CRPs includes an interruption of educators' deficit-oriented ideologies and classroom practices. Specifically, CRP proposed a pedagogical intervention, a paradigm shift, to counter the deficit-orientation commonly associated with racially minoritized students and their families (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1995) advised that

CRPs would equip educators with cultural competence and critical consciousness to prioritize students' academic abilities traditionally seen as inferior. Similarly, Gay (2010) proposed that the main objective of CRPs was to prepare teachers to counter what is considered universal, Eurocentric social norms that perpetuate academic inequalities in the classroom. When teachers practice solely using universal pedagogical norms a devaluation of students' funds of knowledge occurs (Cabrera et al., 2014; Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Furthermore, depreciating students' cultural capital in the classroom and school community can lead to teachers making discriminatory and racist interpretations of student behavior, increasing the risk for unequal disciplinary practices (La Salle et al., 2020).

Culturally Responsive Leadership

Many school leadership practices deemed to work universally across all students, schools, and contexts often fail to acknowledge and respond to the structural disadvantages (e.g., institutional racism, poverty) racially minoritized students' experience (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Following the pedagogical shift scholars like Ladson-Billings and Gay recommended, the field of educational leadership responded similarly to the deficit and racially neutral approaches of school leaders (Alemán, 2007). Knowing the influence that school leaders have on multiple aspects of their school environment (e.g., teacher practices, school culture: Leithwood et al., 2008), educational leadership scholars developed conceptual frameworks to understand and respond to the socio-political and historical inequities influencing racially and ethnically minoritized students' schooling experience (e.g., Diem & Welton, 2020).

Culturally responsive leadership (Johnson, 2006) was conceptualized to integrate a dynamic view of school context (e.g., socio-political). Similar to the milieu of CRPs strategies for teachers, there are multiple strategies crafted to address the cultural aspect of schools. One framework, multicultural leadership (Gardiner, et al., 2009), resists assimilationist educational practices by challenging school leaders to ensure multiculturalism is embedded within all aspects of the classroom setting, from pedagogical practices to assessments. Similarly, culturally proficient leadership (Terrel et al., 2018) prioritizes cultural competence across all interactions and decisions that influence a school community, specifically seeing cultural difference based on characteristics such as gender, race, and nationality as an asset as opposed to a disadvantage. "Color-conscious" leadership is a third framework, which directly challenges the common color-evasive approach used in school leadership by challenging leaders to center race throughout all aspects of their work (Mabokela & Madsen, 2005).

Lastly, using a more situated approach, Horsford and colleagues (2011) conceptualized culturally relevant leadership using a four-part framework placing professional duty, personal journey, and pedagogical approach within the school community's larger political context to best understand how a leader can be culturally relevant within their specific context. While these frameworks do not represent every conceptualization of culturally conscious leadership, they exemplify the continued and increasing need for school leaders to be prepared to work in diverse educational settings.

District Leadership

While the importance of classroom- and school-level culturally responsive practices has long been debated and discussed, we must also analyze CRP implementation from a district-level lens to more fully understand leaders' implementation roles across all levels of the school district (Kozleski & Huber, 2012). Educational scholars have discussed the ways in which school district leaders play a part in ensuring that culturally responsive practices are effectively implemented across their school buildings (e.g., Ishimaru, 2013; Maxwell et al., 2013). One of the areas of literature looks at district leaders as individual "change agents" (Kruse et al., 2018, p. 84). Known across their districts as equity-driven or social justice advocates, school district educational leaders often spearhead work that aims to address the diverse needs within their school community specifically with a culturally responsive and equity-oriented lens (Kruse et al., 2018). Most scholarship studying specific leader behaviors has primarily focused on district superintendents, identifying both their success and difficulties when engaging with equity work (e.g., Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021; Whit et al., 2015).

Maxwell, Locke, and Scheurich (2013) used the "Equity Oriented Change Agent" framework (Skrla et al., 2009) to analyze specific leadership characteristics in three district superintendents identified as "change agents." Characteristics in the framework included behaviors such as avoiding demonizations, initiating courageous conversations, and demonstrating persistence. Superintendents, however, are not always the designated equity "change agents" of a district, as some districts have created specific positions addressing the needs of culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse student populations (Starr, 2020). Thus, there is little current scholarship that explores how other district-level educational leaders influence successful implementation of equity-driven, social justice in schools through specific leadership behaviors and approaches.

Educational researchers have also looked past individual leader behaviors and characteristics to illuminate the ways in which district-level leadership

intersects and interacts with policy that aims to address issues of equity and social justice in schools (Turner & Spain, 2020). School districts can implement state and local-level policies that address a variety of equity-centered issues, such as student discipline (Green et al., 2015), school desegregation/integration (Diem, 2012; Mattheis, 2017), tracking (Turner & Spain, 2020), and inclusion (Lewis & Kern, 2018). Yet these policies are not implemented or enforced successfully without the direct interaction of those working in district-level leadership positions.

Some district leaders become agents of equity due to top-down mandates (Mattheis, 2017) where central office integration coordinators were charged with implementing state integration policies in local school districts. District leaders as agents of equity were described as "boundary-spanning policy intermediaries" due to the complex job of having to implement state-mandated policies within a local context while also then sharing with the state what practices were primarily being utilized (Mattheis, 2017, p. 527). Other district leaders spearhead equity and social justice work in a more locally-driven or bottom-up way, where district-level policy creation is initiated in response to larger educational trends such as budget cuts and accountability measures (Turner & Spain, 2020). For instance, Turner and Spain (2020) found that administrators attempted to change inequitable tracking policies as racial disparities in assessment scores and course enrollment persisted. While many of these efforts do not find lasting success due to issues such as differing values and limited resources (Turner & Spain, 2020), researchers continue to find that district leaders have influence over the policymaking and implementation process (Diem et al., 2015). Thus, there is a need for scholarship to explore the ways in which district-level officials can lead and engage specifically with the promotion of CRPs across their schools.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, the term educational leader is applied to those individuals such as school staff (e.g., Crawford et al., 2019), parents as educational actors (e.g., Aguayo, 2022), or school district administrators who have become the anchor of their schools and school districts, producing the undercurrent that models an environment of advocacy and culturally responsive school leadership (Khalifa, 2018). Focusing on school leaders, scholars in educational leadership are, more than ever, conceptualizing school leaders as inclusive (Scanlan & López, 2012), socially just (Tillman, 2005), and anti-racist (Welton & Diem, 2021; Gooden & Dantley, 2012). However, researchers point to culturally based educational leadership frameworks (Khalifa, 2018; McCray & Beachum, 2014) as necessary tools for effective school leadership.

As such, this study uses Khalifa's et al. (2016) CRSL as a conceptual framework and conceptualizes the school administrators of this study as educational leaders.

Applying the CRSL framework in this study, school leaders are considered advocates that engage in four essential behaviors: critical self-awareness, teacher preparation, school environments, and community advocacy (Khalifa et al., 2016). A leader with critical self-awareness can be reflexive of their values and actions toward "race, culture, language, national identity, and other areas of difference" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1281). A culturally responsive school leader engages in culturally responsive teacher preparation, as they provide pedagogical guidance as teachers strive to develop as culturally responsive educators. Next, using CRSL as a framework, a leader works toward building culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, where they boldly integrate inclusive efforts in their school building. Finally, a culturally responsive school leader engages students and parents in and outside the school, becoming advocates as they develop the social and human infrastructure to connect parents, students, and the community.

Scholars have applied aspects of CRSL to understand school principals' work with racially minoritized students (e.g., DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020). Principals have demonstrated a commitment to racially minoritized students' educational outcomes (Gooden, 2005) while addressing teachers' resistance to CRPs and their own biases (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020). Although Khalifa (2018) proposed cultural responsiveness to be sustained by school leaders, we must consider the network (i.e., school, district, and system-level policies and practices) that promotes culturally responsive classrooms (Kozleski & Huber, 2012). Thus, we are operating under the assumption that CRPs are not strictly classroom-and-school-based as posited by CRSL but also translated to school-wide and district-wide operations. As scholars have proposed that district leaders can influence policy development and implementation (e.g., Diem et al., 2015), the CRSL framework assisted us in exploring how district-level leaders' promotion of CRPs across their district, schools, and classrooms.

Research Design & Methodology

This qualitative comparative case study was part of a 5-year, multi-state, federally funded project that utilized a grounded theory research approach (i.e., classroom observations by parents-as-researchers, teacher interviews, focus group interviews with students, parent interviews) across 10 districts to explore teachers' use of CRPs in classrooms (see study Debnam et al., 2023). Due to the widespread use of culturally responsive interventions in

classrooms (i.e., Bottiani et al., 2018), the larger study focused on identifying which in-service teacher practices aligned with existing CRP frameworks. An integral part for the larger study was connecting with each school district to find schools promoting CRPs. Working directly with district administrators tasked by their central office to disseminate CRPs in schools, four administrators demonstrated CRSL practices (this description is shared in the Participants section below). With the larger study's exploratory inquiry goals in mind, we formulated the following guiding research question for this project: how do school district leaders promote CRPs in their school district?

In this project, we used a horizontal, homologous comparative case study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016) to explore the approaches of four school district leaders as they promoted culturally responsive practices across their school district. According to Bartlett and Vavrus (2016), a horizontal comparison approach to case study explores units of analysis that are "fairly equivalent" to one another (p. 53). We applied a horizontal comparison in our study as we sought to analyze district leaders' experiences when promoting CRPs throughout their district. For our sampling technique, we utilized the key-informant strategy given that the four participants selected served as gatekeepers to their district's schools. During data collection, we also found "corresponding" characteristics of the school district leaders, which permitted a homologous examination for this horizontal case study comparison (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016, p. 52). The corresponding characteristics between the four school district leaders[2] were: (a) each leader was propelled to promote CRPs in their school district by their personal commitment to help build equitable, inclusive, and respectful schools; (b) each leader was a seasoned educator with over 15 years of teaching and district leadership experience; and (c) each leader described their own school-based discriminatory experiences and barriers that were overcome, in part, by their familial tenacity against adversity, community support, and cultural background, inspiring an educational leadership career focused on student-centered advocacy and district-wide systemic changes.

The leaders' districts were comparable across a Midwestern state due to their high concentrations of diverse, racial, and ethnic groups of students. For two of the school districts, the majority of the population (more than 50%) is comprised of Black/African American students. These same two school districts also have more students who receive free or reduced-price lunch (at least 60% or more), with small percentages of white students (less than 20%), Latinx students (less than 30%), Asian students (less than 4%), and Multiracial students (2%). The other two school districts have a majority White student population (more than 60%), with smaller percentages of

Black/African American students (20% or less), Latinx students (7% or less), Asian students (5% or less), and Multiracial students (11% or less). These last two school districts also have approximately 40% of students who receive free or reduced-price lunch.

Participants

Our study consisted of four school district leaders who were tasked by their district to promote culturally responsive practices across their district. Each participant described a vocational calling into educational leadership to engage in systemic changes and promote culturally responsive practices in teachers and school staff. Although not all focused solely on CRPs (i.e., Ms. Miles focused on equity-based practices and CRPs), culturally responsiveness was a component of their work.

Dr. Johnson, at the time of the study, was the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction and Professional Development in an urban school district in the central Midwest. She has over 20 years of experience as an educator and school administrator in a range of settings with diverse students. She was a tenured faculty member prior to her role as superintendent. Much of her work focuses on improving the CRP of school staff. Dr. Johnson's school district serves nearly 15,000 students and employed approximately 1,100 teachers. The majority of the students are Black, followed by a smaller percentage of Latinx, Multiracial, Asian, and White students. Nearly all the students are eligible for free/reduced lunch. Dr. Johnson's school district is emblematic of many large urban school districts in the country that struggle with student retention and achievement and large opportunity gaps.

Dr. Johnson's focus on culturally responsive practices in schools was shaped by her childhood and teaching experiences. Her formative years in elementary, middle, and high school showcased her teachers' resistance to integrating "the role Black people played in history or in anything" when she inquired about the missing perspective of other people's histories. Later in her teaching career, Dr. Johnson's culturally responsive practices were cemented as she learned to fill the gaps of "the missed opportunities" from schools and colleagues to fully engage students; the missing opportunities prompted her to focus her career on building a "community" for students and parents.

Ms. Miles is the Equity Officer for her school district. She has been an educator and administrator for 19 years in Southwestern and Midwestern schools. In her current role, she supports marginalized students and provides staff training to improve culturally responsive school practices. In a rural-suburban-urban setting, Ms. Miles' school district is located in the central Midwest; it serves

approximately 18,000 students in primary and secondary schools, employing nearly 1,300 teachers. Students are racially/ethnically diverse with the majority of students in the district being White followed by smaller percentages of Black, Latinx/Hispanic, Asian, and Multiracial students.

Ms. Miles childhood experiences as a Black student in the 1970s shaped her "journey to here"; to be a school leader that promotes inclusive school environments. Ms. Miles shared in detail the way she was chastised by students, teachers, and administrators for being, what one principal told her father, "… really different." She recalled, "I remember those things that happened to me many years ago… I wanted to be intentional about making sure that nobody else felt like that when they walked into a building." Her goal as a school leader has been to create an experience for every child to be welcomed by "a teacher at the other end whose eyes light up because they are thrilled to see you there."

Dr. Wilson had the role of Associate Superintendent for Human Resources in her school district called Midway School District. She has over 20 years of experience in public school education. In her current role, Dr. Wilson is tasked with promoting culturally responsive practices. Dr. Wilson's school district includes approximately 18,000 students and nearly 1,200 teachers. The majority of students in the district were Black followed by smaller percentages of White, Latinx, and Multiracial students.

When asked how her background impacted her educational leadership trajectory, Dr. Wilson briefly explained growing up with her grandmother who taught her to support other families. For her, teachers need to be "aware of the emotional needs of children, and that you don't negate that and just think you can teach without supporting that." Her educational career became a "calling for me and a passion" to support teachers as they learn to engage students in and outside the classroom. Dr. Wilson became a school administrator to create the systemic changes needed "to remove barriers for children who were having struggles with school, whether it was academic, emotional, behavioral."

Dr. Hill, at the time of the study, was the superintendent for seven years in her school district called Midtown School District. With nearly 30 years of experiences as a public educator, Dr. Hill earned numerous awards in her role as administrator and in her local community for her social justice stewardship. Specifically, she was recognized by the state in recent years for significant improvements in academic achievement, earning the highest scores in the county. During her work with our project, Dr. Hill had been promoting strategic planning to mentor, coach, and support her educators to facilitate equity-focused, culturally responsive practices across her school district. In comparison to the other participants in this study, Dr. Hill's school district is significantly smaller, with nearly 1,500 students and 100 teachers. Most

students in the district are White followed by smaller percentages of Black, Multiracial, Latinx/Hispanic, and Asian students.

As Dr. Hill described her background's impact on her educational leadership trajectory, she explained the way her early teaching career countered her childhood experience. Dr. Hill grew up in a "tight knit," "historically Black community" that offered her an "insulated" experience, surrounded by her family's business, doctors, and lawyers. Yet, when she began teaching, she witnessed the differentiated treatment "in how children were taught and children who looked like me." Colleagues "tokenized" her by asking Dr. Hill to "handle" the Black students, which "bothered my soul" because her educational colleagues "did not understand the culture or did not want to or it was surface level." She entered school administration to "have more say in how we look at the work. How do we engage with families? … So, it's all the cultural relevancy pieces … I didn't have the theory behind it. I just knew this is not okay."

Data Collection

Our research team collected data within a period of 10 months between Fall of 2019 and Summer of 2020. In the Fall of 2019, we began with a focus group with three of the four school district leaders where they presented artifacts that showcased their efforts to promote CRPs in their district. All four leaders were invited to participate in the focus group; however, Dr. Hill was unable to attend due to a last-minute emergency and completed an individual interview responding to the same queries as the focus group participants. After conducting a preliminary analysis, the participants provided us with feedback on emergent themes. In the Summer of 2020, we concluded data collection with an individual interview with each leader to deepen our understanding of their specific work within their district.

Focus Group Interview. Data collection consisted of a focus group interview (Krueger, 2014) with Dr. Johnson, Ms. Miles, and Dr. Wilson to better understand their experiences with the promotion of culturally responsive practices in their district. Our interview protocol consisted of nine questions pertaining to the following: (a) school district leaders' definition of CRP; (b) the policies and practices that fostered or hindered CRPs; (c) specific school building policies or practices that have hindered CRPs in their schools and classrooms; (d) school leader behaviors, attitudes, or skills that fostered and/or hindered CRPs in their schools and classrooms; and (e) any recommendations for improving district, alongside school building policies and practices to foster CRPs in schools and classrooms. The focus group lasted approximately an hour and a half, and was audio recorded and transcribed shortly thereafter. Dr. Hill was invited to the focus group interview but was

unavailable. However, we asked Dr. Hill these same questions during a one-on-one interview that lasted approximately 60 min. The interview was also audio recorded and transcribed.

Artifacts. During the focus group, artifacts were collected from the administrators showcasing their district-wide initiatives pertaining to CRPs. Dr. Johnson shared the training rubric her school district utilized to guide her teacher professional development (PD). The rubric was titled "A Guide to Developing Positive Classrooms" and it included five intricate steps that Dr. Johnson's teachers take during their PD to build a more culturally responsive classroom. Ms. Miles presented us with a PowerPoint presentation where she shared in detail the work she and her district team have done to promote CRPs. Dr. Wilson provided us with a 3-page document titled "District-wide Cultural Competence Training." Dr. Wilson's document provided detailed information regarding participants' aims for understanding, the abilities expected to learn, and the overall expected outcomes of the training. The presentation of these artifacts was audio recorded and transcribed. The documents were also collected from the participants with the exception of Ms. Miles.

Semi-Structured Interviews. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with all four administrators following the focus group to clarify the factors that permitted CRPs in their districts. The interviews focused on obtaining contextual and collegial-interpersonal information from the leaders. We began by asking questions relating to their background and whether this impacted their approach to engaging in CRP work. We also asked contextual questions regarding their district's ability to facilitate and sustain CRPs during any demographic shifts and we asked how their district responded to the Black Lives Matter protests across the nation. During the interviews, we followed up by asking whose behaviors and attitudes most fostered CRPs within their districts. We also asked interpersonal questions regarding the district leaders' relationships with their colleagues across their district (e.g., teachers, school leaders, district administrators). Specifically, during the focus group, the district leaders shared the insight that it was necessary to "train the choir" first, those individuals already committed to the work of CRP. During the interview, a follow-up question related to how "training the choir" was asked. We ended the interviews with a question regarding what type of assistance they would need to help them promote CRPs in their districts.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis process consisted of two phases. In phase one, we used the focus group transcript, along with Dr. Hill's initial interview and artifacts, to create initial codes associated with the promotion and deterrent of CRPs

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The artifacts corroborated with responses from the focus group and interview. For instance, the artifacts supported district leaders' assertions of the districts' CRP goals for their teachers, the type of professional development each school district had implemented, and specific outcome goals expected for classroom educator. After completing initial coding, we grouped the codes according to the promotion and deterrents of CRPs. Accordingly, we created multiple types of analytical groups. Analytical groups were related to curricular, relational, instructional, and socio-political approaches to classroom practices. Other analytical groups included approaches used to conduct professional development, district-wide culture, district-wide leadership efforts, and district-wide policies. After we discussed these analytical groupings, we created preliminary themes. We presented the findings to the district leaders for member-check and after receiving input from them, we arrived at three themes: (a) a tiered approach is needed at the classroom level, (b) a district-wide commitment to CRPs is needed, and (c) district-wide contention exists regarding the types of CRP policies and practices needed.

In phase two of our data analysis process, the preliminary themes assisted us in creating the questions used to follow up with each district leader. First, similar to the first phase of analysis, the transcripts from the interviews were coded using associations to aspects that promoted or deterred CRPs. These initial codes were organized according to participants using Google Sheets. Next, we used the Culturally Responsive School Leadership conceptual framework (Khalifa et al., 2016) to produce higher inference codes to assist in the construction of analytical groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) for each participant. There were codes that aligned with CRSL: teacher preparation, school environments, and community advocacy (Khalifa et al., 2016). Other codes required new categorization that were related to district-level practices. We named this new category, culturally responsive and inclusive school district. When themes were organized by CRSL and the formed category, we engaged in discussion to arrive at the final three themes.

Trustworthiness

We strived for trustworthiness of the data by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout our research project (Savin-Biden & Major, 2014). For credibility, we relied on two strategies: (a) our recruitment process and key informant sampling technique helped us offer quality data by describing participants' qualifications and experience; and (b) the triangulation of our data, by offering three different data collection strategies, was another way to obtain credible results and gain a holistic

glimpse at participants' role in promoting CRPs. To demonstrate transferability, we included a description of the participants' characteristics and strived for a thick description of the findings. Dependability was secured by noting the data collection timeline. Finally, by providing a description of our procedures we aimed to support confirmability. In particular, in our data analysis, two members of our research team coded and analyzed the data and we conducted member checks during the two stages of analysis with our participants to obtain confirmability.

Positionality

The first author (man, Latinx) facilitated the focus group, co-facilitated the interviews, and has over 10 years of experience with qualitative data. The second author (woman, White) assisted with data analysis and has experience with educational leadership through her doctoral program and has 5 years as a classroom teacher. The third author (woman, White) assisted with the organization of the study's methodology and is a full professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis with over 15 years' experience conducting qualitative studies. The fourth author (man, White) was the lead investigator of the larger project and assisted with planning the study, developing the interview guide, and co-facilitating the focus group and individual interviews. The fifth author (woman, Black) has experience as a school district leader, served as a faculty professor for over five years, and has founded an organization for BIPOC teachers to coach them on CRPs. The sixth author (woman, Black) has experience as a school district leader and serves as a coach to school and classroom leaders. The sixth author (woman/Black) has experience as a school district leader and educator; she's currently an assistant professor in Educational Leadership. The seventh author (woman, Black) has experience as a school district leader, an educator, and a business administrator. The final author (woman/White) was a co-lead investigator on the funded research and assisted in the writing of the manuscript.

Findings

We present three themes and associated subthemes that stemmed from our final data analysis, in addition to the leaders' working definition of CRP. In the first theme, the district leaders described the responsibility required by school district leadership to promote CRPs. Each district leader shared details of approaches that create a unified vision and commitment required from the central office, the school board, and the schools. The leaders described the need to incorporate CRPs into district practices and protocols.

The second theme focuses on the district leaders' ability to foster trusting relationships in professional development (PD). The leaders spoke about a trust that would support sensitive conversations between teachers and coaches while in their classroom. Additionally, the trust developed during the PD would allow for conversations that could contextualize the educational disparities at the local and national levels (e.g., discuss the socio-political, historical events) without leading to defensive attitudes. The final theme discusses the leaders' efforts to engage in purposeful teacher retention practices. Before attending to the major themes found during analysis, we also include our participants' working definition for CRPs obtained during the focus group. Together, these findings shed light on the intricacy required to promote CRPs, one that necessitates district leaders' abilities to foster trust in teachers and staff while concurrently designing local policies that connect the central office (e.g., HR departments' hiring practices) with teachers' CRPs.

Culturally Responsive Practices: A Definition by School District Leaders

The definition provided by our participants contextualizes their work as school district leaders. Additionally, the definition may be useful in future studies that involve district level leaders and CRPs. The consensus among the group was that CRPs, first and foremost, are about engaging in self-awareness of one's identity (e.g., white privilege) and secondly, placing that self-awareness into action by being conscientious of how one as an educator interacts with students. Accordingly, CRPs require different layers of knowledge and skill level when interacting with students, beyond active engagement. The necessary knowledge component enables educators to engage in social, cultural, political, and historical conversations with students. This type of knowledge allows educators to follow students' difficult topics with active questions, active listening, and increases the possibility for them to go "off-script" during lessons to further engage in authentic ways. Dr. Wilson described it as "creating awareness about your own biases and white privilege and then just how that impacts student achievement and how you interact with students." For the leaders, the self-awareness guided mindful, culturally responsive interactions with students.

A brief description of the layers of knowledge and skill level required to engage in CRPs was provided by Dr. Johnson, where she discussed how educators need to "let [students] kind of lead where that [lesson] goes." When pressed to differentiate between active engagement and CRP, the leaders agreed that CRP was about drawing out the autonomy of the students:

giving opportunities for interaction that is specific and engaging for the student and then allowing them to contribute to what unfolds. Dr. Johnson gave an example of a classroom she had recently observed and noted the teacher missed an opportunity to be culturally responsive. She shared,

> [Students] were talking about some racial pieces in their reading and so I've seen teachers start pulling things in that they feel are diverse and culturally responsive books and talks and things like that. But I noticed that it was about a Black girl and one little Black girl in the class said, "Why would her mom give her that name? She can't get a job with that name". And the teacher went on with the lesson and I'm thinking, wait, pull that in because a lot of these kids have the same type of names… I don't think the teacher honestly could have done that. So I don't feel she had the tools to go and take that conversation.

Together, school district leaders discussed how the interaction with students, the practice aspect of CRPs, was difficult to apply for many educators and when applied at the "surface level" harm can be done to students. Dr. Hill noted, "[teachers need] to prepare before you do [CRPs] because you can just do the curricular side, you could buy books and use books. But if you don't have a deeper understanding of what you're trying to have the student engage in, you can actually cause more harm." The consensus about CRPs was, as Dr. Wilson reminded us, "I think teachers really don't know how to do it" despite it "been around for at least, I'm going to say 20 years." The school leaders agreed on the need for CRPs to be included in teacher training due to educators' lack of preparation on the topic and its utility to promote all students' academic growth.

District's Leadership Responsibility in Promoting CRPs

Each school district leader had over eight years of experience as an administrator in their respective school districts. Thus, they agreed that for CRPs to be sustained over time, the district's leadership must ensure that district departments (e.g., HR, curriculum), programs (e.g., gifted education), and teacher professional development were committed to promoting CRPs consistently. Similarly, our participants described that school districts needed to embrace the responsibility to promote CRPs, which enabled districts to incorporate CRPs in the district protocols. The following section demonstrates the manner the leaders' school districts harnessed their responsibility to promote CRPs.

Unified Vision and Commitment with District Leaders, Departments, and School Boards. Given the continued lack of educator preparation in CRPs, the district leaders agreed that a message to the entire district needed to be delivered to communicate that "this is not going away." During each

of the interviews, the district leaders provided insight into the message that district leaders needed to convey. For Dr. Johnson, Dr. Hill, Ms. Miles, and Dr. Wilson, it was the district's top leadership that had delivered expectations for educators to perform culturally responsive efforts. Dr. Wilson noted: "[W]e as our cabinet, and the cabinet was the assistant superintendents of all the different little departments, and the superintendent, just made a concerted effort that it was our goal to just bring people along subtly." The school board and superintendents developed a vision for educators in their district to be culturally responsive. The vision and commitment from the district leadership was aimed to be diffused across the district and into the classroom. Dr. Wilson reiterated the point of the district CRP message to reach the classroom:

> But, the district school board and the superintendent have to realize the importance of it and make it a priority. Whatever the expectations are there it flows down because "this is what we do in [our] district. This is how we teach." This is how we interact with our children. This is how we interact with our families.

For the district leaders in this study, the commitment and values for CRP must first be adhered to by the superintendent and different district departments. As a superintendent, Dr. Hill reiterated "step[ping] back and look at, okay, what is the messaging? Who do we value?" as essential to conveying to staff and educators that CRP was "a target" for their district to aim. The message from the top, the district level, needs to clearly endorse the importance of CRPs in the classroom and schools. Such direct language is necessary as they are the key stakeholders whose message is critical across the district.

The commitment to infuse CRPs across the district requires, as Ms. Miles indicated, "being really intentional" to create "an opportunity to really go deeper." By deeper, Ms. Miles aimed to assist schools gain more equitable structures. For instance, Ms. Miles' superintendent designed the role of Equity Officer, which Ms. Miles obtained, to manage nine departments that served equity-driven efforts. One such effort was promoting CRPs. Thus, the vision and commitment for CRPs assisted in the larger purpose, which was to tackle the inequity in schools. The CRPs were part of a wrap-around/holistic process that needed to, according to Ms. Miles, center "students who have been marginalized very often in our society. This [equity] work just encompasses and wraps all of that together."

The objective of an all-encompassing equity work was to involve staff and educators that impacted the classroom directly and indirectly. For Dr. Johnson, the curriculum, professional development, finance, and human

resource (HR) departments required CRP training "to make sure that we were looking at a lens that we were trying to make sure we were equitable." For Dr. Hill, it required educating the school board and even convincing them that a policy was needed to promote CRPs because she understood that "it says a lot to everybody in the district when we create these policies." Similarly, for Dr. Wilson, the curriculum and professional department in her school district committed to being trained on CRPs for the sake of equitable schooling. Dr. Wilson indicated the following:

> … it was pretty much the curriculum department, the professional development department, the superintendent's leadership team coming together and saying this is what we need, and then those departments coming together to outline specifically what the needs were, and how we wanted to have it addressed.

The district leaders ensured that the school board, the superintendent, and other district leaders, including the union president, understood that CRPs needed to be applied across the district given the inequities experienced, particularly by students of color.

Incorporate CRPs into District Processes, Practices, and Protocols. Part of the commitment to promoting CRPs across the district was the collaborative effort in each school district to ensure implementation and sustainability of classroom CRPs. For Dr. Hill and her small school district, it was working directly with the school board to design "an educational equity policy" which she explained as a "broad overview of 'This is what we expect.'" However, Dr. Hill was careful in establishing an equity policy that required her schools and educators to follow a "process" rather than a "procedure." She explained, "I'm going to say a process … I don't want to say procedure. More on a process level in terms of development…I've called out [CRPs] to be a part of it…" For Dr. Johnson's district, they created a strategic plan with goals that were shared with the school board periodically. Dr. Johnson explained her strategic plan,

> So we had a strategic plan and one of the goals that was developed by 70 core members in the community, in the district… So we had a spot that met that said, we want a culturally responsive curriculum in place… So basically twice a year, we reported to the board what we were doing to create a more culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy in the classroom.

The strategic plan was aimed at creating sustainability, not only across the district but over time. Ms. Miles was also working on developing a type of

strategic plan to promote sustainability of CRPs, but hers looked differently. Ms. Miles explained:

> I started an equity work group. It's made up of community members as well as staff. Since I'm also part of the policy committee at the district level, our big to do this year was to create an equity statement that will then guide every other policy in the district. We will be starting to look at each policy to make sure that there are not even hints of disparities…

Both Dr. Johnson and Ms. Miles were part of or created a district-wide process that involved stakeholders from across the district and the outer community. The objective of these initiatives was to ensure that efforts to deliver CRPs in the schools were protected.

Ms. Miles worked tirelessly to ensure that educators across her district were trained on CRPs and was the one that best captured those efforts. She explained:

> You will have leaders in every area in the district trained. Right now as part of our equity training team I have teachers, I have the superintendent, I have counselors, I have principals, I have assistant principals. I have homeschool communicators, I have department heads, all of those people are part of our equity training team…

The district-wide commitment facilitated CRPs, processes, and protocols to be implemented with staff, school leaders, and teachers across the district.

Fostering Trusting Relationships to Promote CRPs

For the three school district leaders in large districts, Dr. Johnson, Dr. Wilson, and Ms. Miles, professional development (PD) played a crucial role in promoting CRPs in their school districts. During PDs, these three administrators aimed at producing a space where teachers were able to explore their personal growth and emotional needs, including any resistance experienced. For these district leaders, the space in the PDs was intended to encourage vulnerable conversations and foster trust-building. The goal of this vulnerability was to later examine teachers' classroom management and instruction. Additionally, the space in the PDs was used to foster trusting relationships with the aim of engaging in race-related discussions, centering national and local context to support understanding of racial injustice.

Dr. Johnson, Dr. Wilson, and Ms. Miles aimed to create trusting relationships during their PDs on culturally responsive practices. While PDs on topics

like CRPs are more prevalent today (as supported by two of the largest American teacher unions; AFT, 2020), there are still educators who manifested physical or verbal resistance during training. Dr. Johnson noticed employees using their sick days to avoid attending PDs related to CRPs. Ms. Miles also indicated that "we may be in an equity training and a teacher will say, 'This is bullshit. Why am I sitting through this? I need to be grading papers.'" Instead of pushing back against the resistance, the district-leaders acknowledged their staff and educators' opposition and designed PDs that would be inviting to those displaying resistance and the rest of the educators.

Dr. Wilson described the intentional effort in designing a PD that would bring their educators and staff members along:

> [Y]ou have to learn obviously how to say things not to offend the other party. And to help get the information out, but at the same time know that you just can't sit and listen and let people say stuff that's inappropriate, or just not good to be saying.

A balance is required to open up dialogue and confront participants' biases and insults. PDs need to be prepared to address resistance, communicated by discomfort, verbal insensitivities, or avoidance. The open dialogue permitted participants to feel a sense of trust and share vulnerable stories. In that regard, PDs were designed to build a trusting space. Ms. Miles noted:

> Those trainings are built to engender a sense of trust so that people are comfortable sharing their experiences so people will share things about themselves in those training. I don't think I've been in a training yet where at least two or three teachers haven't been very emotional. They're sharing their story and just hearing the story, we all have a story.

The open dialogue and trust created in the PD was aimed at helping teachers share sensitive and personal accounts related to aspects of their own socialization, which then permitted the administrators to request the participants to apply such vulnerability in the classroom.

While Dr. Johnson, Dr. Wilson, and Ms. Miles worked directly with the teachers to build a sense of trust, Dr. Hill worked directly with building administrators. First, Dr. Hill's aim was to build relationships. She described an instance when a "good" and "skillful" English art teacher reached out to her for help, she listened without judgment and gave them "an opportunity to really move forward in this time frame because of the constant conversation, and clarifying, and building bridges with one another." Whether it

was building trust with a teacher or school principal, the aim was providing a judgment-free opportunity to self-disclose information that would support students' education. For Dr. Hill, trust was required in order to build "bridges" between educators' "hearts" and their classroom practices.

Integration of CRPs in Classroom Practice. For all four administrators, the trusting relationships were aimed at creating an expectation that teachers design a classroom space to allow the vulnerability needed to build the teacher-student relationships. Dr. Hill noted that her "strategy, right away, was to work closely with administrators so they can create spaces where teachers can do this work in their classroom." Dr. Wilson's superintendent conveyed an expectation that educators' behaviors needed to be culturally responsive with all students:

> [T]his is what the superintendent said. She said, "I can't change people's hearts, but I can change their behaviors." … I can't make you even understand or respect various cultures, but I can make sure that you treat all of our kids this particular way because this is how we have laid out how we want you to teach, and then, if you don't feel comfortable with it, you probably will go somewhere else…

The vulnerability fostered through the relationships became a step into the vulnerability required to engage in critical, self-reflection of one's practice as an educator. For example, Dr. Hill's school district created "a district plan" where each school principal conducts an "equity audit. And so they have to present this information to the Board of Education. And they give their results and then what are their next steps."

Dr. Wilson shared an artifact to support how her school district team established new "key outcomes" for their "Cultural Competence in [Our] School District," to ensure the critical, self-practice was fomented by the school district. Dr. Wilson's school district strived for "all teachers and staff" to know that dialogue regarding "the impact of race on learning and achievement may not be comfortable but they are necessary to eliminate race as a predictor in [Our] School District."

According to the artifact Dr. Wilson shared, the school district also wanted their educators to understand that "culture and the lenses through which we see others impact our behaviors and our perceptions. Each of us must confront our own attitudes, values, and biases that influence student success." Additionally, the school district set out for each educator to be able to ""identify culturally responsive behaviors that contribute to the success of all students" and "initiate, engage in, and sustain conversations that will impact policies, practices, and procedures that eliminate race as a predictor of

achievement in [Our] School District." For Dr. Wilson and her school district, the ultimate goal of the PD was to support their teacher and staff to be "courageous" as they strive to "implement culturally responsive practices" to improve their students' educational success.

In Dr. Johnson's school district, they offered a multi-step PD series, where the first two steps produced emotional vulnerability from the teachers and expect teachers to apply it to their teacher-student relationship. Based on the artifact shared by Dr. Johnson, Step 1 assisted educators to "develop a working definition of culture and values" for themselves to address any biases that stem from such definitions. Educators' introspection aimed at facilitating the building of strong relationships in the classroom, while working on Step 2: "implement restorative practices." In the second step, Dr. Johnson's educators learned to "get to know students individually." However, the PD training supported Dr. Johnson's educators' own individual growth while working with students' learning: a learning that included a response to the child's emotional needs and the integration of students' families as partners in education.

In the PowerPoint presentation Ms. Miles shared with us, the vulnerability designed in the PDs had the additional aim of confronting biases during teacher-student relationships. Ms. Miles described in her presentation "we're partnering that equity training piece with restorative practices." By partnering the training to restorative practices she was referring to being transparent that "walkthroughs" would be occurring where "we're looking at your relationships with kids. You have to know that we're going to be diving deep into discipline numbers and if it looks like it's disproportional coming from your classroom it's going to be a conversation…" The rationale on building teacher-student relationships differed. Dr. Johnson's rationale was "building strong relationships." For Dr. Hill it was to "use different data points to measure if there are any racial disparities going on." For Ms. Miles, district administrators promoted CRPs by integrating the expectation that teachers would need to demonstrate lower discipline numbers for underrepresented minority groups. Finally, for Dr. Wilson's district, the objective was to "use the knowledge gained for greater student success." When we asked them how they were measuring teacher-student relationships, the administrators reported using discipline data, observations by administrators, or teachers' self-reports.

Local and National Context. The district leaders needed to build trust with their teachers and administrators in order to reframe the educational context for educators to understand. Ms. Miles recounted that the training sessions were not about character assessment or judging one's past errors. Rather,

educators needed to learn the history of the district and wider society to understand how they have been "socialized" and how such "socialization" impacts diverse students' educational experience. Ms. Miles' PDs were about "getting people to think about the impact that they're having on students and so much of it is tied to that socialization." Ms. Miles goes on to specify that socialization refers to "what [educators] heard from their family, what they saw on the news, what they read in the newspaper, particularly about students of color or students who were in lower socioeconomic status." In Ms. Miles' leadership experiences facilitating CRP PDs and equity training, "once you know better" about one's local and national context, educators' actions in the classroom begin supporting diverse students' backgrounds and experiences.

Similarly, for Dr. Hill, "[educators] need to have more exposure of what is going on in the world and not in a superficial way, but truly being honest, usually the whole social studies and history piece." By social studies and history piece, Dr. Hill is referring to lessons that require "courageous conversations," for example, "the whole Columbus discovering America" or "the use of the n-word." Dr. Hill explains that students are living in a society where protests are occurring to demand justice for deaths like Michael Brown, and educators need to take charge of learning about the current context to educate students. Dr. Hill would tell her educators, "You all, yes, we've been living a certain way, but we need to start talking about justice, we need to start talking about identity, we need to start having more difficult conversations, we need to shift our curriculum."

Dr. Hill took on the task of helping her educators include "tolerance antibias education standards" in their curriculum, with the expectation to have "thoughtful" discussions with their students. For example, regarding the n-word, "the history of it and why it hurts. And why is it being used in pop culture? And why does it feel like it is a term of endearment for some and then an insult coming from others?" Acknowledging the developmental stages of teachers, Dr. Hill "helps teachers work through what they know about themselves and their personal and cultural identity when they go into these spaces." The spaces Dr. Hill is indicating are classroom conversations with students (or even their parents), where educators are "culturally competent in that regard, it's like you [educators] handle other things but you can deal with race…You can navigate it skillfully."

For Dr. Wilson, her school district helped their educators explore their privileges, while also learning about institutionalized racism. The objectives of the training sessions were to teach on the social and political history of inequities in education. Dr. Wilson describes the demographic shifts occurring while she was a district leader. Over the course of 2004 to 2018, she explained, the district changed from being predominantly a white middle

class school district to one where new group of Black families entered who "were from, the upper middle class part of the district where their homes were like $500,000, $600,000." Dr. Wilson added, "racial discord" started occurring, "between those new black families who were moving in who had these nice big homes and had corporate jobs and probably the original white families that were living there." The "racial discord" in Dr. Wilson's school district came about from the demographic change that occurred slowly over time. Such racial discord affected the way Dr. Wilson educators treated students so much that an "expected outcome from ongoing training" was "faculty and staff understanding of the impact of race on schooling." With the trust garnered from educators and staff, Dr. Wilson and her district leadership team aimed for her educators and staff to engage in "identification and remediation of institutional practices which disproportionately impacts students of color."

Dr. Johnson explained the necessity of educators to "understand the history" surrounding the racial inequities in the schools they were teaching in. In her district, Dr. Johnson provided lessons on the social and economic histories impacting inequities. She noted: "We did race, real estate, and uneven development. We [discussed] racism at [our city]." Dr. Johnson, Dr. Hill, Dr. Wilson, and Ms. Miles designed efforts (e.g., PDs) that created a space where teachers could trust the process and learn of local and national social, political, and economic development that impacted educational inequities.

CRPs as Purposeful Teacher Retention Practice

Dr. Johnson discussed that the largest issue with promoting CRPs was the lack of "strong recruitment for teachers." Dr. Johnson referred to a lack of effort to recruit teachers that can handle, for example, "hard to staff schools like middle schools that are predominantly Black…" Dr. Johnson provided an example that had occurred in her district, where new, white teachers in their 20 s were hired in predominantly Black elementary schools and by December "55 teachers had quit… So they literally said things to me in interviews… 'I wasn't trying to work with this demographic.'" According to Dr. Johnson, it was difficult to promote CRPs with certain teachers as they had little interest in working with diverse populations. Despite this difficulty, it was her job to support the retention of those teachers. Dr. Johnson explained that when she "noticed teachers getting to that point where they wanted to quit, [and] we did triage. So it was going in to help them build those relationships. But everything had to be around those culturally responsive practices." The purposeful retention of teachers revolved around helping teachers build relationships with their students using the multi-step PD series presented earlier.

CRPs became a requirement, not only to promote and sustain diverse students' academic development, but also to facilitate the retention of teachers.

For that reason, Dr. Hill, Dr. Wilson, and Ms. Miles required their educators and staff to train from the beginning of their employment. Dr. Hill was explicit in her message to teachers. Dr. Hill explains: "I'm really trying to change the heart. Because if you don't want to do this work, then you don't want to work here. And I'm actually telling teachers that." However, Dr. Hill does not stop at the message. Her goal is to support teachers' growth in the realm of CRPs. She concludes: "And so, if I say it, I take personal responsibility, I take ownership of giving you the tools on how to do this work because we write our own curriculum." Dr. Wilson described the training as a hiring protocol:

> … one of the practices and it wasn't a policy, but it was pretty much a protocol practice, that as new teachers were hired, new administrators were hired, whatever your position was, you had to go to this three- or four-day institute on cultural responsive practices.

For Dr. Hill and Dr. Wilson, training on CRPs became a necessary practice to support the student-teacher relationship, but also teachers' retention.

Ms. Miles believed in providing support throughout the educators' tenure. Ms. Miles reported:

> HR and I are working very intentionally on what do those hiring practices look like and not just hiring but what do the retention practices look like? What is the support in that building if a teacher or an administrator of color is faulting or struggling a little bit do we say, "Well, you're not a good fit?" But is that what we do for everybody? Or do we give you the support that you need? I firmly believe that probably 99.9% of people with the correct support can get to where you need them to be.

Across the four school district leaders, their aim in providing CRPs to their teachers had multiple goals, including supporting the education of students with diverse backgrounds by supporting teachers of all levels to build relationships with students. Accordingly, the support and promotion of CRPs in a school district allows for multiple stakeholders to benefit from their application.

Discussion

Knowing that CRPs support academic outcomes for students of color (Cholewa et al., 2014; Howard, 2002), we explored the approaches of four school district leaders as they influenced and implemented culturally responsive initiatives across their school districts. We used a CRSL framework to

understand and conceptualize school district leaders' approach to promoting CRPs for students, teachers, school principals, other educators, and stakeholders outside the school wall. Our analyses of school district leaders' focus groups, interviews, and artifacts identified three themes and subthemes including school district leaders' responsibility, trusting relationships, and teacher retention practices to promote CRPs in schools and classrooms.

In the first theme, district leaders agreed on the importance of their school district's responsibility to promote CRPs and used two critical strategies for this cause: (a) create a unified vision and (b) maintain a clear commitment from the district's central office. This finding connected directly with CRSL's maintaining culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, and cultivating culturally responsive and inclusive school environments (Khalifa, 2018). All four district leaders proposed that CRPs needed to be explicitly included within district policies and protocols to emphasize their importance and let the staff know that "this is not going away." Similar to Coviello and DeMatthews (2021) strategic discussion of equity policies, the participants of this study engaged in policy conversations around CRPs depending on their context. For example, Dr. Johnson focused on training various district departments, from HR to finance, to ensure that everyone used an equity-based lens during decision-making processes. In contrast, as a superintendent herself, she saw the school board as the essential starting point to incorporate CRPs in a policy.

While school leaders themselves can provide training on CRPs and do building-level equity audits to assess their school's inclusivity, having district-level support for these needs can ensure those district administrators can sustain efforts over time (i.e., school desegregation/integration; Diem, 2012; Mattheis, 2017). Placing the sustainability responsibility on the district, as opposed to individual principals, could also ensure that more students have access to CRPs by supporting principals' culturally responsive initiatives across multiple schools (Kozleski & Huber, 2012). Nevertheless, as noted by our district leaders, we must remember that the long-term vision should be maintained when making district-wide changes regarding CRPs. District administration and school board members will turnover, emphasizing the importance of implementing district-wide strategies that guide localized policy development regardless of the leadership. For this reason, school district leaders require training to develop or implement district-level equitable policies that promote CRPs across time, outlasting the individual leaders who spearhead them.

In the second theme, the district leaders emphasized the importance of fostering trusting relationships and supportive environments in professional developments about CRPs, aligning with CRSL's critical self-awareness and culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation. It can be

common for educators, especially White educators, to experience strong physical and verbal resistance to topics included in CRP training (Hyland, 2005). When confronted, Dr. Wilson articulated the importance of balance, ensuring that educators are being pushed to challenge inappropriate thoughts and practices while cultivating an environment where they felt supported to work through their initial resistance. Due to the small size of her district, Dr. Hill took a slightly different approach and provided "judgment-free" opportunities for her school leaders to approach her about issues surrounding equity and inclusion. The four school district leaders in our study acted according to the CRSL frame, cultivating supportive environments within professional development across their school district to promote CRPs. They worked to increase the critical self-awareness of teachers, leaders, and staff, equipping them with a critical consciousness to challenge harmful assumptions that they bring into their work. Thus, as their leadership included work with educators and staff across their district, support must be given to district leaders as they continue acting as "change agents" (Kruse et al., 2018, p. 84) or even "policy intermediaries" (Mattheis, 2017, p. 527) promoting culturally responsive initiatives that are becoming more prevalent (i.e., AFT, 2020).

In the final theme, the district leaders emphasized using CRPs when designing purposeful teacher retention practices. Their leadership practice aligned, once again, directly with CRSL's critical self-awareness, culturally responsive curricula, and teacher preparation as district leaders in this study recruited, trained, and retained culturally relevant teachers. For instance, Dr. Johnson noted how in her previous experiences, many White teachers came to her district's predominantly Black elementary schools with little training on how to work with students in their specific demographic. Ultimately, she relied on CRPs as a "triage" intervention when the teachers were considering quitting. Dr. Hill, Dr. Wilson, and Ms. Miles described using CRPs in a slightly different way, making it a requirement for all new hires to set them up for success and make them more culturally responsive from the beginning of the school year. As the teaching workforce is predominantly White, supporting the development in critical consciousness can lead to changes in practice, including adopting and implementing more culturally responsive curricula (Diamond et al., 2004). Despite these benefits, solely supporting the majority of the workforce has been deemed unsafe for teachers of color (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Thus, Ladson-Billings' (1995) call for a pedagogical paradigm shift, from a deficit lens to asset-oriented, must include a policy-driven shift: a policy shift that focuses on diversifying the teacher workforce, especially since students significantly benefit from having teachers of color (Dee, 2004).

The implications of this study can support the practices of school leaders, from principals, school district administrators, and superintendents. For example,

district leaders must learn about the importance of CRPs and the impact they have on supporting teachers with improving student engagement, attendance, and academic achievement (Khalifa, 2018; McCray & Beachum, 2014). This learning can begin by understanding and acknowledging the changing demographics of the student population, which can provide the impetus to offer the professional development and coaching teachers need to implement CRPs. Findings of this study can also support future research studies where single case studies can utilize ethnographic strategies to understand the impact district leader's decision to promote CRPs had on teachers and students.

We acknowledge that as a limitation, our study did not analyze the intersection of race and gender of our Black women leaders (e.g., Horsford, 2020). Black women leaders are unrepresented in education, and so we were fortunate to be able elevate the voice of these four leaders' experiences and perceptions about promoting culturally responsive practices in schools. Our study focused on learning from their unique insights that their combined identities shaped; we did not examine how racial and gender identities may have independently influenced their experiences. However, as contribution to the field, our findings shed light on school district leaders' abilities to influence district, school, and classroom practices and policies grounded on culturally responsive leadership with a pursuit of educational equity (e.g., Ishimaru et al., 2019). Further, this study evidences a need to conceptualize a district-level approach to culturally responsive leadership that includes individual behaviors and the nuances of community-wide influence and policy development (e.g., Green, 2017). Finally, the district leaders' definition of CRPs may be useful in future studies that involve school district leaders.

Acknowledgments

The research reported here was supported in part by the Institute of Education Sciences of the US Department of Education through R305A180111. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute of Education Sciences.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences of the US Department of Education (grant number R305A180111).

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Notes

1. In using the term "racially and ethnically minoritized," we are referring to historically marginalized populations in the U.S. by a dominant society and government institutions. The term indicates the educational, social, economic, and political discrimination these populations have experienced.
2. Names of participants are pseudonyms and specific district numbers have not been included to maintain anonymity.

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Karen I. Hall, PhD, is an accomplished Educational Consultant and University Professor with extensive experience educating, advocating, and guiding action-focused conversations centered around the theory, practice, and business of equity-focused leadership. Recognized as a community advocate and leader, developing

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Carla London, MBA, spent 14 years in Columbia Public Schools, 10 of those in Central Office administration, including Chief Equity Officer (6 years) and Director of Student Services (2 years), and Supervisor of Student and Family Advocacy (2 years); 11 years as a certified teacher in both Missouri and Texas, in social studies, language arts and reading; certified ELL instructor; created the Aspiring Scholars and Opting for Success programs for Columbia Public Schools in 2004; and 4 years as an Emergency Room Social Worker, Children's Medical Center, Dallas, Texas, and 6 years as an investigator for Child Protective Services, Dallas, Texas, and small business owner, Dallas, Texas.

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