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Black Women Principals and Expressions of Culturally Responsive School Leadership During Crisis: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Schools experience a plethora of crises from pandemics, school shootings, weather-related traumas, and mass migrations that require school leaders to create solutions to support students and their families. Researchers have explored school leaders' responses to crises but have yet to explore how principals generally and Black women specifically conceptualize and use culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) practices as a part of their response. In this qualitative study we explored how 9 Black women school leaders implemented CRSL practices when responding to crisis. We found that principals primarily relied upon three domains of CRSL (critical reflection, promoting an inclusive environment, and community engagement) to navigate a crisis and expand opportunities for equity and inclusion––even in the face of district opposition. We also found evidence that principals engaged in instructional leadership regardless of the crisis they faced. We provide implications and recommendations for school leaders, K-12 school districts, and administrator preparation programs on how to support leaders responding to crisis.

Keywords: Women of Color, equity, inclusion, Black women school leaders, culturally responsive school leadership

Introduction

In their historical examination of the brilliance Black women have brought to the field of educational leadership, Peters and Nash (2021) comprehensively described how Black women led despite having to navigate de jure and de facto racism. However, these Black women educational leader pioneers such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Anna Julia Cooper, and many others created physical spaces (i.e., Bethune-Cookman University) to train the next generation of Black women educators and generate educational opportunity for Black folks. Consequently, Black women have been at the forefront of navigating and leading through crisis (Horsford, 2012; Peters & Nash, 2021), defined as an urgent situation that requires immediate and decisive action by the leaders of an organization (Boin et al., 2013). For example, in the face of racism and sexism, politician Shirley Chisolm, through her grassroots organizing and political background in New York, was able to ascend and become the first Black woman elected to the United States Congress (Chisolm, 1970; Gallagher, 2007). Similarly, in her autobiography *Nothing's Impossible: Leadership Lessons from Inside and Outside the Classroom* (1997), renowned New York City school leader Lorraine Monroe recounted how when she was being groomed for the principalship, an assistant principal in her building expressed to her supervisor that she was being tapped for leadership "because she's Black" (p. 117). Chisolm and Monroe's experiences with racism and sexism often characterize the context in which Black women lead.

Within the school context, when Black women overcome these aforementioned structural barriers and ascend to leadership positions, they are placed in the most demanding schools (Jang & Alexander, 2022), which inevitably causes them to have to deal with many crises within their schools (i.e., teacher attrition, student behavioral conduct, etc.). Despite the contentious settings many Black women encounter as leaders, research has shown that Black women leaders improve outcomes for all students (Jang & Alexander, 2022). However, we know little about how Black women leaders navigate crises.

In this paper, we argue that one possible approach Black women use to lead through a crisis is implementing culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) practices, which Khalifa (2018) noted as behaviors and practices that encompass being a reflective practitioner, being a culturally responsive instructional leader, promoting a culturally responsive and inclusive learning environment, and engaging the school community by way of advocating for their

needs. As leaders grapple with many crises, including COVID-19, it is crucial to consider the role of CRSL as a mechanism to support the development of teacher and student learning. Furthermore, it is essential to understand how Black women school leaders may use CRSL to inform their decision-making process when leading through a crisis.

There has yet to be a scholarly conversation highlighting CRSL and its potential role in leading through a crisis. Thus, this research seeks to explore how nine Black women school leaders navigate crisis situations, we explore the following research question: How do Black women principals express culturally responsive school leadership through a crisis? To situate this study in the following sections, we first examine the literature on crisis in the context of school leadership. We then explore CRSL and how Black women leaders have implemented it in their leadership practices. Finally, we explain how this study adds to the scholarly conversation around crisis leadership and CRSL.

Crisis and School Leadership

Due to the limited scholarship specifically focused on school crisis we borrow literature on crisis leadership and apply it to the school context. Crisis leadership has been defined by Wu et al. (2022) as a "process in which leaders act to prepare for the occurrence of unexpected crises, deal with the salient implications of crises, and grow from the disruptive experience of crises" (p. 101520). Despite the current crisis-laden time, school leaders are left to mediate and solve the issues they face with little guidance, disproportionate funding, access to resources, and coping with their own traumatic experiences (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). Additionally, in the United States, where funding mechanisms for schools (Owens, 2020) are uneven and inequitable (Reardon et al., 2019), how children in marginalized communities experience a crisis raises essential issues about educational equity and access to opportunities. Due to the onset of COVID-19, there has been an uptick in scholarship around crises in schools and how leaders respond to these crises (Hemmer & Elliff, 2020; Kiral & Brion, 2021; Longmuir, 2021, Virella, 2023). However, few scholars have acknowledged the inherent inequities embedded in the public school system, which makes a recovery from a crisis an arduous task, compromised by a system designed to perpetuate inequities (Tyack, 1974).

Furthermore, it is essential to note that leadership is characterized as a process leading up to, during, and post-crisis. With this operationalization, Wu et al. (2022) further added that crisis leadership is a process of "how a crisis influences leaders, how leaders exert influence on the effect, cognitions, and behaviors of different stakeholders around times of crisis" (p.

101520). Lessons learned from the pandemic forced school leaders to make quick but critical decisions, protect the well-being of the school community, maintain seamless operations, and adjust educational planning accordingly. Additionally, the existing scholarly conversation encompassing crisis leadership has highlighted some distinct characteristics leaders have displayed during crises. Parveen et al. (2022) have expressly noted specific attributes of crisis leadership that included "resilience, flexibility, adaptability, compassion, and trust" (p. 875648). The literature has similarly revealed that crisis leadership indicates transformational and distributed leadership, focusing on innovative thinking, taking perspective from and collaborating with others versus being unidirectional (Byrne-Jiménez & Yoon, 2019; Mutch 2015; Virella, 2023). Consequently, for this study, crisis leadership will be regarded in the manner above relative to the definition and key characteristics.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Theorists have found a critical need for CRSL (Khalifa et al., 2018). CRSL originally surfaced in multicultural education and culturally responsive practices (Carter, 2020; Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). Foundational research conducted by Johnson (2006) argued that the CRSL practices that Black leaders bring to the school setting and context represent a push toward equity. Khalifa et al. (2016) expanded on this scholarship by examining specific behaviors, practices, policies, and actions that respond to the needs of ethnically diverse students in culturally meaningful ways. The behaviors and practices examined by Khalifa et al. (2016) fell within four broad domains as follows: 1) critical self-reflection, 2) instructional leadership, 3) promoting inclusive environments, and 4) community engagement. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the domains. CRSL behaviors and practices are instrumental for validating, affirming, and being responsive to the needs of marginalized students to advance educational equity and address disparities in K-12 education (Author Under Review, 2022).

Table 1

Culturally Responsive School Leadership Domains

CRSL Domain	Domain Details
Critical Self-reflection	Critical self-reflection allows school leaders to reflect on their lived experiences to confront implicit bias. Through critical self-reflection, practitioners learn how their experiences have shaped whether they perpetuate or arrest oppressive epistemologies within their schools.
Instructional Leadership	School leaders promote, monitor, and support instructional practices that are culturally responsive. Instructional leadership under this domain encompasses strategically recruiting, retaining, and developing culturally competent staff and then building capacity within those staff members to be culturally proficient.
Inclusive and Responsive School Environments	School leaders prioritize validating the cultural identities of students and confronting exclusionary practices. Furthermore, under this domain, school leaders ensure that the cultural expressions of the students they serve are not exoticized or tokenized.
Community Engagement	School leaders focus on leveraging the funds of knowledge that members of the school community hold in non hierarchical and non-appropriating ways. Leveraging community-based knowledge in this manner serves to advance the school's vision and create equitable opportunities for students.

Research has shown how CRSL leadership behaviors and practices manifest in various school settings. For example, Hollowell (2019) studied fifteen principals from Title I schools in Southern California, exploring how they enacted CRSL by enhancing student engagement and promoting an inclusive environment. The findings revealed that the principals in the study intentionally focused on providing culturally responsive professional development to their staff. Moreover, Hollowell (2019) shared that the principals in this study not only saw a need to address disproportionality through creating alternatives to suspension but also a need to increase the "cultural capacity and efficacy of teachers" (p. 225).

Scholars argue that CRSL is relevant and timely because it incorporates aspects of anti-racist, anti-oppressive leadership (Dantley & Tilman, 2006; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Kumashiro, 2000; Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). CRSL provides an opportunity for educational leaders to "identify, protect, institutionalize, celebrate" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 7) and affirm the culture and funds of knowledge students bring with them. By doing so, they are performing a complex form of cultural work (Cooper, 2009) that requires leaders to develop

knowledge about the students, teachers, families, and communities they serve, situating their practice in this knowledge (Gay, 2010; Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Black Women and Their Use of Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Several scholars have linked the relationship between principals' race or ethnicity and gender and their leadership practices and behaviors (Peters & Nash, 2021; Jang & Alexander, 2022). In reviewing knowledge about Black principals through a gender lens, scholars have argued that the experiences of Black women principals are uniquely different from those of all male principals, Black male principals, and White women principals (Fitzgerald, 2003, 2006). In particular, the literature has suggested that Black principals strategically deploy their understanding of and responsiveness to the cultures of their students and their families (particularly among students of color; e.g., Khalifa et al., 2014). For example, Tillman (2004) synthesized the literature on Black principals and found that they were committed to preserving the culture of Black communities and supporting students' positive self-identities.

Similarly, research has shown the success of Black women principals in creating a positive school culture and improving all students' achievement (e.g., Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Tillman, 2004; Okoli et al., 2020; Peters, 2012). For example, Bloom and Erlandson (2003) discussed Black women principals' strong nurturing spirit and spirituality in their leadership practices, which they used to foster all students' success. Similarly, Jang and Alexander (2022), in their study using a nationally representative dataset, found that Black women principals were associated with a higher level of teachers' collective responsibility and higher math achievement scores among students. However, missing from the scholarly conversation is how Black women leaders engage in CRSL while leading their school communities during a crisis. Thus, we center this inquiry around the following research question: How do Black women principals express culturally responsive school leadership through a crisis?

Methods

This study draws from a larger qualitative exploratory case study conducted during 2019-2022 of 50 principals from a variety of ages, races, ethnicities, and genders. In this paper, we focus our attention on the nine (9) Black women principals who participated in this study. All principals in this study led through a crisis. Furthermore, the primary goal of the larger

study was to examine how principals lead through a crisis through an equity orientation (Virella, 2023).

Data Collection and Participants

To solicit participants for this study, the second author recruited principals by distributing a flier through professional networks and online groups. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of data for this study. Each participant was interviewed by a member of the research team and each interview lasted approximately one hour. An interview protocol was developed to ensure the collection of comparable data across school principals in this study. The interview protocol was organized around the following five areas: (1) reflections on their leadership responses as the crisis unfolded; (2) equity opportunities as a result of the crisis; (3) the role of hope in their leadership during a crisis; (4) the challenges (expected and unexpected); and (5) their role as a principal in developing the capacity of others and collaborating with multiple stakeholders during the crisis.

Participants in this study were leaders in school districts in New York, New Jersey, Minnesota, and North Carolina. All the principals in this subset of data identified as Black women ranging in age from 30–48. Principals in this study had 1–12 years of experience leading elementary, middle, or high school levels. These principals were purposively selected from the population of principals based on their experiences leading through a crisis. The principals in this study chose a crisis to discuss such as the novel COVID-19 pandemic, mass migration from Puerto Rico post-hurricane Maria, and acts of racist harm. Table 2 provides more detail about the participants in this study (we use pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants).

Table 2

Demographics of Participants

*Principal	Age	School Location	Level of School	Years as Principal
Natalia	Late 40s	New York	Middle	6
Sasha	Early 30s	New York	Elementary	1
Sarah	Early 50s	New York	Elementary	16
Sandra	Late 40s	New Jersey	Elementary	12
Donna	Early 40s	New Jersey	High	6
Teri	Early 40s	Minnesota	Elementary	7
Meredith	Late 30s	New Jersey	Middle	4
Deborah	Early 30s	North Carolina	Elementary	2
Tonya	Early 40s	New York	Middle	5

*Pseudonyms are included to protect the identity of participants.

Data Analysis

All interviews were first transcribed and then coded using Atlas.ti. For this article, data analysis involved three stages. In the first stage, for data reduction purposes we identified all excerpts in which the principal described how they brought their values and expertise, engendered loyalty, fostered collaboration, built trust, adapted to the changing needs of their school, and made use of resources in response to the crisis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We focused on these challenges because, as Becker et al. (1961) noted in their seminal sociological study of occupational socialization, "If it is true that conflict and tension arise when the expectations governing social relationships are violated or frustrated then it is clear that study of such instances will reveal just what those expectations are" (p. 21). We recognized early on that the racial identity of these principals created tensions due to their focus on equity.

In the second stage, we generated reports of all the data coded under the responses to crisis leadership and then "open coded" this data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The authors read

and reread these reports independently, noting salient themes and paying particular attention to how the participants described their awareness of how being a new principal affected their response to the crisis. Our primary analytical strategy in this stage was inductive while informed by reading of the relevant literature, as reviewed above. After our first reading of this data, we wrote "analytical memos" on salient themes. We then used the four domains of CRSL as codes to explore how leaders enacted CRSL and the context in which these decisions were made in. We then reread the data to verify our interpretations of the four codes and used analytical memos to develop and sharpen the interpretation of the data set.

In the third and final stage of data analysis, to evaluate the similarities and the differences in the leadership responses, we applied Boejie's (2002) constant comparative analysis to the data set. For example, to analyze a single interview, we drafted memos as recommended by Boeije (2002) responding to questions such as, "What is the core message of this interviewee? – Is the storyline consistent?" (p. 397). To analyze across principals, we drafted memos responding to "What are the similarities and differences between interviews A, B, C …??" (Boeije, 2002, p.398). Finally, we drafted our findings using Huffman and Tracy's (2018) approach to reporting findings and conjecture claims through abductive reasoning or an ongoing process of using data to conjecture reasonable claims. Abductive reasoning pairs well with constant comparative analysis (Boeije, 2002) because the findings will engage in a political and analytical act of making connections to uncover power and ideology by relaying concrete ways to act (Huffman & Tracy, 2018).

Findings

As a result of our analysis, we found that principals primarily relied upon three domains of CRSL (critical reflection, promoting an inclusive environment, and community engagement) to navigate a crisis and expand opportunities for equity and inclusion. We found evidence that principals engaged in instructional leadership regardless of the crisis the leaders faced. In the sub-sections that follow we expand upon these findings with representative evidence from the participants.

Critical Reflection and the Importance of an Intersectional Identity

It was evident from the data that these principals were constantly critically reflecting on how to foster an inclusive school climate due to the exacerbating nature of the crisis. Each

of them described how their identity as Black women were at the forefront of how they led and their connections to the community. They reflected on personal experiences, such as being a child of a single parent, and how they imagined those conditions might have been exacerbated because of the crisis being experienced. Donna recalled, "a single parent raised me, and we didn't have a lot, so I guess what's in the forefront of my mind is like breaking down barriers." Donna's comments were typical across our sample because the participants related their cultural and identity experiences to their leadership. There was a direct influence of their cultural identity and experiences with their leadership. For example, Teri said:

> I think just that building my own [leadership] capacity has helped me and also to understand who I am and to know that I'm a Black woman, and this is what I bring to the table; I don't speak for all Black women or people or our race but based on my own experience. So, I'm going to be as transparent as I can be and call it what it is, and like I said, from my experience.

Consideration of their own experiences allowed these leaders to lead in myriad culturally responsive ways during the crisis. Natalia shared:

> Empathy for me came as a part of me not liking injustice. I don't like injustice in any form. I know what it is to be poor and rejected. I know what it is to have a name that no one recognizes. Even throughout this disaster, I teach my kids how to respect each other. My office door is open.

The principals' reflections, their critical self-awareness of who they are as Black women in a leadership position, and the heightened climate that crisis brings about.

Promoting a Responsive and Inclusive Environment

All principals in this study discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected their schools in urban areas. In particular, principals were keenly aware of the disproportionate impact COVID-19 was having on Black and Latinx communities. Marcia explained, "In one class of seven children to have their mothers die of COVID, like we had death, upon death, upon death, and then I had a family where the dad died."

Similarly, these principals shared that the outside political polarized (Klein, 2020) climate of the United States, combined with political attacks on mask mandates and teachers, forced the principals to consider how to support their teachers. Donna shared an illustration

of what it feels like to lead by reflecting, "There's just a different energy that I feel from our teachers, and it's not intentional, and it's not for any specific reason. It's the current climate in America. It is very different as a result of the ongoing pandemic."

She further explained how fostering an inclusive environment is difficult due to restraints put on families and stated, "Interaction with families is awkward because they can't come into the building. Parent meetings are now held outside which just by nature feels exclusive." Donna expounded on the impact of the pandemic on sustaining the inclusive environment she created prior to the pandemic:

> It doesn't feel like we are a family school or we're embracing our families. We are talking to them in the rain, as opposed to welcoming them in and getting them coffee and visiting their child's teacher by literally standing outside of the teachers' class. Parents would be able to come into the class and sit with their students. That was a very common practice, we're no longer granted that option. Parents feel very disconnected.

Promoting an inclusive environment is a crucial hallmark of CRSL. Thus, this finding aligns with the notion that principals who express CRSL are dedicated to making marginalized families feel welcome and breach the schoolhouse door. However, what was interesting about this finding was the notion that a crisis, notably the COVID-19 crisis, limited how families were included. Thus, leaders had to find new ways to make their families feel included. For example, Deborah explained:

> Social media was a tool that we utilized to communicate creatively with our families. We knew that while they may not have Wi-Fi hotspots to get online, most of our families were connected through ClassDojo, Twitter, and Facebook, and we could see the trends of their use. So, we strategically used Twitter and Facebook to communicate flyers, so families didn't forget things like picking up their child's laptop.

What is evident from the data is how the principals in this study adapted their culturally responsive techniques to maintain the CRSL values they felt were important. We found that despite a crisis changing how these leaders enacted CRSL, they still felt the commitment to lead equitably and socially justly.

Community Engagement

Most principals in our sample described how they deployed CRSL practices to deepen community engagement while crises ravaged their communities positively. For example, Donna shared that with the onset of COVID-19, "We had many challenges that I can vividly remember, like getting the devices to students. So, we connected with a few community partners in organizations. I remember them coming to the school and helping us ensure we had student devices." Donna saw that she had to work with community organizations to get students the necessities. Similarly, the principals in this study felt disconnected from their families and tried to engage them to support them through the crisis.

In contrast, many principals in this sample remarked that teachers were more empathetic for themselves than their families, which in turn created a divide of understanding and empathy between teachers and families. Sandra explained:

> There was little to no empathy for our families. And then when it did show up, it may have shown up in one or two staff members who shared it, but again, it was empathy for themselves as a result of what was happening [the pandemic] with their children and families but lacked empathy for our students and families. And so I was grounding myself in courageous conversations, identifying my triggers and being ready for the conversations with teachers.

While principals could make better decisions to support their teachers and students, sometimes, conflict arose. For instance, Tonya shared how bolstering her CRSL through community engagement amid a crisis was tamped down by her board of directors. She shared:

> Well, once I became a building leader, during that particular incident and quite a few others, the board let me know that they were in charge, and I was just there. I don't know how else to put it. It was like; they tell you what you're going to do, what you're not doing, and how we're going to move, what supports it, and I was there as the building leader. It wasn't inclusive, and it wasn't one isolated incident. There's quite a few other times where I was like, "Well, we need to do this so I can do that," or, "Let me purchase this so I can get that," and the board said, "Oh, well, we make those decisions. We'll let you know if we can get that or not, and we'll let you know if we feel like going down that path." And even at one point, I told them they had to limit the number of events they were

having. They had more social events than we were, having children in the
classrooms doing their learning. They heard me, and then they still kept doing
it. I felt like I didn't have much voice because it was a male-dominant type of
situation, and they felt they had the right to tell me what needed to be done. I
kept saying, "No, we should do this, or let's try that," or any other ideas I had
were quickly shot down. I just had to comply with what was being asked of me
for the children's sake.

Similar to promoting an inclusive environment, principals in our study maneuvered
around conflicts to maintain sustainable community engagement. On the other hand, as
evidenced by Tonya's comments, few principals in the study described how they were blocked
from acting on behalf of their communities.

Instructional Leadership

When asked about instructional leadership during the crises, all participants shared
their visions, including how to be a culturally responsive school leader, despite their districts
needing to engage them in this equity work. For example, Teri shared that instructional
guidance did not change despite the multiple crises unfolding (Duante Wright and George
Floyd murders and the COVID-19 pandemic). She shared, "We were given a little more leeway
on how instruction was done."

Like Teri, the other principals shared similar comments that described the lack of
culturally relevant instruction and how they felt it necessary to import it into their curriculum
in their building. Specifically, the leaders in the sample did not focus on the outcome nature
of the achievement as a starting point. Instead, they focused on promoting culturally
responsive academic programming and supporting culturally proficient staff through
professional development. As the interviews shifted to how issues of culturally relevant
curriculum and instructional delivery were facilitated, if at all, during the crisis, it became
clear that the leaders felt the way to reach students during a crisis with the expectation of
academic progression was to include culturally relevant pedagogy. For example, Sandra
shared that because of the crisis, she began seeing how her primarily white faculty's deficit
mindsets impeded her students' instructional success during remote learning. She explained:

In terms of instruction, some of the things that I noticed that also needed to be
addressed included the lack of urgency that was taking place in classrooms

around what was appropriate instruction for the children that they had in front of them. [I] think that became its challenge in and of itself, and that is how equity began to rear its head in my building. So, thinking about instruction alone, going into the crisis, we thought we would do the same type of instruction that we did pre-COVID, but we needed to make adjustments.

Like Sandra, Sasha determined that the instruction in her building, despite lacking cultural relevance in her district, needed an infusion of culturally relevant practices for the academic betterment of her students:

We had to devise ways to reach them [the students] and be creative in facilitating instruction. I told my teachers they have to be creative, which created a shift in the cultural connections we have within our building.

Together, these comments regarding importing culturally relevant practices highlight how these principals went beyond the compliance of fulfilling educational mandates such as assessments and bolstering academic achievement with what was given. Rather they sought to make the curriculum relevant to their students. This shift in their leadership gave students more opportunities to engage in learning despite the crisis-laden state of the world around them.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black women principals exhibited CRSL practices during a crisis. When looking at how Black women exhibit CRSL practices, the most prominent CRSL behavior observed was critical self-reflection. Our participants were keenly aware of not only their actions but also reflective on how they showed up as Black women. As a result, they expressed nuanced strategy on how, when responding to crises, they had to find ways to mitigate the political climate (e.g., masking policies) while giving teachers and staff the support they needed and ensuring students had an equitable schooling experience.

While previous crisis leadership has acknowledged that leaders adopt multiple roles in response to crisis (Byrne & Yoon, 2019; Mutch, 2015; Virella & Woulfin, 2021), much of this literature has focused on the actions leaders take in response to crisis. However, some of this literature has not necessarily considered the important role that racial identity has on how leaders respond in these situations. Our findings suggested that when leaders responded to

crises their intersectional identity as Black women was prominent in their leadership decisions. When responding to crises, many in this study had a heightened sense of empathy for their students as they could relate to their experiences. Moreover, while participants acknowledged their role as Black women in supporting their school community, they also explained how being self-reflective allowed them to learn more about themselves as Black women while leading through crisis.

As a result of being critically self-reflective, participants in this study used those reflective opportunities to examine how they were engaging their community. For many principals in this study, responding to the onset of COVID-19 required them to creatively engage the community to support their students even when they experienced push back from district representatives. In essence, as described by Khalifa (2018) to be a culturally responsive leader, our participants recognized that using CRSL behaviors would be the only way to disrupt systemic inequities in their districts. Furthermore, while not an aspect of CRSL, we found that as Black women, our participants saw themselves enacting what Horsford (2012) described as bridge leadership which is "how the intersection of race and gender as experienced by the Black women leader has resulted in her serving as a bridge for others, and between others in oppressive and discriminatory contexts over time" (p. 17).

Although we explored the types of CRSL practices enacted by the participants in our study, it is important to note that they believed these practices were necessary, especially during a crisis. Participants shared similar sentiments to the Virella & Woulfin (2021) study, who found that during times of crisis, school leaders often had to confront the deficit perspectives that white teachers held about their Black and Latinx students, which informed how they were delivering instruction. Consequently, in this study, leaders saw that because there were not culturally responsive instructional practices and curriculum being promoted district-wide they had to respond themselves–at the risk of reprimand from district leaders.

Although we commend the participants for these actions, this begs us to ask more questions about the weight Black women leaders carry when leading through crisis. For example, what is the physical, psychological, and spiritual toll of being a culturally responsive school leader? How do CRSLs and the communities they serve hold school districts accountable for inequitable responses to crises? As we engage in conversations around CRSL we must also recognize that without addressing school systems, Black women (and other minoritized) leaders carry the burden and backlash around ensuring equity in their buildings.

Our findings leave several implications for the development of school leaders. First, there is a need to increase Black women principals in schools to not only increase diversity in the pool of leaders but also promote educational equity amongst marginalized students (Davis et al., 2017). During times of crisis, we have found this group of Black women principals thought in dynamic and fluid ways, echoing Khalifa's (2018) argument about CRSL. To achieve this aim school districts should create pipeline programs for their current teachers that allows Black women educators in a district to be groomed and mentored for school leadership positions.

Second, we argue that leadership programs and school districts cannot afford to take the stance that once CRSL practices are "taught/shared" via administrative preparation coursework or school district professional development that leaders will have these behaviors solidified as a component of their leadership practice. Rather, university administration programs and school districts must make CRSL a foundational aspect of their work more broadly, including the direct connection of CRSL and crisis leadership. Finally, CRSL seeks to not only influence leaders' actions, but change inequitable policies and practices in education broadly, therefore future research must continuously investigate the actions of Black women leaders and how these actions make schools more just during a crisis event through a quantitative lens.

Third, schools must use their district-wide hiring data to make informed decisions about their recruitment and retention efforts of Black women principals. For example, districts should see what types of schools they send Black women to lead, how long they stay in the position, and their experiences as leaders. From this information districts can begin to understand the working condition related factors that impact whether or not Black women choose to lead. Furthermore, using the data, districts can also develop affinity-groups for school leaders. Given there has been an increased attention to and recognition of how affinity groups support the retention of Black educators (Bristol et al., 2020) these types of programs can be extended to Black women leaders to create spaces for them to share best practices and unpack their experiences leading schools as Black women.

Conclusion

Our findings explored Black woman principals at the helm of navigating through crises in the role of a leadership position in education. Despite having to lead schools during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, mass migration from Puerto Rico post-hurricane Maria, and acts of racist harm, they continuously sought to exhibit and implement CRSL practices in school and community even amid turmoil. These findings showed that these principals did not focus on achievement outcomes as a starting point but focused on culturally responsive programming and supporting staff in professional development throughout times of crisis. We believe that CRSL practices must become an integral part of leadership preparation and a district accountability metric in order for all schools to have leaders who respond with an equitable lens during a crisis.

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