

## Culturally Relevant Leadership: Bridging the Equity Gap

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### Abstract

*The study aims to examine in depth the culturally relevant leadership behavior tendencies of school leaders to prevent inequalities in schools with high refugee student population in Türkiye. We utilized phenomenology in this qualitative research study. We gathered the data via face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 14 school leaders and used both descriptive and content analysis in the process of analyzing the data. The components of "personal awareness", "equity pedagogy", "policy mediation" and "professionalism" constituted the themes of the research. The views of school leaders revealed that the methods and strategies in eliminating the prejudice, exclusion, and xenophobia against refugee students are insufficient, and these problems lead the inequalities for refugee students in school context. Based on the findings of the study, we suggest that multicultural educational management approaches need to be promoted, and so the training programs and good practice examples from different contexts experienced in such practices should be followed.*

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**Introduction**

Today, the cultural and social context of schools is evolving faster than ever before (Bauman, 2020) and this crisis in education necessitates a more realistic understanding than the salad bowl and melting pot metaphors (Fraise & Brooks, 2015). What needs to be emphasized is that when we go by the situation through the lens of Kant's cosmopolitan citizenship (Benhabib, 2018), is it possible for today's schools to integrate students who have diverse cultural backgrounds while maintaining their separate identities? Undoubtedly, the encounter of students from diverse cultures, languages, ethnicities, and religious belief brings both richness and complexity (Banks, 2017) to our classrooms. Research showed that the refugee flows' complexity could be increased through deeper and more empathetic methods in terms of policy and school level practice and leadership (Arar, 2020; Brown et al., 2019).

In this context, culturally relevant leadership (CRL) improves school culture by recognizing the cultural and ethnic identity of each student and by challenging hegemonic social structures (Arar, 2020; Beachum, 2011; Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRL theory seeks to unearth and elucidate the ways in which the educators could address the exclusive learning needs of students in minority groups (Khalifa et al., 2016). Especially, when migration to Western countries is taken into consideration, the reflection of this mobility on schools and education poses several challenges. For



instance, on average in 2018, %13 of 15-year-old students were classified as having a 'migrant background' in OECD countries, and in most countries, the most of these students tended to be socio-economically disadvantaged (OECD, 2018). This means that the only chance of these students for effective school opportunities is the school environment offered by the host countries. In this context, the potential role that schools in Turkey, which have provided housing to 3.5 million Syrians, can play in preventing educational inequalities is quite significant on a societal level (UNHCR, 2023).

The research on CRL has tended to focus on some areas like school culture and environment (Fraisie & Brooks, 2015), instructional and transformational leadership (Arar et al., 2019; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018), critical self-reflection (Ezzani & Brooks, 2018), synthesis of the literature (Khalifa et al., 2016), and conceptualize a framework for CRL (Horsford et al., 2011; Lopez, 2016). However, given the nature of CRL as a challenge to the status quo and dominant power systems, it is obvious that the findings on the activist side of CRL are not very common in the literature. Therefore, the role of school leaders as CRL in policy implementation and their approach to taking initiatives during the integration of diversities into host country education need to be examined in depth. Based on the literature and his previous works, Arar (2020) has combined a synthesized model of CRL which consists of four main components as personal awareness, inclusive pedagogy, policy mediation and leader professionalism. By focusing on this model, we aim to explore the school leaders' role in building bridges between multiple cultures and making the educational environment more effective to increase equal opportunities for the displaced children. Considering the tendencies of immigration, as Bogotch (2002) states the tension that migration creates for schools



must be addressed in a human rights and social justice context. Therefore, such a research is expected to be seminal for educators and educational policy makers. The purpose of the study is to reveal the culturally relevant leadership behavior tendencies of school leaders in order to prevent inequalities in school settings with high refugee student population.

### **The educational context for Syrian students in Türkiye**

The ongoing mass influx of refugees from Syria to Turkey for nearly a decade (Atalay et al., 2022) has created challenges in establishing a homogenous classroom environment. Since Turkey, by placing a geographical reservation on the Geneva Convention, has prevented granting 'refugee' status to non-European asylum seekers, the applicable form of international protection provided to the majority of Syrian refugees in Turkey is commonly referred to as 'temporary protection' (Erdoğan, 2019). Despite terminology differences, we refer to the focal group in our study as "refugees" to avoid confusion. With approximately 3.5 million registered Syrian refugees, Turkey remains the top host country globally, highlighting its significant role in the global refugee crisis (UNHRC, 2023). The influx of migration from Syria since 2011 has prompted adjustments and planning within the Turkish Education System. The number of Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye has risen from 14,237 in 2012 to 3,366,185 as of June 1, 2023 (Presidency of Migration Management, 2023). Syrians constitute the largest group of school-age children (5-17) among the foreign population in Türkiye, with 1,124,000 children, of which 65 percent attend school and 35 percent do not receive an education according to the Ministry of National Education's report from January 2022 (MoNE, 2022).



The initial stages of the Syrian refugee influx into Türkiye, educational authorities did not place a high priority on Syrian children learning Turkish (Tezel McCarthy, 2018). Additionally, the educational programs mostly targeted the Syrians' camp neighborhoods rather than the Syrians of school age living outside of these camps (Aras & Yasun, 2016). During the initial years, several reasons can be identified for Syrian students being unable to attend school during the compulsory education period. These reasons include the perception of their stay in Türkiye as 'temporary', economic concerns leading to boys being compelled to work, capacity limitations of schools, cultural differences resulting in girls not being sent to school, and concerns surrounding assimilation (Aras & Yasun, 2016; Erdoğan, 2019). In 2014, the Turkish Government enacted laws and regulations to support education for refugee students, and in 2016, they secured financial assistance from the European Union for this purpose (OECD, 2020). Additionally, the Migration and Emergency Education Department was established within the MoNE to facilitate the implementation of this roadmap (Erdoğan, 2019).

Promoting social integration and normalcy among refugee children requires their active engagement with non-migrant peers (Canaz & Küçüker, 2019), and schools play a crucial role in facilitating these interactions by providing opportunities for the host society to familiarize themselves with foreign cultures. Since 2014, the Turkish government has implemented more inclusive measures to integrate Syrian students into the education system, recognizing the importance of such interactions. However, educational leaders often lack the necessary preparation to effectively engage with culturally diverse individuals and establish inclusive learning environments (Lopez, 2008) that foster respect, tolerance, and intercultural understanding,



which is particularly important in a rapidly changing society characterized by significant demographic and linguistic diversity. Above all, to foster the redirection of education policies and practices towards the education and well-being of refugee students, it is imperative that both national and global contexts embrace more equitable and culturally responsive approaches (Akin-Sabuncu & Kasapoğlu, 2023).

### **Why cultural relevance matters ?**

The global movement of refugees due to various reasons has had a significant impact on migration patterns, leading to a diverse population in terms of ethnicity, race, social class, language, religion, and other identities (Lopez, 2016). Western societies have differing views on managing migration and diversity, with some expressing exclusionary attitudes towards refugees. This is evident in political rhetoric and media portrayal, contributing to debates on refugee policy centered around nationalism, racism, and xenophobia (Arar 2020; McIntyre & Hall, 2018; Welphy, 2022). The rise of right-wing populist parties and exclusionary discourse towards refugees (Bauman, 2020; Benhabib, 2018) emphasize the importance of examining the role of public institutions, particularly education, in promoting democratic participation and capabilities (Welphy, 2022).

Schools and education play a crucial role in the discussions surrounding migration and inclusive policies. However, there is a tendency to avoid explicit use of the term 'cultural diversity' within schools, instead indirectly referring to it as 'increasing challenges' in the teaching field (Herzog-Punzerberger et al., 2020). This calls for further examination and clarification of how schools respond to cultural diversity, particularly in classroom settings. It is important to develop innovative approaches to education that effectively address



diversity, allowing students from different backgrounds to have a positive learning experience (Lopez, 2016). While schools aim to integrate refugee students into society, they also contribute to perpetuating inequalities through assimilation and reproduction (Welpy, 2022). Educational leaders should take on greater responsibility in combating these inequalities. By fostering awareness and actively challenging discriminatory practices, schools can create an environment that promotes equal opportunities, human rights, and the foundational principles of equality (Brown et al., 2019).

### **Culturally Relevant Leadership at Schools**

Culturally Relevant Leadership (CRL) is grounded in social justice leadership as both stance and praxis (Arar, 2020) because it aims to achieve a holistic model that will address students' educational, cultural, and socio-economic differences (Ezzani & Brooks, 2019; Horsfold et al., 2011; Khalifa et al., 2016). CRL, which is a principal element of social justice efforts in education, takes its roots from Ladson-Billings' (1992) culturally responsive pedagogy and Gay's (1994) culturally responsive teaching (Arar & Oplatka, 2022; Khalifa et al., 2016).

In a school with a pedagogy that values cultural differences and empowers each student socially, intellectually, politically, and emotionally (Ladson-Billings, 1992), educational leaders seek to understand the historical context and experiences of students and support diverse learning styles through a flexible pedagogy (Ezzani & Brooks, 2019). In this respect, it is recognized as "an attempt to create a schooling experience that enables to students to pursue academic excellence without abandoning their cultural integrity" (Arar & Oplatka, 2022, p. 65). In other words, it supports building new dynamics instead of assimilation that suppresses students' identities



(Lopez, 2016). Another concept which CRL derives is Gay's culturally responsive teaching (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Gay (2015) argues against political or cultural domination by any ethnic group and advocates for cultural, ethnic, social, and linguistic pluralism. Culturally relevant teaching aims to make classroom content and context relevant to students' cultural experiences (Gay, 2018), increasing academic achievement by embracing differences such as culture, language, race, and ethnicity among students. For this reason, being culturally relevant can be characterized as the ability to think and learn in a manner that respects cultural differences in meaning-making, values, and belief systems, while also demonstrating sensitivity, awareness, and acknowledgement of these variations (Nortvedt et al., 2020).

In the literature, there are a couple of models for CRL that addresses and focuses on different tendencies of leadership (Beachum, 2011; Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Horsfold et al., 2011; Khalifa et al., 2016; Lopez, 2016; Ryan, 2015). For instance, CRL model proposed by Horsfold et al. (2011) focuses four constituents: a pedagogic approach, a personal journey, a political context and professional commitment (Arar, 2020). Similarly, Khalifa et al. (2016) discusses three components of CRL, which include self-reflection on leadership behavior, supporting teachers in building an inclusive school environment, and addressing the diverse needs of learners. On the other hand, Lopez (2016) who inspired by Freire, argues for CRL on the notion of conscientization which depends on the building the school capacity on issues collaboration, reflection, and agency. To Lopez (2016), school leaders should make existing inequitable practices questionable.

Depending on his previous studies with colleagues (Arar et al. 2019, 2020), the CRL model proposed by Arar consists of four main





components as “personal awareness, inclusive pedagogy, policy mediation, and leader professionalism” (Arar 2020, p.173). Arar (2020) points out that previous models have not emphasized the importance of developing emotional awareness in leaders. As emotions and cultural understanding are an interrelated pattern (Arar & Oplatka, 2022), it is critical that the school leader has the emotional awareness and self-reflection skills to recognize the vulnerabilities of both refugee and host country students (Arar, 2020). The second component of Arar’s (2020) synthesized CRL model emphasizes inclusive education practices to ensure social cohesion and integration of students and society. As Kincheloe (2018) states, a pedagogical tendency that is removed from the social, cultural, and economic, political context will deepen the existing social stratification in society. Therefore, “it is not enough to build a program around supposedly depoliticized taco days, falafels, and Martin Luther King’s birthday” (Kincheloe, 2018, p. 51). Education practices that value the differences and do not ignore ‘the other’ should be formed. In Arar’s (2020) model, the other component leader professionalism refers to the strengthening at school level via collaboration with internal and external stakeholders. There is an emphasis on policy mediation and interpretation in this component, which drives the school leader to take risks and action when necessary. The last component, policy mediation, as Khalifa (2018) states requires education leaders to be active in the absence of government policies in humanitarian crisis situations. So much so that sometimes, even when educational policies are in place, it can be a challenge for school leaders to interpret these policies in terms of cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and economic differences in their school context.



Creating culturally just learning environments for learners is increasingly challenging and complex due to the mobility created by migration. In today's diverse educational landscape, marked by the influx of individuals from various backgrounds such as asylum-seekers, refugees, migrants, and international students, culturally responsive school leaders play a vital role as adept bridge builders, fostering intercultural understanding and collaboration (Brown et al., 2019). To refuse to name the forces that produce the suffering, exploitation and exclusion of the individual (Kincheloe, 2018) because of his or her cultural, ethnic and linguistic background is to side with the power mechanisms that produce these problems. Embracing all these different backgrounds is becoming increasingly important in our schools (Lopez, 2016), which are among the leading social institutions. For all these reasons, this research focuses on examining educational leaders in schools with large refugee populations through Arar's (2020) CRL conceptual framework, which emphasizes the leader's emotional awareness and self-reflection skills.

## **Method**

### **Design of the study**

In this study, we adopted a qualitative research design incorporating phenomenology as a research design to examine the CRL tendencies of school principals. We used this design because the main interest of the researcher in phenomenology is to focus on a specific phenomenon, to reach in-depth data through interviews with the participants (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008) and to reveal what is common in the perceptions of the participants (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenological studies “describe the essence of the experience” and this essence involves individuals making sense of their experience



of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 10). In this context, phenomenology allows the researcher to focus on the life world of the subjects and generate rich data (Flick, 2007; Maxwell, 2012).

### **Participants**

While deciding on the participants of the study, we employed criterion sampling, which is one of the types of purposeful sampling that provides the researcher with a purposeful understanding of the basic phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2007). The point of criterion sampling is to enable all cases with certain predetermined criteria contribute to an in-depth qualitative analysis (Patton, 2002). In this study, which is based on voluntary participation, we applied the following criteria to select our participants: Firstly, we prioritized schools with a comparatively higher refugee population in relation to other schools within their respective regions. Secondly, within this subset of schools, we established contact with local authorities to identify principals who have actively undertaken measures to mitigate educational disparities for refugee students and have implemented relevant practices and projects. Because as Devers and Frankel (2000) argue that it is critical to utilize existing social networks in qualitative research to gain baseline information and facilitate access to participants.

Correspondingly, it is recognized that social networks enable researchers to gain insights into the experiences and qualities of potential participants, thereby enhancing their ability to select individuals appropriate to the research context. In this context, we conducted interviews with the provincial director of migration administration, district director of national education, and district research and development unit project officer, from whom we obtained information regarding potential participating principals. Our

objective was to identify schools that emphasize the enhancement of language, culture, and academic skills, which are crucial criteria for the successful integration of refugee students into the educational and societal framework. Ultimately, we successfully reached to 14 school principals whom we deem to be instrumental in facilitating the education of refugee students within their respective regions.

The table of the participants in this study is as follows:

**Table 1.**  
*Demographics of Participants*

Pseudonym	Age	School type	Seniority in school management (year)	Seniority as a manager in school
Vladimir Nabokov	43	Primary	1-5	2 years
Kazuo Ishiguro	50	Secondary	11-20	8 years
Khaled Hosseini	32	Primary	6-10	3 years
Edward W. Said	32	*Imam Hatip Secondary	1-5	2 years
Zygmunt Bauman	41	Primary	11-20	9 years
Junot Diaz	33	Primary	6-10	2 years
Joseph Roth	41	Imam Hatip Secondary	6-10	8 years
Henry Roth	45	Secondary	11-20	8 years
Isaac Asimov	52	Imam High School	6-10	5 years
Art Spiegelman	52	Primary	11-20	4 years
Halil Cibran	57	Primary/Secondary	6-10	8 years
Thomas Mann	35	Secondary	6-10	4 months



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Sigmund Freud	55	Secondary	21+	7 years
Karl Popper	37	**VTA High School	6-10	9 years

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\* The Imam Hatip Schools in Türkiye are education institutions which are designed to increase religious sensitivity of students and to train leaders of prayer (imams) and hatips (deliver khutba at every Friday sermon).

\*\*VTA High School is an abbreviation for Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School.

As shown above, we conducted interviews with a total of 14 school principals working in different school types. 5 of the participants work as school principals in primary schools, 4 in secondary schools, 2 in imam hatip secondary schools, 1 in imam hatip high schools, and 1 in vocational and technical Anatolian high schools. 1 of the participants is the principal of both primary and secondary schools in the same school district. All participants are male, and they have a range of school management experience, from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 25 years. We interviewed individually with all school principals. We conducted face-to-face individual interviews with school principals by informing them about the scope of the research via e-mail or phone. Also, we used pseudonyms to protect the identities of participants and make them to answer the questions sincerely. We used the names of authors who migrated at some point in their lives as pseudonyms, but we preferred to use their forenames as pseudonyms so as not to be mistaken for referring to the authors.

### Data Collection Procedures

In this study, the interview technique was preferred as it is one of the leading techniques for accessing rich experiences about an event or phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In a phenomenological research, data is collected through in-depth interviews. The researcher tries to identify the perceptions and reactions of each individual, in other words, to make sense of the individual's experience. Once the



interview process is completed, the researcher tries to identify the facts that are particularly relevant in each participant's statement or that are meaningful to the participant (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2018).

Data were collected via face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Before the interviews, school principals were contacted by phone or e-mail. As Creswell (2014) states, in order to build trust and prevent interruption in access, the participants were informed about the scope of the research. Then, the interview protocol, which includes the purpose of the research and the scope of the interviews, was sent them via e-mail and appointments were made to meet at the most convenient time for them. Before the interviews, the participants were asked to sign the consent form. Participants were informed that participation in the study was voluntary, so they had a chance to give up the study whenever they wanted. Each interview took approximately 30-40 minutes and most of the interviews were conducted in the principals' rooms. During the interviews, we took field notes and audio recordings with the consent of the participants. After the interviews were completed, the voice recordings were transcribed the same evening and the voice recordings were deleted. Finally, the transcripts were sent to the participants via e-mail and participant confirmation was obtained.

### **Interpretation of Data**

We used descriptive analysis method while creating themes in the analysis of research data. Considering the dimensions of the CRL model, which served as the basis for the research, we believed it was important to adhere to the theory. On the other hand, when deriving codes from participants' statements and conceptualizing categories, we utilized the procedures of content analysis, which we believed provided a more analytical and critical framework. Descriptive



analysis, which is one of the approaches used to analyze the basic context of data, is an extremely useful method of analysis, especially for qualitative studies. The descriptive coding method facilitated us to categorize the data content to provide an organizational understanding of the data (Saldana, 2016). Descriptive analysis became a source for the data being analyzed in that it provides descriptions that are as representative as possible of what is going on in a specific context (Wolcott, 1994; as cited in Hatch, 2002). According to descriptive analysis, in the first cycle of coding of the data, we utilized the In Vivo coding technique, as suggested by Saldana (2016). This allowed us to separate the participants' statements into meaningful units while preserving their expressions. In the second cycle, we employed the Pattern Coding technique to establish categories. Pattern coding allowed us to pull together a lot of different codes into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis. Thus, we could classify categories under the themes created via theoretical CRL model.

### **Results**

In the analysis of the findings, Arar's (2020) synthesis of the CRL model built on four components was used and these components are "personal awareness", "equity pedagogy", "policy mediation" and "professionalism". These components constituted the main themes of the research in the process of interpreting the data. Under the theme of personal awareness, there are three categories: "emotional/cultural awareness", "values of care and equity", and "self-reflection". Under the theme of equity pedagogy, the categories of "inclusive practices", "student and community engagement" and "sustaining CR teachers and curricula" were developed. Under the theme of policy mediation, two different categories were developed: "playing according to the rules" and "negotiations". The theme of professionalism includes the

categories of “agency”, “collaboration”, “devotion”, and “empowerment”.

### **Theme One: Personal Awareness**

In the CRL corpus, Arar's conceptualization of personal awareness corresponds to school leaders' emotional awareness of the needs of both refugee and host community students and the leader's ability to critically self-reflect on their work in such contexts. In Arar's CRL model (2020), emotional awareness is a new concept added to the previous models, which is related to the leader's ability to take responsibility for traumatized and vulnerable students and the ability to empathize emotionally. In this context, school principals' views on emotional and cultural awareness, values of care and equity, and self-reflection skills were examined under this theme. For example, Joseph, who thinks that cultural differences are richness for society, but some precautions should be taken by the school leaders in this regard, said the following words:

*Even in different regions of the same nation, there can be cultural differences. Of course, cultural differences are riches, but when we talk about the fusion and orientation of these cultures, when we think about the school environment, it is vitally important to ensure orientation... Because this is not a three-day visit... Now, what we call ‘cultural differences are richness’ has turned into living in the same house, and in the same school. Therefore, here we must take precautions about how cultural differences are lived...*

Joseph's remarks underscored the imperative of surmounting the inherent ambiguity prevailing in the initial stages of educational policies concerning Syrian refugee students in Türkiye. Emphasizing that it is now about living together, as opposed to a mere three-day



stint, serves as a stark reminder of the significance attributed to effectively addressing the educational requirements specific to culturally diverse refugee students (Khalifa et al., 2016). The proclivity of culturally responsive leaders to engage in introspection and cultivate emotional resonance and empathy towards children who have experienced trauma (Arar, 2020) is further exemplified through the subsequent discourse of Vladimir and Kazuo. Vladimir, who has more than 200 Syrian students in his school, emphasized the difficulty of being a refugee: *I think migration is done out of necessity. It is very difficult. When it doesn't happen to you, you don't understand, but you must put yourself in their shoes.* Similarly, working as a school principal for 20 years, Kazuo, referring to the phenomenon of migration as caused by a state of obligation, stated that especially those who migrated from Syria came to his country due to traumatic reasons.

*I empathize. I mean, for example, under these conditions, in which case would I leave my country and go to another country with my wife and children? Maybe for a better job, which is also far from me, but I am talking in terms of those who go. Better economic conditions, better welfare, education, etc. Maybe for these benefits, but other than that, I don't think anyone would leave their country for no reason or simple reasons. There is a drama. Moreover, children are perhaps the most innocent victims of this dirty war, we cannot ignore this.*

On the other hand, some school principals stated that the cultural differences that students bring from their families and past environmental experiences lead to conflicts at school. To give an example, Edward, a principal in an Imam Hatip Secondary school, explained his awareness of this situation with the following words.

*For example, the lifestyle and culture of the locals in this region are very different... children or parents might misunderstand each other.*



*In other words, when the child exhibits friendly behavior in his own way, the other one thinks that this is something very wrong with the upbringing of his/her family. His/her parents think the same way, and this leads to arguments between friends all the time.*

Another category examined under the theme of self-awareness is the critical self-reflection skills of school leaders to reconsider their practices and actions. Vladimir, regarding the inadequacy of refugee students in some subjects due to the language barriers, expresses his awareness of his inertia with these words: *“We do the same thing with them as we do with our other students. We can’t do much, they are in their own capacity, but they start 1-0 behind. So, it is not easy for them”*.

All these quotes and examples prove that although school leaders were aware of the emotional and cultural challenges that migration poses to students, they applied different approaches to addressing the barriers created by these challenges.

### **Theme Two: Equity Pedagogy**

Under the theme of equity pedagogy, the practices of the participants towards strengthening school culture, reducing prejudice, and inclusive education activities for both host country students and refugee students were examined. In this context, the practices of school principals are discussed in three categories as *“inclusive practices”*, *“student and community engagement”* and *“sustaining CR teachers and curricula”*. Touching on practices and activities that involve every student in his school, Isaac explained his views on egalitarian pedagogy with the following words:

*We are not talking about assimilation; we are talking about integration. We are strictly against the assimilation programs for Turkish children in Germany. We are against assimilation in Greece.*

*As minorities there, we should be against the assimilation of people from different geographies in Türkiye in the same way. We need to move towards integration, and we need to find the answer to the question of how they can live together with the Turkish community... Anyway, all the courses in our school are open to everyone. Every student can attend our support and training courses.*

Isaac's remarks emphasize the importance of promoting new dynamics within the school environment, as opposed to assimilating the identity of culturally diverse individuals, as highlighted by Lopez (2016). Similarly, Art commented on the inclusive practices in his school as follows: *"Absolutely, we don't discriminate between people from here or there, they are all our students. They are all equal in our eyes. Whatever is done to one is done to the other"*. On the other hand, commenting on the way he handles disciplinary problems between the host country students and refugee students, Joseph stated that equitable treatment at school is also extremely important in terms of the student's integration into society.

*We apply the same rehabilitation, the same thing to him as we do to the other one. We do it all, from the parents to the meetings and visits... we listen to both. Whoever is at fault, the necessary discipline and action are taken. There is no discrimination. This is a fair thing. This attitude binds the child to me, to the institution I represent here, and therefore to the state. In other words, everything I personally do here actually creates a perception against the administration of the country he is subject to and lives in.*

Joseph's statements present the fact that in the school setting, which represents the society on a micro-political level (Welphy, 2022), equality and just approaches serve as a catalyst for the integration of refugee students into society. Similarly, in the second category, Khaled

emphasized the urgent need to overcome language barriers of refugee students for their adaptation to school and society in terms of student and community engagement. Khaled's remarks underscore the necessity of overcoming language barriers (Herzog-Punzerberger et al. (2020) as a prerequisite for fostering inclusive knowledge construction.

*Within the scope of the PICTES project, there is an integration class for foreign students, and we have a Turkish teacher here. When those children start primary school, we enroll them in our teacher's class from the first grade onwards, even if they do not speak Turkish at all. In this way, if the child has an adaptation problem, he/she first overcomes the adaptation problem in that adaptation class and gets used to the culture of the school. There, he improves his Turkish and then continues in his own class in the appropriate branch and completes his academic studies.*

The third pillar of equity pedagogy is to sustain culturally relevant teachers and curricula. Junot, who is the principal of a primary school, mentioned that young Syrian children have more language problems and as a natural consequence of this situation, some classroom teachers sometimes do not want refugee students due to concerns about academic success. Therefore, he explained his strategies to prevent them from being marginalized by their peers and teachers.

*I believe that discrimination against those who are different is a natural human tendency, and this is a problem that exists not only in our region but all over the world. As a preventive measure, we are working to address this issue before it happens, rather than trying to fix it later... Unfortunately, sometimes teachers are also prejudiced against refugee students. We hold trilateral meetings, troika, with the teachers who are resistant to embrace, together with the teachers they*



*are closest to. In the tripartite meeting, we try to convince the teacher of the process. In other words, not to show resistance...*

The significance of fostering connections between refugee students and host country students in facilitating their integration into the school and broader society (Canaz & Küçüker, 2019) is clearly manifested in Junot's endeavors. Junot strives to mitigate the marginalization and neglect experienced by refugee students as a result of language and associated academic barriers, employing persuasive techniques to convince resistant teachers of the importance of this approach.

To summarize in general, the theme of equity pedagogy can be regarded as knowledge construction for the social cohesion and integration of refugee students in school and thus in society. As Arar (2020) suggests, CR school leaders should encourage and support teachers when necessary to create such a climate in the school environment. As it is clear from the participants' views, there are some prejudices by teachers and peers in schools due to the language and cultural differences of refugee students.

### **Theme Three: Policy Mediation**

The third component, policy mediation, can be defined as the educational leader acting with a sense of moral duty and agency to ensure that individuals who do not benefit from education policies adequately are not further disadvantaged. The theme of policy mediation includes two different components: "playing according to the rules" and "negotiations". In this context, participants' understandings of their roles in mediating educational policies for refugee students were categorized into two different categories. Under

the first category, playing according to the rules, Henry expressed his views on Turkish educational policies for refugee students as follows:

*The education policy used to be that they should be in one class. (He refers to a monoculture homogeneous class). Until a certain period, they always had their own Syrian classrooms, but I find it more correct to have them as they are now (multicultural classroom). In other words, within the scope of inclusive education, all children should be in the same classroom, all children should benefit from the same conditions...*

Through his statement, Henry articulates his viewpoint regarding the imperative for refugee students to engage and interact with host country students as a means of effectively integrating into the culture of the host country. Moreover, he highlights that classrooms structured solely around single identities serve as a hindrance to this integration process. Some school principals emphasized that they take risks when implementing educational policies for language acquisition of refugee students in their schools. For instance, 52 years old and a principal for almost 20 years, Art expressed that he took risks in some decisions with the following words:

*To be honest, I used to take the initiative in such decisions. For example, in the Turkish course offered as part of PIKTES, if there were few students in the 3rd grade, there were times when I took the students in the 2nd and 4th grades to this integration class. Did it help these children? Yes, I think it did, especially for Turkish lessons. That's why I wish they (the policymakers) would leave some decisions to us... because I know best what is most needed in my school.*

Similarly, Edward, the principal of a secondary school where 73 students in a school with 370 students are Syrian, stated that at times they forced Syrian students to attend the courses for Turkish language skills, even though it was noncompulsory.

*In our country, decisions are often made by those who are not in the field but rather by those who are appointed. These decisions are then passed on to us to implement, but we face difficulties from time to time. For instance, a general manager may assume that all Syrian students in school are attending the PICTES courses and that they are productive. However, this is not the case, as most children do not participate because it is not mandatory.*

Some school principals, on the other hand, stated that they did not negotiate the implementation of policies because there was nothing in the bureaucracy that required the administrator's interpretation. One of the best examples of this bureaucratic behavior can be seen in the words of Thomas.

*Policies are established by the government and bureaucrats are responsible for executing them. There is no government intervention in the implementation process, and we have not faced any pressure to carry out specific tasks. As long as we work diligently and strive to improve student outcomes, there is no room for external pressure. We are not allowed to disregard orders given by the state, but we have the freedom to innovate and improve upon them...*

On the issue of negotiation, Joseph stated that within a formalized system, principals should take the initiative and provide additional measures for the interest of the students.

*As a central education policy of the state, integration classes were created, and teachers were assigned there. This system was not*



*working somewhere, there was a blockage. We charged a Turkish teacher with this teacher. We supported our own teacher. At some point, two hours were not enough, we created two more hours, and increased it to 4 hours...These all were unofficial. There is already a system that is officially implemented, apart from that; you do it on your own initiative. This process was overcome with such additional measures.*

#### **Theme Four: Professionalism**

Under the theme of professionalism, the categories of “agency”, “collaboration”, “devotion”, and “empowerment” were discussed. It was observed that school principals applied different strategies in reflecting beliefs about racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in teaching behaviors and activities. For instance, Kazuo described the following as his strategy to reduce prejudice against different cultures “We organized an event for the mutual introduction of local dishes, where there were conversations in Turkish and Arabic. Parents also got to know each other”. Similarly, Vladimir stated that he organized parent meetings to reduce the prejudices of Turkish parents against Syrian students in his school with these words “We do paintings; we do cultural activities. We had a kermess, for example. They introduced their food to each other”. In the efforts of school administrators to reduce prejudice towards refugee students, one important characteristic of culturally relevant leaders, as emphasized by Horsfold et al. (2011), can be interpreted as their attempt to facilitate the establishment of regional and global connections among students within their own communities.

School principals also mentioned that they collaborated with internal and external stakeholders to develop a cultural understanding in the school. School principals stated that they cooperate with the teachers and counselors of their school, parents, the provincial





directorate of national education, the governorship, aid organizations, and some ministries to develop a better educational environment. For instance, Khaled expressed his cooperation with the stakeholders as follows:

*We acted together with the Regional Directorate of Forestry and did a sapling planting activity with these students. For example, we met with Fenerbahçe sports club and took these students on a tour of the stadium there, the Ülker stadium and its museum... We have stakeholders. For example, one of our stakeholders is the Red Crescent. The Red Crescent tells us to identify students in need, then we send them the lists and they provide them with the necessities.*

Another characteristic that culturally relevant leaders are prone to is devotion. For instance, Sigmund mentioned that each refugee student in the school was individually counseled with these words: “I have a tolerant personality. I can empathize with them. I try to explain with our counselors in an appropriate way that he should not feel incomplete because of his language problem, and this is an advantage for him”. Similarly, Joseph stated the following words:

*My understanding of management is based on the child’s coming to school happy. I always look at whether children come to school willingly, whether they come smiling, whether they are happy. I care about these things at school because people fail in a job where they are unhappy. I think the foremost argument of education is to love what you do...*

Another category under the theme of professionalization is empowerment, which is closely related to school principals’ breaking down prejudices to develop a cultural understanding in the school. The participants implemented different strategies to reduce prejudices



of students, teachers, and parents towards refugee students in the school. For instance, Zygmunt stated that he sometimes conducted classroom supervisions to learn about the achievement of refugee students with the following words.

*There are teachers who say 'I will let them sit in the back of the classroom, I don't want to deal with them'...But in a meeting, I say, "we entered your classroom, it's nice, the children in front are reading, but whose children are the children in the back? 8 of them couldn't write when I asked them. Did you ask us for help? You didn't. Did you want us meet with the parents? You didn't. Now we can easily say that you are to blame". I often do supervision and classroom observation.*

Zygmunt continues his words with his strategies for preventing segregation among the students with these words: *"I show them the cameras and say I always watch them. I see who is doing what, where they are going, who is fighting with whom"*. Culturally relevant school leaders fulfill their professional responsibilities in providing equitable and exceptional education to their students while also being culturally sensitive towards diverse population groups (Horsfold et al., 2011; Khalifa et al., 2016). However, it is observed that Zygmunt resorts to elements of coercion and control in his efforts to create equal educational opportunities.

Under the theme of professionalism, the views of principals on the methods and strategies they use to reduce possible prejudices against refugee students and to develop a cultural understanding in their schools. It is seen that school principals employ many ways such as organizing cultural events where parents introduce local foods, establishing cooperation with internal and external stakeholders, and classroom supervisions.



## Discussion

In this study, we attempt to grasp the experiences of school leaders in reducing and preventing inequality of opportunity in the education of displaced refugee students. The influx of Syrian refugee students in Turkish schools has led to significant disparities in language, culture, and academics (Atalay et al., 2022). School leaders play a crucial role in ensuring equal educational opportunities (Dinçer et al., 2013) and especially culturally relevant leadership is important in valuing all children equally, including those of refugee backgrounds, and adopting a whole-school approach to support them (Devine, 2013). The above analysis shows that the methods and strategies used by school principals in eliminating the common problems of discrimination, prejudice, exclusion, racism etc. against refugee students (Fraise and Brooks, 2015; McIntyre & Hall, 2018), the inexperience of school staff on multicultural education environments, and curriculum alignment (Brown, 2015; Demir & Özgül, 2019) in their schools, as well as the problems that lead to the academic failure of students, are insufficient in the current chaotic environment in schools.

The quotes emphasize the challenges about the ways that the principals in overcoming the educational barriers of refugee students due to financial constraints, language barriers and cultural differences. In our study, we observed that the words and experiences shared by the principals exhibited various manifestations of the four components encompassed within the CRL theory. For instance, all participants expressed a *personal awareness* of the challenges of being a refugee in a foreign country and recognized the importance of support in healing the trauma of children who had experienced war in their home countries. On the other hand, even school principals, who stated that cultural differences were richness for a society, mentioned that cultural



differences sometimes create conflict between students and families. The current literature proves that it is much more difficult for a school to thrive when it faces conflict and disagreement (Hakvoort, 2010; Lopez, 2008). Teaching, learning, and leading in culturally diverse educational contexts in schools can present some challenges (Horsfold, et al., 2011), but given the current number of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, it is clear that this cultural diversity will continue in the long term (Mamei et al., 2019), and therefore school leaders should take the lead with inclusive strategies (Lopez, 2016) to create environments in their schools that embrace cultural diversity.

Another important finding related to personal awareness is the self-reflection of some school principals about their inability to address the academic underachievement of refugee students. Khalifa et al. (2016) assert regarding the critical thinking about leadership practices as the most important action for culturally relevant leadership emphasizes the significance of leaders first confronting their own identities and aligning them with the identity of the learning community. Therefore, the perspectives of the participating principals suggest that culturally relevant leadership requires a high level of agency in their self-reflection skills. The other main component of CRL is *equity pedagogy* (Arar, 2020) and it supports student's academic achievement (Arar & Oplatka, 2022). Although the limited resources allocated to education may challenge policymakers in the redistribution of resources, increasing the schooling rate of refugee students is important both for normalizing the lives of children with war traumas and for these children to acquire skills that will contribute to the country's economy in the future (Mamei et al. 2019). Only by improving educational opportunities, the vulnerability of refugees to poverty and racism be reduced (Banks, 2017; McIntyre & Hall, 2018).



Similarly, the findings of Demir and Özgül (2019), the participants emphasized that the academic achievement of refugee students was low due to obstacles such as poor language proficiency, insufficient experience of teachers in multicultural classroom environments, cultural barriers, and lack of economic resources. Nortvedt et al. (2020) also emphasize the importance of teachers' self-awareness, highlighting that teachers may harbor certain stereotypical prejudices, such as perceiving refugee students as less capable. For these reasons, it is imperative for culturally relevant leaders to cultivate self-awareness and regularly interrogate their beliefs concerning students, pedagogy, and the sociocultural context of education.

In *policy mediation*, another component of CRL, the findings suggest that school principals mostly implement the decisions taken by policy makers. Although many decisions are made by higher political authorities, school principals implement these decisions in their schools by involving the environment, parents, teachers, and students (Brooks, 2015). Arar et al. (2019) argue that regardless of or despite the political context, educational leaders at school level face moral and ethical dilemmas in creating fair access to high-quality education. The views of school principals suggest that they are successful in implementing national education policies for refugee students because they acted in a bureaucratic manner. It is important to remember, however, that leading in marginalized societies is a tension between service and activism (Gutrie et al., 2013). CRL, being rooted in social justice leadership, is inherently activist (Arar, 2020). As McCray and Beachum (2014) state that we believe that principals' inability to act autonomously in their decisions leads them to prefer staying out of difficult and potentially risky decisions. This ultimately can hinder the creation of a fair educational environment.



As a final component, *professionalism* includes the school leader's agency, collaboration, devotion, and empowerment skills (Arar & Oplatka, 2022). Arastaman and Fidan (2022) list the challenges faced by school leaders in multicultural schools as policy, curriculum, administrative, operational, and cultural diversity challenges. Therefore, leadership professionalism is critical to handle these challenges, both in terms of community engagement through collaboration and empowerment to reduce prejudice, and in terms of inclusiveness through agency and devotion (Arar, 2020; Horsfold et al., 2011; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). Based on the findings, school principals exhibit a positive level of collaboration with both internal and external stakeholders to address the challenges they encounter. In multicultural schools with refugee students, it is crucial to establish professional collaboration (Devine, 2013) between teachers, students, and internal/external stakeholders at the school level to ensure equitable practices within the school environment (Brown et al., 2019). Another important finding under professionalism theme is the style of school principals in strengthening cultural understanding between teachers and students within the school. The significant influx of refugee students in Türkiye has posed important demands on teachers, who play a critical role despite the diverse challenges encountered in the education of these children (Akın-Sabuncu & Kasapoğlu, 2023). Some school principals stated that by conducting classroom supervisions, they prevented refugee students from being pushed to the back of the classrooms, in other words, ignored by teachers. The same school principals also stated that they achieved this among students by warning them that there were cameras everywhere and they were always watching them. Is Bentham's panoptical surveillance, which is used to normalize and order individuals (Foucault, 1981; as cited in Castrellón, 2022), a functional method to



ensure justice, respect, sharing and unity in schools? There is a paradoxical situation in this type of leadership tendency in terms of cultural sensitivity, as there is a simultaneous tendency towards repression and surveillance while seeking to embrace respect and acceptance of diverse cultural identities within diverse populations (Khalifa et al., 2016). Panopticon-like actions can have negative effects on social justice efforts with the element of pressure they create. This is precisely why we need more equitable educational experiences that would eliminate all forms of oppression, systemic power, discrimination, and prejudice in education that critical theory advocates. (Castrellón, 2022).

To sum up, this study revealed the unique experiences of school principals in Türkiye for eliminating the opportunity inequalities in the education of refugee students. One of the primary limitations of the study could be conducting our research in a single region, which restricts our access to observable units and may result in the transferability of findings limited to that particular region. By including participants from a broader geographical area, the diversity of experiences could be enhanced, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Depending on the findings obtained in the research, some suggestions can be presented. Given Türkiye's current refugee population, multicultural educational management approaches need to be promoted in the future to support a harmonious and inclusive educational environment for school staff and students. For this purpose, training programs and good practice examples from countries experienced in multicultural educational management practices should be followed. In addition, school principals' autonomy in decision-making may increase, because they are more aware of the deficiencies in the

language and academic skills of refugee students in their schools. To prepare a ground for an inclusive and fair understanding in education, the priority should be to prevent practices that individuals cannot make sense of and internalize through pressure and imposition. CRL should also acknowledge the diverse identities students bring to the educational context. Future research on CRL can explore how school leaders address the distinct needs and experiences of students from multiple marginalized groups. Understanding the interactions between culture, race, language, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and other identities can enrich the development of inclusive culturally responsive leadership practices.

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