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## The Role of Lived Experiences in Culturally Responsive School Leaders' Administrations: A Phenomenological Case Study

Angela Dolezal

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE ROLE OF LIVED EXPERIENCES IN CULTURALLY  
RESPONSIVE SCHOOL LEADERS' ADMINISTRATIONS:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

PROGRAM IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

BY

ANGELA DOLEZAL

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological case study explored how the lived experiences of three self-identified culturally responsive high school leaders impacted the systemic decisions they made for their school and their students. The study also investigated how these lived experiences informed the leaders' responses to their stakeholders' reactions to the systemic decisions. The three school leaders participated in a three-part interview series to answer these three questions (1) What are the personal and educational life histories of three self-identified culturally responsive school leaders in a predominantly White school? (2) How do the life experiences described in the self-identified culturally responsive school leaders' life histories influence the systemic decisions they make? (3) How do the self-identified culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White schools respond to various stakeholders as they enact these systemic decisions? The research study utilized a culturally responsive school leadership conceptual framework to analyze the systemic decisions made and the school leaders' responses to their stakeholders' reactions to these decisions.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Sixty-five years ago, the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) declared the segregation of schools, classrooms, and programs by race as illegal and unconstitutional. Although *Brown v. Board of Education* eliminated de jure segregation, the legal separation of groups, many believe that people have not experienced the real purpose of this legal decision even today. While de jure segregation has been deemed unconstitutional, school systems today still experience de facto segregation, resulting from societal differences between groups without mandated laws to segregate (Ford & King, 2014). Students can attend the same school yet have different, segregated learning experiences. Historically marginalized populations are under-represented in gifted education, advanced placement classes, and advanced learner courses such as honors and International Baccalaureate (IB). Tracking systems that group students based on ability produce segregated courses with historically marginalized student populations over-represented in lower tracked classes, often because of the teachers' lower expectations (Oakes, 2005). These historically marginalized populations are also over-represented in special education programs and various discipline systems such as suspensions and expulsions.

De facto segregation occurs when historically marginalized populations are concentrated in specific neighborhoods and produce neighborhood schools predominantly attended by that marginalized population. As a result, neighborhood schools may lack a myriad of educational opportunities seen in schools servicing predominantly White students and families, further perpetuating a system of educational disparities (Orfield & Lee, 2007). In addition, these schools may not receive the resources they need to ensure their students success, such as a lack of highly qualified staff and mental health support staff, a lack of technological resources and up-to-date textbooks, and a lack of appropriate funding. The inequities created due to the de facto segregation within and among schools have led to educational systems of privilege. These privileged educational systems have created systems of exclusivity in schools (Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003). As a result, American public schools serve certain demographic groups well, while other groups flounder in mediocrity or failure. Further, as student diversity continues to grow, the gaps in services continue to create increasingly apparent gaps in outcome data (Howard, 2007).

The student populations in schools are becoming increasingly more diverse, yet educators in today's school systems are not representative of these populations (Gay, 2000; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2002; Khalifa et al., 2016; Riser-Kositsky, 2019). Many school districts are experiencing rapid growth in the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students. As of 2015, the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES) reported that 51% of students in American public schools were non-White, compared to America's teachers who look very different from

their students, with about 20% of the teachers being non-White (Howard, 2007; Riser-Kositsky, 2019). Most of today's teachers and administrators grew up and attended school in middle-class, predominantly White communities, and they completed their teacher preparation in predominantly White colleges and universities (Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003; Howard, 2007). This disconnect between teachers and students has contributed to several inequities in the United States school system (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Because of their own personal and educational experiences, many educators have not acquired the educational or experiential background to readily teach and lead the increasingly diverse student populations arising in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2002; Howard, 2007). Ladson-Billings (2002), Howard (2007), and Khalifa et al. (2016) explain that culturally responsive leadership is a necessity for these teachers and their schools because culturally responsive leaders address the inherent barriers, including the de facto segregation, that students experience throughout their educational experiences (Ellison, 2018).

Principals can positively impact critical populations, including low-income socioeconomic status and students of color, through direct and indirect actions and decisions (Grissom et al., 2021). In predominantly White schools, culturally responsive school leaders may make systemic decisions to impact their students' learning positively. Sometimes, following the enactment of these decisions, stakeholders (i.e., staff members, students, parents, families, community members) respond in ways that may reflect social pressures, racism, and privilege (Ford, 2013, 2014; Ford & King, 2014). These stakeholders often assist in the persistence of inequalities and injustice because they

acquiesce to the status quo through their responses. The inequalities and injustices often benefit White students and families; these families fight to ensure schools do not make significant changes to a system designed to benefit their children. Racially and economically privileged stakeholders, often from the White population, contribute to, and magnify, the social and educational inequities in schools (Gamoran, 2001; Flessa, 2009). The perpetuation of systemic educational inequalities is often studied (Gay, 2000; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2007); however, there is little information about the phenomenon of how culturally responsive school leaders respond to their stakeholders' as they enact culturally responsive systemic decisions.

### **Personal Reflection of Problem**

As a Black<sup>1</sup> female school administrator, I often question how my leadership ensures all of my students, especially my students from historically marginalized populations, demonstrate academic and social-emotional success as defined by our current school system. As a Black mother of a biracial daughter and a multiracial son, who presents as a Black male, I often question whether my decisions will help elevate their success or perpetuate systemic racist structures and practices in our school and district. I scrutinize my staff and my decisions through a culturally responsive lens as I work to ensure positive schooling experiences for historically marginalized populations. I host discussions with staff members, parents, and other administrations about students' school experiences (i.e., academics, discipline, extracurriculars) to provide a positive

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this study, Black is used as a general term to reference anyone of African descent, including indigenous Africans, African Americans, Caribbean Blacks, and immigrants.

schooling experience by addressing the inequities in our school's systems. As a self-identified, culturally responsive, Black school leader, I want my students from historically marginalized populations to have the same opportunities and experiences as their White peers.

I provide my teachers with professional development around culturally responsive practices. I work to educate staff and school board members who do not see the need for or understand the importance of cultural responsiveness, and I am critical of the curricular resources and instructional practices throughout our district. In my previous role, I would also challenge educators who practiced exclusionary practices with students, including teachers who regularly sent students to my office, as a way to punish them for various behaviors they displayed in the classroom. While the discussions I have with teachers and the decisions I make for our students ensure the best education system for all students, especially those from marginalized populations, my identity as the mother of two multiracial children is the driving force behind my work. My children and my experiences as their mother emphasize the importance of a culturally responsive school led by a culturally responsive school leader. As a Black educational leader, I continuously asked myself what I would expect for my daughter and son, and the systemic decisions I made in my previous role and make in my current role are with both of my children in mind. My lived experience of having my two children attend the school district I previously worked for emphasized the need for a culturally responsive school led by a culturally responsive school leader.



As one of eight elementary school principals in a predominantly White school district, I witnessed first-hand the differences in schools with leaders strong in culturally responsive school leadership compared to school leaders with limited knowledge of culturally responsive school leadership tenets. This school district included eight elementary schools and two middle schools and has one mission and vision statement. The mission statement expresses the district's goal of ensuring an education that meets our students' diverse needs, and the vision statement communicates the desire to create an "equitable and inclusive" (School District, n.d., Vision section, para 1) learning environment.

Both the district mission and vision statements state a commitment to ensuring educators meet the needs of all students (e.g., low socioeconomic, students who receive special education services, gifted and talented students, students of color, White). However, some school leaders do not see this as a driving force in their leadership and, consequently, their school-based decisions. For example, I witnessed school leaders question the need to be involved in the district's Diversity Committee. Some school leaders justified tracking students in mathematics as something that continues to happen because "we have always done it this way." Some leaders questioned making changes to the gifted program because "our community will be too vocal." These thoughts demonstrate the lack of culturally responsive leadership throughout the school district. These leaders are likely not ensuring their staff members hold high expectations for all students, valuing their students' and families' cultures, values, and beliefs, and including their students' cultures in their educational curriculum. A variety of the district's data,

including discipline data, academic data, and social-emotional data, reflect a lack of culturally responsive leadership. Historically marginalized communities perform significantly lower than White students in the district in both the assessed areas of mathematics and reading, and these populations represent more significant percentages of the discipline and special education referrals.

A few leaders in the district worked to address the systemic inequities of the district head-on. These leaders called attention to the way students are identified for certain math classes and worked to ensure a better representation of students of color in higher-track math classes. These leaders addressed the disproportionality in the discipline through restorative practice techniques, and they confronted the "vocal community" head-on by explaining why they are leading in this manner and continuing to make specific decisions. However, these leaders have since left the district. They left because they did not feel supported by their supervisors when teachers and parents complained about their decisions.

In the district, some parents consistently vocalized their displeasure with different culturally responsive decisions these leaders tried to make to ensure all students have access to an equitable and quality education. These vocal parents usually fought out of fear that their children would lose what they currently received educationally. They did not want changes to programs that have consistently benefited them (Johnson, 2014). These vocal parents were often White. A current division in the district is around the gifted program and the inherent problems associated with it. In recent discussions, several parents played to public fear and fought the culturally responsive school leaders who

worked to make changes to address the under-representation of marginalized populations in the program.

My former school district experienced the loss of two culturally responsive principals who left the district to lead in other districts. They left because they felt unsupported by their colleagues and administrators as they worked to make culturally responsive changes, especially when White parents tried to perpetuate the status quo. Seeing and experiencing several conflicts while leading a predominantly White school as a self-identified culturally responsive school leader ignited an internal desire to learn how other leaders work with their stakeholders to ensure all their students feel safe and valued in their schools. In exploring this phenomenon, I discovered a gap in the literature. Several studies on culturally responsive school leadership in districts where historically marginalized populations are the majority of the school population; however, there is little research on culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White school districts. This literature gap has led to this research study of the systemic decisions that culturally responsive school leaders make and how they respond to their stakeholders' reactions to these decisions.

"For cultural responsiveness to be present and sustainable in schools, it must foremost and consistently be promoted by school leaders" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 13). Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) explain the school leaders' role in school climate and culture. They state that the school leader conveys what school values, beliefs, and practices should be important to the teachers and students. According to Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016), the school leader provides the school's direction, and they should do this by

communicating the direction clearly and modeling their expectations. A school's direction will rise and fall on the leadership of the school. Effective leaders hire staff members who have the same values and beliefs as the leader and will aid in furthering the school leader's vision. A successful leader plans professional development aligned to their core values and beliefs, and they utilize their budget to advance these core values and beliefs. A successful supervisor knows that students' academic outcomes increase through the beliefs that ground all the educators, including the school leaders, in their practice (Khalifa, 2018). The school's leadership affects the teachers' behavior, beliefs, and attitudes, affecting the students' achievement (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016). The systemic decisions leaders focus on display their values and beliefs. Further, schools need leaders who focus on culturally responsive practices vital to student success (Smith, 2005).

Mugisha (2013), Smith (2005), and Taliaferro (2011) explain that successful school leaders understand the cultures, values, and beliefs of their students, staff, and communities. Effective leadership focuses on and encourages classroom practices that promote diversity and equity, focus on differentiated practices, and assist the school's educators in utilizing culturally responsive teaching strategies or culturally responsive pedagogy. With a focus on culturally responsive pedagogy, these leaders can make systemic differences in the lives of their students and communities through their vision planning, leadership, guidance, and direction. Research refers to these leaders as culturally responsive school leaders (Mugisha, 2013; Smith, 2005; Taliaferro, 2011).

As Gay (2000) and Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) explain, culturally responsive school leadership refers to leaders ensuring that educators recognize and value all cultures, beliefs, and values in curriculum and instruction. Khalifa (2011) explains that culturally responsive leadership includes fostering an environment that is safe and upholds the students' cultures, values, and beliefs. Culturally responsive school leadership means the school leader assists the educators in building their instructional practices upon their students' cultural strengths. Above all else, culturally responsive school leadership means the school leader has high expectations for their staff, and these high expectations transfer to the students (Gay, 2005). A culturally responsive school leader enacts measures to develop a culturally responsive school curriculum taught by culturally responsive teachers committed to the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers are more likely to enact culturally responsive pedagogy, practices that have shown growth in student achievement, in schools where leaders engage in culturally responsive leadership and work to overcome the barriers, including stakeholders, that fight against them. Students are more likely to experience successful academic achievement by using the practices culturally responsive leaders expect (Isabel, 2012).

This study explores the systemic decisions enacted by culturally responsive school leaders and the role the leaders' lived experiences may have played in these decisions while also exploring how the school leaders respond to their stakeholders' as they enact these systemic decisions. This chapter provides an overview of the study, including the context and background of the research. This chapter also presents the

research questions, the significance of the study, and critical terms. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

### **Purpose of the Study**

A search of research on culturally responsive school leadership produces ample amounts of studies conducted on leaders in urban settings with populations of predominantly historically marginalized communities. However, not much research has focused on culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White schools who make decisions to ensure a quality education for historically marginalized students. This study explores how culturally responsive leaders in predominantly White schools ensure a culturally responsive education for the school systems' increasingly diverse student populations. In predominantly White schools, parent and community responses to systemic changes often include questions or resistance. Parents and community members often fear that these changes will reduce the benefits some students, mainly White students, have received from a school system designed with their success in mind (Ford, 2013, 2014; Ford & King, 2014). Therefore, this study will also consider how these leaders respond to their stakeholders' reactions when enacting culturally responsive systemic decisions.

### **Research Questions**

This study will explore the phenomenon of culturally responsive school leaders, their systemic decisions, and their responses to their stakeholders' reactions to these systemic decisions. It will also explore the possible role of their lived experiences in the

systemic decisions they made. This research study will address the following research questions:

1. What are the personal and educational life histories of three self-identified culturally responsive school leaders in a predominantly White school?
2. How do the life experiences described in the self-identified culturally responsive school leaders' life histories influence the systemic decisions they make?
3. How do the self-identified culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White schools respond to various stakeholders as they enact these systemic decisions?

### **Significance of the Study**

The body of literature on culturally responsive school leadership indicates a need for more information on how school leaders address all stakeholders when enacting culturally responsive systemic decisions. This study will expand the limited body of research around culturally responsive school leadership, specifically in predominantly White schools, thereby sharing strategies other school leaders can use to work with stakeholders when making systemic changes to better the schooling experiences of historically marginalized populations. Sharing how culturally responsive school leaders respond to various stakeholders as they enact culturally responsive systemic decisions may help others deal with stakeholder questions and concerns as they enact measures to address systemic inequalities and injustices. The historically marginalized students in these predominantly White institutions need culturally responsive leaders to remain in the

schools and continue to make these needed decisions regardless of the stakeholders' reactions.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

The following terms may have multiple everyday uses, but I define their use for this study below:

#### **Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)**

Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) describe a culturally responsive school leader as one who explores their own beliefs, values, and biases to relate to, and learn about, others. The leader embraces their differences as they see others for who they are while leading and imparting change. Derived from the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, it includes the leadership philosophies, practices, and policies enacted to ensure an inclusive schooling environment for students and families from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Johnson, 2014). Culturally responsive school leaders demonstrate an understanding of the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of references, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students, and they use this understanding to enact school decisions that value and utilize students' home cultures, contexts, and languages to improve academic achievement and ensure rigorous instruction throughout the school (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2002, 2009; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

#### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)**

A pedagogy that uses cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes while subsequently empowering students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and



politically (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally responsive pedagogy uses the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more accessible, relevant, and valuable for them (Gay, 2010). People of all backgrounds can employ culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

### **Marginalized**

Lopez (2001) explains that researchers use this term to describe populations whose voices, perspectives, and identities have been excluded from the dominant society's center. For this study, the term marginalized refers to ethnically and culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged student populations traditionally underserved and undervalued in American schools.

### **Predominantly White Schools**

Predominantly White schools are schools where more than 50% of the school's students identify as part of the White dominant culture.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Based on previous lived experiences, this study makes the following assumptions regarding the study and its participants. First, there is a resistance to different decisions made through the enactment of culturally responsive school leadership in predominantly White schools. Additionally, culturally responsive school leadership positively affects student achievement and engagement, impacting all students' schooling experiences. The assumptions around the participants of the study and their resulting data include: (a) three high school leaders would willingly discuss their personal, professional, and educational

life histories; (b) the three school leaders would participate in a three-part interview series authentically and with integrity and honesty; and (c) the data collected would be analyzed to capture and reflect the thoughts, words, and actions of the participants.

Creswell (2013) describes the limitations of a study as the possible weaknesses of the study. In this study, it is essential to note the following limitations. First, researchers have not thoroughly studied culturally responsive school leadership, resulting in the need for more information to improve the ways school leaders lead and interact with stakeholders (Khalifa et al., 2016). Second, this study is limited to a purposeful sample of three high school leaders in predominantly White schools with varied upbringing, education, and leadership experiences. The differences in experiences can lead to differing responses to stakeholder reactions. Further, because this study employs a small sample, the findings may not apply to other school leaders' experiences in other schools and cannot be generalized to all school leaders' experiences in predominantly White schools. However, readers may apply the results of this study to similar situations.

Delimitations are boundaries that narrow the study's scope (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). This study was bound by (a) the number of school leaders who self-identify as culturally responsive; (b) access and proximity of the school setting to the researcher; and (c) the availability and willingness of the participants to engage in the study voluntarily during the fall of 2019. Because there is limited research around culturally responsive school leadership, a limited number of school leaders self-identify in this manner. While many leaders may practice culturally responsive school leadership tenets, they may not yet view themselves in such a manner. Because the researcher

conducted the interviews for this study, the participant sample was bound to locations within specific areas. These areas needed to be within reasonable access and proximity to the researcher to ensure the completion of the data collection.

CHAPTER II  
LITERATURE REVIEW

**Introduction**

Several research studies show an increasing imbalance between the percentages of White educators and those students from marginalized populations that they teach (Gay, 2010; Khalifa, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). This imbalance can harm diverse student learners, as a connection exists between student success and the students' cultures, beliefs, and values with the educators' practices around them. Research shows this disconnection often leads to educators deciding what acceptable behavior and good learning look like based on their prior experiences and upbringing, regardless of whether these decisions relate to the students' realities (Chamberlain, 2005; Khalifa, 2018; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). The continued discrepancy between the students' cultures, beliefs, and values and those of the educators calls for new approaches to school leadership, incorporating culturally responsive systemic practices, behaviors, and competencies (Gay, 2005; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Culturally responsive pedagogy has played a role in marginalized students' success (Gay, 2000, 2005, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2002, 2009). However, there is scarce literature on how school leaders can help teachers work with students from diverse backgrounds and incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy. Even less research exists

on how leaders should direct schools and teachers in districts where the marginalized populations are the minority.

In predominantly White schools, educators, families, and community members may value the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in theory, but once put in practice, they may feel it "clashes with the traditional schooling methods" (Warren-Grice, 2017, p. 2). This clashing can make it difficult for leaders to enforce and support culturally responsive systemic practices, behaviors, and competencies in these schools (Warren-Grice, 2017). The current research on culturally responsive school leadership centers around leaders ensuring culturally responsive pedagogical practices in schools where marginalized populations comprise most of the schools' population. However, the current research is incomplete without exploring culturally responsive school leadership in predominantly White schools. This study explores culturally responsive school leaders' systemic decisions and their responses to stakeholders' (i.e., staff members, students, families, community members) reactions to these decisions to address this research gap.

In this chapter I present the conceptual framework for this research study and a review of the literature. I explain the conceptual framework, culturally responsive school leadership, first to provide a rationalization for the themes discussed in the literature review. I begin the literature review with a brief explanation of the history of schools and the lack of progress in their function and services, as schooling has not changed since educators first designed schools for White students to make children into similar citizens. I then discuss culturally responsive pedagogy and its importance in diverse populations' educational experiences. Culturally responsive school leadership was born out of the

tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy, and culturally responsive school leaders work to ensure staff members are enacting these practices. I then explain what research has shown to be successful school leadership and its relationship to culturally responsive pedagogy. Finally, the experiences of culturally responsive teachers and leaders are woven throughout the literature review to explain further the purpose and need for culturally responsive school leaders.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The discussion of this study's conceptual framework deliberately precedes the literature review to provide a rationalization for the concepts and themes presented in the review. The tenets of culturally responsive school leadership provide the foundation for this study's conceptual framework. These tenets will aid in examining the how and why behind the culturally responsive systemic decisions the participants make. The framework will also assist in studying how the participants respond to their stakeholders' reactions to their decisions.

The tenets of culturally responsive school leadership serve as the foundation for the conceptual framework for this study. Culturally responsive school leadership provides an avenue to explore the multiple ways leaders intentionally confront oppressive structures in schooling to discontinue the oppression of students (Khalifa, 2018). This study explores how current school leaders address oppressive systems in their schools by employing culturally responsive school leadership tenets as a conceptual framework. I will apply this framework in understanding the systemic decisions culturally responsive school leaders make and their subsequent responses to their stakeholder's reactions.

Culturally responsive school leadership will be used as the lens to help guide the interview protocols, questions, and data collection. It will also help guide my participants' experiences through the analysis methods employed in this study.

### **Culturally Responsive School Leadership Tenets**

**Grounded in CRP.** Cultural responsiveness is a necessary piece of effective school leadership. To talk about culturally responsive school leadership, one must talk about and understand culturally responsive pedagogy. The culturally responsive school leadership framework was derived from the concept and tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy (Johnson, 2006, 2014; Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018). Practices common to both culturally responsive school leadership and culturally responsive pedagogy include maintaining high expectations for students; developing a critical consciousness among self, students, and faculty to challenge the inequities in the larger societal context; including the history, values, and cultural knowledge of students' home communities in the curricula taught to students; and empowering students and parents from often marginalized communities (Johnson, 2014). Culturally responsive leadership overlaps with culturally responsive pedagogy. To understand culturally responsive leadership behaviors, one must first start with an understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy. Furthermore, to be a culturally responsive school leader, the leader must engage in culturally responsive pedagogy (Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018).

**Ongoing critical self-awareness.** Critical self-reflection is an integral part of culturally responsive school leadership because it is a process through which school leaders can recognize and discover how their institutions and practices have been

oppressive towards their marginalized populations (Khalifa et al., 2016). School leaders who possess an ongoing critical self-awareness have a critical consciousness. This quality in culturally responsive school leaders precedes all other behaviors. Culturally responsive school leaders need to have an awareness of self and an awareness of their own beliefs and dispositions, as this serves as a foundation to the beliefs that will undergird the principal's practices (Brown, 2004; Dantley, 2005; Gay & Kirkland 2003; Gooden, 2005; McKenzie et al., 2008). Culturally responsive school leaders must be keenly aware of inequitable factors that adversely affect their students' potential. Culturally responsive leaders who consistently practice critical self-awareness explore their situatedness within an organization that maintains oppressive practices and procedures, and they look for ways to personally and systemically resist that oppression (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006, Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016).

Culturally responsive school leaders are critically self-aware and promote critical self-reflection in all their schools' structures and processes. These leaders examine the role of school programs, departments, hiring practices, enrichment courses, and other school systems and structures (Khalifa et al., 2016; McKenzie et al., 2008). Culturally responsive leaders must identify and understand the oppressive systems that their students and communities face regularly. They must be willing and humble to identify and vocalize their background and privilege; this allows them to see how they might be complicit in the oppressive systems they may have observed. Then they must have the courage to push colleagues and staff to critically self-reflect on these systems and their own personal and professional role in the oppressive and anti-oppressive works (Khalifa,



2018). School leaders are responsible for initiating and sustaining critical self-reflection of individuals, systems, and structures throughout their school.

Khalifa (2018) observed a leader who regularly reflected on his historical lived experiences and current practices. The leader performed this reflection to measure his involvement in the oppressive systems in schools. The leader regularly asked his students and parents what he could do better to serve the students properly, and he used this information to challenge oppressive practices. The leader used his students' voices of their experiences and epistemologies directly with the adults practicing the oppressive procedures (i.e., class removal, low expectations), and then challenged these adults to see how their oppressive structures were not helping the students to be successful while experiencing the educational environment they deserved. In this study, Khalifa (2018) points out that the "practice of giving space for students to speak directly about the ways they feel oppressed is crucial to culturally responsive school leadership" (p. 67).

**Culturally responsive teachers and curricula.** Leithwood et al. (2004) assert that school leaders play a primary role in maintaining culturally responsive schools. As Khalifa et al. (2016) and Grissom et al. (2021) point out, school leaders are responsible for recruiting and retaining culturally responsive teachers, mentoring and modeling culturally responsive pedagogy, and securing culturally responsive resources and curriculum. School leaders are on the frontlines when it comes to recruiting, hiring, and retaining teachers. Culturally responsive leaders recruit and hire teachers who fit the vision of ensuring culturally responsive pedagogy throughout the school. A teacher's racial and ethnic background, personal life experiences, social interactions, and personal

perceptions influence curriculum and instruction (Khalifa et al., 2016). Therefore, culturally responsive leaders need to recruit and hire educators who understand, believe in, and promote a culturally responsive orientation.

Once culturally responsive school leaders hire teachers who engage in culturally responsive pedagogy regularly, it is up to them to ensure they support these teachers in their efforts (Khalifa et al., 2016). For a school to indeed be culturally responsive, school leaders must ensure professional development efforts to assist teachers in current best practices and help teachers who may knowingly or unknowingly resist culturally responsive practices for students (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Khalifa, 2011; Khalifa et al. 1, 2016; Murtadha-Watts & Stoughton, 2004; Riehl, 2000; Voltz, Brazil, & Scott, 2003). Culturally responsive school leaders must mentor, support, and evaluate their teachers' abilities to practice culturally responsive instruction (Brown, 2007; Khalifa, 2018; Sobel, Taylor, & Anderson, 2003). When hired teachers receive consistent support and training, their capacity to support student achievement increases (Khalifa, 2018).

Culturally responsive school leaders are critical of the curricula and instructional practices (i.e., collaborative learning, direct instruction, project-based learning) their educators use in the classroom. They also engage and reform curriculum practices to be more culturally responsive (Sleeter, 2012; Vilegas & Lucas, 2002). Murtadha-Watts & Stoughton (2004) explain how school leaders have to work with teachers through observations and reflection procedures to help them unpack, understand, and address their assumptions around the curriculum. They further discuss the importance of school leaders helping teachers ensure learning that truly engages students and is authentic,

rigorous, and thought-provoking. For example, Khalifa's (2018) school leader encouraged his teachers to "use the students' life stories in the lessons 'cause it has got to be relevant" (p. 140). Culturally responsive leaders provide a space for their teachers to take risks with the educational frameworks to facilitate a safe, risk-free learning environment that values every student's contributions (Murtadha-Watts & Stoughton, 2004).

**Culturally responsive and inclusive school environments.** Culturally responsive school leaders protect and promote inclusive practices of all students and the spaces in which these students and practices exist (Khalifa, 2018). To achieve this, culturally responsive school leaders must understand the identities and communities of their students. This inclusion underscores a sense of belonging for often marginalized students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018). Culturally responsive school leaders must promote a culturally responsive school context that emphasizes inclusivity. As culturally responsive leaders, they must challenge exclusive practices and policies (i.e., suspensions, detentions, allowing students to miss class without repercussion, constant disciplinary referrals, not valuing non-White behavior, shaming, teasing, tokenizing, dismissiveness) (Gardiner & Enomot, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018; Webb-Johnson, 2006; Webb-Johnson & Carter, 2007). In his study, Khalifa (2018) observes a teacher who allows student disengagement to happen in her class. The teacher thought she was kind and loving by allowing students whom she perceived as "having a bad day" to not participate in class. This educator, who assumed her teaching did not play a role in the student's disengagement, perpetuated the exclusionary practices of having low expectations for students and mentally removing themselves from instruction.

Culturally responsive school leaders need to address any recognized exclusionary practices. Researchers have found that culturally responsive school leaders mentor teachers around utilizing inclusionary practices and model inclusionary behaviors themselves (Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018). When they see the exclusionary practices, culturally responsive school leaders challenge teachers' and other staff's behaviors. These leaders also look for opportunities to promote student and parent perspectives through self-advocacy methods (Khalifa, 2018; Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). Student advocacy is not something that happens because a leader desires it. Culturally responsive school leaders take the time to develop this skill in their students and parents, providing the space for this inclusionary voice (Khalifa, 2018).

School leaders who display culturally responsive behaviors also understand the importance of trust. Challenging teachers' exclusionary practices can cause anxiety for all involved and can erode trust and positive climates in buildings (Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018). If a culturally responsive leader looks to challenge practices, they must be sure they have developed a trusting relationship with the teacher; otherwise, they can cause more harm than good. The leaders in many of the studies conducted around culturally responsive school leaders usually have the trust of their teachers, students, and communities (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2001; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018; Riehl, 2000).

**Engagement of students and families in community contexts.** Johnson (2014) and Khalifa (2018) discuss the importance of expanding culturally responsive school leadership beyond the school site-based role to encompass community-based leadership

and cultural empowerment. School leaders often connect directly with students and families, and through these connections, they develop meaningful and positive relationships with community members (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Gooden, 2005; Johnson, 2006, 2014; Khalifa, 2012, 2018; Walker, 2001). In her study of three historical Black educational leaders, Johnson (2014) points out how the leaders in the study all used their community influence to advocate for culture-based curriculum, race equality and civil rights issues, and their diverse communities' involvement in the schools. With their influences, they developed relationships with community organizations that assisted with implementing school district initiatives. This collaboration allowed leaders to develop programs and curriculum centered around Black students, their culture, and their history. Engaging with the community allowed the leaders in Johnson's (2014) study to gain resources for their schools, as well as create spaces for parents to feel they had a "place at the table" (p. 160) in decision-making. As the school leader, culturally responsive leaders can engage students, families, and communities in culturally appropriate ways, and they can leverage these relationships to further assist with the successful education of students from marginalized populations (Johnson, 2014; Khalifa, 2018).

The culturally responsive school leadership framework provides a foundation for how school leaders create school contexts and curricula that respond effectively to all students' educational, social, political, and cultural needs. While based on Gay's (2000) work around culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally responsive school leadership also recognizes that it is not enough to ensure teachers practice culturally responsive pedagogy. Strong leaders who are strong in culturally responsive pedagogy are needed to

ensure the entire school climate provides a space for all students' cultural values and beliefs (Brown, 2004; Eilers & Camacho, 2007; Ellison, 2018; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Webb-Johnson & Carter, 2007). The culturally responsive school leadership framework will serve as the blueprint for this study. Data will be analyzed against the tenets of this framework when analyzing the decisions made by leaders and their responses to their stakeholder's reactions to the decisions. This framework helps illuminate how leaders are addressing the inequities of the U.S. school system. It also shows how these leaders are navigating the reactions of those around them as they do this work.

## **Literature Review**

### **Schools: From Past to Present**

Educators initially designed schools in the early 1900s to resemble the American industry, shaping and fashioning children into similar "products." These schools ran on tight schedules, with students moving from room to room when a bell rang. Today, many schools still operate along these lines, with bells ringing and students moving through a fragmented curriculum (Wilms, 2003). While the schools have become more racially and culturally diverse, these schools' activities remain relatively unchanged since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Teachers are still facing a group of students in classrooms nested within schools, nested within school districts, and governed locally. Textbooks, lectures, and recitations dominate today's schools' educational activities regardless of the students in them (Gamoran, 2001).

Today's school systems are not producing positive results for all students. These systems are consistently denying marginalized groups access to quality education. Often marginalized student populations perform worse on just about every educational measure utilized by schools in the United States, and the racial disparities in disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions demonstrate that school cultures are hostile towards marginalized student populations (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Khalifa et al., 2016; Pitre 2014; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Pitre (2014) specifies that disparities in achievement are often between White and non-White students, and stakeholders see these differences in standardized test scores, grade point averages, graduation rates, drop-out rates, and college admission data. One such standardized test is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The U.S. Department of Education has administered the NAEP since the 1960s. The NAEP shows a clear and consistent discrepancy in academic achievement between various student groups. The percentages of African Americans, Latinx, and American Indian student populations who score at proficiency are significantly lower than White students scoring at proficiency (Vanneman et al., 2009). Among public school fourth-grade students in 2015, only 18% of Black students were proficient in reading while 45% of White students demonstrated proficiency. As students advance to higher grades, the achievement gap remains, with only 15% of Black students demonstrating proficiency in eighth grade in 2015 compared to 42% of their White peers. This same academic discrepancy is present in twelfth grade as students complete their K-12 educational experience. In 2015 only 16% of Black students demonstrated proficiency in reading while 44% of their White peers performed proficiently. These trends are also

present in NAEP mathematics outcomes (see Table 1 and Table 2) (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Gregory and Weinstein (2008) conducted a research study to examine the patterns of suspension referrals and their connection to the teacher patterns that possibly contribute to the over-representation of African American students in discipline referrals. This study revealed that students referred for discipline referrals were more likely to be male and non-White. In addition, the authors discovered that Black students were about three times more likely to be suspended than any other student population. In this study, Gregory and Weinstein (2008) examined a year's worth of disciplinary referrals for one school and learned that Black students were over-represented for defiance compared to other student populations. Students in the study shared that certain teacher qualities predicted students' willingness to trust and cooperate with their teachers or work against their direction and desires. Gregory and Weinstein (2008) validated that teacher attitude and conduct could impact students' level of success and that a connection exists between low school performance and how marginalized student populations connect to the educators who serve them.

McKown and Weinstein (2008) and Pitre (2014) discuss educators who often have lower expectations for marginalized student populations than their White peers. They further express the importance of not letting these beliefs go unchallenged, as that can lead to complacency, acceptance of failure, and continued acceptance of low expectations for marginalized populations. However, it is difficult for many school



Table 1

*Percentage of Public-School Students at or Above Proficient in Reading. National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Reading Achievement by Race/Ethnicity and Grade: Selected years 2013-2019*

Grade & Year	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Two or More Races
4 <sup>th</sup> grade						
2017	46	19	22	56	21	40
2015	45	18	20	52	21	39
2013	44	17	20	51	22	38
8 <sup>th</sup> grade						
2017	44	17	22	54	21	40
2015	42	15	20	50	23	35
2013	44	16	21	50	19	38
12 <sup>th</sup> grade						
2017 <sup>a</sup>						
2015	44	16	24	48	27	44
2013	46	15	23	47	26	37

Note. Black includes African Americans, Hispanic includes Latinx, and Pacific Islander includes Native Hawaiian. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin. *U.S. Department of Education, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2013, 2015, and 2017 Reading Assessments.*

<sup>a</sup>The reading assessment was not administered at grade 12 in 2017.

Table 2

*Percentage of Public-School Students at or Above Proficient in Math. National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Math Achievement by Race/Ethnicity and Grade: Selected years 2013-2019*

Grade & Year	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Two or More Races
4 <sup>th</sup> grade						
2017	51	19	25	64	25	44
2015	51	18	26	61	23	44
2013	53	18	26	64	24	45
8 <sup>th</sup> grade						
2017	43	13	19	61	19	36
2015	42	12	19	58	19	35
2013	44	14	21	59	21	37
12 <sup>th</sup> grade						
2017 <sup>a</sup>						
2015	30	6	12	46	9	29
2013	32	7	12	47	13	25

Note. Black includes African Americans, Hispanic includes Latinx, and Pacific Islander includes Native Hawaiian. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin. *U.S. Department of Education, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2013, 2015, and 2017 Reading Assessments.*

<sup>a</sup>The mathematics assessment was not administered at grade 12 in 2017.

leaders to challenge these beliefs, as often, a number of these leaders are unprepared to lead diverse schools and implement policies that will respond to diversity issues. These leaders also struggle to articulate meaningful discourses around diversity (Young, Madsen, & Young, 2010). Unless this status quo is challenged and leaders learn how to disrupt oppressive systems properly, the systemic oppressive structures and practices will remain in place (Khalifa, 2018).

School leaders are the ones closest to the students who can enact the systemic school-wide changes needed to address the disparities in achievement and discipline. School leaders are responsible for hiring and retaining educators who will impact their students. These leaders must employ teachers with qualities that garner students' trust, persistence, and perseverance in our current school systems (Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016). School leaders have to make decisions that will positively impact underserved student populations, which must happen in all educational settings. However, change is difficult. Different circumstances, environments, and historical practices play a role in accepting change (Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018). While the data shows that the current school systems have not been working for marginalized populations, they have provided White students with successes in academic and discipline realms. Implementing change when a system has worked for one group can produce challenges and possibly slow the process. This study will explore how school leaders enact necessary systemic decisions to positively impact the academics and discipline of marginalized populations while also addressing reactions from those who benefit from the current system.

### **Addressing Diverse Student Populations—Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Hammond (2015), Kalyanpuur and Harry (20212), Taliaferro (2011), and Tatum (2009) have shown that culturally responsive pedagogy can enhance learning by strengthening student connectedness with the school. These studies have also shown that culturally responsive pedagogy supports the achievement of all students. Johnson's (2014) research study profiles three culturally responsive leaders who all portrayed culturally responsive pedagogy tenets. School leaders looking to positively impact marginalized students' educational experiences should ensure that their staff regularly practice culturally responsive pedagogy in their schools. Khalifa's (2018) study also demonstrated that culturally responsive pedagogy is a foundational piece of culturally responsive school leadership. Khalifa's study shows that one cannot talk about culturally responsive school leaders' decisions without understanding culturally responsive pedagogy.

The tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy have evolved from the inception of education for and about cultural diversity. Multicultural education originated in the 1970s when educators were concerned about the racial and ethnic inequities in students' learning opportunities and outcomes (Gay, 2010). Over time, culturally responsive pedagogy has been referred to by a variety of names, including culturally relevant, culturally sensitive, culturally centered, culturally congruent, culturally reflective, and culturally sustaining, to name a few; however, the concepts behind all of these terms are the same—classroom instruction must be more consistent with the cultural orientation of ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Therefore, culturally responsive is used for

this research study, as it encompasses several ideas and explanations from various researchers.

Ladson-Billings (1994), the originator of culturally responsive pedagogy, provides three dimensions within the culturally responsive framework. These dimensions are (a) academic achievement, (b) cultural competence, and (c) sociopolitical consciousness. Academic achievement focuses on making learning more rigorous, exciting, challenging, and equitable with high standards. Cultural competence centers around educators knowing and facilitating their students' learning in various cultural and linguistic cultures. Finally, sociopolitical consciousness focuses on educators recognizing and assisting students to understand that their education and schooling did not happen in a vacuum (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Taliaferro, 2011).

As various scholars continued to research culturally responsive pedagogy and the definition of culture continued to evolve, studies began to focus on the benefits of culturally responsive pedagogy for all and not just for Black students as was intended when Ladson-Billings (1994) first coined the term. Culturally responsive teaching began to be defined more broadly as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively (Gay, 2002, p. 106). As the term continued to evolve, Gay (2000; 2002) also identified five components that further defined culturally responsive pedagogy. These five components included (a) developing a culturally diverse knowledge base, (b) designing culturally relevant curricula, (c) demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community,

(d) developing effective cross-cultural communication, and (e) developing cultural congruity of instruction.

**Developing a culturally diverse knowledge base.** Gay (2002) explains that effective teaching requires the educator to know whom they are teaching. Gay (2002) further explains that developing a culturally diverse knowledge base includes using multiple methods to learn about and understand the students and their families. A large part of this culturally diverse knowledge base includes understanding the cultural features and contributions of various ethnic groups (Gay 2002; Taliaferro, 2011). As previously mentioned, the evolution of culturally responsive pedagogy has led to culture encompassing many things, including cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns. This understanding is more profound than a mere awareness of these cultural features and contributions; this understanding must include detailed factual information about the cultures' particularities for specific ethnic groups (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). A culturally responsive educator understands the importance of knowing about their students' diversity and how the inclusion of this knowledge in the educational experience enriches their learning (Isabel, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Riehl, 2000).

**Designing culturally relevant curricula.** Once educators have developed a culturally diverse knowledge base, they must take that knowledge and design culturally relevant curricula (Gay, 2002; Taliaferro, 2011). Gay (2002) explains that three curricula exist - formal curriculum, symbolic curriculum, and societal curriculum. Gay (2002) also explains how each of the three curricula plays a role in students' educations. Culturally

responsive educators must ensure the formal curriculum (e.g., adopted textbooks, standards issued by national commissions and state departments of education) accurately reflect marginalized populations. This accurate reflection includes ensuring the formal curriculum deals directly with controversy (i.e., racism, historical atrocities, powerlessness, hegemony), studies a wide range of ethnic individuals and groups, and includes multiple kinds of knowledge and perspectives (Taliaferro, 2011).

Educators who design culturally relevant curricula know how to determine the formal curriculum's multicultural strengths and weaknesses, and they work to reverse the weaknesses (Isabel, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2002; Taliaferro, 2011). Culturally responsive educators must also ensure the symbolic curriculum (e.g., images, symbols, icons, celebrations, and other artifacts) represents the diverse student populations. To address the symbolic curriculum, educators must ensure bulletin board decorations, images of people, books, and publicly displayed statements are diverse, as these all display what the school values (Taliaferro, 2011). Culturally responsive educators are aware of the symbolic curriculum's power, and they use it to impart important information, beliefs, and values to their students (Gay, 2002).

The societal curriculum also needs to be addressed when designing culturally relevant curricula. Gay (2002) explains that the societal curriculum includes the knowledge, ideas, and impressions portrayed about ethnic groups through mass media. Mass media is a common source of knowledge for many students and often inaccurately depicts marginalized communities. The culturally responsive educator includes critical

analyses of how mass media and popular culture portray diverse groups, and they work to reverse these portrayals in their classrooms.

**Demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community.**

Demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community requires educators to build a learning environment where all students feel welcomed and supported (Gay, 2002; Isabel, 2012; Taliaferro, 2011). Culturally responsive educators need to ensure they create a classroom conducive to learning for ethnically diverse students and provide optimal opportunities for them to learn and achieve regardless of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Gay, 2000; Isabel, 2012). Demonstrating cultural caring means the educators care immensely for their ethnically diverse students and their students' achievement; it also means the educators hold their students to high standards and accept nothing less. In building a culturally responsive learning community, educators must partner with their diverse students. Respect, honor, integrity, and resource sharing are the foundation for this partnership (Gay, 2000). Demonstrating cultural caring requires educators to use imaginative strategies to ensure academic success for their diverse student population, and they build on that academic success through cultural validation. Educators who are displaying the trait of demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community model the specific values of their culturally diverse students, ensure respectful interactions, show compassion and provide their students with space for their voices to be heard and valued (Gay, 2002; Isabel, 2012; Taliaferro, 2011).

**Developing effective cross-cultural communication.** Gay (2000) explains that developing effective cross-cultural communication involves developing communication



strategies that best serve the students. Culture influences everything about people, including what they talk about and how they talk about it. Therefore, culturally responsive educators need to understand the cultural nuances related to how their students communicate (Gay 2002, Ladson-Billings, 1994). Gay (2002) explains that the communication styles of different ethnic groups reflect their cultural values and their learning behaviors. Understanding these details allows the culturally responsive educator to determine what their students know and can do and what they are capable of knowing and doing. In addition, understanding the differences in communication styles allows the educator and student to communicate across cultures effectively and helps to ensure educators do not violate the cultural values of the students, thus silencing the student in the learning environment (Gay, 2000, 2002; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

**Developing cultural congruity of instruction.** Gay (2000) articulates that developing cultural congruity of instruction deals with the actual delivery of instruction and includes creating lessons that use various methods that complement students' learning profiles. Culturally responsive teachers who develop cultural congruity of instruction work to match their instructional techniques to their diverse students' learning styles. Gay (2002) explains that this might include cooperative group learning or peer coaching because they align with many marginalized populations' communal cultural systems. Integrating ethnic and cultural diversity into all the educational process's formal and informal aspects establishes cultural congruity. Culturally responsive educators must

connect prior knowledge to new knowledge by including rich culturally diverse examples, scenarios, and vignettes when teaching (Gay 2000, 2002).

Culturally responsive teachers help students build solid cultural identities to succeed in school (Gay, 2000; Isabel, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Culturally responsive pedagogy increases students' academic achievement and makes learning more interesting by connecting it to their worlds (Wagner, 2013). However, these aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy are not things that happen automatically for any educator regardless of their own race/ethnicity (Ladson-Billings, 2014). These skills must be taught or coached, and developed. These skills must be encouraged, and opportunities for growth and development presented to the educator (Khalifa, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014). A culturally responsive school leader should be grounded in these aspects to ensure these practices are consistent throughout their school. Khalifa's (2018) study explains that school leaders must consistently display cultural responsiveness for culturally responsive pedagogy to be present and sustainable in their schools. Moreover, a culturally responsive school leader must lead their staff members in developing these aspects of culturally responsive pedagogy within themselves.

Further, while culturally responsive pedagogy is essential, it will not solely solve marginalized students' significant challenges (Gay, 2010). There is a need to reform and transform all aspects of education, including funding, policymaking, and administration, to ensure each of these aspects is culturally responsive. School leaders are the individuals in schools with the most authority and power to make these systemic changes (Grissom et

al., 2021). This study will explore how school leaders in predominantly White schools enact decisions rooted in culturally responsive pedagogy.

### **Effective School Leadership**

"One of the most critical elements in change-making and equity work is strong and courageous leadership" (Colorado Department of Education, 2010, p. 13). As the educational system looks to reform and transforms education to ensure it is more culturally responsive, school leadership is a crucial entity to explore. School leadership is essential to any educational reform, second only to teachers' work (Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). The principal is the most recognized school leader and the most empowered by district and state policy. The principal is held accountable for the school programs' progress or lack thereof (Khalifa et al., 2016). Research has shown that school leaders can influence teachers' learning, instruction, and student achievement, and as such, principals can profoundly impact instructional practices and student learning (Anderson, 2008; Branch et al., 2013; Drago-Severson, 2012; Eilers & Camacho, 2007; Khalifa et al., 2016).

Taliaferro (2011) explains that the most successful school leaders understand their students' cultures, staff, and communities. These successful leaders can make systemic differences in the lives of their students and their communities. Branch et al. (2013) and Khalifa et al. (2016) show that successful school leaders understand the importance of students feeling they are a part of the school community and that their contributions matter. Successful school leaders understand that their students' experiences shape their cultures, heritages, and world views (Khalifa et al., 2016, Ladson-Billings, 2014). These

school leaders ensure their teachers care on a personal level for their students, and they enable them to learn and understand their students' cultures, heritages, and world views so that they can cultivate an environment of respect and cultural awareness. Successful school leaders provide students opportunities to participate in school processes, and they create and sustain positive relationships among and between students, parents, and staff members (Taliaferro, 2011). It is no coincidence that successful school leaders exhibit many of the qualities of culturally relevant pedagogy and that many of these same qualities are a basis of the culturally responsive school leadership framework.

### **Culturally Responsive School Leadership**

"Culturally responsive school leadership is a dynamic, fluid set of behaviors that regularly (re)develop the individual and the organization based on a steady stream of data from the school and the community" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 60). A culturally responsive school leader's role is comprehensive, multidimensional, and iterative (Gay, 2000; Taliaferro, 2011). The successful implementation of school-based programs often results from solid and successful school leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016). Taliaferro (2001) states that strong school leadership includes leading a school of culturally responsive educators. Being a culturally responsive school leader begins with an examination and understanding of oneself. A culturally responsive school leader must reflect on their cultural values and beliefs to ensure they can openly explore the cultural referents of their students, teachers, and community in their efforts to lead their school toward academic success (Khalifa et al., 2016; Taliaferro, 2001).

Like culturally responsive teachers, culturally responsive school leaders must have affirming views toward diversity, and they must respect the differences among their students, staff, and school community members (Taliaferro, 2011). Culturally responsive school leaders lead their school communities in developing awareness in students, staff, and families to educate, promote tolerance, and foster an appreciation for diversity in the school culture (Khalifa et al., 2016). This awareness demonstrates for students the importance of feeling safe and a part of the school community. Strong school leadership promotes this awareness. Culturally responsive school leaders establish an environment of respect and cultural awareness, not only for the staff, students, and teachers they serve but also for themselves. Furthermore, they create an environment where their teachers care about their students on personal levels, reaching far beyond their classrooms (Khalifa et al., 2016; Taliaferro, 2011).

Khalifa et al. (2016) and Khalifa (2018) explain that culturally responsive school leaders play a role in establishing the school's culture, and a part of establishing a school's culture includes hiring culturally responsive teachers. Once the culturally responsive school leader hires these teachers, they must ensure the teachers use culturally responsive pedagogy and classroom management strategies. They must provide training for staff members to use these culturally responsive strategies, and they must hold the staff members accountable to follow through with their training and knowledge (Khalifa et al., 2016; Vogel, 2011). Culturally responsive school leaders provide their teachers with constructive feedback and professional development opportunities to ensure they can effectively continue to enact culturally responsive pedagogy. A culturally responsive

school leader is also responsible for the recruitment, hiring, retention, and continued growth of the educators in their building. These leaders must ensure that their educators promote culturally responsive pedagogy, which produces the most success for their students (Vogel, 2011).

Culturally responsive school leaders establish positive school climates and nurture positive relationships with the community to improve family engagement, increase school resources, and ensure their students' learning experiences center around their cultural knowledge, beliefs, and values (Taliaferro, 2011). They create systemic and sustained efforts to build bridges of community support leading to better outcomes for students (Epstein, 2010; Khalifa, 2010; Taliaferro, 2011; Wilson, 2004). These culture and climate behaviors are a part of being a culturally responsive school leader, and the culturally responsive school leadership framework underscores these behaviors.

### **Conclusion**

While current research on culturally responsive school leadership relates to school leaders in schools that serve predominantly historically marginalized populations, current research does not include much about culturally responsive school leadership in predominantly White schools. Leading with a culturally responsive lens in an area where marginalized populations of students are in the minority presents a unique set of challenges, including a lack of understanding around the need for cultural responsiveness, the perpetuation of systemic oppressive structures and processes, and community members' agendas as schools work to meet all students' educational needs. In this research study I explore how culturally responsive school leaders execute systemic

decisions around the success of all students and how they respond to the reactions of a predominantly White community when they make these decisions. This study will contribute to the literature by hearing from culturally responsive leaders in school contexts not often included in this discussion. This research study seeks to fill the current gap in research on culturally responsive school leadership in predominantly White schools and aspires to show others different methods for addressing stakeholders from all racial and ethnic backgrounds when enacting culturally responsive decisions.

CHAPTER III  
METHODOLOGY

**Introduction**

As a culturally responsive school leader in a predominantly White school, I have made several culturally responsive educational decisions. More often than not, I have drawn on my past personal, educational, professional, and leadership experiences when making these decisions. My experiences provided the foundation for different meanings behind how I viewed the lived educational experiences of my students; further, these lived experiences are part of the foundation of how I work to ensure the academic and social-emotional success of my students. Reflecting on my decision-making processes and how my personal and professional life experiences influenced those decisions became the basis for exploring if, and how, other culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White schools draw upon their life experiences to inform their decision making, especially around marginalized students.

The purpose of this phenomenological multi-case study was to explore how school leaders' lived experiences influenced the systemic decisions they made, especially concerning marginalized populations. This study used a small sample of school leaders at predominantly White high schools to explore the phenomenon of culturally responsive school leadership and the role of lived experiences in culturally responsive decision making. This study addressed three research questions:



1. What are the personal and educational life histories of three self-identified culturally responsive school leaders in a predominantly White school?
2. How do the life experiences described in the self-identified culturally responsive school leaders' life histories influence the systemic decisions they make?
3. How do the self-identified culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White schools respond to various stakeholders as they enact these systemic decisions?

In this chapter I explain this study's research methodology in six sections. These sections include an overview of the research design, sampling procedures, data collection, data analysis, considerations of validity and trustworthiness, and limitations of the study. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a summary.

### **Qualitative Research Design**

Qualitative research studies help others better understand a particular phenomenon from the participant's perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Qualitative research studies are about understanding how participants see their experiences, how they construct their lives, and the meaning they make of their experiences. These studies are about how people make meaning of their world and their experiences in that world (Flick, 2009; Lichtman, 2010; Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative studies contain a link between a problem, a purpose, and an approach; they reflect on the problem(s) and purpose and focus on researchable questions while considering the best way to address these questions, all to answer what and why (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019;

Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, this study explored the influence of the lived experiences of culturally responsive school leaders on their professional decisions by seeking to understand the underlying reasons and motivations behind the leader's systemic decisions.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), Creswell (2009), and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that there are several qualitative methods, and each type of qualitative study has a few key features in common. First, qualitative studies include small samples that are purposefully selected. These samples are studied in their natural settings as real-world situations naturally unfold, and the researcher tries to make sense or meaning of a case, a phenomenon, or an experience in terms of the meanings people in these situations bring to them. Second, qualitative research explores how participants experience, interpret, and understand their social and cultural worlds within specific contexts and then describes the meanings of this exploration from the perspectives of those participants. Often in qualitative studies, these findings are described through thick descriptions, thorough descriptions of the study's setting, the research participants, and their related experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, qualitative research studies triangulate data to address concerns of trustworthiness. This triangulation occurs through the use of multiple and different sources and methods (i.e., peer reviews, peer debriefs, member checks) (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The triangulation of data for this study will be further discussed later in this chapter.

Qualitative research helps promote a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants. It includes a strong

activist agenda encouraging researchers to strive past prevailing assumptions, understandings, and norms. As such, it has the potential to highlight inequities and inequalities, barriers and access, poverty and privilege, and the implications of the injustices of these dynamics (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). For these reasons, this study, exploring how lived experiences inform culturally responsive decisions in predominantly White schools, utilized a qualitative approach. This research study explored how leaders responded to the binary challenges in K-12 education of inequities and inequalities, barriers and access, and poverty and privileges as they made decisions around and for their marginalized students.

### **Phenomenological Case Study**

The primary goal of this qualitative research study was to examine the lived experiences of self-identifying culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White high schools and how these personal and professional lived experiences influenced the culturally responsive systemic decisions these leaders made for their students. In addition, this research study explored how these past experiences informed how these leaders responded to various stakeholders in light of their culturally responsive systemic decisions. To accomplish these goals, I chose a qualitative research design known as a phenomenological case study, combining two research methodologies—phenomenology and case study—often used in social sciences research. Phenomenological case studies examine a particular phenomenon as individuals experience it in a specific context. The phenomenon in this study is the influence of school leaders' lived experiences, and the specific context for the phenomenon is the predominantly White high school setting.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) explain that phenomenological research explores the meanings of participants' lived experiences in a search for the crux of a phenomenon. Phenomenological research also explores how a particular group of people in a specific context make meaning and interpret their lived experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Vagle, 2016; van Manen, 1990, 2016). Phenomenology aims to explain what an experience means for the participants who have had the experience and provide a complete description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). This research study explored how a particular group of people in a specific context, self-identified culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White high schools, made meaning of and interpreted their lived experiences. This study also explored how these lived experiences informed the systemic decisions the leaders made.

Case studies develop an understanding or form deep insights to inform professional practice, policy development, and community or social action (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Case studies are often detailed explorations of a social phenomenon within the context of a particular environment, situation, circumstance, or another bounded system (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell, 2007; Creswell, 2013). Merriam (1998) describes a case study design as follows:

A case study design is employed to understand the situation and meaning for those involved deeply. Case studies explore the process rather than the outcomes; they explore context rather than a specific variable, focusing on discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research. (p. 19)

Consequently, a case study approach was an appropriate method to frame this research study, as this study examined, and aimed to understand, the phenomenon of the influence of the lived experiences of culturally responsive school leaders bounded by their role as school leaders in predominantly White high schools.

### **Research Design**

I used a phenomenological case study approach to analyze and compare the experiences of the participants. This approach helped to identify how the school leaders' lived experiences influenced the systemic decisions they made and how these lived experiences may have informed the way these leaders responded to their stakeholders' reactions to their systemic decisions. Each school leader's case study was instrumental in learning about the effects of culturally responsive leadership in predominantly White schools. The combination of the individuals also provided essential themes related to the professional practice of culturally responsive school leaders. These themes may have future implications for other culturally responsive school leaders in the predominately White schools. The themes may also provide implications for future research.

### **Research Questions**

This research study strived to offer understanding and meaning into how the lived social, cultural, educational, and familial experiences informed the systemic decisions made by culturally responsive school leaders (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To gain this understanding and meaning, I explored the following research questions:

1. What are the personal and educational life histories of three self-identified culturally responsive school leaders in a predominantly White school?

2. How do the life experiences described in the self-identified culturally responsive school leaders' life histories influence the systemic decisions they make?
3. How do the self-identified culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White schools respond to the various stakeholders as they enact these systemic decisions?

### **Identifying and Selecting Participants**

I selected three participants for this study using a convenient purposeful sampling procedure. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that purposeful sampling allows a researcher to discover, understand, and gain insight by working with a sample from which the researcher can learn the most. According to Patton (2015), purposeful sampling emphasizes an in-depth understanding of a setting or practice. This research study sought to examine school leaders who self-identified as culturally responsive leaders and worked in predominantly White high schools. Two female school leaders and one male school leader participated in this research study. The school leaders range from 38 to 64 years in age, and the extent of their administrative experience ranges from 9 to 29 years in any administrative position. The following three chapters include detailed descriptions of each school leader, their school, school demographics, and lived experiences.

I located all three school leaders through both personal and professional interactions. One school leader leads a school located in a neighborhood near my home. Thus, I have experienced first-hand observations of the culturally responsive systemic decisions the leader makes. I attended a culturally responsive workshop in which one of

the other school leaders led a breakout session that discussed a specific systemic decision she had made while leading, demonstrating the culturally responsive nature of her leadership. The final school leader and I both attended a regional culturally responsive professional development session. I learned some culturally responsive decisions the school leader had made around marginalized students throughout our small group discussions.

Once I identified these three school leaders as potential participants, I contacted each participant by phone, and utilizing a recruitment script, I discussed the research study with them and ensured they met specific participation criteria. The recruitment script allowed me to ensure the participants were current school leaders in a predominantly White high school who self-identified as culturally responsive and had the authority to make decisions around instructional practices, school improvement, and practices and policies that impacted the climate and culture of their school. The script also allowed me to ensure the potential participants had at least three years of leadership experience at their current schools.

To join the study, the potential participants had to self-identify as culturally responsive school leaders. Identifying as culturally responsive is necessary because leaders who are familiar with and self-identify as culturally responsive have a better sense of the actions needed to ensure culturally responsive pedagogy and practices occur in their schools. Culturally responsive school leadership is often marked by

- critically self-reflecting on leadership behaviors;
- developing culturally responsive teachers and curricula;

- promoting a culturally responsive/inclusive school environment; and
- engaging students, parents, and indigenous contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Participants had to be school leaders who had been leading their school for a minimum of three years. Leading school change requires leaders to be comfortable with their school climate and culture so that they can discern the needed changes for success and act on these views. Research has shown that it can take leaders an average of three years to develop and enact their vision for school improvement, increased instructional quality, and the implementation of policies and practices that positively affect the achievement of the students (Tyre, 2015; Van Cleef, 2015). The school leaders who participated in this research study led predominantly White high schools. For this study, predominantly White schools have at least 51% of their student population identifying as White. Because most research around culturally responsive school leadership focuses on leaders in settings often characterized as urban, this study sought to learn more about culturally responsive leadership in schools where the marginalized populations are in the minority.

Finally, the participants had to be school leaders who have the authority to make decisions around instructional practices, school improvement, and practices and policies that impact the climate and culture of the school. These are all areas that may impact the achievement and success of the students at the school. Because this study focused on the systemic decisions made by culturally responsive school leaders and their responses to their stakeholders' reactions, the participants in this study needed the authority to make decisions within their role.



This study used a convenient purposeful sample because the participants were selected based on the previously mentioned criteria; they were also selected based on the location of their schools. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that a convenient sampling is a sampling based on time, money, location, and the availability of sites or respondents. The schools were within a 25-mile radius of my location; the schools were purposefully nearby if the participant chose their school as the interview location. Had I not secured participants for the study through my professional and personal channels, I would have also used network sampling. Network sampling involves other people knowing potential participants who meet the selected criteria and refer them to the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Table 3 identifies the participants, their identified race, gender, school district size, leadership position, and years of experience.

### **Setting**

The participants in this study led predominantly White high schools, at least 51% of the student population identifying as White, located in a Midwest state. Because much of the literature around culturally responsive school leadership addresses leaders in schools comprised predominantly of students of color, this study deliberately looked at culturally responsive school leadership in a different setting.

### **Data Collection**

For this research study, I explored the systemic decisions culturally responsive school leaders made in the best interest of their students and how their lived experiences influenced these decisions. I also explored how these lived experiences underscored the school leaders' responses to their stakeholders' reactions to these systemic decisions. I

Table 3

*Comparison of School Leaders Gender, School District Size, Position, and Experience*

Name	Identified Race	Gender	District Size	Position	Years in Position	Years of Experience
Donald	Black or African American	M	Four High Schools	Assistant Principal	4	10
Joy	Black or African American	F	One School District	Superintendent	3.5	29
Mary	Black or African American	F	One School District	Principal	5	9

used data across multiple participants and triangulated the data to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that utilizing multiple data collection methods and triangulation adds rigor, breadth, and depth to a study while also providing corroborative evidence of the data obtained. For this research study, I used a three-part interview series with multiple participants to provide the data needed to explore how the participants' lived experiences informed the systemic decisions they made. The three-part interview study also provided the data to explore the participants' responses to various stakeholders' reactions to these decisions.

## Interviews

Case studies are about obtaining descriptions and interpretations from others. Interviews are the primary source of data collection for this research study, as they provide opportunities for the participants to provide descriptions and interpretations of their lived experiences. Researchers often use interviews to understand the world from the participants' points of view. Interviews provide opportunities for the meanings of the participants' experiences to unfold. The use of interviews allowed me, the researcher, to demonstrate an interest in understanding the participants' lived experiences and the meanings the participants made of those experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Seidman, 2013).

Through the interviews, the participants recreated their lived personal, professional, and educational histories to help explain possible reasons for the systemic decisions they made as school leaders. The recreation of the lived histories also provided possible explanations for how the leaders responded to their stakeholders' responses to these systemic decisions. A three-part interview series (Seidman, 2013) provided the structure for the participants to share their personal, professional, and educational histories.

The first interview included the completion of a demographic questionnaire (See Appendix A). Following the demographic survey, the participant participated in a semi-structured interview designed to allow for a discussion rather than a question-and-answer format. The first research question - What are the personal and educational life histories of three self-identified culturally responsive school leaders in a predominantly White

school? - provided the basis for the first interview. This interview, which lasted about 60 minutes, allowed the participant the opportunity to share their lived personal, professional, and educational experiences through their lens. Between the first interview and the second interview, the participant received a transcript and summary of the interview, allowing them the opportunity to review and member check the conversation and my interpretations of the data.

At the beginning of the second interview, I asked the participant if any items from the summary need clarification. I also asked any clarifying questions I might have had from summarizing the previous interview's data. Following the clarification period, the second interview, which again lasted no longer than 60 minutes, focused on the second and third research questions. These questions - How do the life experiences described in the self-identified culturally responsive school leaders' life histories influence the systemic decision they make? How do the self-identified culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White schools respond to the various stakeholders as they enact these systemic decisions? - drove the direction of this interview. The second interview allowed the participant to discuss any systemic decisions they have made in their setting. The second interview also allowed the participants to examine their stakeholders' reactions to the decisions and how the previously discussed' lived experiences may have informed their responses to these reactions. Between this interview and the third interview, the participant received a transcript and summary of the interview, allowing them the opportunity to review and member check the conversation and my interpretations of the data.

Like the second interview, the third interview allowed clarification for both the participant and the researcher. Following the time for clarification, the third interview provided the participant time to reflect on the meaning of their involvement in this research study. This final interview, which again lasted about 60 minutes, provided the participant with the opportunity to reflect on how their participation in this research study impacted them professionally and personally. It also allowed the participant to discuss how the two previous interviews may have contributed to their current beliefs and values.

Provided the participant's schedule allowed, the entire three-interview series (See Appendix B) took no more than three weeks. Seidman (2013) explains that spacing each interview within the series from three days to one week apart provides time for the participant to reflect on the previous interview but not lose a connection between the interviews. The time in between also allowed me, the researcher, the opportunity to prepare an interpretative summary soon after the interview enabling the participant to member check the information before proceeding (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Seidman, 2013). The limitations associated with interviews include the fact that interviews are not a neutral method of data gathering, as they result from the interactions between the participant and the interviewer as well as the context of where the interview takes place (Finlay, 2002; Seidman, 2013). The interviews took place at a location of the participant's choosing, often their school office, to account for these limitations.

### **Data Validity**

Data validity ensures that the participants' realities of the studied phenomena are accurately represented (Creswell & Miller, 2000). According to Creswell (2009), there

are eight validation strategies frequently used by qualitative researchers, and researchers should engage in at least two of them in any research study. For this study, data triangulation occurred within the three participants' three-interview series. I shared the detailed, thick descriptions developed from the interview data with each participant for member checking. Once I completed their chapter, each participant also member checked the chapter. I also used researcher reflexivity as a validation strategy to reflect on my assumptions, beliefs, and biases throughout the research study.

The triangulation of data addresses concerns of validity with the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data triangulation occurs across the data received from the three participants' three-interview series. Participants had opportunities for member checking to confirm the credibility of the information gleaned from the interviews. These member checking opportunities followed each interview and the completion of the participants' chapters. Member checking allowed the participants to play a role in the validity process. Each participant's chapter highlights their lived experiences. This thick, rich description is another validity check. With the vivid descriptions of the participants, their context, and their thoughts and feelings, readers can better understand that the account is credible (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Researcher reflexivity also took place throughout the data analysis and the findings, serving as another validity check. Reflexivity disclosed my assumptions, beliefs, and biases that might have shaped the study's inquiry. Creswell and Miller (2000) explain the importance of acknowledging and describing the researcher's beliefs and biases to allow the readers

to understand the researcher's positions and allow the researcher to bracket their assumptions and biases throughout the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that data collection and data analysis should be a simultaneous process in a research study, as there are large amounts of data to review, reduce, and synthesize. For this research study, data analysis occurred throughout the research study process. I began analyzing data between participants' interviews throughout their three-part series. Moreover, the analysis continued following the final participant's final interview. Reflexivity occurred concurrently with data collection. Throughout the participant interviews, I reflected on my assumptions, beliefs, and biases and how they may have shaped my data collection. I also reflected on my assumptions, beliefs, and bias as I analyzed the data.

I used the Dedoose platform to organize the coding of the three participants' three-interview series. First, I explored relationships and connections between participants' responses and the culturally responsive school leadership framework with this platform. Next, I explored the leaders' systemic decisions, what led to those decisions, and the responses from various stakeholders regarding those decisions. Finally, I explored how the leaders' responded to their stakeholders' reactions to their decisions and what role their lived experiences may have played in those responses. I started by categorizing each of the five parts of the culturally responsive school leadership framework (e.g., grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy, ongoing critical self-awareness, culturally responsive teachers and curricula, culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and

engagement of students and families in community contexts.) Then I categorized common themes that evolved from multiple participants.

Data analysis also included the thick descriptions of each participant, their lived histories, and their current school context. This thick description provided a portrait of the participant and their role in the research. Thick descriptions increase the complexity of the research by thoroughly describing the study's setting, participants, and lived experiences. In addition, the thick descriptions allow the readers to derive contextualized meanings from the collected data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Finally, I also analyzed the decisions each participant enacted, their thoughts and feelings behind those decisions, and how their lived experiences played a role in responding to stakeholder responses to their systemic decisions.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological case study explored how the lived experiences of the school leaders underlie the systemic decisions they make in the best interest of their students, especially for their students from marginalized populations. It also explored how these lived experiences inform the participants' responses to their stakeholders' reactions to these systemic decisions. The research study explored the phenomenon through the lens of the culturally responsive school leadership framework. This chapter outlined the methods for data collection, data validity, and data analysis.

In this chapter, I explained the methodology for the research design. First, I explained why I chose a phenomenological case study as the research design. Next, I discussed how I identified and selected research participants who were from a specific



setting. Then, I explained my data collection process and elaborated on each participant's three-part interview series structure. Next, I explained how I would ensure data validity and the data analysis process I used for the study.

The following three chapters will share the thick description of each participant. In the three participant-focused chapters, I explore the themes that evolved from the influence of the lived experiences on the leaders' systemic decision-making and the leaders' responses to their stakeholders' reactions.

## CHAPTER IV

### DONALD—HIGH SCHOOL ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

#### **Childhood**

When Donald describes his experiences growing up, he uses the word humbling, yet he feels that these experiences, along with his faith, have cultivated him to be the man he is today. Donald maintains a stern desire to make sure his family never has to experience what he experienced. Donald, a surviving twin at birth, was the second of eight children. Born and raised in one of the three major sections of a large Midwestern metropolitan area, Donald was the product of divorce at the age of three. He and his older brother served as the father figure of the home, helping to raise their six younger siblings. Donald and his family experienced many hardships throughout his childhood. His family experienced living in poverty and the lower socio-economic bracket, and they utilized food stamps to provide for the family's needs.

Donald's neighborhood elementary school was not the best environment where academics and safety were concerned. Because they were not ideal schools to attend, Donald and his brother were bussed 10 to 15 minutes across town to a local elementary school for kindergarten through eighth grade. Having not known anything else, Donald recognizes his primary education as a productive experience; however, not much stands out to him about it. The one strong memory Donald has about his school is his sixth-grade teacher.

While Donald's elementary school was predominantly Black and Hispanic, the staff working there was predominantly White. Donald's first Black male teacher, however, was his sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Washington. Mr. Washington took pride in his appearance, wearing a suit every day along with his gators and his Jheri curl. Donald, who thinks fondly of Mr. Washington, prides his appearance on what he saw Mr. Washington model. Moreover, Mr. Washington was an example for Donald on what he could accomplish. Donald remembers thinking, "I can do that. I can strive to be that." Mr. Washington's example was not just something that was in the back of his mind as an elementary student, but also something that was tucked away in the back of his mind throughout college, in his subsequent educational positions, as well as in his current position as he continues to impact his current high school students.

### **High School**

While Donald does not feel his elementary education was groundbreaking, he does credit his elementary school for preparing him to attend one of the top-tier selective college preparatory high schools in his area. Donald's high school was a selective admission ninth- through twelfth-grade school. Students were chosen based on a formula that incorporated standardized test scores, middle school academic grades, and entrance exam results. Donald's high school was a multiethnic high school, with about 30 percent of its population represented by Black students. Donald describes these demographics as "enough of us to feel welcome, but it was 30 percent of 4,500 students, so it was enough of us."

Much like elementary school, Donald used public transportation to get to high school, taking two busses to school and two busses to return home. While in high school, Donald participated in the school's gospel choir, and he would arrive at school by 6:00 in the morning for rehearsals every day for four years. His grit, perseverance, and determination set Donald up for success at his high school, where he graduated in the top third of his class. He credits the stiff competition at his high school, from the selective enrollment his freshman year to graduating in the top third of his class, to further ingrain that he could continue to be academically successful when he went off to college. Donald knew that academic success was the norm for his peers, so why wouldn't it be the norm for him.

### **Post-High School**

Donald, a first-generation college graduate, received an academic scholarship to attend an evangelical Christian university located close to his family. When Donald arrived at this university, he had planned to major in music and develop a professional gospel career. However, Donald was struggling with his first two music courses because he could not read music. The music department was ready to send him home, but the Dean of Education called him in for an impromptu meeting. At this meeting, she told him that she had been watching him, and she noticed that he was always speaking in front of groups. The Dean of Education asked Donald if he had ever considered being a teacher, which had not been on his radar. To this day, Donald strongly believes that the Lord brought this Dean into his life to make Donald's career in education happen.

Throughout his four years attending this Christian university, Donald participated in the gospel choir. His participation in the choir afforded him opportunities that he would not have had otherwise, which he feels helped nurture and develop him into the man he is today. During his freshman year, Donald toured Japan for two weeks; his junior year, he went on a mission trip to South Africa for six weeks. Finally, during his senior year, he traveled to London for two weeks. Having grown up with the hardships he experienced in the neighborhood he was raised in, Donald recognizes that these experiences were not typical for a boy with his background. However, Donald also notes that this is the type of trajectory his life has often taken. He has always been placed in the right situations at the right time, allowing him to experience different things.

When Donald graduated at 21 years old, no one immediately hired him to teach. He used the grit, perseverance, and passion he had learned along his educational path to secure a teaching position about three weeks into the school year. Donald showed up every day at a school down the street from his apartment and asked them to put him to work. For those first three weeks, he served as a substitute teacher until the administrator hired him to teach sixth grade. Donald taught at this school for two years before moving to the East Coast.

Donald and his wife lived on the East Coast for eight years, during which he taught in a major metropolitan city. While on the East Coast, he also received his Master of Education in Administration through a public research university located in a city nearby. During his first year of teaching on the East Coast, Donald taught in the inner city. However, his wife pushed him to consider working in the suburbs, saying to him,

“The kids in the hood need you, but the kids in the suburbs may never know you even exist.” This thought-provoking statement was the catalyst for Donald’s transition from urban education to suburban education, and this transition, Donald states, was a mission calling. To this day, Donald comes to work every day, seeing it as a calling for the cultural dynamics, opportunities, and examples he demonstrates every day.

### **Administration**

Donald's wife also planted the seed of administration in him. She believed he was a great teacher who could do great things as an administrator, and she strongly encouraged him to become a principal by 30 years of age. After some serious consideration and his wife's support and encouragement, Donald had his principal certification by 29 years old and his first assistant principal job that same year. For the next five years, while living on the East Coast, Donald served in an administrator role.

In 2015, Donald and his wife moved back to their home state. His first role upon his return was again in administration, as the PBIS coordinator in a predominantly Hispanic school district consisting of two preschools, a STEAM academy for primary age students, 12 elementary schools, three middle schools, one high school, and one alternative high school. The school district also had a magnet school for intermediate and middle school-aged students. As PBIS coordinator, Donald worked to create systems to address attendance issues at the buildings assigned to him. He also worked to create systems to address the extensive discipline issues at these buildings and support teachers to more adequately engage with their students and families. After a year in this role,

Willow Park High School hired Donald as their assistant principal. Donald was the first Black administrator to be hired at this school.

### **Current Setting**

Willow Park High School is a predominantly White high school located in the Willow Park School District, a predominantly White consolidated district. The district consists of 17 elementary schools, seven middle schools, and four high schools; there is also an early learning center and an alternative school for middle school and high school-aged students located in the district. Located in the southwest suburbs of a large metropolitan city, Willow Park School District serves students from about a 60-square mile area, including parts of Willow Park, Silverleaf, Coral Springs, Westwood, Oak Grove, Edgewater, and Pinewood. Table 4 shows the population and income for each of the communities served by Willow Park Consolidated School District, highlighting the diversity of the students attending Willow Park Consolidated School District. Table 5 shows the racial demographics for the communities served by Willow Park Consolidated School District. Willow Park High School has 2,328 students with a 14% low-income population and a 10% special education population. Table 6 shows the racial demographics for both the students and staff at Willow Park High School.

Table 4

*Population and Income of Communities Served by Willow Park Consolidated School District*

Community	Population Estimates	Median Household Income	Poverty Rate	Unemployment Rate
Willow Park	44,138	\$126,127	2%	4%
Silverleaf	75,178	\$85,643	7%	4%
Coral Springs	20,568	\$54,594	12%	4%
Westwood	148,099	\$67,504	11%	6%
Oakridge	25,508	\$84,147	6%	5%
Edgewater	148,304	\$118,187	4%	4%
Pinewood	39,624	\$77,053	7%	4%

Note. Data are from “Quick Facts: United States, 2020” by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 (<https://www.Census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PSTO452>). In the public domain.

As one of two assistant principals at Willow Park High School, Donald oversees discipline and building and operations. He is in charge of four deans of students, five campus monitors, four lunchroom supervisors, 12 custodians, and three attendance secretaries. The administrative team divides up the evaluations of the certified staff members; therefore, Donald also evaluates several certified staff members each year. Donald also sits on the district's Cultural Competency Committee. For the past two years, he has helped spearhead the district's intentional recruitment, hiring, and retention of diverse and minority staff members. Ensuring a diverse staff is a passion of Donald's, a passion heightened by him being the first Black administrator in his school's history.



Table 5

*Demographics of Communities Served by Willow Park Consolidated School District*

Community	White	Black	Hispanic/Latino <sup>a</sup>	Asian	Multiracial	Other Races
Willow Park	77%	8%	14%	8%	3%	4%
Silverleaf	48%	19%	25%	12%	5%	16%
Coral Springs	65%	23%	18%	4%	4%	4%
Westwood	66%	17%	30%	2%	3%	12%
Oakridge	92%	2%	8%	2%	1%	3%
Edgewater	72%	5%	6%	18%	3%	2%
Pinewood	59%	11%	33%	7%	4%	19%

Note. Data are from “Quick Facts: United States, 2020” by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PSTO452>). In the public domain.

<sup>a</sup> People identifying as Hispanic or Latino may be of any race, so also are included in any/all or applicable race categories above.

Table 6

*Demographics of Willow Park High School*

Group	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Multiracial	Other Races	Not Reported
Students	66%	7%	14%	9%	4%		
Staff	93%	1%	5%	1%	0%	0%	0%

Note. From *Illinois Report Card*, by Illinois State Board of Education, 2020 (<https://www.illinoisreportcard.com>)

Through his participation on this committee, Donald has also worked to include staff professional development that helps his teachers see the curriculum through the eyes of those they teach.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed Donald's childhood lived educational and personal experiences. Then, I talked about his experiences in high school, including clubs and activities he participated in both during and out of school; I shared his post-high school lived experiences, including events that occurred in college. Finally, I wrapped up the chapter with a discussion about his current setting. I communicated his current high school demographics and discussed different leadership experiences and decisions. Throughout this chapter, I also shared Donald's different thoughts and feelings during these various lived experiences throughout his life.

## CHAPTER V

### JOY—HIGH SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT

#### **Childhood**

Joy, who grew up in a Black neighborhood, never went to school with anyone that was a color other than Black until she went to college. Joy recalls her mother working to put a roof over her head and food in her mouth, but sometimes they went without lights or gas. "I grew up in poverty; I just didn't know that I was living in poverty" (Joy, personal communication, March 4, 2020). While growing up in her hometown, some families owned their homes, but most, like Joy's family, rented. However, regardless of Joy's childhood socioeconomic status, her mother always taught her and her brother to hold their heads up high.

Joy's education began in a Catholic school setting until around seventh or eighth grade when her mother could no longer afford it; at that point, Joy and her siblings attended public school. Joy attended school with other Black students during her Catholic school years, yet most of her teachers were White. Joy had two teachers at her Catholic school who were Black, one was her female third/fourth-grade teacher, and the other was her male sixth-grade teacher. Joy considers her third-grade teacher, Ms. Goco, to be an instrumental part of her life. This teacher recognized that Joy was shy and withdrawn, and she pushed Joy to participate in programs that would help set her up for success in later life. Programs like *Great Books*, Girl Scouts, Candy-Stripers, Ballet Lessons, Piano

Lessons, and Charm School were all activities Ms. Goco and Joy's mom enrolled her in to help her get a good education. Joy's mom felt that these activities would enable her to take care of herself because she could not depend on anyone else to do that for her.

### **High School**

During high school, Joy attended a public school system that academically tracked students. Joy was a scholastically talented student; her elementary principal had previously tried to get her mom to place her in a school for gifted kids, but her mom refused to separate her from her peers. Before entering high school, Joy and her brother took the track test to establish their academic class placement. Joy scored into track one, which meant she was college-bound and required to take certain classes; her brother scored into track three, which groomed students for a trade. Joy had completed her required high school credits before the second semester of her senior year, enabling her to participate in a work-study program. Her guidance counselor set her up with a file clerk position based on an aptitude test, although Joy would have preferred to participate in a work-study program aligned with her college-tracked classes.

### **Post-High School**

Joy knew she wanted to be a teacher. For as long as she could remember, she wanted to be a teacher. When she went to Catholic school, Joy wanted to be a nun who taught, and when Joy switched to public school, she decided she wanted to be a gym teacher. Her mom did not understand why she wanted to be a gym teacher and decided to show her another opportunity. She took Joy to a school for severely handicapped students, and it was there that Joy fell in love with special education. Following high

school, Joy attended a teachers' college located near her home in the Midwest. When Joy attended, it was an all-Black college that would allow her to pursue her dream of teaching and her future goals of getting her master's in education. Joy received her undergraduate degree in elementary education and special education, and her first job was in special education. Through her role as a special education teacher, Joy experienced discrimination in many ways. Her first classroom was in the basement; there was no public announcement (PA) system in the room, and they were isolated from everyone else. Joy remembers walking into the room, thinking, "How do you do this?" The lack of resources and the isolation of her room was when Joy realized she wanted to address equity issues with kids in special education.

Joy taught in other schools where she experienced discrimination against both her students and her. In another school Joy taught at, she was one of two Black teachers, and while treated ok, Joy always felt she still had to work harder than her colleagues to prove herself. After some time, Joy moved to another school district while she worked on her master's degree. This school district supported the needs of children with disabilities; Joy worked there one summer, and when she arrived, she experienced discrimination towards her. Upon Joy's arrival, the school principal informed Joy that her presence was not required until the following day because the aides did not report until the following day. When Joy informed the principal that she was a teacher, he showed her to her classroom back in the basement corner. The principal let her know there would be a staff meeting at the end of the day. When she arrived at the staff meeting, all the related service providers (i.e., the Occupational Therapists, the Physical Therapists, the Speech-Language

Pathologists) were there. When Joy asked them why none of them had come to schedule their time with her students, they responded that they were waiting for the teacher to arrive. Again, Joy had to explain that she was the teacher. Joy spent that entire summer with only her two classroom aides speaking to her. Against her better judgment, Joy went back to work in this school the following summer at the request of a new principal. This principal then asked Joy to join her at her new school that fall. Joy worked for this principal for a short time; however, during this time, the principal encouraged Joy to go into administration. To this day, Joy considers this principal to be an influential person in her life, having planted the seed that she could be a successful administrator.

### **Administration**

At the urging of her principal, Joy applied for and became the principal in a general education building that supported students with disabilities, as it was a handicap-accessible building. Joy was younger than all of her teachers, and she was the first black principal to lead this building. Her school was in an impoverished neighborhood, and she had to learn how to lead special education teachers, which was her background, and general education teachers. Joy learned how to communicate with her school community about the rights their kids deserved to have. She worked to empower her teachers at this school.

Joy worked at this building for five years before her superintendent moved her to another school on the affluent side of town. The superintendent moved her to this school to "straighten it out." When Joy arrived at this school, she learned that immeasurable racial discrimination occurred in this building. During her first year at this school, Joy did

not renew the contract of four tenured and one nontenured teacher due to how they were treating the students. Joy recalls her first indication of racial discrimination was when she saw a first-grade student hanging, with his hands, from a locker door. When Joy told him to come out of the locker because he would hurt himself, his teacher said, "Oh no, he's being punished." Joy had to explain to the teacher that they would not be punishing students by having them hang on the inside of a locker. Joy went into a classroom in that same building and saw a Black student with his lunch tray on the floor. When Joy asked the student why he was sitting there and then told him to go sit at a desk, the teacher said, "No, I don't want him to get the desk dirty." Joy told this teacher that this punishment would not continue, and by the end of the year, she released the teacher. Joy saw another teacher at the school punish a student by making him sit under her desk and another who would score all her Black students low. Joy talked to both teachers and coached them both about how to work with students properly. She recalls working hard to get rid of the "bad teachers because they had to go." Joy had taken over this building from one of her colleagues, and she mentioned that through this experience, she learned, "Just because I was doing something that I thought was in the best interest of kids, not everybody was" doing the same.

Joy applied for a position when another school located in a different district had a principal position open. However, the district's superintendent informed her that she would not be getting the position because it would go to a board member's wife. He let her know she was the only external person interviewed and that he had been following

her career, and he knew she was doing good things. It was at this time that Joy decided to pursue her doctoral degree.

The advisor for her doctoral program was a White male who said to her, "You have a master's. Isn't that enough?" This advisor taught one of her classes and would talk slower to her and another Black student or asked them if he was making sense. When Joy learned that a White student received an A in the class that he did not complete any work, and she received an A for the work she had done, she requested a new advisor. Her new advisor ended up being the superintendent who had been following her career but could not hire her due to the position going to a board member. The following year she got a call from his school district offering her the principal position of an elementary school, which she accepted.

When a Director of Instruction and Student Services position opened, her superintendent/advisor told her she should apply for it. He told her she would not get it, but she would get experience interviewing for the role. She did not get the position, but when a new superintendent came in, a Director of Instruction position opened, and Joy applied for it. She got the job, but after three weeks, she was promoted to an assistant superintendent position because there was a sudden opening. Because of this unexpected opening, Joy ended up learning everything about Central Office while steering the ship. Her colleagues questioned why she was promoted and felt she had received some type of favoritism. After five years of working in this role, her superintendent retired, and Joy applied for his job. She did not get it; the search firm told her she did not get the position because they did not hire internal candidates. The person hired for the superintendent



position continuously piled work on Joy to ensure she was not successful in her role. When she had had enough, she began to pursue other opportunities; however, the Board President had clued her in that the current superintendent was leaving, and he was hoping she would wait it out. Two months later, he was gone, and Joy became interim superintendent. The following year the school board removed the interim title, and Joy was the superintendent of that school district for nine years until she retired. During her time as superintendent, she increased Advanced Placement (AP) course offerings and Black students taking AP courses. She took the district from a provisional accreditation to full accreditation; she also had two new schools built in the Black neighborhood, historically known for closed schools.

After accomplishing all of these things over her nine years as the superintendent, Joy had plans to retire and start a consulting business; however, through her connections in different organizations, a search firm sought her out for a superintendent position, first in one suburban school district. When that series of interviews did not result in her leading that suburban district, the same search firm sought her out to fill the position for Midtown East High School District.

### **Current Setting**

Midtown East is a one-school school district located in Midtown, a suburb of a large metropolitan city. Midtown East High School serves the students from both Midtown and Eastview, a suburb located just west of Midtown. Table 7 shows the population and income for Midtown and Eastview, highlighting the diversity of the students attending Midtown East High School. Table 8 shows the racial demographics for

the communities served by Midtown East High School. Midtown East High School has a population of 3,400 students with a 19% low-income population and a 17% special education population. Table 9 shows the racial demographics for both the students and staff at Midtown East High School.

Table 7

*Population and Income of Communities Served by Midtown East High School*

Community	Population Estimates	Median Household Income	Poverty Rate	Unemployment Rate
Midtown	52,265	\$91,945	8%	5%
Eastview	10,903	\$121,908	4%	2%

Note. Data are from “Quick Facts: United States, 2020” by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 (<https://www.Census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PSTO452>). In the public domain.

Table 8

*Demographics of Communities Served by Midtown East High School*

Community	White	Black	Hispanic/Latino <sup>a</sup>	Asian	Multiracial	Other Races
Midtown	69%	18%	9%	5%	5%	3%
Eastview	85%	6%	6%	5%	2%	2%

Note. Data are from “Quick Facts: United States, 2020” by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 (<https://www.Census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PSTO452>). In the public domain.

<sup>a</sup> People identifying as Hispanic or Latino may be of any race, so also are included in any/all or applicable race categories above

Table 9

*Demographics of Midtown East High School*

Group	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Multiracial	Other Races	Not Reported
Students	56%	20%	12%	9%	3%		
Staff	76%	8%	7%	3%	0%	2%	4%

Note. From *Illinois Report Card*, by Illinois State Board of Education, 2020 (<https://www.illinoisreportcard.com>)

Joy began her tenure at Midtown East High School three and a half years ago as an interim superintendent, with the plan to stay in the role for one year and then return to her hometown to pursue her consulting business. However, when the school board went to interview to fill the role permanently, she was questioned by board members, teachers, parents, and students about her intentions to apply. She had not planned on applying for the position, but as more people asked, including her teachers, she decided to throw her hat in the ring. After attending several interviews and the school board conducting a site visit of her previous school district, Joy became the Midtown East High School superintendent, where she has been for the past four years.

As the superintendent of Midtown East High School, Joy's responsibilities encompass everything. She is responsible for ensuring all of her students get a quality education with the least number of barriers and challenges in their way. Joy must guarantee the safety of her students and staff while they are at Midtown East High School. She ensures the school is a good fiscal steward of the district's money and ensures the people hired to work in Midtown East are highly qualified to do their jobs.

Joy's responsibilities also include ensuring students have the best resources possible and that the curricular resources placed in front of these students are rigorous. As the top school leader of Midtown East High School, Joy is also accountable for implementing the policies and procedures of the school board.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I shared Joy's childhood and high school educational and personal lived experiences. Then I discussed her post-high school experiences, including post-secondary schooling and her teaching positions over time. Next, I discussed Joy's administrative path, including her roles as a building leader and her roles in the district office, which led her to the superintendent role. Finally, I revealed Joy's personal and professional lived experiences in her current setting. I start this section by sharing the demographics of her current setting, and then I explained the various decisions Joy has made along her administrative journey. Throughout the chapter, I communicated the thoughts and feelings Joy shared regarding these numerous lived experiences.

## CHAPTER VI

### MARY—HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

#### **Family**

Mary grew up in a western suburb of a large municipality on the East Coast; this suburb was predominantly a White suburb, but Mary and her family lived in what was considered the Black section. The Black section of the suburb was the section where there were large concentrations of non-White families. As Mary grew up in this neighborhood, she considered herself a child of the community. It seemed to Mary that everyone in the community (i.e., church members, older people looking out their windows, the dope dealer on the corner, and the "aunties" on the street) were responsible for her upbringing, as her dad was a well-known member of the community. He was one of the founders of the senior center and the community center in the neighborhood, and he had been a community activist since he was in high school. When Mary returns home to visit family, it still feels like she is everyone's kid, even as an adult. This feeling is something that she still takes pride in because this demonstrates strong values, especially values around the community and caring for one another. Mary has an older brother, an older sister, and a younger sister. Although her parents divorced when she was a child, she remained close to both parents; they lived across the street from each other, and although things might have been hard at times, they made things work because of Mary and her siblings.

Education has always been important to Mary, and this began with messages from her mother. Mary's mother instilled the importance of education in Mary and her siblings at a young age. Mary remembers her and her sister beginning their homework immediately after school without any adult needing to tell her. Part of this was out of respect for her mom, but it was also the way Mary and her sister set themselves up to honor what their mom wanted for them, a good education that would yield experiences for them that their mom never had.

Mary's father had many articles written about him. He was a well-known athlete, but he was also a well-known student who used his sports platform to advocate for a culturally relevant curriculum. He stood up for a curriculum that would include books that spoke to the narratives and histories of black people. Mary's dad played college basketball and some semi-professional basketball before becoming a union organizer at hospitals.

### **Primary and Secondary Education**

Mary attended public school from kindergarten to third grade; when she was in third grade, her mother married her stepfather, who began working at a private school to help them afford the tuition for her and her older sister. It was this private Christian school that Mary attended from third through twelfth grade. Mary and her sister rode a bus to their private Christian school, located outside the large municipality she grew up near. The school was not diverse; for many of the years that she attended, Mary and her sister were the only Black students in their grades. Attending this school was emotionally challenging for Mary. There were times she would resist going to school because all of

her friends from home were going to their neighborhood school while she attended school in this all-White space. Mary described attending the private school and navigating that space as exhausting.

As a student, Mary experienced peers making ignorant comments, touching her hair, and touching her skin. Furthermore, although she expressed these things to her mom and saw that they bothered her mom, she was still made to attend the school. Her mom tried to see the larger picture of what going to that well-known and prestigious school could yield for her daughters later. Although Mary remembers these negative experiences, she also remembers having built close relationships with some great teachers. Her art teacher was very instrumental during her time at the private school, as art class was an escape for her, the same way sports and other creative venues became an escape for her.

As Mary continued through school, she began to reconcile the things she was learning at home through conversations that adults had with the things taught to her while at school. The history she learned by being around older people and listening to the adults around her home and neighborhood talk was different from the history she was being taught. Mary remembers offering these different perspectives in her classes, perspectives that were not welcomed by all. Mary also feels she learned a lot about navigating the world by listening to how her parents, great-grandparents, grandmothers, and grandfathers navigated the world.

### **Post-High School**

Mary attended a private research university in the Midwest for her undergraduate years; she chose this school because she had received a full scholarship. Mary was a good student, but she knew she would have to figure out how to finance her education. Her older sister was three years older than her and attended a public research university on a full-ride scholarship. The private university's full-ride scholarship offered Mary this same opportunity. Mary received academic and athletic scholarships from a variety of schools. However, Mary chose this private research university because she wanted to capitalize on the education she knew she could receive. Mary also chose this school, and this scholarship, in part, to honor her father.

While Mary's college was another predominantly White school, Mary felt connected because of her basketball team. Being on the team provided her a support system of sorts as she navigated this White space similar to her schooling experience. Mary is still close with a number of her teammates and friends who played for other schools across all different sports. Mary is also still connected to the assistant coach who had recruited her. When the assistant coach visited Mary's home on the East Coast, she promised Mary's dad that she would watch out for Mary as she grew and developed as a young black woman. Moreover, Mary feels her assistant coach continues to ensure her continued growth and development to this day.

Relationships have always been important to Mary. From elementary and high school relationships with teachers that she continues to maintain as an adult to relationships with various professors and coaches that she also continues to hold dear,



Mary has had several people who have impacted her in one way or another. One professor at her university, who taught African American Studies, had a tremendous impact on her. It was his style of teaching and how he weaved the arts in with his history lessons. Mary always felt that she would be like him if she ever became a teacher, providing her students with a comprehensive experience learning history. Mary's academic advisor, a black male, poured into all his advisees. Mary always felt he was someone to talk to who understood her, and to this day, she is still in touch with him.

### **Post-Undergrad Employment and Education**

Mary had a mentor teacher at the first high school she worked at; this teacher poured into Mary like she was his child. She was able to talk to him about anything. Mary had a close relationship with her dad, and because she was attending school far away from her dad and her family, this teacher filled that void. While working on her masters at a predominantly White but still diverse, private Roman Catholic University, Mary had a Black female professor who was very influential in her life. This person impacted Mary's life in that she even supported Mary when she went through an onerous hiring process to secure her current position. This process included contentious board meetings, sometimes attended by over 500 people. Mary attended a public university for her doctoral studies that prides itself on being ethnically and culturally rich.

Before Mary began teaching, she took a job in a high school athletic department. This high school was a diverse high school located in a town that included a private research university in its attendance area. In this role, she developed the system of accountability to monitor students' academic progress, and she ensured they were eligible

to participate in all types of extracurricular activities such as sports, theater, and clubs. Mary created structures for reporting and ensuring the students received the academic support they needed to maintain their eligibility.

Mary left the high school's athletic department to accept a teaching position in the high school's history department, teaching history and social science. As a teacher at this school, Mary taught African American Studies, Middle Eastern History, Asian History, Latin American Studies, and World Civics. The high school's curriculum allowed her to teach these areas through the humanities course and a single-topic semester class. While Mary did not teach a dedicated United States History Class, she did mention that "African American Studies *in* United States History, because ideally United States History would be taught through the perspectives of many different people." Mary was also a literacy coach in the history department.

As a classroom teacher, Mary infused critical race theory in her instruction. Infusing critical race theory in her instruction was especially crucial to Mary in Western Civilization and World Civilizations. These are courses primarily told through a White perspective, so laying out some of the prompts and fundamental tenets of critical race theory helped students identify what information was missing in those courses or what other perspectives could contribute to the readings. Her instruction provided students a jumping point for researching and seeing how they could fill in some of those missing pieces. This approach helped her students learn to ask different types of questions when learning new information.

Mary transitioned out of the classroom while at this high school. The high school created a residency program for Mary, allowing her to complete her doctoral program's required residency while also getting paid for a full year of work. Through this residency program, Mary worked directly under the principal as the school moved particular student supports forward. The supports Mary created were tiered supports across the building while also bringing professional development conversations around racial equity to light. Following her year creating these tiered supports, Mary took a position as the Director of Academic Supports. In this position, she was again building tiered supports across the school. She was heavily involved in the professional development strands, which included a racial equity strand. As the Director of Academic Supports, Mary co- led her high school districts' equity leadership team and guided the district's work around racial equity and culturally relevant teaching in the building.

Mary worked hard to model and live everything she talked about and believed as a classroom teacher and an administrator at her high school. In the classroom, Mary modeled her values through the integration of critical race theory in her instruction. She modeled her beliefs as the Director of Academic Supports by creating a weekend academic program for students. Historically schools have been structured around order and compliance, and Mary wanted to create a space of affirmation for students outside of the systemic schooling practices. She spent a semester talking to students who were supposed to attend the high school's morning support class but were instead missing the class to hang out in the hallways or do something else. She asked them questions about how they identified racially, when they had felt affirmed in their identity when they felt

good about school and themselves, and when a teacher connected with them and "spoke life into them"—connected with them and inspired them. After a semester of collecting this anecdotal data, Mary created the weekend academic program and used her data as a foundational component of the program. The weekend academic program was a voluntary support program for the students and took place on Saturdays. Mary arranged for student transportation, hired the staff and tutors across all content areas, and provided food. This voluntary Saturday program would have as many as 1,500 students attend. (The school's total enrollment was around 3,100.) The weekend academic program eventually morphed into a variety of things. It was a tutoring hub where kids could access support and get their homework done. Attending allowed students to “buy-down” their detentions by receiving counseling from deans and social workers while in attendance. This weekend academic program was Mary’s first inkling into what was possible.

After 10 years at this high school, first in the athletic department, then as a classroom teacher, and lastly, as an administrator, Mary began working in another high school district located just west of a nearby major metropolitan city. This high school district created a position modeled after Mary's Director of Academic Support position, and they hired Mary to fill it. So while she knew the position, she had to forge all new relationships while building up this district’s new position. Mary feels that relationships are the most important aspect of anything, so she spent significant time with people in the spaces that mattered most to them (i.e., co-planning lessons, co-teaching, just being in their classes). Mary knew that relationships were crucial for her to put new structures in place. She needed her staff to feel like they were a part of the building process and had a

collective responsibility for the success of these structures. She knew that would only happen if she first built relationships and established trust.

While at this high school, Mary created a professional development model with different focus areas for professional development. This new model provided consistency in professional development, which had previously been lacking. She worked with facilitators to write the curriculum for the different professional development strands that people could participate in, and she worked to ensure all the strands were grounded in racial equity. Mary again built several student supports; these supports included a reading program, a tutoring center, and day-to-day Tier 1 classroom supports. She also worked closely with the special education department to ensure that teachers were utilizing all support levels (i.e., Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports) before initiating special education case studies for students.

Mary spent four years at this high school before leaving and becoming Principal of Clearview High School. Mary feels that her entire life experiences have prepared her to lead Clearview High School.

### **Current Setting**

Clearview High School is a high school located in a northern suburb of a large metropolitan city. Clearview High School serves students from Clearview, Westview, and several unincorporated areas, including Somerset North, Somerset South, Darwin, and Blue River. Table 10 shows the population and income for each of the communities served by Clearview High School, highlighting the diversity of the students attending Clearview High School. Table 11 shows the racial demographics for the communities

served by Clearview High School, including an average of the demographics of the unincorporated areas. Clearview High School has 1,585 students, with 1% of that population identified as low income. Twelve percent of the students at Clearview High School make up the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) classification. Table 12 shows the racial demographics for both the students and staff at Clearview High School.

Table 10

*Population and Income of Communities Served by Clearview High School*

Community	Population Estimates	Median Household Income	Poverty Rate	Unemployment Rate
Clearview	19,544	\$126,127	2%	4%
Westview	5,617	\$85,643	7%	4%
Unincorporated Areas (average)	1,729	\$84,417	6%	8%

Note. Data are from “Quick Facts: United States, 2020” by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 (<https://www.Census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PSTO452>). In the public domain.

Table 11

*Demographics of Communities Served by Clearview High School*

Community	White	Black	Hispanic/Latino <sup>a</sup>	Asian	Multiracial	Other Races
Clearview	87%	2%	4%	8%	2%	1%
Westview	91%	1%	2%	7%	1%	0%
Unincorporated Areas (average)	90%	1%	24%	3%	3%	3%

Note. Data are from “Quick Facts: United States, 2020” by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 (<https://www.Census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PSTO452>). In the public domain.

<sup>a</sup> People identifying as Hispanic or Latino may be of any race, so also are included in any/all or applicable race categories above

Table 12

*Demographics of Clearview High School*

Group	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Multiracial	Other Races	Not Reported
Students	85%	1%	7%	4%	3%		
Staff	98%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%

Note. From *Illinois Report Card*, by Illinois State Board of Education, 2020 (<https://www.illinoisreportcard.com>)

Mary has been serving as the principal of Clearview High School since 2015. In this role, Mary serves as the lead instructional leader of the high school; furthermore, because Clearview High School is a one-school district, Mary also has responsibilities around articulation with the two feeder school districts. She works with the feeder districts aligning their instructional programs and their services and supports for students and families. As principal of Clearview High School, Mary sees her role as supporting the academic, social, and emotional growth of her high school students and supporting the staff, and ensuring they position themselves to be their best selves for the students.

Mary's road to this position was not an easily traversed path. People had warned her that the community viewed the principal of Clearview as the pinnacle of the community. Moreover, she was the furthest person from many residents' minds when they thought of who should lead the school; in fact, there are still people who are still processing the fact that Mary holds this position five years later. It has been difficult for some to wrap their minds around a black woman driving the educational outcome and trajectory of the one school district. When she was moving through the interview/hiring

process, there was much fear, and with heightened fear came unrealistic concerns and terrifying responses. There were many threats against Mary that she had to have security for her first few months as principal. Newspapers wrote some horrible things about her, things that would incite violence against her.

Nevertheless, when people ask Mary how she could persevere through the negative hiring process and how she has managed to stay in this role for over five years, Mary responds by saying, "I know my qualifications for this position. Why would I walk away, stand down, or back down from something that I knew I had every right to pursue." When asked why Mary would have wanted to come to a place that offered her such a hostile welcome, Mary responds by saying, "Why not?"

### **Future Goals and Aspirations**

Mary is currently working on a second doctoral degree. While she has her EdD, she has decided that she would like to get a Ph.D. in Policy Studies. When Mary began her first doctoral program, she started her studies working towards a Ph.D. in Policy Studies in Urban Education. However, Mary switched to the Ed.D. program because she wanted to get her General Administrative Endorsement, allowing her to pursue administration when she was ready. Because Mary had already taken several classes towards a Ph.D. in Policy Studies, she has returned to the public research university where she received her EdD to continue her studies. Mary's future goals involve bridging the divide between policy and research and educational practitioner, as she feels there is a big disconnect between these two. Policy is not one size fits all; thus, Mary sees policy as a significant contributor to the disparities in academic achievement.



### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed Mary's personal, professional, and educational lived experiences. I started with her experiences as a child with her family. Then I shared her experiences throughout her primary and secondary school years. Next, I talked about Mary's experiences in her post-high school setting and followed that with her personal, professional, and educational experiences during her post-undergraduate years. Then I discussed Mary's current setting, including the demographics of the school she currently leads. Finally, I concluded this chapter by sharing Mary's future goals and aspirations, as she included this information during her three-part interview series. Throughout the chapter, I shared the thoughts and feelings Mary expressed about these various lived experiences.

## CHAPTER VII

### CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SYSTEMIC DECISIONS

This phenomenological case study explored (1) if, and how, the lived experiences of culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White schools influenced the systemic decisions the leaders made to ensure a culturally responsive education for an increasingly diverse student population of schools and (2) how these leaders responded to the reactions of their stakeholders as they enacted these culturally responsive systemic decisions. A better understanding of how lived experiences influence culturally responsive leaders' systemic decision-making can provide insight into preparing future leaders. Furthermore, an improved grasp of how culturally responsive school leaders respond to stakeholders' reactions to their decisions as they ensure a culturally responsive education can offer ideas on supporting culturally responsive leaders working to guarantee a culturally responsive learning environment for all students.

This study suggests that school leaders' personal and educational lived experiences may impact their systemic decisions as they ensure all students' success, especially marginalized populations. In this qualitative study, I conducted an individual three-part interview series with three high school leaders. I drew on the culturally responsive school leadership conceptual framework outlined in Chapter Two for the coding, data analysis, and structure of this chapter. This chapter discusses three high school culturally responsive school leaders' experiences and systemic decisions while

leading predominantly White schools. I begin the chapter with a demographic description of the three participants. Table 13 compares the participants regarding their gender, size of their school district, position, and years of experience. Then I explore the leaders' systemic decisions, how their lived experiences may have informed their systemic decisions and their responses to their stakeholders' reactions to their decisions. I explore these findings related to the culturally responsive school leadership conceptual framework by organizing them around this framework's tenets. These tenets include the following:

- School leaders are grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy.
- School leaders possess ongoing critical self-awareness.
- School leaders employ culturally responsive teachers and ensure a culturally responsive curriculum.
- School leaders ensure a culturally responsive and inclusive school environment.
- School leaders engage students and families in community contexts.

I conclude the chapter with an explanation of how this study adds to the existing literature.

## **Demographic Data**

### **Participants**

This study included three high school leaders who work in predominantly White schools, with at least 51% of their students identifying as White. The participants held the following positions: (a) a superintendent of a one-school school district, (b) a principal of

a one-school school district, and (c) an assistant principal in charge of discipline and building and operations, as well as a sitting member on the district's Cultural Competency Committee in a multi-school community consolidated school district.

Table 13

*Comparison of School Leaders Gender, School District Size, Position, and Experience*

Name	Identified Race	Gender	District Size	Position	Years in Position	Years of Experience
Donald	Black or African American	M	Four High Schools	Assistant Principal	4	10
Joy	Black or African American	F	One School District	Superintendent	3.5	29
Mary	Black or African American	F	One School District	Principal	5	9

### **Systemic Decisions**

This study categorizes the three participants' approaches to systemic decision-making according to culturally responsive school leadership tenets. These tenets include ongoing critical self-awareness, culturally responsive teachers and curricula, culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and students' and families' engagement in

community contexts. Several systemic decisions shared in this study fit with more than one tenet. However, for this discussion, they are categorized by their central tenet.

### **Ongoing Critical Self-Awareness**

Critical Self-Awareness is a trait of culturally responsive school leaders. Culturally responsive school leaders need to have an awareness of self, as well as an awareness of their own beliefs and dispositions, as this serves as a foundation to the beliefs that will undergird the leader's practices (Brown, 2004; Dantley, 2005; Gay & Kirkland 2003; Gooden, 2005; McKenzie et al., 2008). Each participant in this study demonstrated a keen awareness of self and their beliefs and dispositions as we met and talked during their three-part interview series.

Mary spoke explicitly about understanding the continuous development of her identity. Mary viewed her identity as her core values and beliefs and what she stood for, especially race. Mary also reflected on how her past experiences have played a role in developing her core values and beliefs. Through her life experiences, coursework, and reading interests, Mary develops an understanding of what is essential to her as a person, an educator, and a school leader. Her understanding of what she values continues to develop, and her ability to articulate what she is experiencing and expecting in her professional world and her scholarly world continues to grow. As her understanding of her ideals continues to grow, Mary also explores how race plays out in different systemic issues.

When Mary reflects on her past experiences, she sees that all her life experiences have prepared her to lead Clearview High School. Placing her feelings aside about

attending a private high school (i.e., the exhaustion from navigating various microaggressions and negative feelings) allows Mary to see how all those experiences prepared her to navigate leading her current school system.

When I attended the private school, I felt like I was holding my breath every day as I got on the bus to go to school, and I didn't feel like I could fully breathe until I stepped off the bus [and returned home]. As soon as I step into this community [Clearview], I feel like I'm under a microscope. I actually feel suffocated even more here at Clearview because people are actively looking for something [wrong].

Mary sees working at Clearview as coming full circle. She attended a private Christian school, and Clearview, while not a Christian school, displays Christian values and beliefs. Mary can also see similarities between her education at the private school and how things play out at Clearview, especially when exploring who gets to dictate other groups' experiences.

I understand a lot of the experiences the kids are having here [at Clearview], especially knowing the amount of ignorance, the lack of understanding and knowledge regarding anyone or anything that shows up that's not White or culturally normed White here.

These reflections support Mary's critical awareness; this critical awareness led Mary to examine Clearview's systems upon her arrival. Culturally responsive school leaders are critically self-aware and encourage their schools' structures and processes to be critically self-reflective. Critically aware culturally responsive school leaders examine

the role of school programs, departments, hiring practices, enrichment courses, and other school systems and structures. Mary did this upon her arrival at Clearview by examining its various systems and structures. She saw systems in place that, to her, were “malpractice.” Mary stated, “There were a lot of things that could be better, that weren’t on anyone’s radar because things seemed to be working for most, even though they weren’t working for all.” One of these systems that had not been on anyone’s radar was the school’s interviewing/hiring processes.

Mary began to reflect on the hiring process. She reflected on the lack of timelines, who was selected to sit on the hiring committee, the interview questions, and the amount and type of candidate information shared with the interview committee. Mary and her team developed timelines for the hiring process. She was also deliberate in the questions asked of candidates. Mary stated that specific questions would “provide the candidate insight into the school’s values, and it was always interesting asking those types of questions to see who was surprised by the questions and who just went with it.” Another new part of the hiring process was to name who would be a part of the hiring committee as Mary wanted to make sure the committee represented the people served by the school. As a result of this deliberate change, Mary began including students and parents on the hiring committee. She explained that including these stakeholders spoke to “our values and beliefs, especially around educating all students and around equity.”

Another adjustment to the hiring practices was with the information shared with the hiring committee. Committee members no longer received a candidate’s complete hiring packet. Reducing the amount of information shared with the committee eliminated

private information dissemination while addressing another systemic problem with the school's hiring practices. Mary noticed committee members' tendency to analyze and be very particular around the candidates' post-secondary schools and their post-secondary grades. Committee members would analyze the candidate's schooling without meeting the candidate to hear about their experiences. Mary recognized this as a level of elitism and the permeation of White norms. Committee members would pay attention to the candidate's addresses, their names, the schools they attended, their transcripts, and their grammatical errors on their applications. Mary noted that committee members judge candidates on these items even if the committee members themselves would not have met their level of expectations. With the changes in the interviewing process, Mary worked to reduce these systemic barriers, and she began by vetting candidates with her leadership team, and the interviewing committee received only the candidate's resume when they move forward.

### **Culturally Responsive Teachers and Curricula**

Culturally responsive school leaders play a primary role in maintaining cultural responsiveness (Leithwood et al., 2004). They are responsible for recruiting and retaining culturally responsive teachers, mentoring and modeling culturally responsive pedagogy, and ensuring the use of culturally responsive resources and curriculum (Khalifa et al., 2016). A teacher's racial and ethnic background, personal life experiences, social interactions, and personal perceptions influence what curriculum they teach and how they teach it. A teacher's influence on the curriculum highlights the importance of whom culturally responsive school leaders hire. Culturally responsive school leaders hire



educators who understand, believe in, and promote a culturally responsive orientation. At Midtown East High School, Joy and her leadership team are exploring their hiring practices. Joy and her team use a racial equity framework, adopted by her board of education, to ensure their hiring practices produce a diverse staff. About 25-35% of the entire staff represent the student body; Joy and her team want to increase that number to ensure that at least 50% of the entire staff reflects their student demographics by 2024. Joy believes that it is essential for students to see themselves in all roles throughout the school. "It is about making the school a welcoming environment for our students and our community members."

Ensuring culturally responsive schools does not stop with hiring; culturally responsive school leaders must ensure substantial professional development efforts to assist their teachers in enacting current best practices. Donald and Mary both spoke of professional development for their staff at Willow Park High School and Clearview High School. Donald and his administrative team provided staff members with an opportunity to learn about cultural competency with an outside provider. About 25 staff members, or 20% of the Willow Park staff, volunteered to participate in this professional development opportunity to develop their cultural competency. These staff members worked with the professional consultant to walk through what cultural competency looks like and how it impacts their students, families, and school.

Mary also provided professional development for her staff at Clearview High School to maintain current best practices in culturally relevant instruction. Clearview staff members began participating in professional development around culturally relevant

teaching in various ways, as determined by their professional development model. The culturally relevant professional development prompted the Clearview staff to consider race as an aspect of students' misidentification for the special education program. It also helped the staff see that race intersects with culture in many ways, and it helped the staff clarify what they specifically meant when referring to culture. Mary strongly felt that this professional development pushed the staff members to explore the learning environments they created and the instructional practices they used with all students at Clearview High School.

Culturally responsive school leaders understand the importance of knowing their students. Explicitly knowing students ensures that the instructional environment and practices best meet student needs and guarantees their academic and social-emotional success. At one point in Joy's tenure at Midtown East High School, Joy had a student who wore a bright yellow ethnic wrap around her head. When the young lady wore her ethnic wrap to school, several teachers expected Joy to send the student home because they felt the headwrap distracted others. Joy pushed back and asked the staff members why the student needed to go home. The staff members explained they had called home already but that her mom continued to let her wear it because her daughter had researched her background and the ethnic wrap represented her heritage. Joy took this opportunity to explain how the teachers were perpetuating systemic oppression by not allowing her to wear an ethnic wrap but allowing a White peer to come to school with technicolored hair that others may have found distracting. Had these staff members been culturally responsive, a student wearing an ethnic wrap that represented her heritage would not have

been a concern; instead, the staff members would have understood this was part of her identity, and they may have even encouraged her to share about her heritage with her peers. Joy was able to take this opportunity to educate her staff to help them understand the importance of knowing their students and respecting their differences.

Culturally responsive school leaders are critical of their schools' curriculum and instructional practices. Mary pointed out that racial literacy is absent and not a priority in schools, and she feels this continues to have a detrimental impact on how our nation functions and how we, as a population, relate to each other. Culturally responsive school leaders engage and reform curriculum practices ensuring they are culturally responsive and produce academic and social-emotional successes for their students (Sleeter, 2012; Vilegas & Lucas, 2002). Culturally responsive school leaders help teachers unpack, understand, and address their curriculum assumptions (Murtadha-Watts & Stoughton, 2004). Donald has had to challenge his teachers to address their assumptions and biases around their curriculum.

A couple of years ago, a parent inquired why students had to read Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The parent wanted to know "why, in this day and age, his child had to read this story, with a racial slur throughout the entire book," instead of reading any number of texts that could achieve the same curricular goals without harming marginalized populations. The parent noted that this book harmed his child and other students because they forced them to endure the language and hostile environment in the book's context. Donald worked with his teachers to help them understand and process their "White fragility." He worked with his teachers to help them understand that

knowing their students were uncomfortable but not changing their ways was irresponsible. Donald told his teachers that they needed to examine how they would address their students' uncomfortable feelings, and he worked with the teachers to help them see that "Even on your best day, with your best intentions, the wrong content can be hurtful to students, even if it is not hurtful to you." Donald admits these conversations were challenging and required tactfulness on the administrative team's part because he dealt with teachers working at the school for 15+ years. However, through this tactful process, Donald and the administrative team moved the teachers to adjust the curriculum. The teachers took a break from the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and they selected a different piece of literature to meet their academic goals.

Donald believes administrators "must make sure teachers are communicating and articulating and teaching their curriculum through a lens that is cognizant of the different lenses of all the students receiving the information." Donald knows that this should happen regardless of a school having a predominantly White population. By not acknowledging all students, teachers may be causing harm. Donald states, "Ignorance can be as hurtful as racism." As a culturally responsive school leader, Donald wants his staff to understand that "choosing not to know and understand can be very detrimental to students, just as determinantal as knowing and not doing anything about it."

As a culturally responsive school leader, Joy also understands the importance of representative curricula. When students at Midtown East High School expressed concern with the lack of instruction regarding racial equity, Joy and a student leadership team met regularly, allowing her to hear what they felt was missing from their curriculum. Joy

proceeded to work with the students to determine a racial equity curriculum, which the school is currently implementing. Joy learned of a curriculum necessity as the school leader and immediately met her students' academic needs.

### **Culturally Responsive and Inclusive School Environments**

Culturally responsive school leaders protect and promote all students' inclusive practices and the spaces in which these students and practices exist (Khalifa, 2008). Protecting and promoting these inclusive spaces and routines underscores a sense of belonging for students, especially for students from often marginalized populations. Promoting inclusivity also means challenging exclusive systems and policies, including suspensions, detentions, the overidentification of marginalized populations in special education, dismissiveness, and excessive disciplinary referrals (Gardiner & Enomot, 2006; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Webb-Johnson, 2006; Webb-Johnson & Carter, 2007).

In this study, all three school leaders made decisions to protect and promote inclusive practices and school policies. Joy worked with her administrative team, staff, students, and families to develop new procedures and policies to ensure systemic equity. At Midtown East High School, Joy worked with all stakeholders to develop a sex equity and transgender policy to address students' feelings about lacking safe spaces. The students also felt unsafe because adults and other students did not honor their identities throughout the school, especially in physical education classes. Joy worked with her administrative team and, subsequently, her teachers to amend the school's Equal Education Opportunities Policy. This amendment process led to the policy's renaming as

a Sex Equity Policy. Amending this policy included new practices for staff to follow. These new procedures encompassed making it mandatory to honor how students identified, including using their appropriate pronouns and calling students by their chosen name, even if it was not the name on their birth certificate. The names students chose to identify with were uploaded in the school's Student Information System and printed on the student ID cards. Having the students' chosen names in the Student Information System ensured that all staff members knew students' chosen names, enabling teachers to address them appropriately.

The Sex Equity Policy also advanced the need for an increase in gender-neutral bathrooms throughout the school. Few gender-neutral bathrooms existed in the school, and most students had limited access to the ones that did exist because they were not centrally located. An increase in gender-neutral bathrooms ensured that all students had access to a safe space regardless of where they were throughout the building. According to Joy, the gender-neutral bathrooms helped address students' and families' concerns about not being comfortable in the same physical education dressing room as students who may identify differently. When the students and families expressed this concern, Joy let them know any student could use the gender-neutral bathrooms to change for class. Allowing all students to access the gender-neutral bathrooms allowed for a safe space for all students without taking away any group's rights.

The Sex Equity Policy also addressed the graduation attire requirement. Before the Sex Equity Policy, a requirement existed involving female students wearing a specific dress to graduation and male students wearing a particular suit. This requirement

negatively impacted low socioeconomic students. It also caused harm to other students, including students in the LGBTQ+ population. Many students from various populations relayed to Joy and the administrative team that they were not comfortable with the dress requirements. Some female and male students did not want to conform to binary gender norms by wearing a dress as a female or a suit as a male. Once enacted, the Sex Equity Policy required caps and gowns for graduation, allowing all students to wear what they were comfortable with under their gowns.

Joy also promoted inclusive practices by addressing the disproportionate discipline occurring due to students not having their student ID cards around their necks. Students from marginalized populations noted that when they arrived without their ID cards, the staff at the school's entrances would rush them off to an office and question them about why they did not have their ID. However, these same students expressed that when their White peers arrived with no ID, they were told not to forget it next time. Students from marginalized populations disclosed that they would often be stopped in the halls and questioned about not wearing their IDs, but their White peers would walk by without their IDs, and the adults would say nothing to them about it. Joy, realizing the need to address the systemic discipline issues around student IDs, adjusted the administrative procedures. A requirement for students to have IDs to get into the building still existed, but the students did not have to wear their IDs on their necks. Instead, students could show their identification on their devices. The school had adopted a program that allowed their IDs to be accessible on their phones. Students might have their ID around their neck, in their pocket, or on their device, and they showed it upon

entering the building or walking in the hallways. Joy saw a decrease in student disciplinary referrals with this new procedure due to not displaying student IDs.

Both Mary at Clearview High School, and Joy at Midtown East High School, have been working to promote inclusive practices in curriculum and instruction. Mary has been working with her staff at Clearview around inclusive procedures. The staff previously studied culturally responsive teaching and learning environments. Now they are taking this knowledge and raising their understanding and consciousness by connecting their previous work to current conversations about students' successes with learning (academics) and belonging (participation). Mary continues to help her staff understand that learning success is not a separate conversation from student belonging. Moreover, she continues to model that discussions must include the students' multiple identities because "we all have multiple identities."

Joy and her administrative team also worked to address inclusivity in the courses provided to students. Joy's administrative team conducted an audit across all their freshman courses to determine which classes were a part of the students' schedules. The audit showed the team that students felt pigeon-holed into lower tracks based solely on placement assessment scores. Moreover, Joy noted that several of these students would have done well in honors and Advance Placement courses. Joy and her team determined that they need to address this disparity. Addressing this disparity is further discussed in the Community Engagement section of this chapter.

Donald mentioned decisions made around protecting and promoting safe spaces for students and families. For the past two or three years, Donald hosted an annual



Christmas social for the Black families at Willow Park High School. This holiday social is a dedicated time in a safe space for parents to enjoy each other's company, good food, and good music. Music is another way to create a safe space for families. Donald plays Christmas music by Al Green, Marvin Gaye, Boyz II Men, and others from that genre in the background because he knows the parents will enjoy the music and feel a little more at ease. Donald intends for this gathering to be a place for the Black families to get to know each other because they are rarely in an environment filled with only Black families. Donald also uses this time to create a space where he lets the parents know that he acknowledges the partnership between home and school and needs the families' assistance for the kids to be successful. Through this holiday social, families develop relationships with other Black families, and the conversations the families have supported the structures needed for the students and their families to feel as though they are a part of Willow Park High School.

Donald established an all-girls group for Black girls at Willow Park High School to promote safe spaces. Donald developed The Black Girls Rock Club to meet a need expressed by the Black female students at the school. Black female students would often ask Donald whom they were supposed to date around homecoming and prom because the “Black guys would not ask them out, nor did the White guys.” Issues like this showed a need for a safe place for the girls to have appropriate conversations and share their experiences with others like them. About 20 to 25 girls participated every week, and they wanted to meet twice a month instead of once a month because they loved the environment. Willow Park High School's Dean of Students, a Black female, and an

English teacher, also a Black female, facilitated the Black Girls Rock group, and they provided all the girls with journals to record their experiences. Sometimes, these journals guided their discussions, and sometimes the girls' recent experiences were the focal point of the discussions.

Mary promoted inclusive practices and policies by addressing student participation and belonging at Clearview High School. Mary strongly believes in the importance of participation, belonging, and engagement and she worked with her Student Activities Director and her Athletic Director to take the time to learn about extracurricular participation and lack thereof. With this information, Mary and her administrators developed a real-time system for tracking student engagement. Mary and her administrative team identified who had not participated by grade level and by demographics from this system. With this new system, Mary and her team learned that many students with IEPs, especially those with more significant disabilities, had not participated in anything throughout their years at Clearview. Similar trends with students from marginalized populations also existed. The team learned that many students were doing things outside of school, such as club sports and semi-professional athletics. As a result of this new system, Mary and her team implemented a Special Olympics program because one did not exist at Clearview High School, and it provided students with special needs an opportunity to participate in an extracurricular activity. Mary reflected on the data presented to her through a critical lens, and she was able to address the inclusive need of her students.

Culturally responsive school leaders recognize exclusionary practices or programs and address them. These leaders challenge staff members who display or promote these exclusionary practices, and they model inclusionary behaviors themselves. Donald and Mary both addressed exclusionary academic practices by addressing the disproportionate academic achievement and students' overidentification in special education. At Willow Park High School, Donald noticed large disproportionality between White students and students from marginalized populations concerning their academic performance. Students in the same building receiving the same academic programming performed drastically differently. To create an environment where all his students felt included and experienced the level of success Willow Park High School was known for, Donald created a mentoring program for about 25 students from marginalized populations. The program paired 25 first-year students from marginalized populations who were in danger of falling through the cracks with 25 juniors and seniors from marginalized populations who had experienced academic success at the school.

The inaugural group of students, who started when the mentoring program began, set a new benchmark in their junior year. As juniors, the National Honor Society program accepted 10 of the 25 students into the program. These 10 students comprised part of the most significant number of students from marginalized populations accepted into Willow Park High School's National Honor Society in the school's history. Donald created this program to address the academic exclusionary systemic structures that prevented certain students from experiencing the same academic success as their White peers. The induction of the 10 students showed small changes as a result of this mentoring program.

Mary noticed academic exclusionary practices with Clearview's special education identification procedures. When Mary first arrived at Clearview High School, she noticed an overidentification of students in Special Education and disproportionality in the students referred for Special Education services. Like the other participants in this study, Mary stated that when "you are knowledgeable about negative occurrences within a system, it is your responsibility to address these situations." When Mary arrived at Clearview High School, 18% of her students were receiving Special Education services. Mary saw that the Special Education department's leadership was not up to par; one of the Special Education directors could not even write their own Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for students. The Director was not up to date with Special Education law or current practices within the Special Education realm. Furthermore, the Special Education Director's lack of knowledge trickled down throughout the department and to the teachers. The teachers were also not up to date with current special education laws and practices.

Through a thorough examination, Mary learned that the overidentification was partly due to a lack of tiered academic supports. If a student needed assistance, they were immediately qualified for Special Education services. Clearview's problem-solving team did not function as a problem-solving team but rather as a place to have anecdotal conversations about how people felt students were doing. Data did not support discussions about student needs, and no supports were available to implement with students in need of support.

Because Mary was knowledgeable about this systemic problem, she knew she had to address it. Mary started by changing her leadership team. She moved the Directors of Special Education back into the classroom, and she hired a new director who was well-versed in systems, equity issues, Special Education law and compliance, and personnel issues. She worked with the new Special Education Director to create a tiered support system, and Mary partnered with the Director to teach, and work side-by-side with, the staff on implementing these supports. The new system included using data, including progress monitoring data, to drive students' academic support decisions. Mary also hired a Response to Intervention (RtI) coordinator and a reading specialist to help the staff refocus on students' supports. Throughout Mary's tenure, she moved the percentage of students qualifying for Special Education from 18% to 12%. Mary acknowledges that disproportionality within the various demographics still exists, as she begins focusing on shifting to addressing the student populations identified for Special Education services.

Creating a safe and inclusive environment means valuing and nurturing students' multiple identities. Culturally responsive school leaders demonstrate they value their students' multiple identities by ensuring the staff that interacts with the students represents these multiple identities (Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013). Donald and Joy have deliberately worked with their teams to recruit, hire, and retain a diverse staff. Donald stated, "In my last two roles, previously when I lived in another state, I was the first African American administrator in the history of their district. And then I moved here, where I was the first-ever African American administrator in this school district. The recruitment, hiring, and retention of diverse and minority staff is definitely a passion of

mine." Donald realizes that representation helps his students and families feel a part of the Willow Park School community. He has worked with his administrative team to make purposeful strides to diversify the staff. When Donald arrived at Willow Park High School, he was the only Black certified staff member. Since then, he has deliberately worked to hire staff members from marginalized populations. Since becoming an administrator at Willow Park High School, Donald has hired a Black dean and a Black English teacher. He has also hired an administrative assistant, a teaching assistant, and a registrar from other marginalized populations. Donald attributes the retention of staff members from marginalized populations to the fact that they work in a school actively looking to learn and understand, evidenced by Donald and his senior principal's work, including the previously mentioned cultural competency professional development.

Joy and her administrative team use an equity assessment tool that requires them to look at their hiring practices, and other significant decisions, through a racial equity lens. The tool, adopted in part from another school district's equity plan, requires the administrators to look at their decisions through five key pillars to ensure the decisions made will not negatively impact Midtown East's most marginalized populations. The equity assessment tool requires the administrative team to have a diverse staff, and the team is held accountable for this by reporting the demographic statistics for all hires at monthly school board meetings. Midtown East High School has set a goal of having the entire faculty and staff reflect the student's demographics; currently, they are at about 25% to 35% of their staff reflecting these demographics.

### **Engagement of Students and Families in Community Contexts**

Culturally responsive school leaders must facilitate a positive school climate and nurture positive relationships with the community that surrounds their school. Strong collaborations between the school and the surrounding community will improve family engagement and connect the home and school cultures. Through this connection, a sense of trust increases between students, families, and schools, and in turn, increases students' academic success rates (Epstein, 2010; Khalifa, 2010; Wilson, 2004). When making most systemic decisions, Joy and Mary involved community members and families in the decision-making process. Joy also mentioned many systemic decisions that included her students in the decision-making process.

Joy conducted an audit of all freshman courses, and through this audit, Joy and her team learned of academic disparities regarding the students' enrolled courses. This audit included student focus groups across all levels of Midtown East's tracking system. Students expressed concerns about their ability to do more in their courses during these focus groups; however, they felt locked into the lower tracked courses based on placement assessments from the end of eighth grade. The students in these focus groups admitted that they were not working up to their potential because their work was not challenging. Through the audit, Joy and her team also learned that two students in the same course at the same tracked level could still have two very different academic experiences. As a result of these focus groups and the audit overall, Joy and her team developed a goal of providing more consistency across grade-level content areas and providing more rigorous coursework for all students in all classes. Involving students in

this process was so successful that the same process is being used for the remaining three grade levels to ensure consistency throughout their high school experience.

Mary did not involve her students in her course restructuring work, but she did involve her parent community from the beginning of the process. When Mary began exploring course offerings, she spent much time having one-on-one conversations with her parents. Many parents expressed concerns about the course restructuring and how it would affect their children. Because of these concerns, Mary began her one-on-one conversations to allow parents a space to talk about their concerns and feelings behind the restructuring discussions. She would ask the parents, "What's coming up for you? What are your fears?" These questions allowed parents to bring their "stuff" to the conversations. They also provided Mary with the information needed to address these individuals' issues with the entire parent community through her schoolwide communications. During these conversations, Mary turned the parent's concerns around and personalized these concerns for them. Mary would ask the parents, "Wouldn't you want this for your kid? Don't you want your kid to have a sense of belonging, to participate and be fully engaged in their educational experience, and to experience academic success?" These conversations helped guide Mary's direction throughout the course restructuring process.

The students at Midtown East High School expressed concerns about the student dress code. Students from marginalized populations, especially Black females, felt the dress code was unfair. Black females mentioned that they felt they were either being body-shamed or objectified because of their physical stature. Staff members told them



what clothes they could not wear based on how the clothing fit their bodies. However, their White peers, who were possibly slimmer, could wear the same clothing type, such as midriff shirts, tight shirts, and leggings, and staff members would not address them. Black males felt singled out for wearing hoodies and hats, but again, their White peers would do the same, and staff members would not address it with these students. They expressed the inequities in how staff addressed hats between Black and White students. If a Black student wore a hat, staff members often profiled the student as a gang member and told the student to remove it immediately; however, if a White student wore a hat, teachers engaged the student by saying, "So you're a Cubs fan?" As a result of these concerns, Joy and her administrative team worked with the students to develop a new dress code.

Students from the Black leadership group at Midtown East High School and a school-sponsored student equity group met with Joy and her administrative team to review the dress code. The students from these two leadership groups brought ideas from other school districts across the state and throughout the country to the meetings and subsequently worked with the administration to modify Midtown East's dress code. The new dress code allowed females to wear shorter tops as long as "not too much belly is showing and not a lot of cleavage is exposed." Allowing students to wear a hat as long as students did not wear the bill backward addressed students' feelings of being targeted. The new dress code allowed students to wear a hoodie as long as their faces were still visible. Joy noticed fewer students wearing hoodies, baseball caps, and tops that showed "too much belly or cleavage with the new dress code's implementation." Moreover, she

also observed fewer discipline referrals for dress code violations. Joy noted that “Now we aren’t stopping kids in the hall because they have a hoodie on, so it has become a non-issue. The students aren’t wearing them as often.”

When Black and Brown students at Midtown East High School did not feel like they had safe spaces to hang out with their peers after school, they brought their concern to Joy and her administrative team. These students felt they were often rushed out of the building or held in the entry foyer between the school's completion and the start of their extracurricular activities. However, they also noticed that their White peers could wander the building under the auspice of seeing their teachers. Joy again included a community of students, families, and other community members in deciding on a solution for this concern. Joy assembled a committee of parents, community members, and students to design a new cafeteria and student resource center. Once completed, this new design provides all students with a new cafeteria and student resource center. It also includes collaborative spaces to serve as a safe space for all students, especially the Black and Brown students. The students can use these spaces to hang out instead of being pushed out of the building while waiting for extracurricular activities to begin.

Joy’s leadership style includes involving her students in most decision-making processes regarding things that will impact their academic success. She includes students on every interview and policy review committee. She feels the students’ role on these committees helps her staff learn how to address and navigate systemic issues that impact the student population. Joy firmly believes that “when people talk about things that impact students, they need to go to the students and ask their opinions.” Joy has found

that when she talks with the students and includes them on these committees, she learns of systemic concerns and hears about the positive things happening throughout her school.

### **How School Leaders' Life Experiences Influenced Their Systemic Decisions**

Each leader talked about historical life experiences that influenced their systemic decisions. All three leaders drew upon their grade school and high school environments to relate to their students and the various situations they experienced. For example, Mary's experiences at the private Christian school she attended with her sister laid a foundation for her to understand many of the experiences her Black students currently have Clearview High School, especially concerning the "ignorance and lack of understanding and knowledge regarding anyone or anything that shows up that is not White or culturally normed as White." The leaders all discussed recent life experiences that have played a role in their culturally responsive decisions. For example, Donald made decisions for Willow Park High Schools' current students with his children in mind. Donald's daughter and son will eventually attend Willow Park High School, and he hopes to change some of the systemic structures before their arrival. The life experiences that helped inform the leaders' decisions included personal connections to the decisions, observations, or demonstrated needs. These decisions were also informed by students or families voicing a concern.

Two leaders specifically mentioned their experiences with figures from their past who poured into them and only asked that they pay it forward and do the same for someone else. Donald specifically mentioned conversations with the men of his church

who told him, "You owe us nothing but to replicate it. You owe us nothing but to do it for someone else. If you do that, you've done your job." Because of these words, Donald believes that it is not good enough just for him to be successful, but he must also empower and equip as many people as possible to live out their true calling, their true destiny, even if they do not know it yet. The generosity and unselfishness of the church's men drive many of Donald's decisions and the work he does at his school.

Joy mentioned that she needs to do for her students what one of her teachers did for her. This teacher regularly reminded Joy that she was bright, gifted, and talented and that nobody should tell her she is not. Joy believes she has to do this for her students. She believes that if she stifles their voices, then she is perpetuating an internalized oppression. Joy generally uses her historical lived experiences to help those around her understand some of her students' and families' thought processes. For example, Joy used her past experiences to explain why families did not pick up free wireless routers when offered by the Midtown East administrative team. When her administrative team complained that "all these families say they don't have wifi, but nobody picked it up," Joy responded by saying, "Why would they? You have it at open house. It's in the midst of where everything is, and you tell them to come get some free wifi. Telling everyone at the open house that they need assistance." Joy also uses her historical lived experiences to point out representation from her point of view. One such incident occurred with the team working to define needed facility updates. Joy walked into a meeting with this community-based 40-member team and noticed that none of the team members were Black. She pointed this out to her administrative team, saying, "We have architects, we

have engineers in this community who are Black who should be sitting at that table."

Because of her lived experiences, she is aware of this deficit and can point it out to her team to remember for future work.

### **Historical Lived Experiences**

All three participants mentioned personal connections behind some of their systemic decisions. Specific historical lived experiences drove them to notice the need for a variety of systemic decisions. Mary remembers watching her mother navigate the public school system as a single parent and try to figure out her brother's services and needed supports. She watched her mom advocate for her brother and find alternative ways when the school district shut various doors on her. This historical lived experience caused Mary to have a strong sensitivity to parents navigating Special Education systems. It also drives the work she does to ensure all students receive a rigorous education with their peers, rather than receiving their education through outplacement. This connection helped Mary notice the need for changes in the special education identification process.

As Joy proceeded through her educational experiences of grade school through her post-graduate studies, those in authority did not address some of the educators' discriminatory behaviors around her. Joy recalls advocating for herself throughout her educational experiences. Because of these experiences, Joy sees it as her job to help her student by advocating for them when she notices discriminatory behavior. One of the underlying reasons behind Joy refusing to send a student home for an ethnic wrap she wore on her head included Joy's need to advocate for students when she noticed discriminatory behaviors. The student researched her personal history and designed the

wrap to reflect her heritage; Joy took the opportunity to explain to her staff that she would not send the student home, which aligned with those same staff members allowing other students with dyed hair to remain in school. Joy used this opportunity to explain the systemic oppression that was occurring and help her team see why students should be allowed to be themselves rather than forced to assimilate into a White world.

### **Current Lived Experiences: Observations**

All three participants discussed the current lived experiences of observing a need for change. Upon her arrival, Mary noticed a need to dismantle White norms systematically. Mary recognized a need for a procedural change with the school's interview process. She observed staff members prejudging candidates based on several items, including their names, where they went to school, their transcripts, and grammatical errors on their applications. Mary recognized that new procedures needed to address the interview procedures that perpetuated elitism and White norms. Mary addressed the microaggressions she observed by changing what application materials administrators shared with the interview committee members. Mary believes it is essential to systemically dismantle the opportunities for White norms to permeate various school procedures.

Mary and Donald both noticed the need for normalizing conversations about instructional practices and learning environments. Both looked to provide opportunities for professional development around culturally relevant instruction and cultural competency. Mary and Donald's approaches for this professional development were different; Mary required her staff to attend her professional development, and Donald's

staff volunteered to participate. However, they both worked to help educators in their schools explore the learning environments and instructional practices through the students' lens. Mary knew that discussing learning environments and instructional practices related to race and culture was not common for teachers, especially teachers in a predominantly White setting; therefore, she knew she needed to formalize this practice. With the changing demographics at his school, Donald knew his teachers needed to examine their instructional practices and how they might impact their students.

Donald noticed that the Black families at his school needed a safe place to connect with others and build community. Because Black students make up only 7% of the population at Donald's school, the number of Black students in each class is small. Therefore, Donald wanted to provide an environment where the students and families could develop a support system and community. To this end, Donald began hosting an annual Christmas social for the Black families at his school. He used this holiday social as a dedicated time to enjoy each other's company, good food, and good music in a safe space for students and families.

Mary spoke of the benefits realized when students felt connected to their school. Her years of experience have shown that student engagement and belonging promote academic success. To further support her students, Mary determined a need to develop a real-time system to track her students' engagement in different activities. The development of this system showed Mary a gap in her students' engagement. The system pointed out that the students at her school with individualized education plans (IEPs) were not involved in different activities. Thus, Mary, her administrative team, and a few

of her coaches began a Special Olympics program at her school. With the real-time tracking system and the Special Olympics program's creation, Mary saw her student engagement in school activities rise to 89%.

Donald spoke of connections to school, leading to tremendous student success. His understanding of the importance of connections motivated him to develop a peer mentoring program for his students. Donald observed that students from marginalized populations not succeeded at the same rate as their White peers. From his own experiences at a top-tier selective college preparatory high school, he knew that all students, including students from marginalized populations, could succeed at high levels. However, he needed his students to see the possibility of their success. Donald knew a peer mentoring program would provide his students just that. Donald's mentoring program allowed Black and Brown students to mentor incoming Black and Brown first-year students and sophomores in Advanced Placement and Honors courses. This program allowed the freshmen and sophomores to see that students from marginalized populations could be successful in these courses regardless of their prior educational experiences.

Mary made a major systemic decision to ensure a rigorous education for all students. Based on her students' academic experiences, Mary and her administrative team determined that freshman courses needed alignment to ensure all students could experience a rigorous education. This determination meant the team needed to realign the school's curriculum to ensure all students could learn the same course in the same room as their peers, regardless of their academic or racial/ethnic backgrounds. Realigning the school's curriculum was an enormous undertaking, and Mary made sure to involve her



teachers in the course restructuring. The teachers assisted in designing the new course work to allow all students to participate in a class with an earned honors component added.

### **Current Lived Experiences: Student and Family Voice**

Donald challenged his teachers' assumptions and biases with a curricular unit when a parent inquired why teachers were using Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The parent's concern centered around his daughter reading this novel and encountering racial slurs multiple times throughout the book. He wanted to know the purpose of using this literature and why another book could not accomplish the same goal as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This parent's inquiry led to piloting a new novel to teach the unit's stated goals.

All three leaders also looked for opportunities to promote student and parent perspectives through self-advocacy methods (Khalifa, 2018; Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). Student advocacy is not something that simply happens because a leader wants it. Culturally responsive school leaders take the time to develop this skill in their students and parents, and they provide the space for this inclusionary voice. Joy demonstrated exceptional skills with the inclusion of student and family voices. She discussed many systemic decisions that arose from the current lived experiences of hearing from her students and families. Joy firmly believed that when “people (i.e., board members, administrators, teachers, families) talk about changes that will impact students, you have to go to the students and ask them their opinions and thoughts.” She has learned a great deal by asking students and then listening to what they share. Joy also believes

that as students voiced their opinions and concerns, staff members should listen for how they might address the students' voiced needs and wants.

Several of the systemic decision that Joy discussed throughout the study resulted from students' voices. When Joy and her administrative team addressed the curriculum to ensure a rigorous education for all students, they held student focus groups while working to realign the freshman course options. Through these groups, Joy heard that students felt pigeon-holed into a specific track of courses based on assessment scores; these scores prevented them from participating in many honors classes. Joy and her team also learned that two students could take the same course but still have two entirely different learning experiences. The voice of the students helped demonstrate the need for the course realignment work.

Students and families voiced concerns about a lack of space for the LGBTQ+ population. They also voiced concerns about students' identities not being honored; instead, staff members addressed students by the gender they were born with instead of their identified gender. The voices of the students and families led to the work on a new Sex Equity Policy. This policy focused on various procedures to ensure that staff members addressed students correctly. It ensured students had access to gender-neutral bathrooms regardless of where they were in the school. The policy also guaranteed that students were not required to wear gender-normed graduation attire, and it provided students a safe space to regularly come together. While the students and families initially voiced the concerns, Joy strongly felt the administrators and staff members needed to remove these barriers to ensure all kids felt comfortable and accepted.

Students voiced, and Joy also observed Black and Brown students being treated differently for not wearing their ID cards around their necks at all times. When Black and Brown students came to school without their ID cards, they were rushed off to an office and berated about needing their ID. However, staff members often gave White students a "pass" and told them to be sure they had it next time. These concerns led to procedural changes, including allowing students to keep their Student Information System identification picture and information on their phones rather than on a physical card around their neck.

Students expressed concerns about the school dress code. Black females mentioned feeling body shamed or objectified, and Black males discussed feeling profiled as gang members for wearing a hat or a hoodie during school. However, both groups noted that their White peers could wear the same clothing, and staff members would not approach them. In listening to her students' voices, Joy knew changes were needed. As Joy and her administrative team adjusted the dress code, they worked with the Black student leadership group and the schools' student equity group to review Midtown East High School's current dress code and dress codes from nearby high schools. They then used this information to help develop a new policy.

### **Historical and Current Lived Experiences**

As Joy explored her school's hiring practices, she and her team employed a racial equity framework. Several stakeholders, including school board members, parents, and staff, expressed a need for the school to review their hiring practices to ensure the administrative team hired more teachers who proportionally represented the student

population. The school board created a goal for the entire faculty and staff to reflect 50% of the student demographics by 2024. Joy knows the value of students having teachers who look like them. When Joy was in school, her peers and a few of her teachers looked like her. However, her Black and Brown students tell her they have been through all levels of school, and they have never had a teacher who looks like them. Joy explains that having peers and some teachers who looked like her was instrumental in her life, and she wants that for her students.

Donald's school is also working on the recruitment, hiring, and retention of diverse staff. Donald discussed the impact on students who have a teacher that looks like them. He mentioned current Black students and families demonstrating pride because he is their administrator; often, families will introduce him as "my principal" as they show how proud they are to have a Black administrator. He spoke about White students and families who told him that they never saw someone who looked like him in an authoritative position before he arrived. Donald knows of that impact personally. When he was in sixth grade, Donald had his first Black male teacher, which was monumental. This teacher took pride in how he looked, and to this day, Donald takes pride in his appearance just as his sixth-grade teacher had. His teacher's pride in his work and how he cared about his students is also what Donald modeled himself after. Donald hopes that 20 years from now, students are still digesting the impact he has had on their lives, much like how he is still digesting the impact of his sixth-grade teacher.

Donald created a group for the Black female students at his school. For years, Donald worked to support the Black female students academically and emotionally.

Moreover, frequently around homecoming and prom, the girls would always come to him and ask, "Who are we supposed to date? The Black guys won't ask us out; the White guys won't take us out. Who are we supposed to date? Why I gotta go to another school to get a date?" These questions were heartbreaking for Donald. Donald desires to be there for all students. However, always on his mind and heart is his daughter attending this school in a few years. As the Black females expressed these concerns, Donald knew he had to enact some change for them, and he knew he needed to accomplish this before his daughter attended the school. Donald worked to address this systemic concern by creating a group for Black female students to have a safe space to talk about the issues impacting them and impacting them specifically due to their race and gender.

### **School Leaders' Responses to Stakeholders When Systemic Decisions Were Enacted**

Each of the school leaders responded to a variety of stakeholder reactions to their systemic decisions. Depending on the systemic decision, these stakeholders, often students and teachers but sometimes families and community members, reacted positively or negatively. Occasionally the leaders enacted systemic decisions, but the stakeholders had no reactions. Often, the leaders' responses to the type of stakeholder reaction, positive or negative, were similar regardless of the systemic decision.

### **Positive Stakeholder Reactions**

Many of the leaders' systemic decisions resulted from an observed need or the result of a concern voiced by families or students. Thus, in these situations, many stakeholders, especially the students and families who voiced the concerns, were pleased

with the systemic decisions. All three of the school leaders experienced positive stakeholder reactions to systemic decisions they made.

Donald strongly believes that all students benefit when leaders correctly pursue diversity, and as such, he has worked to make recruiting, hiring, and retaining a diverse and minority staff a priority. Donald, the first Black administrator in his school's history, is increasing minority representation on his staff. Families and students of all races/ethnicities expressed appreciation. White students and parents tell him, "Before you, I never had anybody who did not look like me in an authoritative role. So, thank you for daily being that example and that reference point for me going forward."

Donald experienced a positive reaction from his staff when he began providing cultural competency professional development for them. About 25 staff members, or 20% of the staff, volunteered for the professional development sessions, and they responded positively. Donald co-hosted the group with an outside consultant, and the teachers who participated appreciated working on learning methods to engage their students better. While this number may not be significant, Donald counts this as a success for an initial voluntary professional development topic.

Donald experienced positive stakeholder reactions to the mentoring program he developed. Donald began the mentoring program to have Black and Brown juniors and seniors in Advanced Placement and Honors courses mentor Black and Brown first-year and sophomore students. By mentoring the freshmen and sophomore students, these juniors and seniors modeled for the freshmen and sophomores that all students can succeed regardless of their race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. As a result of

students, families, and staff's positive reactions, Donald continues to grow the mentoring program's scope and membership.

Donald hosts an annual Christmas social for the Black families at his school. He provides the space, the food, and the music for this social. The Black families and students appreciate this gathering as it gives them a chance to connect and build a community. Donald responds to this positive reaction by continuing to host the annual social. It is important to note that other stakeholders, including students and families who are not Black, did not positively or negatively react to the annual social. There is no reaction from these stakeholders because Donald does not advertise the Christmas social. He invites the Black students and their families but does not advertise it in a flyer, on the website, or through announcements. Donald chose not to advertise the social due to stakeholders' adverse reactions when forming the all-Black girls' group. To eliminate the possibility of adverse reactions to the Christmas social, he does not call attention to the social.

Joy listened to her students' concerns about the disproportionate discipline of students not wearing their identification cards. Students talked about how they noticed Black and Brown students being disciplined more often for not having their identification cards around their necks than their White peers who were also not wearing their identification cards. Joy also noticed this disparity firsthand. Her observations and the students voicing their concerns led to procedural changes regarding student identification cards. Students and staff positively received these changes. Students were happy the

administration heard them and made changes. These changes made the implementation of students having their identification cards easier to enforce.

Joy's students voiced concerns about what was missing from their curriculum; Joy listened to them and worked with them to develop a new racial equity curriculum. The students took their role seriously throughout the curriculum development process as they researched appropriate materials and requirements for the course. Joy noticed that they appreciated being heard and working with the administration to address this curricular need. Joy also mentioned that her teachers positively responded when they piloted the newly designed course, which became a permanent course offering.

Mary's students, families, and teachers responded positively when she and her admin team developed a real-time system to track student engagement, which led to the development of a school Special Olympics program. The system that tracked student engagement showed Mary and her administrative team that the special education population was not involved in activities. Because Mary knew engagement and belonging increase a student's potential for academic success, she wanted to create something to allow the special education population a chance to be engaged and belong to at least one activity. Three staff members coached the program, and several students signed up for several different sports. Students throughout the school now belong to at least one activity and contribute to 89% of the student population participating in extracurricular activities throughout the school year. Also, as a result of this work, Mary's school/district made student engagement a school/district goal.



### **Negative Stakeholder Reactions**

Donald and Joy both experienced adverse stakeholder reactions to a couple of systemic decisions they made. When encountering adverse reactions, Donald and Joy held firm to their culturally responsive decision. They continued to hold firm even after explaining the reasons behind their systemic actions. Both Donald and Joy believed in their choices and how these decisions would support their students.

When Donald worked with his English teachers to examine their use of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, some of his teachers expressed resistance. The teachers demonstrated a level of White fragility because they felt Donald and the parents were questioning their instructional practices and materials. Donald and the administrative team at his school participated in several tough conversations with the teachers to help them see that they were not bad teachers because of their previous decisions. Donald and his team also used these tough conversations to help the teachers understand that they needed to do better now that they knew the harm. Through these difficult conversations, Donald assisted his teachers with piloting a different novel to meet the same instructional goals of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Joy responded to her teachers' adverse reactions when they disagreed with disciplining the student who wore a head wrap to school. The teachers wanted Joy to send a student home because they said her head wrap was a distraction. Joy took that moment to explain that this was perpetuating systemic oppression, but the teachers still wanted the student removed from school. Joy stood her ground and did not remove the student from school. Moreover, she continued to work with her teachers as she used her prior lived

experiences to explain the harm they could do to the student if they continued to pursue the issue.

### **Mixed Stakeholder Reactions**

All three school leaders enacted systemic decisions that caused mixed stakeholder reactions. With these decisions, some stakeholders expressed satisfaction with the decision, while other stakeholders shared concerns. In these situations, all three school leaders addressed the unfavorable reactions while also recognizing the positive reactions.

Donald experienced adverse reactions from stakeholders when he formed an all-Black, girls' group. Donald created this group to meet a need expressed to him by the Black female students at Willow Park High School. However, when he began to advertise this group, some stakeholders, including students, families, and school board members, questioned the group's purpose and exclusivity. They did not understand the Black female students' need to have their own safe space to discuss their schooling experiences. Donald responded to these adverse reactions by first explaining to the school board members the group's purpose. Donald let those female students who were not Black know that they could attend as well, but that the conversations would still center around the needs and experiences of the Black females, and these conversations might make others uncomfortable. While Donald did deal with these adverse reactions, the target population of Black females appreciated his work, and they enjoyed their group meetings. The Black female students appreciated the group so much that they requested to meet more often; thus, Donald increased the number of days the girls met from once a month to twice a month.

When Joy and her administrative team began to focus on using an equity framework with their hiring practices, the school's stakeholders, namely the staff, did not respond, positively or negatively, to the systemic work. However, because the community and the school board members were the reason behind the work, they were pleased to utilize the framework when hiring. Working with Joy and her team, the school board even approved a goal related to whom the school was hiring. The goal was to have the entire faculty reflect 50% of the student demographics; the administrators report monthly on their progress towards this goal.

Joy also had mixed reactions to the development of the Sex Equity Policy. The sex equity policy arose from conversations with students and families regarding removing barriers preventing all students from feeling comfortable and accepted at school. Students and families who were not comfortable and feeling accepted welcomed the Sex Equity Policy changes, and Joy continued to work with them to ensure the school addressed these barriers. However, some families expressed difficulties with parts of the Sex Equity Policy. These families did not like the new procedures allowing students to use the gym locker room for their identified gender rather than their gender assigned at birth. They also did not like the change in graduation attire; this change directed all students to wear a cap and gown rather than a dress for girls and a suit for boys. When parents talked with Joy about their "concerns," Joy reminded the parents that she was there for all students, and the procedures she put in place were there to ensure all students' well-being. She also explained to the parents who had "concerns" that their children, like any student, could use the gender-neutral bathrooms if they were

uncomfortable in the gym locker room, and their student could wear whatever they wanted under their graduation gown if they still wanted to wear the previously required dress or suit. When parents brought these adverse reactions to her, Joy always showed how the procedures could apply to all students and reminded families that her job was to ensure she met all students' needs.

Joy received mixed reactions when she began the work of auditing and redeveloping the freshman curriculum. When Joy started working on student courses' inclusivity and alignment, some students, families, and staff members felt it was time. These stakeholders felt this work was beyond overdue, and they agreed with the work beginning. However, there were also families and staff members who shared their displeasure. They felt the change in curricular alignment would lead to water-downed courses and, in turn, would mean the courses would not appropriately challenge the students. Joy noted that these concerned families were the same families for whom the current programming was working. These were the families of primarily White students who were already in the Advanced Placement or Honors courses. To address these concerns and adverse reactions, Joy and her administrative team held several community forums. At these forums, Joy and her team listened to the families and community members to hear their concerns, and as they continued with their forums, they incorporated information that addressed concerns they had previously heard. During the different forums, Joy and her team used data to show that while their school was a high-performing school, not all students were high performing, and those who were performing at a high level were flatlining. When families or community members

continued to express adverse reactions to the decision, Joy reminded them that the school board hired her to educate all students, and this change ensured that she was educating everyone appropriately.

Mary experienced mixed reactions when she worked on restructuring the courses for her students. Mary and her team wanted to ensure the courses offered to her students were more inclusive of all students, and therefore, they sought to develop courses that allowed all students to participate in most courses, with those who desired to take a higher-level course receiving extra work for Honors credit. Many parents appreciated this work, and teachers helped design the new courses. However, some teachers continued to ask why they needed to redesign the courses, and they expressed concern about how these courses would affect the higher-achieving students. Mary worked with her teachers to explain why the change was needed, and she often tried to shift their thinking by focusing on the positive possibilities rather than all the possible negative things that could happen. Mary recognized the emotions connected to the shift for both parents and teachers, and she held many one-on-one conversations with them to hear their fears and concerns. She then addressed these individual concerns, which were often rooted in misunderstanding or misinformation.

When Mary provided her staff with professional development on best practices for culturally relevant instruction, her staff had mixed reactions. They welcomed the professional development, and Mary saw shifts in their beliefs and understanding. The teachers even asked for more professional development around this topic as they wanted to increase their knowledge and skill. However, with her staff's desire to have more,

Mary noticed that she had to build her administrators' capacities to host these conversations. Mary's administrative team was an all-White team of administrators who did not feel equipped to host conversations with White teachers about the intersection of race and culture and the role of race and culture in learning environments and instructional practices. Furthermore, they needed help building their capacity in this area. This work caused Mary to shoulder the bulk of this work. Her teachers desired more, but her administrative team was not ready to lead the work; therefore, Mary led the work and simultaneously built her administrative team's capacity. Mary mentioned that while this work is crucial, it has been exhausting to carry the load, and she knows it is not sustainable for her to lead the work on her own.

Mary experienced mixed stakeholder reactions to her work around restructuring the special education department and procedures. Mary worked to address the disproportionate rate of identifying students from marginalized populations by restructuring the special education department and ensuring tiered academic supports. Mary understands the importance of students participating in their education alongside their peers rather than in an outplaced location. Some teachers knew they need to accomplish this work, and they appreciated Mary restructuring the department to provide more leadership for the staff, especially the related service staff members. However, some staff members expressed discomfort with the changes. They felt that the areas Mary chose to address indicated that they had been doing everything incorrectly. While Mary focused on the ineffective parts of the system, she worked with the staff to help them understand why she was making these changes. To help the staff understand the reasons

for the changes, Mary co-taught with the teachers to model what she wanted to see. She had one-on-one conversations with the staff to determine the reasons behind their pushback, and she learned it was primarily due to skill deficits and uncertainty about how to meet the new expectations. With this information, Mary then provided professional development to help build her teachers' capacities in this area.

Both Joy and Mary acknowledge that it was usually due to angst and anxiety over the unknown when stakeholders had unfavorable reactions. Talking to stakeholders was one way Joy and Mary tried to address these feelings of angst and anxiety. They talked with the stakeholders as much as possible to educate them about the reasons behind their decisions. It was evident that both Joy and Mary were aware of the change process, and when they encountered adverse reactions, they worked through the change process to help move more stakeholders through the changes.

### **No Stakeholder Reactions**

In this study, the school leaders all spoke about the importance of community involvement before they enacted any significant decisions. Ensuring community involvement and dialogue before enacting any systemic decisions helped the leaders stave off adverse reactions from various stakeholders—students, staff, families, and community members, and led to situations where no one voiced reactions. Community involvement and dialogue could be one reason why Mary enacted at least one systemic decision that resulted in no reactions from her stakeholders.

When Mary adjusted the interview procedures for her school, the teachers' did not have any type of response. They may have asked a question or two about the changes

with the information shared. However, Mary explained that the change was simply to ensure the teachers only had the necessary information needed to explore a candidate through the school's values and beliefs without excess information that could impact their decision regarding different candidates. She also explained that in providing some of the excess information, she was violating some privacy policies.

Mary worked with her staff to help them realize the importance of identifying their students' multiple identities and having conversations around these identities and their role in their students' success. No stakeholders shared any reactions to this systemic decision; however, the staff continues to build their capacities to call things into question that may harm any students.

### **Contribution to Existing Literature**

Current research has explored culturally responsive school leadership related to schools that mainly serve historically marginalized populations. Researchers have devoted limited research to understanding the experiences of culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White schools. Leading with a culturally responsive lens in an area where marginalized populations of students are in the minority presents a unique set of challenges, including a lack of understanding around the need for various cultural responsive systemic decisions, the perpetuation of systemic oppressive structures and processes, and community involvement in meeting all students' educational needs.

This study could influence literature on leadership development and higher education, culturally responsive leadership, and impacting marginalized populations in predominantly White educational settings. This study explores leadership practices in



acknowledging stakeholders' positive and negative responses to culturally responsive systemic decisions. Including the voices of culturally responsive leaders leading schools with predominantly White populations provides more information regarding possible methods for addressing these responses.

This study's significance has increased with the current state of politics and education. As of June 2021, legislators in 21 states have introduced legislation to restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism. Five states have passed these bills into law (Education Week, 2021). Parents, politicians, educators, and students weigh in on both sides of the "ongoing debate over how to teach the nation's complicated history and make sense of its present" (Education Week, 2021, para. 1). Knowledge from this study, and subsequent studies, can help culturally responsive leaders prepare to address this divisive topic.

Although this study did not start out being about black culturally responsive leaders leading in predominantly White schools, the three participants were all Black leaders. Even greater importance is that two-thirds of the participants are Black women in leadership roles in predominantly White schools. As Mary mentioned, "The voices of women of color, especially black women in leadership roles in White schools, is totally missing from current research."

### **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed how the historical and current lived experiences of three culturally responsive school leaders influenced the systemic decisions they made at their schools. These decisions, which aligned with the culturally responsive school leadership

framework's tenets, were made to address systemic concerns personally observed by the leaders or brought to their attention by various stakeholders, including students, parents, or teachers. As they made these decisions, the leaders sometimes brought their historical lived experiences into the decision-making process.

Following the discussion of the systemic decisions made and the lived or historical reasons behind these decisions, this chapter explored how the school leaders responded to various stakeholders' reactions to their systemic decisions. The chapter discussed how the leaders responded to positive, negative, and mixed reactions from various stakeholders. The chapter wrapped up by sharing how the study contributes to existing literature, including offering a different setting, a predominantly White school, for exploring culturally responsive school leadership.

## CHAPTER VIII

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter builds on the findings presented in the previous chapter, which revealed culturally responsive systemic decisions three school leaders made and how they responded to their various stakeholders in response to these decisions. During the three-part interviews, the three participants shared their lived histories, the culturally responsive decisions they have made in their current roles, and how those lived histories may have played a role in their decisions and reactions to their stakeholders' responses to these decisions. This chapter begins with an exploration of the third part of the interview series. During the third part of the interview series, each participant shared how their participation impacted them professionally and personally. Next, the chapter discusses my reflections on how this study has impacted me, the researcher, personally and professionally as I continue my journey as a culturally responsive school leader in a predominantly White school district. The chapter then moves to a discussion on themes that emerged from the data. Next, the chapter provides implications and recommendations for future research, ends with my concluding remarks.

#### **Participants' Reflections**

In the previous chapters, the participants have shared their personal and professional lived histories. They also shared various culturally responsive decisions they made in their current roles and the reasons behind those decisions. These reasons were

often the result of historical or current lived experiences. Recalling these lived histories, culturally responsive decisions, and reactions to stakeholders' responses proved to be a reflective experience for all three participants and exhausting for some. For some of the participants, discussing their memories and all they have been through to change systemic oppression reminded them of the sometimes-trying times they have experienced in their lives.

As a newer administrator, Donald is still working through the logistics and politics required to navigate his environment to enact systemic change. He works to make small changes, but he could see how the current systemic structures still confine him as he participated in this study. One specific example of this confinement is Donald's Christmas social. Donald's families need this dinner, as it helps build community among his Black students and families. However, Donald has learned that he could not mention the dinner to the larger population while meeting this need. Donald learned that events geared towards the Black population were met with questions and backlash if they were not inclusive of the White majority population. Donald also recognized his confinement within the school's systems when the school had the highest representation of minority students inducted into the National Honor Society but did not acknowledge this achievement. No one wanted to shine a light on it since it reflected a previous deficit. Donald acknowledged it with the students, but no one acknowledged this accomplishment with the greater school community.

Two of the participants went through personal reflections as they participated in the three-part interview series. Donald shared that as he reflected on the process and

himself as a leader, he did not see his identity as a Black male impacting his role as an administrator. For Mary, participating in the study and talking through her experiences in detail reminded her that every day is emotional. When Mary comes to work, she keeps her emotions bottled up inside her. It is less that she does not want to share her experiences, but more that no one asks her about them. Her participation in the study highlighted that people make assumptions before asking her questions in her current role. This study highlighted how much Mary often suppresses and the toll working in the district has taken on her. Mary mentioned that it was hard to come to grips with the reality that she was losing a part of who she is, and the research study reminded her of the importance of not losing sight of this and the importance of not losing sight of how far she had come. Through her participation, Mary pushed herself to think about what she needs for herself as she works to restore and regain what is missing. As a result of this study, Mary has been thinking about her journey and the value of her work. She has realized she needs to take better care of herself in various ways, including self-preservation and restoration, both now and in the future. This study challenged Mary to question if her work in this role is causing her to lose parts of herself, which she does not want to happen.

Mary also mentioned daily reflections following each interview. She often found herself thinking about the interview throughout the rest of the day and into the evening. When things happened on subsequent days, she would find herself thinking, "Yes, I just shared that." Furthermore, her daily reflections also pointed out that she has worked in more diverse places, where stakeholders did not monitor her day-to-day actions and

speech as much, nor did she have the same stressors as she experiences every second of every day in her current situation role.

Donald and Joy reflected on a Black versus White dynamic, Joy regarding leadership, and Donald concerning the environment. As Joy reflected on her participation in the study, she mentioned that the interviews caused her to reflect more on her thoughts about school leaders and marginalized student populations. Joy reflected how people would say they wish they could understand what she has experienced or how she realized certain things. This reflection led her to state,

While all leaders can find importance in culturally responsive leadership and pedagogy, it is different for people of color versus White people. They may not fully understand because they have not had the experiences we have had.

She truly believes that her White colleagues fighting this fight, fight it with all that they have within them. She knows they are fighting the fight with what they genuinely believe is in the best interest of their marginalized students, but through her participation in this study, she thinks of the fact that there is "a certain level of understanding, a connectedness that they will never have because of how they were born."

Donald expressed that his participation in this study provided him an opportunity to remember what it was like working in an urban setting. Several years have passed since he has worked in a school or school district that is not predominantly White, and this study helped him remember "what the other side of the coin looked and felt like." In reflecting, Donald stated that the parents in each setting have different sets of priorities. He felt that the students' parents care about their kids and their schools in the urban

setting, but their priority might have been working to ensure they met their kids' other needs. Because of these different priorities, Donald felt the parents in an urban setting may not have been available to come to the school all the time or to check on their student's grades as frequently as they might like. Donald also felt his mentoring of students in an urban setting was more scaled-down and focused on the day-to-day (i.e., homework, grades, attendance) rather than the big picture. He felt the difference in his mentoring was due to his students relying on him to support these everyday items in place of their parents.

Donald also reflected on the "different burdens he carried" in the two different settings. Donald mentioned that he spends a different kind of energy in the two environments. He has noticed that in a predominantly White environment, he spends his energy on defending his actions. Donald noticed that parents in this setting ask, "Why did you do that to my child," causing him to spend his time explaining his actions. He also has to defend his actions when he provides activities for only his Black students, explaining why something is only for his Black students instead of integrating all students in the activity. Donald compares this to the energy he spent making sure "he did what he had to do and more" for his students in an urban setting.

Participating in this study allowed the leaders to reflect on their overall career and past experiences. Donald stated, "Participating in your study provided a time for me to self-reflect. When you're living it, it's hard to really take time to reflect and say, 'I really have come in a pretty significant way.'" Through this study, Donald realized he had done many things to enhance the experience of the marginalized populations through his

current position; however, Donald also realized he needs to reflect on how he has connected with the White students at his school. He has noticed that he has not always been as intentional as possible because of his own biases, including assuming his White students have everything they need to be successful, so what else could he provide them. This realization has led him to ask, "What can I be doing better? Could I be doing more to connect with all students, and what does that look like?" While participating in this study, Donald also realized he is excited to share his work and experiences with other districts to provide a template for navigating marginalized populations' needs in schools and districts. He recognizes that he is not an expert, but Donald feels he is well-versed in the area and could provide suggestions and ideas as a consultant or panel discussion.

For Mary, looking back throughout the interviews has helped her realize how far she also has come in her life, both professionally and personally. However, her participation also reinforced for her how far she would still like to go. This study reminded her of the navigation of her professional environment as she works to enact change successfully. Likewise, Joy's participation provided her with reminders of all that she has accomplished in her current position, mainly because Joy is at the point in her career where she does not have to worry about finessing what she says and does. Her years of experience as a school and district leader have provided her the credibility and skills to address specific concerns with fewer criticisms. Her participation also reminded her that the work she does is essential, and it validated for her that the work is worth doing.



Each participant stated that they enjoyed contributing to the study. Donald specifically stated that he enjoyed the level of candidness in the interview conversations, and he conveyed a level of excitement to shed light on his journey and process at this stage in his career. Mary mentioned that the process of reflecting on her journey and articulating this journey has been meaningful. She further stated that the study capturing her journey and experiences is powerful, especially considering voices of women of color, especially black women in leadership roles who work in white schools, is completely missing from the published narratives. Joy expressed appreciation because the study caused her to reflect on her life's work and the things she has done. It also caused her to reflect on if she would do things the same way or if there were things she would have done differently. Joy sees some things she believes she would have done differently through her reflections, even in this current role, and there are things Joy knows she would have done with more urgency. All three participants were appreciative of this experience, as it helped them refocus their personal and professional goals.

### **Researcher's Reflections**

As part of the validity of this research study, I reflected throughout the data collection and data analysis processes. As I listened and learned from the three participants of the study, I reflected on my own personal, educational, and professional experiences. I have always felt that my professional decisions were grounded in what I would want for my children; however, I had not connected my other lived experiences to my work. As I reflected on my upbringing and my elementary and secondary school

experiences, I found that I was most able to relate to Mary. However, unlike Mary, I did not experience my schooling as exhausting.

Both Mary and I grew up in predominantly White areas; however, unlike Mary, I did not live among a large concentration of non-White families. My mom, a single parent, raised me in her hometown. Her parents helped take care of me while my mom worked. My elementary and secondary education took place at the local neighborhood elementary (kindergarten through sixth grade), junior high (seventh and eighth grade), and high school (ninth through twelfth grade) schools. These schools were predominantly White; however, there were a few other Black students that I spent time with, including my best friend in both elementary and high school. Except for my junior high choir teacher and my sophomore typing teacher, all of my teachers were White.

Mary learned about her racial past at home, and she was able to reconcile what she learned at home with what her teachers taught her at school. My family did not talk about racial items much at home throughout my primary and secondary schooling. I did participate in a Black History program, but I was naïve and did not realize the importance of this activity. I can see I took this activity for granted, and I did not absorb everything I could have from my participation. Furthermore, I realize that I spent most of my primary and secondary years trying to assimilate with my White peers. As I reflected on the research study's participants' lived histories, I better understood the practice of culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership later in my life.

Because I mainly associated with White peers, I only explored predominantly White universities. I received my bachelor's degree from a predominantly White public

university. While at this university, I joined the marching band and a co-educational service fraternity. However, I deliberately did not pledge any of the historically White sororities, nor did I pledge the historically Black sororities. I did not pledge because I did not think I would fit in with either type of sorority. This experience was a turning point in my college years as I recognized that my racial differences went beyond hair textures and interracial romantic interests.

Like Joy, I experienced discrimination in my first job; however, I did not have the words to label it at that time. My first principal constantly committed acts of microaggressions. Although she knew I was dating a White man at the time, she always insisted on taking me to her son's naval football games so that I could "meet a nice Black man." When I asked to transfer to her new school the next year, she told me I was not the right type for the population. The principal told a group of staff members, including me, that she hired me at a job fair thinking she was getting a Black educator, but instead, she ended up with me, someone who was "as lily White as they come." I worked with this principal for two years before moving back home to teach due to personal circumstances.

Joy and Mary share information about influential leaders who encouraged them to continue their schooling and pursue higher careers. None of my building leaders encouraged me to pursue a graduate degree. Instead, my godfather, a Black male high school physical education teacher with his master's in administration, told me I was required to get a graduate degree. After becoming a principal, it was a friend who encouraged me to pursue my doctoral degree because she was starting a doctoral program and wanted me to join her.

I assumed my first principal position in an elementary school in the town I lived in. The superintendent of the district, a Black female, appointed me to this position. I remained in this role for 13 years before leaving to become a district administrator in a nearby district. Upon my hiring, I learned I was the first Black administrator in the district. As I commence my third year in this role, I continue to be the only Black administrator; furthermore, we only have one Black teacher on staff.

I spent a large portion of my life naïve to the complications and barriers my racial identity provided me. I was a strong student who graduated in the top 10 percent of my class, and I was well-liked by my teachers, cheer coach, and flag line coach. There are only two remarks from classmates that stand out to me as racially aggressive comments. I know my inexperience with racial identity contributed to my delayed knowledge of the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership. After interviewing the three participants, I realized I had not been as racially aware as I perceived myself.

### **Discussion**

This research study explored the influence of the lived experiences of culturally responsive school leaders on their professional decisions by seeking to understand the underlying reasons and motivations behind the leaders' systemic decision and their responses to their stakeholders' reactions to these decisions. Five themes emerged from this study's data. These themes demonstrated why the leaders in this study successfully enacted several culturally responsive systemic decisions. These themes included (a) culturally responsive school leaders not only ground their systemic decisions in personal, educational, and professional lived experiences, but they also ground them in

observations, student and family voice, or a combination of the two; (b) culturally responsive school leaders must demonstrate a keen awareness of self and their beliefs and dispositions; (c) culturally responsive school leaders must protect and promote inclusive practices and policies; (d) culturally responsive school leaders should include students, families, and community members in the decision-making process; and (e) culturally responsive leaders experience greater success when they do the work on the front end, including hiring the right staff members and providing professional development to ensure all staff understands the values and beliefs of the school.

Culturally responsive school leaders not only ground their systemic decisions in personal, educational, and professional lived experiences, but they also ground them in observations, student and family voice, or a combination of the two. The participants in this study all enacted some of their systemic decisions based on their historical lived experiences, both personal and professional. They also enacted systemic decisions based on what they observed in their schools. For example, all three participants observed procedures that created barriers for their students' learning or socioemotional well-being, and they enacted systemic decisions to address these observations. In addition, the school leaders enacted systemic decisions based on what they learned from their students and families. When students and families expressed concerns to the leaders, they explored these concerns further and then enacted systemic decisions to address them. The leaders also used a mix of what they observed or learned from students and families and what they experienced to determine the need to enact culturally responsive decisions.

The participants in this study each displayed strong critical self-awareness, each demonstrating a keen awareness of self along with an awareness of their beliefs and dispositions. This strong self-awareness helped the leaders identify systems and processes that perpetuated oppression or systemic racism. In addition, this critical awareness helped the school leaders identify similar previous experiences or lack of such experiences, which aided in their decision-making. For example, Mary's reflection on her mom's experiences with special education and public schools makes her acutely aware of how parents must navigate special education in her school. Because of Mary's past lived experiences, she removed barriers for families whose students participate in the special education program.

Culturally responsive school leaders must protect and promote inclusive practices and policies. Students' sense of belonging and safety must be protected. Each participant acknowledged that student success is grounded in students feeling a sense of safety and belonging. All three leaders strongly believed in promoting student safety and belonging, and they each implemented programs or policies to ensure students had a safe space and felt as though they belonged.

Culturally responsive school leaders should include students, families, and community members in the decision-making process. Joy regularly grounded her work in this theme. For example, joy ensured her students were on all decision-making committees because she believed that if adults make decisions that impact students, then students should be a part of the decision-making process. Further, the data from this

research study suggests that involving students and families in the decision-making process helped to ensure fewer adverse reactions to enacted systemic decisions.

Culturally responsive leaders experience greater success when they do the work on the front end. The leaders in this research study focused on hiring and professional learning. Hiring staff members who share the beliefs and values of the school will help ensure support with various systemic decisions. All three leaders also discussed the importance of professional development to help build their staff members' capacities for culturally responsive work. Taking these steps helps culturally responsive leaders garner support when enacting systemic decisions.

Each leader experienced positive, negative, and mixed reactions to their systemic decisions. When they encountered negative responses, the leaders may have used their historical lived experiences to help the stakeholders understand the need for change. They also used their historical lived experiences to help the stakeholders understand a different perspective or see views the stakeholders might be missing. Moreover, at times, past experiences with adverse reactions drove recent systemic decisions. For example, Donald experienced push-back from the school board, parents, and students, when he started the Black Girls Rock Club; therefore, he did not advertise his Christmas social for Black families. Donald made this deliberate decision to prevent adverse responses to this special event.

Even though the leaders' lived experiences may have played a role in their responses to their stakeholders' reactions, they also used various strategies to address adverse reactions to their decisions. Realizing that negative reactions were often

grounded in feelings of loss or not understanding, the leaders often had conversations with the stakeholders who voiced concerns. For example, Mary would meet one-on-one with staff members and parents; Donald met with his teachers when they had difficulties with his decisions, and Joy would meet with her students, teachers, or community members to hear what was behind their concerns. All three leaders took the time to explain the reasons for their decisions, share data to support their decisions, and show how their decision would benefit students. They did everything possible to help the stakeholders understand and shift their thinking, but in the end, they held fast to the decisions they made, knowing they were in the best interest of all students.

This research study included the following assumptions:

- The personal, educational, and professional lived experiences of a culturally responsive school leader may play a role in the leader's systemic decisions.
- There is often a resistance to different decisions enacted by culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White Schools.

The data from this research demonstrated that these two assumptions are not always the case. Because these three leaders based their systemic decisions on data, observations, and the voice of their students and families, they rarely received adverse reactions from stakeholders. However, when they did receive negative responses, the leaders attributed it to the stakeholders not understanding or having feelings of loss. Usually, it was less about perpetuating systemic oppression or racism and more about not understanding the benefits for all students.



This research study shares ways for culturally responsive school leaders to successfully enact systemic decisions in a predominantly white school. However, due to the small sample size, the data results cannot be generalized to all culturally responsive leaders in predominantly white schools.

### **Implications**

This study suggests that observations and input from students and families, along with the lived personal, educational, and professional experiences of culturally responsive school leaders, impacted the systemic decisions they made as leaders of predominantly White schools. This suggestion highlights the importance of school leaders talking with their stakeholders to help determine their needs. It also underscores the importance of observation and gathering data to support systemic decisions.

Another suggestion from the study includes that leaders with solid critical self-awareness can identify and address potentially oppressive processes and procedures. This suggestion implies the need to assist current and potential leaders in developing their critical self-awareness. Helping leaders more purposefully build their critical self-awareness can help them better identify systems, structures, or people that perpetuate systemic racist systems that negatively impact students.

Additionally, this study proposes the importance of culturally responsive leaders hiring and retaining culturally responsive educators. By hiring educators who understand, believe in, and promote culturally responsive pedagogy, the culturally responsive leader builds a foundation of support for any needed systemic decisions. Likewise, providing professional learning opportunities for staff members to build their capacity with

culturally responsive pedagogy provides the school leader with more support when enacting systemic decisions in the best interest of students.

Finally, according to the findings in this study, a key to successfully enacting culturally responsive systemic decisions includes communicating with stakeholders to determine their schools', students', or families' needs. With information about the various groups' expressed needs, the culturally responsive leader can use their lived experiences to help educate their stakeholders on the importance of their decisions and how they will enact these decisions.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study contributes to the literature on culturally responsive school leadership by focusing on leaders in predominantly White schools. However, as previously mentioned, the literature on culturally responsive school leaders in predominantly White schools is scarce. This study did not focus specifically on elementary school leaders. Student voice at the elementary level is different from student's voice at the high school level. All three school leaders spoke about students bringing issues of concern to them. High school students can better advocate for themselves than elementary students. Including the perspective of elementary school, leaders would share ideas on including student voices in conversations about student needs. Likewise, parent involvement at the elementary level is more significant than at the high school level, as parent involvement decreases in the high school years (Foster, 2015). Replicating and expanding this study by including elementary culturally responsive leaders in predominantly White schools

might provide ideas on addressing the questions and concerns of a more involved population.

This study explores how the lived experiences of three Black school leaders of predominantly White schools impacted the systemic decisions they made and how they responded to various stakeholders' reactions to these decisions. This small group of Black school leaders is too small to generalize to the larger culturally responsive school leader community. Expanding the scope of this study to include leaders of any race, including White leaders who self-identify as culturally responsive, may provide insight into how the lived experiences of leaders of different racial/ethnic backgrounds differ from what the study revealed.

Another suggestion for further studies would be to replicate this research study in different settings. For example, this study's participants were from midwestern public high schools. By expanding the study to different regional areas, the study could provide insight into how culturally responsive leaders address various stakeholder responses to culturally responsive systemic decisions related to regional beliefs and politics. Likewise, using a similar methodology to this study in a private school setting may expose other methods for responding to various stakeholders when enacting culturally responsive systemic decisions in a school which families "choose" to attend.

### **Final Thoughts**

My personal and professional experiences as a culturally responsive school leader draw from my academic learning and lived experiences as a school administrator and a parent of multi-racial children. Each of these influences is not only foundational to my

professional practice and personal life as I help my children successfully navigate their education, but they also serve as a guide to my continuous personal and professional growth. In my former role as a building leader and my current role as a district leader, I purposely work to ensure all my students' academic and socioemotional success. In doing this, I have to focus on and draw attention to historically marginalized populations. In addition, I have to show administrators and staff members of high-performing districts where we are failing certain groups of students.

During the final interview, I asked each participant how their participation in this research study impacted them professionally and personally. Mary mentioned that each time we talked, it left her reflecting for the rest of the day and into the evening on her work. She also said the process was emotional for her. Participating in the research study was a reminder that she keeps many things inside because she often is not asked to share. Likewise, conducting this study was an emotional experience for me. I found myself reflecting on my own experiences after each interview. Through the process, I identified culturally responsive school leadership tenets I can continue to improve on, including engaging students and families in community contexts and increasing my critical self-awareness. My participation has also helped me identify culturally responsive school leadership tenets I am doing well with, including ensuring culturally responsive curricula and ensuring an inclusive environment. Additionally, this research study has helped me improve on how I move forward in garnering the support and assistance of my administrators, staff, and community as we all work together to ensure the success of all students.

As an educational leader in a predominantly White school district, I always find it valuable to constantly refine my practices while leading staff members and administrators who work with various populations of students. As a leader constantly learning and utilizing what I learn to increase my knowledge and skill set, this study has been very impactful. I was fortunate to secure three participants with varied backgrounds and professional experiences. Throughout the study, I was always excited to learn more about each participant, their lived and professional experiences, the decisions they made for their students and families, and how they enacted these decisions in environments that might question the work they were doing. I grew professionally as I learned from all three participants. For example, I learned why Joy was able to implement systemic decisions at her high school with little push-back in the same community I witnessed push back on similar decisions at the elementary level. The lessons I learned from all three participants continue to benefit me in my current role.

In closing, this research study impacted, and continues to impact, my professional experiences and increase my knowledge and skill set as a district-level leader. As a result of this study and my interactions with these three participants, I am committed to working with my stakeholders to impact historically marginalized populations in predominantly White schools.

APPENDIX A  
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Participant Code:

Chosen Pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_

1. How do you currently describe your gender identity?  
 Specify \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your age in years?  
 Specify \_\_\_\_\_
3. Which categories describe you? Select all that apply to you:  
 American Indian or Alaska Native  
 Asian  
 Black or African American  
 Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin  
 Middle Eastern or North African  
 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander  
 White  
 Some other race, ethnicity, or origin, please specify  
\_\_\_\_\_  
 I prefer not to answer
4. Which categories describe you?  
 Master's degree (e.g. MA, MBA, MFA, MS, MSW)  
 Specialist degree (e.g. EdS)  
 Applied or professional doctorate degree (e.g MD, DDC, DDS, JD, PharmD)

- Doctorate degree (e.g. EdD, PhD)
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_



APPENDIX B

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT—INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Interview Part One:****Read Prompt (5 minutes)**

Hi, my name is Angela and I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at Loyola University. Thank you for taking the time to sit with me and talk about your experiences leading up to and currently as a culturally responsive school leader.

(As you may know) I'm currently the Director of Teaching and Learning in an elementary school district; however, prior to this role, I was an elementary school principal for 13 years. As a school leader who self identifies as culturally responsive, I worked to implement a number of systemic changes, as well as a number of new structures and activities. And, each of these decisions have been met with different reactions from a variety of stakeholders, such as students, staff, and parents, as well as other administrators including those at the district level.

This interview study seeks to understand how the personal, professional, and educational life experiences of other school leaders in predominantly white schools influence their school leadership practices and decisions. It also seeks to understand how these leaders respond to their stakeholders as they enact culturally responsive school leadership.

Our interview today will last no more than 60 minutes, during which I will be asking you about your personal, professional, and educational life experiences.

As I am taking notes, I would like to record our conversation in order to refer back to your exact words as I analyze the data. Your identity will be kept confidential, and anything shared by you that is used for data in the study will be connected to a

pseudonym. Also, all my notes and this recording will be destroyed upon the completion of my dissertation study. Do I have your permission to continue to record our conversation?

*If yes:* Thank you! Please let me know if at any point you want me to turn off the recorder and keep something you said off the record.

*If no:* Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation.

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? (*Discuss questions*) If any (other) questions arise at any point during this interview or research study, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.

#### **Interview One Questions:**

- 1) Let's start by talking about your current professional role.
- 2) How long have you held this position?
- 3) Talk about the demographics of your student population.
- 4) Talk about the demographics of your staff population.
- 5) Now let's talk about your lived historical experiences. Talk about the neighborhood where you grew up. (*Depending on the answer may ask, "Were there any notable situations, friends, experiences, etc?"*)
- 6) Talk about the K-12 schools you attended. (*Depending on the answer may ask, "Were there any notable situations, friends, experiences, teachers, classes, etc?"*)
- 7) Talk about your path to receiving your educational administration degree. This should include college, but may also include lived experiences prior to, during, or

after college. *(Depending on the answer may ask, “Were there any notable situations, friends, experiences, courses, etc?”)*

- 8) Talk about the jobs you held prior to your current role. *(Depending on the answer may ask, “Were there any notable experiences, colleagues, students, etc?”)*
- 9) Talk about your experiences in your current role. These experiences may be positive, negative, or a combination of the two. *(Depending on the answer may probe further with “Have there been any notable situations, staff members, experiences, colleagues, students, etc?”)*
- 10) *If not addressed in question nine, ask follow-up questions around the four tenants of culturally responsive school leadership (e.g. critical self-awareness, culturally responsive teachers and curriculum, inclusive environment, and community engagement. These questions may be:*
  - a. *Talk about your experiences with programing, including enrichment and/or remediation courses, student discipline? What role have you played in this/these areas?*
  - b. *Talk about your experiences with recruiting, hiring, and retaining culturally responsive teachers? Talk about the role you have you played in ensuring a culturally responsive curriculum is in front of your students.*
  - c. *Talk about how you ensure an inclusive school environment for all your students and families.*
  - d. *Talk about how you engage the community in your schooling systems and structures.*

**Read Prompt:**

Thank you for your time today. I appreciate your honesty and candor in talking about your personal, professional, and educational experiences. Before I explain the next steps, do you have any questions for me? (*Respond to any questions.*) The next steps in this process will be for me to analyze your responses and look for any themes. We will meet again in five to seven days for the second interview in this three-part interview series. However, prior to this interview I will send you the themes I have drawn from your responses, so that you may offer any clarity or corrections when we meet again. Do you have any questions? (*Respond to any questions.*) At this time, I will stop recording, and we can select a date, time, and location for the next interview. Thank you.

**Interview Part Two:****Read Prompt (5 minutes)**

Hello again. Thank you for taking the time to again sit with me and talk about your experiences leading up to and currently as a culturally responsive school leader. As you know, this interview study seeks to understand how the personal, professional, and educational life experiences of school leaders in predominantly white schools influence their school leadership practices and decisions. It also seeks to understand how these leaders respond to their stakeholders as they enact culturally responsive school leadership.

Our interview today will last no more than 60 minutes, during which I will be asking you about decisions you have made in your role as a school leader, and how these decisions may be connected to the some of the lived experiences you shared in the first

interview. We will also explore the reactions of your stakeholders, for example your students, families, staff, and district administrators to name a few. Finally, we will explore your responses to these reactions, and the reasons for these responses.

As I am taking notes, I would like to record our conversation in order to refer back to your exact words as I analyze the data. Your identity will be kept confidential, and anything shared by you that is used for data in the study will be connected to a pseudonym. Also, all my notes and this recording will be destroyed upon the completion of my dissertation study. Do I have your permission to continue to record our conversation?

*If yes:* Thank you! Please let me know if at any point you want me to turn off the recorder and keep something you said off the record.

*If no:* Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation.

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? (*Discuss questions*) If any (other) questions arise at any point during this interview or research study, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.

**Interview Part Two Questions:**

- 1) Before we jump into my questions, do you have any questions or clarifying comments about the notes I sent you prior to this interview?
- 2) (*If clarification around any answers from interview one is needed ask about them here.*)
- 3) Talk about any culturally relevant decisions you have made while in your current role? (*Prompt for these questions if they are not discussed in the participant's*

*answer. What was the decision? What led to the decision? What was the intended outcome of the decision? What was the lived outcome of the decision?)*

- a. If the leader cannot think of a culturally relevant decision, pull an example from their personal, professional, or education history and probe to see if they have seen this type of situation in their school? If they have, how did they handle it? Then lead to other prompts about the decisions they made in relation to the situation. Continue to pull from the participant's previous answers until a decision or two is discovered and discussed.
- 4) Talk about the reactions from the different stakeholders (i.e. your students, staff, families, community, other administrators, etc).
- 5) Talk about your response, or responses, to these reactions. *(If the participant needs assistance with this question, or if the following are not discussed, prompt for the participant's emotional response, immediate response, long-term response, public vs. private responses.)*

**Read Prompt:**

Thank you for your time today. I appreciate your honesty and candor in talking about specific decisions you have made as a leader as well as about the reactions of others to these decisions and your subsequent responses to these reactions. Before I explain the next steps, do you have any questions for me? *(Respond to any questions.)*

The next steps in this process will be for me to analyze your responses and look for any themes. We will meet again in five to seven days for the third interview in this three-part interview series. However, prior to this interview I will send you the themes I have drawn

from your responses, so that you may offer any clarity or corrections when we meet again. Do you have any questions? (*Respond to any questions.*) At this time, I will stop recording, and we can select a date, time, and location for the final interview. Thank you.

**Interview Part Three:**

**Read Prompt (5 minutes)**

Hello. Thank you for taking the time to again sit with me and talk about your experiences leading up to and currently as a culturally responsive school leader.

As you know, this interview study seeks to understand how the personal, professional, and educational life experiences of school leaders in predominantly white schools influence their school leadership practices and decisions. It also seeks to understand how these leaders respond to their stakeholders as they enact culturally responsive school leadership.

Our interview today will last no more than 60 minutes, during which I will be asking you to reflect on the professional and personal impact your participation in this study has had.

As I am taking notes, I would like to record our conversation in order to refer back to your exact words as I analyze the data. Your identity will be kept confidential, and anything shared by you that is used for data in the study will be connected to a pseudonym. Also, all my notes and this recording will be destroyed upon the completion of my dissertation study. Do I have your permission to continue to record our conversation?



*If yes:* Thank you! Please let me know if at any point you want me to turn off the recorder and keep something you said off the record.

*If no:* Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation.

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? (*Discuss questions*) If any (other) questions arise at any point during this interview or research study, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.

**Interview Three Questions:**

- 1) Before we jump into my questions, do you have any questions or clarifying comments about the notes I sent you prior to this interview?
- 2) (*If clarification around any answers from interview one is needed ask about them here.*)
- 3) Given what you have shared about your personal, professional, and educational experiences, the decisions you have made as a culturally responsive school leader, and the responses you have had to your stakeholder's reactions, how have your thoughts about yourself as a culturally responsive school leader been solidified or adjusted?
- 4) Given your experience with participating in this research study, where do you see yourself going with culturally responsive leadership in the future?
- 5) In what other ways has your participation in this study impacted you professionally and/or personally?
- 6) Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences, past or present, and/or about culturally responsive school leadership?

**Read Prompt:**

Thank you for your time today and for your time over the past *(two)* weeks. I appreciate your honesty and candor throughout these interviews. Before I explain the next steps, do you have any questions for me? *(Respond to any questions.)* The next steps in this process will be for me to analyze your responses and look for any themes. Within the next week, I will send you the themes I have drawn from your responses, so that you may offer any clarity or corrections. I will reach out to you through email to see if you have any corrections or possibly to ask any final clarifying questions. Do you have any questions for me? *(Respond to any questions.)* At this time, I will stop recording. Thank you again for your time and participation in this study.

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## VITA

Angela Dolezal was born and raised in Bellevue, Nebraska. Before attending Loyola University Chicago, she attended the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Education in May 1998. From August 1998 to May 2006, Dolezal taught elementary and middle school grades in Virginia, Nebraska, and Illinois. She also attended the University of Nebraska, Omaha, where she received a Master of Science in Educational Administration and Supervision in 2004.

From August 2006 to May 2019, Angela Dolezal was an elementary school principal in Illinois. While at Loyola, in May July 2019, Dolezal began working as the Director of Teaching and Learning in an elementary school district.

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