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## None of Us Are Safe: How Leaders Sustain Culturally Responsive Elementary and Middle School Improvement Planning

Jerry B. Michel

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

“NONE OF US ARE SAFE”: HOW LEADERS SUSTAIN CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE  
ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION  
PROGRAM IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

BY

JERRY B. MICHEL

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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Dedicated to Bella – the only race you lose is the one you don't run.

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## INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH PROPOSAL

School leaders face many challenges when implementing change in schools, especially changes involving making school climate, curriculum, and instruction more equitable for all students. When the world entered a pandemic in 2020 and educators conducted schooling in many places via video conferencing into family homes, what students learned and what teachers taught was on display. Concurrently, political and media-driven forces mounted intensive campaigns against equity-driven reforms, often under the umbrella complaint that schools used critical race theory (CRT) to negatively indoctrinate students (Schwartz, 2022; Will, 2022; Young and Freeman, 2022).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022), over the past decade, the percentage of Hispanic students has increased while the percentage of Black and White students has decreased. The collective impact of demographic changes is that the United States student population is now less than 50% White. While the share of White teachers has decreased over the last 30 years, a significant majority of public-school teachers still identify as non-Hispanic White, according to the most recent educator demographic data from NCES (Schaffer, 2021). The same percentages are mirrored in the NCES data for public school principals (NCES, 2020), again the majority being White.

When a majority White teacher and school leader work force plans, implements, and leads school change as the student populations become increasingly diverse, research indicates educators are often unready and unprepared not only to address issues of equity, but even to have

adequate understanding of the equity-based issues they face (Irby, 2021, Lewis and Diamond, 2015). These demographics provide an important context for the focus of this research, as teachers and school leaders make improvement plans each year to establish and maintain a growth-oriented, engaging school environment where students feel safe and supported. School improvement plans will have to have thoughtful planning and specific action planning to address the cultural differences that exist between school leaders, teachers, and their students. This study examined the challenges teachers and school leaders face when implemented improvement plans aimed at making school climate and curriculum more equitable, especially when there is a politicized landscape opposed to their efforts to be culturally responsive. Recently, some of this opposition has come under the guise of criticizing critical race theory.

Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that defines race as a social construct and asserts racism is not merely a function of individual biases and actions but is embedded in social and legal systems (Delgado and Stefanic, 2012). CRT, most significantly during and following the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020, appeared at the center of many political debates around kindergarten-twelfth grade (K-12) teaching and school policy (Schwartz, 2022). Opponents to diversity, inclusion, and equity work questioned the intent behind efforts to expose and disrupt systemic racism by examining school policies, practices, curriculum, instruction, and discipline procedures (Perry and McDaniel, 2023). Educational leaders found themselves having to respond to critics, especially in terms of the content students learned in classrooms and pedagogical practices educators employed while teaching. Although teachers, schools, and districts continued in their efforts to better engage their students in learning that was meaningful, rigorous, and responsive to the needs of a diverse range students,

they found their efforts increasingly under attack (Will, 2022; Gross, 2021; Young and Friedman, 2022).

When opposition to anti-racist work arrives at the schoolhouse doors and board meetings, school leaders must be ready to dismantle disinformation and bring clarity to confusion. In this case, educators must first have a clear understanding of the three main tenets of CRT, as outlined by Delgado and Stefancic (2012). The first of these tenets contends that to study, address, and undo systemic racism, we must understand that racism is an ordinary condition rather than an exceptional one. Second, systems of power and privilege often do not change until there is a convergence of interest between those who hold power and those who do not. Third, and of significant note, it must be recognized as scientific fact that race is a social, rather than biological construct (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). Scholars also emphasize that CRT is necessarily reflective of the experiences of those who study its effects (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1998). These experiences highlight intersectionality as another important nuance CRT, born out of Crenshaw's (1991) groundbreaking work in gender and legal studies. Intersectionality (which recognizes how marginalization is compounded by gender expression, faith, language, sexuality, or other aspects of personal identity) illustrates the complexity of culturally responsive pedagogy, as no individual is made up of a single story (Adichie, 2009). Recognizing and elevating the unique voice and perspective that people of color have in experiencing systemic racism must also be appreciated.

When opponents of equity and anti-racist work use CRT complaints to oppose all equity efforts (Gross, 2021; Will, 2022), it makes understanding the language around and connections between CRT and culturally relevant pedagogy ever more important to understand. Being

engaged in anti-racist work means helping teachers recognize the ongoing presence of racism needs to be addressed and interrupted, rather than something maintained and left in silence (Galloway, 2019, p. 495). If teaching includes developing students' understanding of how certain knowledge, values, behaviors, and roles have become privileged and normalized, it is then actively anti-oppressive and anti-racist (Galloway et al., 2019). Galloway and her colleagues go on to make this important connection, bringing clarity to the connection between CRT and culturally relevant pedagogy:

While CRT provides a framework and for some a tool of analysis for examining educational practices and structures that continue to subordinate groups of people, culturally relevant pedagogy offers a model of theory to practice and examples of how such instruction can be delivered (p. 71).

So, while CRT is an academic framework used primarily by researchers and scholars rooted in the role that race and racism play in maintaining systems of oppression, culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on the practice and philosophy behind better education for the diverse student populations served by American schools. Understanding both CRT and culturally relevant pedagogy enhances how educators examine the role of race and racism in society and, by extension, our schools.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Teaching**

One of the foundational tools strategies for responding to the needs of diverse school communities is to develop systemic understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. In framing and defining culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1995) argued educators are obligated to take “a more expansive view of pedagogy” (p. 483) in both teacher education

programs and continuing in-district professional development for educators. Her original research in culturally relevant pedagogy continues inform school equity work today. Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is characterized by three main criteria or conditions for teaching and three conceptions or mindsets that educators should hold in relation to those criteria. The three criteria are (a) teaching with a focus on academic development, (b) an understanding of and the ability to develop capacity for growing cultural competence, and (c) the ability to actively consider the context that sociopolitical consciousness brings to education (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). These criteria must be continuously examined by educators having a clear sense of self and others (and the influence that has on curriculum and instruction), an understanding of how social relations influence learning, and the role of knowledge (both whose is valued and whose is represented) in both learning and education. Ladson-Billings work is the starting point for foundational understanding of the interactions between CRP and CRT, as she is also a significant contributor to the field of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995).

Educators also need historical understanding of another branch of strength-based equity work, culturally responsive teaching. Grounded in Geneva Gay's research, *culturally responsive teaching* can be thought of as using the "cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students" as foundations of strength for more effective instruction (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Culturally responsive teaching eschews deficit mindsets that systemically perpetuate gaps in academic performance. Rather than maintaining deficit narrative, culturally responsive teaching instead looks to grounding instruction in the "lived experiences and frames of reference of students" (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Student engagement is increased when learning tasks and texts

are personally meaningful; culturally relevant teaching pushes teachers to respond to student needs to fulfil their potential by using “the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of culturally diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). Using a culturally responsive lens is critical for effective teaching and, as the demographics for American schools reflect, it means that educators must invest in the work to build productive student-teacher relationships by making the same investment in cultural competence that they do with content knowledge and instructional methods.

Continuing in this line of strength-based conceptual frameworks, and most applicable to this research study, is the next evolution of CRP and culturally responsive teaching, culturally sustaining pedagogy. Recognizing the important and continuing contributions of CRP and culturally responsive teaching to school equity work, researchers and educators have continued to establish tools and practices that more actively and urgently dismantle systems of oppression. Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) demands more than being responsive and relevant, it requires pedagogy that supports “young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). CSP does more than recognize culture, it builds the conditions to help students collectively and as individuals flourish and grow into the future. A key aspect of CSP is the concept of pluralism; the diversity of cultural practices and funds of knowledge make all learners stronger and communities healthier (Paris, 2012; Paris and Alim, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Page, 2008).

When we consider what culture means to a learner, we must also question what cultures matter or, conversely, do not matter within our schools, districts, and educational systems

(Apple, 2014). Educators must constantly grapple with the question of how students' cultures interact with their learning in a school setting. This is especially true when researchers consider the role culture plays in literacy development and student engagement, beginning with Rosenblatt's (1946, 1968) work in the transactional nature of reading to Tatum's (2011) exploration the lack of diversity in literacy instruction. Discussions, professional learning, and research on CRP, culturally responsive teaching, and culturally sustaining pedagogy have long helped educators grasp the moral and ethical reasons for making our instruction both accessible and respectful to students and families whose lived experiences have been traditionally marginalized by mainstream society and school culture.

As educators seek to address this marginalization, the forces opposed to anti-racist and diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging efforts in schools are becoming even more active. One hundred thirty-seven gag orders were introduced in 2022, a 250 percent increase from the 54 bills introduced in 2021. These gag orders, introduced through legislation, employ vague language, create a climate of fear and self-censorship, and target race, gender, American history, and LGBTQ+ identities (Young and Friedman, 2022). Throughout the reports of censorship through legislation, school board meetings being co-opted by opponents, and educators being threatened, there is a consistent theme: opponents don't know what critical race theory is, they just know that they don't like it (Gross, 2021; Mazariegos and Sullivan, 2022; Perry and McDaniel, 2023; Schwartz, 2022; Will, 2022). Perry and McDaniel (2023) provide many specific examples where Republican opponents to equity efforts purposefully use coded language that is thinly veiled racism and bias at work, all with the goal of plausible deniability. Unfortunately, it works, and it must be countered by education leaders with specific clear



knowledge of what CRT is and isn't and why culturally sustaining pedagogies are both here to stay and to help students learn in meaningful and effective ways. When considering what educators are facing today, I am partial to the tweet, "The people who threw rocks at Ruby Bridges for trying to go to school are now upset their grandchildren might learn about them throwing rocks at Ruby Bridges" (Evans, 2021).

Humor aside, it is critical for educators and school leaders to examine whose culture matters both critically and constantly within our schools and systems of education. Muhammad (2020) advocates for a historically responsive literacy model that centers "literacy as identity meaning-making" (p. 57). Building on Freire and Macedo's (1987) seminal work, Muhammad sees the texts and tasks educators select as critical to young readers both "defining their lives and help[ing] them to gain confidence in knowing who they are" (p. 57). As literacy development is central in a student's learning identity, as Gee (2000) explores in a lengthy example of how the different combinations of student identities (derived from their nature, position within an institution, individual, and affinity group traits) situated learners in a school setting and illustrated how those identities were reflected in teacher-student interactions. Students don't just learn, they learn who they are as learners, and the conditions and interactions teachers develop have great potential to influence their students' image of themselves as learners.

Learners are most readily engaged when what they are learning seems relevant; one way to do that is to use strategies aligned with culturally sustaining pedagogy. When considering the role identity plays within a learner's development, especially literacy development, Giroux's (1993) outline of the role of politics in educational discourse is critical. Literacy, he argues, "makes visible the historically and socially constructed strengths and limitations" of our society

while also providing “a form of ethical address that structures how we construct relationships between ourselves and others” (p. 368). It reasons to follow that the core of our relationship with literacy development provides our youngest learners with the “opportunity to govern and shape history rather than being consigned to its margins” (p. 367). Perhaps it is exactly this kind of empowerment that is at the roots of opposition to educators’ work to build schooling that is more equitable and actively anti-racist, for it represents a shift in political power.

La Guardia (2009) explores contemporary explorations of identity and identifies two key contributing factors to how learners’ identities develop, the ability to explore and evaluate “a variety of values, beliefs, goals, and social roles” followed by the ability to commit to those elements that align with one’s developing values and needs (p. 90). She goes on to note that “healthy identity formation” necessarily involves active exploration of those values, beliefs, and goals that are meaningful to the individual (p. 100). When juxtaposed with two of Hammond’s (2015) conditions aligned with culturally responsive pedagogy, creating environments “intellectually and socially safe for learning [and making] space for student voice and agency” (p. 17), it would seem there is a healthy alignment between the identity development that is consistent with culturally responsive and sustaining practices. Lewis and Diamond’s (2015) research bears this out, noting that “while all kids come to school with social and cultural resources, only some of those ‘pay off’ and translate into currency (i.e., capital) in the context of formal schooling” (p. 168). This is the dynamic between identity and instructional conditions this research explored; understanding the importance of student identity is critical for developing deeper learning partnerships between teachers and students (Hammond, 2015).

Another critical intersection in culturally sustaining school improvement work is understanding the intersection between CRP, affective, and cognitive neuroscience (Hammond, 2015; Immordino-Yang, 2016). Affective neuroscience is primarily concerned with the connections between emotion and learning, as we best learn things that we care deeply about (Immordino-Yang, 2016). Cognitive neuroscience more carefully examines the architecture of our brain and how it is organized for learning. Hammond (2015) explicitly explores these learning processes and aligns them with best practices in culturally responsive pedagogy. The intersection of neuroscience and culturally sustaining pedagogy will help educators better understand the link between *how* the brain learns and *how* the learner feels. For schools to engage in CSP, educators and school leaders must invest in deepening their understanding of CSP, the science of learning, and how to address challenges from those who would oppose their efforts to increase equitable learning conditions, especially those whose understanding is influenced by disinformation. The background to my research will be at the juncture of culturally sustaining pedagogy, critical race theory, critical literacy theory, a developing understanding of how we think and learn (cognitive neuroscience), and the influence of emotion on thinking and learning (affective neuroscience).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The challenge education leaders often face with any implementation or change is one of internal coherence (Forman, et al., 2017), noting that struggles with school improvement are not typically a failure of implementation, but a shortcoming of learning (p. 10). In other words, an organization cannot change without individuals learning the shared understanding of core concepts embedded within those improvement efforts. The work of critical literacy theorists will

provide a helpful lens identify the concepts in culturally sustaining pedagogy for which there needs to be organizational coherence. Bishop (2014) enumerates the key reasons why critical literacy informs this line of research, as it is “built on exploring personal, sociopolitical, economic and intellectual border identities” (p. 52). This is an important perspective, as learners’ identities are complex and multi-faceted. Learners are not a single story (Adichie, 2009). Understanding how an individual is both defined by and defines their identity (and the intersections of their identities) is crucial to engaging students in significant learning, especially in terms of literacy development. When society struggles to address issues of equity in the structure of schooling, disrupting patterns of marginalization that are *outside of the learner’s sphere of influence* is morally necessary. Adopting critical literacy as the primary lens and framework for this research will help ensure that the questions asked focus on disrupting inequity, bias, and stereotype threat that are integral to culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Also informing this line of exploration is the work of cognitive neuroscientists, and specifically those whose work explores the affective domain of learning and identity development. Understanding the role that emotion plays in learning and a learner’s approach towards traditional schooling is critical for identifying both the potential and the effectiveness of culturally relevant pedagogy might have on instructional and intervention design. Immordino-Yang (2016) asserts, “the legacy of our intelligent brain is our social and emotional mind” (p. 69). Her work is crucial in how we look at our students’ development, especially in terms of academic and literacy development, as assessments and measurements often tempt educators reduce student data to growth and progress in relation to important standards. Throughout evaluation of student learning, educators are always looking for evidence; evidence that specific

instruction or interventions provides students with the best opportunity to achieve specific, measurable growth. But, if “learning is dynamic, social and context dependent because *emotions* are,” how can we ignore the role of emotion in “how, what, when, and why people think, remember, and learn” (p. 17)? Immordino-Yang builds an impressive case, through experimentation and research, demonstrating that it is “neurobiologically impossible to build memories, engage complex thoughts, or making meaningful decisions without emotion” (p. 18). To teach without considering emotion is folly; learning is most fully engaged and effective when learners care about and are emotionally connected to the content they are learning. Finding ways to leverage the power in Immordino-Yang’s work and research is critical to growing and maintaining culturally sustaining pedagogy.

The powerful relationship between emotion, learning, and self-image is especially important, because as students develop the ability to read, write, and problem-solve, they are also developing their academic and social identity as learners and global citizens. (Keehne, et al., 2018; La Guardia, 2009; Nasir, et al., 2009). Educators and students alike must be well-versed in how to learn from work with a range of cultures and individuals, especially those whose cultural backgrounds differ from their own. This is but an initial step; awareness must lead to action, else the effects of stereotype threat on student learning will continue to influence student performance and confidence (Cadinu, et al., 2003; Keehne, et al.; 2018).

In his research on stereotype threat and bias, Claude Steele (2011) notes how crucial it is for teachers to understand and address bias in their classrooms. First, although we see “ourselves as autonomous individuals, evidence consistently shows that contingencies tied to our social identities do make a difference in shaping our lives” (p. 14). When faced with a task that students

are invested in successfully completing, the bias against any group they may belong to (identity threat) can negatively influence their performance as learners. This is where I investigate; just as teachers influence their classroom environment, school leaders have influence over the conditions established through improvement planning involving culturally sustaining practices.

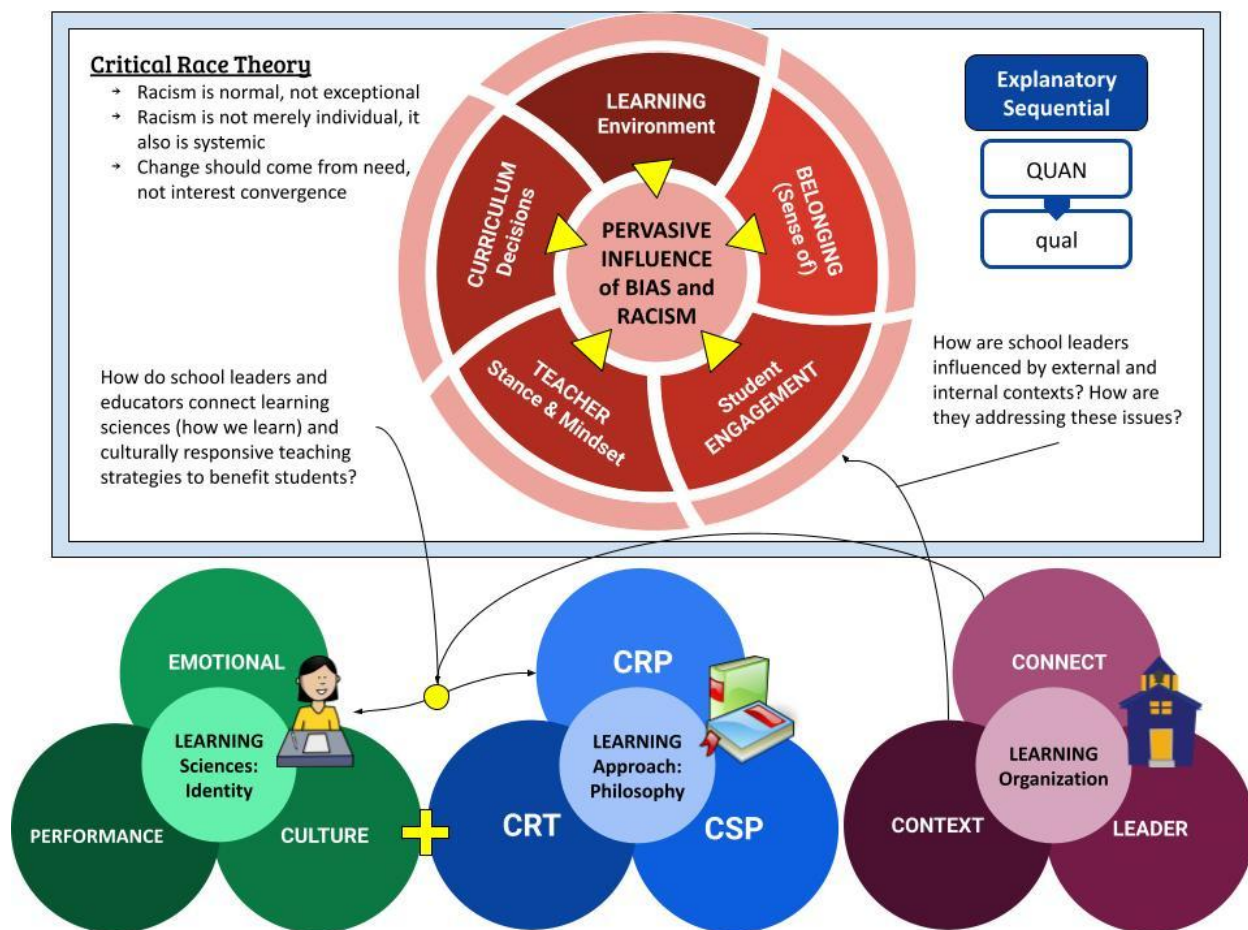
Steele's research also demonstrates that stereotype threat, especially when left unchecked, hinders educators' ability to address "the racial, social class, and gender achievement gaps that persistently plague and distort our society to the equally persistent intergroup tensions that often trouble our social relations" (Steele, 2011, p. 15). When these conditions exist, school leaders and teachers must be able to articulate how, as a collective, the actions a school implements will address and disrupt these persistent challenges. At the heart of this improvement planning are strategies aligned with culturally sustaining pedagogy, that stress the value of individual student identities and establish explicit, organized planning for developing and delivering on increasing teacher capacity to align their practices with identified CSP strategies. To be clear, strategies grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogy will support all students, not only students from marginalized populations. As we have an increasingly diverse student body being taught by teachers and systems that are largely shaped by White, middle-class, and Protestant values, it will be increasingly important to demonstrate how the benefits of diversity (Page, 2008) in curriculum and instruction will benefit all students and dismantle barriers to inclusion and safety for marginalized populations.

The influence findings from cognitive neuroscience could have on examining culturally relevant pedagogy is equally important. Looking at literacy development through the lens of critical literacy is analogous to witnessing the development of consciousness. Examining the

forces of bias and stereotype threat on the development of self and self-image is enhanced by understanding how the brain encodes meaning. Dehaene (2020) works to crack open what consciousness truly is, focusing on three key elements, vigilance, attention, and conscious access. These three conditions correspond to being awake and aware, the ability to focus our attention on specific information, and the process by which we store and relate information in our brain (p. 8-9). Figure 1, Research Study Graphic helps visualize how these different components work together within a theoretical framework of critical race theory.

Through experimentation, Dehaene (2020) reports on how the study of consciousness reveals insights into how our mind processes, encodes, stores, and relates information in our mind's neural network. By examining three qualities associated with conscious thought (conscious access, manipulating conscious perception, and awareness of introspection), Dehaene (2020) and other experimenters can peel back the mysteries associated with conscious and unconscious processing. Understanding this branch of neuroscience is important in our study of culturally sustaining pedagogy and how our self-image forms. No learner is immune to the forces of stereotype bias and threat (Steele, 2010); understanding how the mind processes information both consciously and unconsciously can help develop valuable insights.

Figure 1. *Research Study Graphic*



**Research Questions**

This study will address the following research questions:

1. What conditions do school administrators consider necessary for implementing culturally sustaining teaching practices in K-8 schools?
2. What challenges or barriers do school administrators expect to encounter when building the conditions necessary for implementing culturally sustaining teaching practices in K-8 schools?



3. What strategies can school administrators employ to address the challenges and barriers schools and educators face when implementing culturally sustaining teaching practices?

As the background to this study recognizes the important links between affective neuroscience and culturally responsive pedagogy, I will be using an established framework for guiding my research, Hammond's (2015) "Ready for Rigor Framework," introduced in her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* (p. 17). Her work centers the role of neuroscience informing how we identify solutions within the learning sciences to help frame and effective culturally responsive practices, making her framework an especially useful and pertinent tool for this research. This tool is included in Appendix A.

## **Methodology and Reporting**

### **Study Design**

This case study used mixed methods research. The first phase of research employed a survey to collect quantitative data and was followed in phase two by a limited number of randomly selected interviews to collect qualitative data, consistent with a sequential explanatory design strategy. Hammond's (2015) Ready for Rigor Framework was used as a survey tool and is shared in Appendix A. The first phase of research included collecting and analyzing the survey data, then using descriptive statistics to identify patterns that develop identifying barriers and strengths towards implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy, from the perspective of kindergarten through grade eight school administrators. In the second phase of research follow-up interviews were conducted with five subjects who took the survey, all selected through

random sampling. A structured interview protocol was conducted to elicit deeper responses, using the questions listed in Appendix B. Responses were analyzed and coded for themes; the themes were examined for further evidence of trends and patterns established through the survey data. Consistent with Creswell's (2014) description of a transformative worldview, this research is necessarily "intertwined with politics" as equity-related advocacy must frequently be and addresses "important social issues of the day" (p. 9). Understanding that students, family, and educators, especially those traditionally marginalized, require the active support and action of school leadership to disrupt systems of oppression, this research examines challenges school leaders face implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy in school improvement planning.

### **Context**

This case study focused on a suburban school district in the northern suburbs of a major Midwestern city and is made up of 16 schools, including three middle schools (grades 6-8), two magnet schools (grades K-8), eight elementary schools (grades K-5), an early childhood center, a residential school, and a self-contained public therapeutic day program. Four of the elementary schools also provide two-way Spanish immersion programming for emergent bilingual students. The district has over 7,100 students with the following demographics: 39% low income, 14% students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), 3% homeless, 15% emergent bilinguals, and 10% chronic absenteeism. The racial makeup of the school district is 42% White, 23% Black, 21% Latinx, 9% multi-racial, and 4% Asian.

The district employs 667 certified teachers, 68 percent of whom hold at least a master's degree. The district maintains an 88 percent retention rate, with the teachers being held in good regard by the community. The district made significant investments in equity-based professional

learning over the last five years, including in-depth, multi-day workshops for all district employees. Fifty-five administrators oversee supervision, school operations, and curriculum and instruction, including building-level principals and assistant principals and central office cabinet. Additionally, administrators have participated in a significant amount of professional learning around equity, culturally responsive teaching practices, and addressing race and racism.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were all school and central office administrators. The survey was offered via email to 55 administrators, with participation completely voluntary. Twenty-five administrators responded and 16 were able to complete the survey, resulting in a 32 percent response rate for the initial survey. Demographics for survey participants are included in Table 1 below. This was a quasi-experimental study, with a non-random convenience sampling using a naturally forming group of participants within this school district, to obtain the greatest number of participants possible (Creswell, 2014).

Administrators in this district are familiar with Hammond's work, including her Ready for Rigor Framework (2015). Satterfield School District's commitment to professional learning around equity and culturally responsive pedagogy, is represented by the professional opportunities displayed in Table 1, Research Study Demographics, Satterfield School District Survey Participants. These opportunities include two levels of SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) from the National SEED Project, Courageous Conversations About Race workshops (based on Singleton's (2014) by the same name), Beyond Diversity (a multi-day training held by Pacific Education Group), and a book study centered on Hammond's (2015)

book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*.

### **Data Collection**

As the primary researcher, I introduced Hammond's Ready for Rigor Framework (2015) to potential study participants via an email survey. The framework was presented as a tool for identifying and considering different ways in which educators institute a range of strategies and practices aligned with culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms. The framework included four practice areas (awareness, learning practices, information processing, and community of learners) and twenty-four components organized with these practice areas. The survey was developed as a SEED project with other school and district administrators during a year-long professional learning experience but, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was never field tested. While the Ready for Rigor Framework was readily available as a resource to Satterfield School District school administrators, it had not been used as a survey instrument.

Participants rated each of the 24 individual components on a five-point scale, assessing how much each individual component is present or applied across their school building(s). The same scale was used for all 24 items, ranging from 5 (nearly all the time, 90% or more) to 1 (not often, less than 25% of the time). Using this scale supported the sequential explanatory design, seeking to identify both challenges and areas of strength in a school's efforts to support culturally responsive pedagogy, as identified in the research questions.

Administrators were introduced to the survey tool and potential follow-up interview via email. Once the invitation to the survey was emailed, administrators had one week to respond, with a reminder three days before the response deadline. For security and anonymity, the

instrument was distributed through the Qualtrics platform, with all responses remaining anonymous. Subjects were informed that results would be analyzed for group characteristics and no personally identifiable information would be shared or published.

From the responding participants, five respondents were randomly selected for a thirty-minute, follow-up interview via Zoom, a video conference platform. The interview protocol will include the components that Creswell (2014) identifies as critical to this design, including standard instructions and interview questions to be followed for each interview. The five questions (and follow-up probes) are outlined in Appendix B. Video conferences facilitated the recording, transcribing, and coding the interviewee responses. Each of the five questions directly addressed the research questions by asking respondents to share their understanding and personal definition of culturally responsive teaching, what they see as barriers to culturally responsive teaching, and what strengths in implementing culturally responsive teaching do they see in their school.

Coding of the interview data resulted in 36 distinct categories and 157 total responses across the five interviews. Response categories were subsequently organized into strengths and growth areas, as well as being coded into Hammond's (2015) four different practice areas for the Ready for Rigor Framework, Awareness, Learning Partnerships, Information Processing, and Community of Learners and Learning Environment (p. 17). The interview data results are reported in Tables 4, 5, and 6 in Chapter 4.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze both the survey and interview responses, including the mean, standard deviation, and range of scores for each component. Consistent with

Cohen, et al.'s (2007) summation of descriptive research, this study was used to examine school administrators and their perceptions of CRP within the context of school improvement planning "in order to describe...classify, analyze, and interpret" conditions in their organizations (p. 205). Also, in defining what Cohen, et al. (2007) describe as "fitness of purpose," (p. 461) data analysis was conducted to generate themes and understand what school leaders face when integrating improvement planning with culturally sustaining pedagogy and practices. Additionally, the goal for reporting the analysis naturally emerged to both raise issues and promote further exploration, especially within different local contexts.

The initial survey data was collected and analyzed with no preconceived notions or assumptions about what this small, single district population of school leaders would reveal (Creswell, 2014). This cross-sectional study provided a snapshot of a single point in time at Satterfield School District and was organized to use an ordinal data scale, as participants were rating their opinions in relation to CRP implementation (Cohen, et al., 2007). The analysis of survey was used to "simply report what has been found, in a variety of ways" (p. 504) to provide context for the qualitative interview data. These descriptive statistics include determining the mean (for ranking and comparison purposes), range (for reporting the distribution of leadership observations), and standard deviation (for examining both individual and practice area differences for significance). Consistent with exploratory data presentation design (p. 507), data was organized into both frequency and percentage tables as well as a Pareto chart.

Interview data collection and analysis followed survey data collection, consistent with Creswell's (2014) considerations for planning explanatory sequential mixed methods research studies, where the "qualitative data collection builds directly on the quantitative results" (p. 224).

Equal weighting was given to both the quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data and although Hammond's (2015) Ready for Rigor Framework was used, themes were developed from the qualitative through an inductive approach. As the qualitative data provided supporting information to the collected survey data, the analysis was done separately, rather than merging the data (Creswell, 2014). Data analysis was also reported separately; phase one, the survey results and phase 2, looking deeper into the individual responses of school administrators to better understand challenges, strengths, and growth areas around implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy and practices. Phase 2 data was organized into data tables and included further analysis through discussion of the results in the following section.

Deeper comparative analysis between individual components was conducted for ranking purposes and results were also examined by combining components for each practice area to also determine commonalities and patterns by grouping. The patterns and data for the survey and interview data were also compared and analyzed. To determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between survey response rankings, the data was plotted using a Pareto chart, as this technique is commonly used to determine which conditions or causes most accurately reflect a significant solution to the problem at hand which, in this case, is implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy and practices (Kelley, 1999, p. 139).

The interview data was prepared using inductive coding to organize the transcribed responses into more discrete categories, creating and assigning codes "only on the basis of the emerging information collected from participants" (Creswell, 2014, p. 199). Once the descriptive codes (Cohen, et al., 2007) were identified and documented within the participants' transcripts, definitions were created for each inductive code to assure that repeating appearances of the

theme would have a shared meaning or connection. Repeated readings of each transcript were conducted to ensure the number of codes created (36) were both manageable and accurately reflected the interview data (p. 478). At this point, each data point was also identified as being shared as a strength or a growth area by the interview subject, to bring further clarity and accuracy to the information shared.

To further assist in the analysis, each coded response was then categorized into one of the four practice areas identified in Hammonds' Ready for Rigor Framework (2015). Cohen, et al. (2007) describe this "unitization" (p. 479) of the data as a helpful process for developing meaning around patterns in the data. As Hammond's Framework was used as the survey tool, this organizing step in the data analysis allowed for developing richer insights into the challenges school leaders face and the foundations they can build in sustaining culturally responsive practices. The interview data was ranked to identify and prioritize conditions and strategies that are elevated by the interview subjects, providing guidance for making informed decisions around school improvement priorities and planning. Data analysis at this level included, "counting, patterning (noting recurrent themes or patterns), clustering...and relating findings to theoretical frameworks" (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 482).

### **Validity and Reliability**

As this was the initial application of this framework as a survey instrument, the main source of validity is content, or face validity, as Hammond's published framework (2015) in this area is respected for its expertise. The twenty-four components, spread across the four practice areas, represent comprehensive coverage of major characteristics of culturally responsive pedagogy. Since the quantitative data came from a non-random convenience sampling, random



selection of participants for the follow-up interviews was employed. In analyzing the qualitative data, Creswell's (2014, p. 197) model was followed for validating the accuracy of the interview information collected. Creswell's model was also used to organize and code the data in relation to the four practice areas of Hammond's framework (2015), to further aid in the interpretation of the qualitative interview data.

### **Researcher Role and Perspective**

As an employee of this district (and as a past administrator) I ensured that no school sites or administrators where I served in a supervisory capacity were included in the population; this eliminated two of the school sites from the target population. I also ensured that the follow-up selection of interview subjects was a completely random selection from those participants who indicated they were willing to participate by using a random number generator to both assign participants a random number and then a second time to select potential interview subjects. Three of the interview subjects were previously professional colleagues of mine; our relationships are cordial and, given that the data collection was voluntary, anonymous, and not shared with district administration, the subjects seemed to be able to answer with honesty and vulnerability. The data was not, to the best of my knowledge, compromised; power structures within the district did not influence the data collection and analysis by asking to view the results or putting any conditions on publishing, sharing, or presenting the results in any form. All the steps for obtaining institutional permission through the institutional review board were followed with integrity and granted, both from Loyola University and Satterfield School District, with no significant delays or corrections.

## Article Outputs

For this study, I followed Loyola's three-article dissertation design. Each chapter serves as one of those articles and are detailed below.

Chapter 2, the first article, includes analysis and interpretation of the empirical data for the publication *Improving Schools*. This peer-reviewed journal targets educators involved in school improvement efforts, uniting academics and practitioners; articles are normally 4,000-6,000 words in length. Entitled "From Identification to Action: Planning for Culturally Sustaining School Improvement in Elementary and Middle Schools," this article examines the role of race and bias in school settings and provides insights into the challenges school leaders face when working align school learning environments with culturally sustaining pedagogy and practices. This article will provide guidance for how to identify and prioritize practices that help schools and school systems plan for culturally sustaining pedagogy in action-oriented, goal-focused ways.

Chapter 3, the third article, is a practice-based article for submission to *Educational Leadership*, a journal produced by ASCD, Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development. Article in this publication are typically in the 2,500 word range and target school reform within themed issues; it is the only article for publication which does not require an abstract. This article, "Dismantling Roadblocks to Equity" is designed for submission to the October 2023 issue themed "What New Leaders Need." The focus will be threefold – strategies school leaders can use for developing common understanding culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy; practical professional learning guidance that anticipates potential challenges, especially through disinformation

campaigns; and highlighting the systems that help school leaders organize for improvement planning that aligns with established frameworks for culturally responsive pedagogy.

Chapter 4, the final article, is designed for submission to *Equity and Excellence in Education*, a publication that actively examines social justice work in schools, especially schools in an urban setting that work with diverse and marginalized student populations. This article, entitled “None of Us Are Safe: Planning for Culturally Sustaining School Improvement in Elementary and Middle Schools” is over 6,500 words and takes a closer look at the social justice implications for marrying affective neuroscience with culturally sustaining pedagogy. It includes a closer look at the literature review and provides guidance for addressing how to engage in productive conversations and professional learning around culturally sustaining pedagogy, especially in light of the misunderstanding and politicization around equity-focused professional learning and critical race theory (Will, 2022; Gross, 2021; Young and Friedman, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

This research study helps define where school leaders and organizations can refine their professional learning to better define and establish culturally responsive pedagogy and grow it into culturally sustaining pedagogy through school improvement action planning. The original impetus for this line of research developed as I noticed an inconsistency in educators (the author included) in understanding and using the tenets of culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy, even in our district where equity-focused professional learning was embraced and embedded. The theme continually recurred throughout my reading, research, writing, and reflection is that language and concepts evolve to

address the challenges we face, especially when combatting challenging topics in school improvement such as implicit bias in individuals and systemic racism in organizations.

When educators take the first steps towards establishing culturally sustaining pedagogy with greater permanence and purpose, they must think beyond the multicultural choices made when selecting texts and designing tasks. When I review lesson planning with teachers and we look for elements of CSP, the most common response is the inclusion of a figure or event associated with people of color. When looking to Hammond's (2015) work around rigor, multiculturalism is but one of a multitude of moves, stances, and mindsets that an educator must adopt and explore. This is where the intersection of affective neuroscience – understanding how emotion and culture influence learning and engagement – and CSP helps educators use targeted, specific awareness about how the brain learns and purposeful strategies to build authentic connections with students through honoring their identity. Together, these two powerful strands of research can facilitate educators learning how culture shapes learning, information, and society and encourage greater transparency around the decisions made in schools and classrooms around culturally sustaining pedagogy.

It is my hope that this work provides another tool and rationale to combat deficit thinking as educators work with students from a range of cultures, experiences, and backgrounds different than their own. Understanding the power dynamic between whose culture matters and what is valued in dominant American education culture will allow us to forge ahead and prepare students to both have successful futures and become our next generation of social justice advocates.

ARTICLE 1: FROM IDENTIFICATION TO ACTION: PLANNING FOR CULTURALLY  
SUSTAINING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOLS

**Abstract**

In the spring of 2020, school leaders, school boards, and teachers faced challenges beyond the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, finding themselves under attack for the perceived applications of critical race theory in school curriculum. These conditions made active engagement in equity-focused school improvement planning more challenging. School leaders and leadership teams may benefit from using an established framework to identify strengths and areas for growth around culturally responsive pedagogy for effective school improvement planning. This article explores the use of Hammond's (2015) Ready for Rigor Framework as a tool for identifying prioritizing which conditions for culturally responsive pedagogy are most urgently needed, especially for student populations that have been traditionally marginalized. This case study highlights the importance of developing common language around important philosophical frameworks and concepts to better develop culturally sustaining and engaging practices, which will aid the development of clear communication to community stakeholders. Understanding the importance of internal coherence in action-based culturally sustaining school leadership is a critical foundational tool in anti-racist work. These findings will also inform school improvement planning, from applying identification protocols to designing actions to be implemented.

## Introduction

Early in my career school administrator, I always looked forward to school improvement planning for the upcoming school year with a mix of excitement, anticipation, and dread. Excitement for the opportunity to identify needed changes and develop potential solutions; dread for the meetings spent what we called “admiring the problem” where talk ran long, and concrete actions seemed to always be just out of reach. Inevitably, gaps in performance were often explained by student and family deficits (low socio-economic status, lack of involved parenting, for example) rather than looking inward and systematically at what our schools, teachers, and administrators were doing to perpetuate the conditions that produced the results we were seeing.

Slowly, but surely, both internally within our school and in collaboration with other educators and colleagues, we identified books, research, and began developing a stronger collective consciousness about the effects of bias, systemic racism, and unexamined privilege and the influence each of these conditions had on school climate. As we began to ask and answer hard questions about ourselves and our practices, we began to encounter both internal and external challenges. Internally, we did not have the necessary expertise and experience to discuss race, which led to both quiet and disquiet. Those educators who felt disquiet became frustrated by those who remained silent, feeling that there was not a sense of urgency to fix the historical, systemic, racial performance and behavior gaps we were seeing. How could we, as a school, move from identifying problems rooted in systemic racism to concrete, actionable, and effective improvement plans with urgency and agency?

Placing this question within a larger social context is important for today’s school leaders. Being able to lead a school or district staff through the necessary personal and

organizational work to make schooling more equitable for all students requires daily, public commitment to the endeavor (Khalifa, 2021). This article will examine the challenges school leaders face on this journey, notably attending to the heightened and politicized discourse around equity work in schools. Brittney Sykes (2022), a professional WNBA player, noted in a poignant personal essay that “none of us are safe until all of us are safe.” Until schools can embrace and act on responding to the needs of *all* students in an equitable and supportive manner, school improvement work must continue. This article will examine how school leaders can apply Syke’s mantra to school improvement planning, overcoming the barriers of overt and covert bias and racism, and developing thoughtful learning environments for students, school staff, and families.

One of the first challenges school leaders must face is addressing disinformation, from sources both within a school community and the external pressures from both social and traditional media that amplify that disinformation. Historians trace the history of mudslinging to the 1828 presidential election between Jackson and Adams (Sacher, 2013). This type of negative campaigning continues today, frequently without merit and often done by proxy, and has as a primary goal to paint an outrageous picture with no concern for fact or need for proof. The mere suggestion is intended to, at best, influence votes and, at worst, silence and censor opposition (Saxman, et.al., 2022). Today’s mudslinging reduces complex concepts and arguments to memes and phrases in both traditional and social media, with access to news, information, and opinion easily accessible to anyone with a smartphone or any connected device. When it is most effective, it can be boiled down to a single word or phrase, evoke strong emotions, and, most importantly, is purposely vague. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis campaigns against “woke ideology” and champions legislation “that clearly targets content about America’s racist history

and systems” by making the descriptions and rationale of this type of legislation “ambiguous enough to provide plausible deniability” (Perry and McDaniel, 2023, p. 1). This type of governance seeks to silence anti-racist work through legislation and censorship.

This climate makes examining systematic ways to sustain culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership essential in school improvement design today. Policies and practices are the backup that educators need for sustaining culturally responsive teaching. Change does not stem from implementation; it stems from individual and collective learning. In this article, I will explore how school leadership and school improvement teams can inform their equity and inclusion improvement planning using an established frameworks, clear communication, and concrete actions. From identification to action, planning for school improvement is necessarily rooted in the principles shaping culturally sustaining pedagogy. The use of a framework helps leaders establish clear understanding of current conditions, allowing school improvement teams to strategically identify and implement more effective action plans. In this research study, Hammond’s (2015) Ready for Rigor Framework was employed as a tool help school leaders consider the strengths and growth areas currently in place in their schools, using culturally responsive teaching as a critical lens. The results from this study can inform school leaders and improvement teams in their school improvement planning by identifying potential areas for development and strategies that will best support instructional goals. Additionally, these results also inform a school internal coherence planning (Forman, et al., 2017) when building shared understanding around critical concepts.



## Literature Review

Forman and colleagues (2017) argue that “improvement is a challenge of learning, not implementation” (p.10) and schools can benefit from thoughtful capacity building through planned, targeted learning for educators. Simply put, investing in teachers’ personal growth precedes organizational change. When tackling subjects that require significant personal reflection around race, bias, and marginalization, this capacity building can be especially challenging. As Irby (2021) points out in his case study of Central Waters High School, White educators’ often neither have the knowledge nor the expertise to address racial inequity within their own schools (p. 1). Organizations can set out to do the work needed; but, before there is organizational change, educators first have to invest in their own personal learning and make personal change (p. 204).

As researchers identify qualities of school leaders who actively work for more equitable schooling conditions, one quality that stands out is active, daily routines and practices that do not put off equity initiatives to some future action plan (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis, 2016; Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Vassallo, 2022). Additionally, awareness and action around culturally responsive school leadership is significantly influenced by school leaders’ ability to be critically self-reflective (Khalifa, 2018), which directly relates to building organizational coherence around the racial learning that educators need to do both collectively and individually. The work is challenging because it often does not provide certainty nor closure (Irby, 2021; Singleton, 2014). But, if school improvement plans are urgent, action-based, and specific, school improvement teams can develop “capacity to enact change through doing the complex and

context-specific, devastating, cathartic, and uncertain work of pursuing racial equity” (Irby, 2021, p. 3).

Irby (2021) also reveals an important reality in equity-focused school improvement, “when a school makes an improvement, a new, often more complex instance of racism will present itself” (p.5). Even when schools are committed to sustaining culturally responsive practices and dismantling systemic racism, as Lewis and Diamond (2015) note in their case study of Riverview High School’s efforts to dismantle discipline disparity and achievement gaps, “even those operating with the best intentions can contribute to negative consequences, particularly if they are operating without full awareness of and information about the ways that racial dynamics are a part of daily life in schools and beyond” (p. 169).

Urgency and developing common understanding of what students face in systems steeped in oppression and systemic racism is necessary, especially in settings where educators are not comfortable talking about the deleterious effects of bias, racism, and marginalization. Those who approach racism in society through a colorblind lens often see racist acts as committed by a few bad actors, rather than being part of an entrenched system of repeating oppression. Bonilla-Silva makes an apt metaphor when describing those who argue we are moving beyond racism, especially those persistently remain uncomfortable with discussion and action around dismantling White supremacy and oppression. Racism, he notes (2022, p. 20) has become “the *apple tree* (or central to the tree) rather than the rotten apples as all actors in society (become) participants.”

School improvement work depends on coherence around internally understood concepts and practices. As anti-racist work requires collective agency and belief, understanding how to

develop coherence is a vital skill for school leaders to have. Forman and colleagues (2017, p.7) identify four core principles to guide school improvement teams in their strategic planning: “internal coherence should be built around the instructional core; improvement is a challenge of learning, not implementation; mastery experiences change beliefs and behavior; clinical practices and tools make research actionable.” Using this lens, school leaders can then set about facilitating both individual and collective educator growth, leading teachers in the personal work of defining and developing deep understanding critical race theory, culturally responsive pedagogy, and culturally relevant teaching. This work precedes communication and planning with staff and community; assuming shared understanding for these concepts exists within an organization or community will lead to detours in racial equity work (Gorski, 2019).

The final core principle from Forman, Stosich, and Bocala’s internal coherence framework (2017) is of particular importance to this research study, as Hammond’s Ready for Rigor Framework (2015) is the tool being applied to make research on culturally sustaining leadership and teaching actionable. The second core principle edifies the importance of developing common understanding in school improvement work; *learning* is the key lever to updating practices, not merely implementation. This research study examines the role of coherence in how school leaders and school improvement teams plan and sustain practices aligned with both culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002; Hammond, 2015) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) with their staff and in their school building.

### **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Leadership**

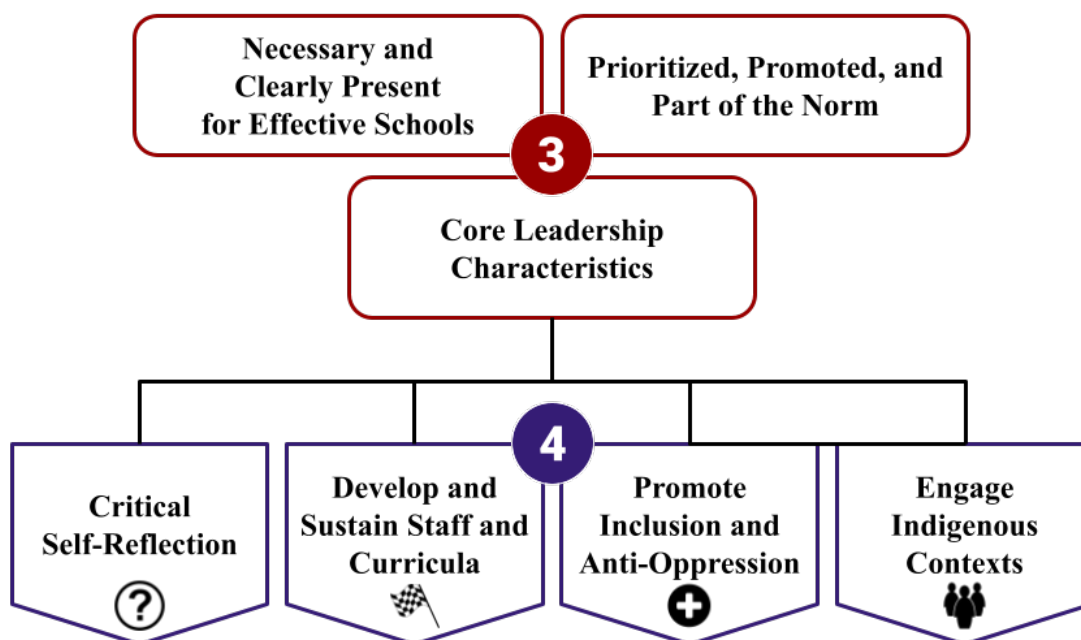
Language evolves to address the challenges we collectively face; such is the case with *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (CSP). Researchers (Paris, 2012; Paris and Alim, 2014; Ladson-

Billings, 2022) have recognized the need to update our practice and pedagogy, building on the foundations of strength-based pedagogies that seek to overcome the traditional, long-lasting deficit ideologies that have dominated education in the United States. Culturally sustaining pedagogy (and, by extension, culturally sustaining school leadership) “seeks to perpetuate and foster – *to sustain* – linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as a part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change” (Paris and Alim, 2014, p. 88). Rooted in moving both research and practice farther away “from the deficit approaches that echoed across the decades” (Paris, 2012, p. 93), CSP helps school leaders answer the question, “what is the purpose of schooling in a pluralistic society?” (p. 95). If schools are to prepare students to work collaboratively and collectively in a multi-lingual, multicultural, and globally connected society where competence in across-group cultural practices will be necessary for future success. Past and current practices that have “the explicit goal of creating a monocultural and monolingual society based on White, middle-class norms of language and cultural being...[have] created the need for equally explicit resistances” (p. 95).

When paired with the three premises and four characteristics of culturally responsive school leadership identified by Khalifa (2018) and visually interpreted by the author in Figure 2, school leaders and educators have a clear starting point for sustaining culturally responsive practices in schools. Educators often describe equity work as a marathon. Even so, we must run the race with urgency, deliberate pace, and with specific goals in mind. Just like an elite runner, each culturally sustaining pedagogical marathon we complete in should lead to better, stronger, and more just races in the future. In this research, Khalifa’s framework will provide insights into the characteristics of culturally responsive school leaders and the role they play in sustaining this

pedagogical focus. Khalifa, et al. (2016) note that leaders must be “continuously responsive” to shifting population demographics and community makeups, ensuring “leadership practices and school contexts that respond to the needs that accompany these shifts” (p. 1274). Khalifa establishes both the urgency and need for grounding these efforts in the daily planning and routines, not merely in a future-focused action plan (Khalifa, et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018).

Figure 2: *Khalifa’s (2018) Characteristics of Culturally Responsive School Leadership*



### Critical Race Theory

Understanding critical race theory (CRT), an academic theoretical framework, is especially important given how disinformation campaigns have used critical race theory as a dog whistle for those who are opposed to efforts to making school more equitable, most notably for students of color (Gross, 2021; Perry and McDaniel, 2023). Untangling this challenge involves attacking disinformation. Understanding the three main tenets of critical race theory will help leaders better able to actively address disinformation. The first of these tenets contends that to

study, address, and undo systemic racism, we must understand that racism is an ordinary condition rather than an exceptional one. Secondly, systems of power and privilege often do not change until there is a convergence of interest between those who hold power and those who do not. Finally, and of significant note, it must be recognized as scientific fact that race is a social rather than biological construct (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). As addressing these challenges in a critical aspect of today's culturally responsive school leader, it bears mention here.

### **Affective Neuroscience**

Simply put, *affective neuroscience* studies the relationship between emotion and learning. Recognizing that human beings are “social and emotional creatures” has significant implications for educators and students; the importance recognizing that rigorous instruction with heavy cognitive demands is not a process “detached from emotion and body” cannot be understated (Immordino-Yang, 2016, p. 28). When examined alongside the tenets of CRP and CRT, affective neuroscience provides invaluable insights into how to support the learning process as culturally sustaining leaders and educators.

Primarily, affective neuroscience research reveals “our fundamentally social nature, making clear that the very neurobiological systems that support our social interactions and relationships are recruited for the often covert and private decision making that underlies much of our thought” (Immordino-Yang, 2016, p. 29). How we feel is inextricably linked to how we think and learn; how we feel is informed and influenced by our culture and experience. Recognizing that emotions both “involve automatic mental and bodily reactions to situations” and differ in tone, tenor, and context across different cultures (Immordino-Yang, 2016, p. 20) provides a foundation for normalizing cultural differences as opposed to marginalizing groups

that do not automatically reflect the mores of a dominant cultural group. This concept also applies as we consider how learners interpret new experiences and integrate knowledge into their existing understanding. Again, emotion is involved. When learners understand both how and why their culture, identities, and experiences influence what they are learning, it sets the stage for using culture and identity as a source of pride and strength, a fund from which learners can draw to better integrate and retain learning.

Building and sustaining culturally responsive pedagogy in a school building is difficult work, but the intersections between internal coherence, neuroscience, and CSP provide a potential map for moving the work from theory and future potential to the daily work and routines established in a school's ongoing improvement plan. Forman and colleagues' (2017) internal coherence framework establishes the importance of deep shared understanding of critical concepts, especially in their pillar emphasizing the importance of learning these concepts prior to and part of implementation. Hammond's Ready for Rigor Framework (2015) then provides us with both the clear links between neuroscience and CRP and a thorough, in-depth look at the many facets of CRP beyond multiculturalism. Understanding the science of learning and the connections between emotion, identity, and learning development (Immordino-Yang, 2013, 2015, 2016) then provides educators with a vision of how learning happens, what they can do to make those processes transparent to students, and why it is critical to learners' identities to be aware of the links between emotion and learning. Finally, Khalifa's (2018) identification of the characteristics of culturally responsive school leaders provides guidance for interpreting the results of this study and having context for applying those findings to concrete, daily actions,

especially those associated with school improvement planning in a time of resistance from opponents to anti-racist work.

This study uses an established framework as a tool to establish a baseline in current schooling conditions. Hammond's (2015) "Ready for Rigor Framework" is introduced in her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* (p. 17). Her work aligns the neuroscience behind learning with effective culturally responsive practices, which is especially pertinent for this research. The self-assessment tool used in this study appears in Appendix A.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What conditions do school administrators consider necessary for implementing culturally responsive teaching practices in K-8 schools?
2. What challenges or barriers do school administrators expect to encounter when building the conditions necessary for implementing culturally responsive teaching practices in K-8 schools?
3. What strategies can school administrators employ to address the challenges and barriers schools and educators face when implementing culturally responsive teaching practices?

### **Methods**

This case study employed mixed methods research. Study participants took a survey, resulting in quantitative data capturing school leaders' opinions on their school's current level of performance in relation to implementing culturally responsive pedagogy. Using the self-assessment tool pictured in Figure 3, school and district leaders in Satterfield School District, a



medium-sized suburban Midwest school district, rated their organization's collective use of practices, conditions, and strategies consistent with culturally relevant pedagogy and philosophy. Following a sequential explanatory strategy (Creswell, 2014), collected survey data was then analyzed using descriptive statistics for pattern identification and develop initial impressions that informed the second phase of research. Upon final completion of the survey, weighted averages were calculated for participant responses to determine which components, according to this self-assessment, were more firmly established or seen as an area of strength. Results were then ordered using a Pareto chart to determine whether there was a significant difference between the rankings to provide guidance towards school goal setting.

Five randomly selected administrators agreed to a thirty-minute follow up interview via video conference in the two weeks after the survey administration. Each interview subject responded to the same series of five questions as shared in Appendix B; subjects also had a written copy of the questions for their reference and clarification during the interview. Following the interviews, the written transcripts were coded using an inductive process to organize responses into discrete response types or categories. Each response type was named and defined; a total of 36 unique categories were identified out of a total of 157 coded and defined responses. Interviewees averaged 31.4 responses each that could be identified as part of a specific category. To maintain the confidentiality of the information collected, all names used in this article are pseudonyms, including Satterfield School District.

### **Context**

This case study focused on a suburban school district located near a large Midwestern city. Satterfield School District has 16 schools, including three middle schools serving grades 6-

8, two magnet schools serving grades K-8, eight elementary schools serving grades K-5, an early childhood center, a residential school, and a self-contained public therapeutic day program. Four of the elementary schools also provide two-way Spanish immersion programming for emergent bilingual students. The district serves over 7,100 students with the following characteristics: 39% low income; 14% students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs); 3% homeless; 15% emergent bilinguals; 10% chronic absenteeism. The 2022 racial makeup of the district was 42% White, 23% Black, 21% Latinx, 4% Asian, and 9% multi-racial.

Satterfield School District employed 667 certified teachers at the time of the research study, 68 percent of whom held at least a master's degree. The district maintains an 88 percent retention rate and teachers are held in good regard by the community. Satterfield School District made significant investments in equity-based professional learning over the five years before and continuing after this study, including in-depth, multi-day workshops for all district employees on issues of race and equity. At the time of the study, a little more than fifty administrators supervised staff, students, school and district operations, and curriculum and instruction across the district, including building-level principals, assistant principals, subject area directors, and central office administration. In addition, administrators in this district had opportunities to participate in professional learning focused on equity, culturally responsive teaching practices, and addressing race and racism.

## **Participants**

Study participants are all school and central office administrators. An initial, voluntary survey was offered to all administrators via email. As the primary researcher was employed by this district at the time of the study, the quasi-experimental design focused on a non-random

convenience sample. Twenty-five administrators responded to the survey and 16 were able to complete their responses, leading to a 32% response rate for the initial survey. The survey pool revealed an experienced group of administrators, with 88 percent of respondents having at least six to nine years of experience as an administrator. The participating administrators also had significant experience as classroom educators, with 25 percent of the study population having three to five years classroom teaching experience, 31 percent having six to eight years classroom experience, and 42% having nine or more years classroom experience. The demographics (displayed in Table 1) of the pool closely mirrored the overall district demographics for staff, with 19 percent of the respondents identifying as Black, six percent identifying as Latinx, and 69 percent identifying as White.

Table 1. *Research Study Demographics, Satterfield School District Survey Participants*

Ethnic/Racial Identity		Years as an Administrator		Years as a Teacher	
White	11	6 to 9 years	8	6 to 8 years	5
Black	3	10 to 14 years	5	9 to 11 years	4
Hispanic/Latinx	1	3 to 5 years	2	3 to 5 years	4
Prefer not to say	1	15+ years	1	12+ years	3
Student Demographics		Staff Demographics		Professional Development	
26-50% POC	7	10-20% POC	6	SEED	14
51-75% POC	5	31-50% POC	4	Other	10
0-25% POC	4	0-10% POC	3	CCAR	9
POC – Person of Color CCAR – Courageous Conversations About Race		21-30% POC	2	Beyond Diversity	8
		51-70% POC	1	Hammond Book Study	8

Table 2. *Professional Learning Participation, Satterfield School District*

Professional Learning Opportunity	Description	Percent
Beyond Diversity	Multi-day in-district workshop offered by Pacific Education Group, focused on building capacity to discuss race and address and correct conditions contributing to bias and systemic racism	83%
Other	Equity-related professional development other than the four choices listed, selected independently by the participant	63%
Courageous Conversations About Race	In-depth, multi-day workshops based on Glenn Singleton's (2014) work around organizational capacity to discuss race and racism and the organizational actions needed to improve.	56%
SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Training	Year-long seminar enabling teachers to create more equitable classroom environments and curricula, considering race, gender, gender expression, and the intersections of identities learners bring to school.	69%
Zaretta Hammond Book Study	In-district work focusing on her book, <i>Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students</i>	50%

Satterfield School District's commitment to equity was evident, as participating administrators identified the following professional learning experiences they had completed at the time of the study, listed above in Table 2, Professional Learning Participation. The percentages indicate that many survey respondents participated in multiple professional learning opportunities; while Beyond Diversity (professional learning provided by Glenn Singleton's Courageous Conversation organization) training was required, the other opportunities were voluntary. The high level of voluntary and self-selected professional learning indicates an internal culture that is supportive of equity-based professional learning, reflective of the

collective importance placed on these initiatives in Satterfield School District. The district's commitment to equity is an interesting context to this research, for that commitment serves as the first defense against those who oppose equity work and who have become increasingly vocal in their opposition during and following the heights of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The five randomly selected interview participants also reflected a cross-section of Satterfield School District administrators. Of the five participants, three identified as female and two identified as male. Racially, three identified as White, one as Black, and one as Latinx. Three of the interview subjects were building level administrators, while two served at the district level. No two interview subjects worked at the same school or in the same department, leading to five different perspectives of culturally responsive teaching in the school district.

### **Data Collection**

Participants were introduced to Hammond's Ready for Rigor Framework (2015) as a tool for identifying and considering different ways educators can institute a range of strategies and practices aligned with culturally relevant teaching in their classrooms. The Framework includes four practice areas (awareness, learning practices, information processing, and community of learners) and twenty-four components organized within these practice areas. Participants were asked rate each of the 24 individual components on a five-point scale, asking them to identify how much each individual component is present or applied across their school building(s). The survey tool appears in Appendix A and is an example of the assessment tool that can be used with school improvement teams; this study used Qualtrics, an online statistical and survey tool designed to maintain the anonymity of survey respondents for research purposes.

The five-point scale supports the study's sequential explanatory design by helping educators more concretely identify specific strengths and areas for growth in supporting culturally responsive pedagogy as a foundational tool for school improvement. From the responding participants, five respondents were randomly selected for a thirty-minute follow-up interview conducted via an online video conference. The interview protocol includes components that Creswell (2014) identifies as critical to this design, including standard instructions and interview questions to be followed for each interview, the five questions (and follow-up probes) listed in Figure 1, and a standardized method for recording, transcribing, and coding interviewee responses. Each of the five questions directly addresses the research questions by asking respondents to share their understanding and personal definition of culturally responsive teaching and the barriers they see to implementing best practices.

### **Data Analysis**

Consistent with Cohen, et al.'s (2007) summation of descriptive research, research data was examined school administrators' perception of CRP implementation within the context of school improvement planning at a specific point in time "in order to describe...classify, analyze, and interpret" current conditions and behaviors within their own schools (p. 205). Data analysis was conducted comparatively rank and compare survey data, followed by using interview data to generate themes identifying strengths and growth areas within their school building in terms of implementing culturally responsive pedagogy. As the goal of this analysis was to raise issues and promote further actions within a local context, summation of quantitative data, coding of interview data, and organizing and classifying of qualitative data, this process was consistent with what Cohen et al. (2017, p. 461) describe as "fitness of purpose."

Descriptive statistics used include the mean (for ranking and comparison purposes), range (for reporting the distribution of leadership observations), and standard deviation (for examining both individual and practice area differences for significance). Consistent with exploratory data presentation design (p. 507), data was organized into both frequency and percentage tables as well as a Pareto chart. Appendix D, Survey Results, Descriptive Statistics reports all interview data descriptive statistics, include average weighted scores for each component, standard deviations for both practice areas and the complete survey, and ranges for each response. Equal weighting was given to both the quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data and although Hammond's (2015) Ready for Rigor Framework was used, themes were developed from the qualitative data through an inductive approach. Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data was done separately, rather than merging the data (Creswell, 2014).

Interview data was organized through inductive coding to develop discrete categories, creating and assigning codes "only on the basis of the emerging information collected from participants" (Creswell, 2014, p. 199). Once the descriptive codes (Cohen, et al., 2007) were identified and documented within the participants' transcripts, definitions were created for each inductive code to assure that repeating appearances of the theme would have a shared meaning or connection. Repeated readings of each transcript were conducted to ensure the number of codes created (36) were both manageable and accurately reflected the interview data (p. 478). At this point, each data point was also identified as being shared as a strength or a growth area by the interview subject, to bring further clarity and accuracy to the information shared.

## Results

### Phase 1, Survey Data Results

Appendix D shares the survey data results, with responses organized by growth area. An initial analysis of the organized data revealed that for 16 of the 24 components (67%), that 50% or more of the participants indicated those components were in place not often or only occasionally in place, meaning that these practices were in place less than 50% of the time for most the participants' schools. Coupled with only two components with rated as always in place by survey participants, which equated to less than one percent of the total responses, the weighted results were unable to cross the average for the scale, often, which equated to the practice being in place 50-74 percent of the time. Those components with lower-than-average weighted averages also had data ranges equal to two 75% of the time, further emphasizing the emphasis on the lower end of the rating scale. Table 3 shares key highlights from the survey data to illustrate these findings; practice areas are listed in the table from lowest to highest average weighted mean. The listed standard deviations are within-group standard deviations.

Twenty-three of the components (96%) did not have a statistically significant distance from the mean. All 24 components were graphed and ranked on a Pareto chart, displayed in Appendix C. As the slope of the Pareto line crosses in the center of the graph, it demonstrates that there is not a significant difference between the ratings of the 24 difference components.

One of the 24 component was more than two standard deviations from mean, the only one of significant distance from the mean. This component, the use of "restorative justice to manage conflicts and redirect negative behavior" appears in Hammond's (2015, p.17) fourth practice area, Community of Learners and Learning Environment. Prior to the COVID-19



pandemic, both elementary and middle schools had both training in restorative practices and access to trained restorative practice coaches over the course of a two-year, fully supported implementation. Sixty-nine percent of survey respondents indicated restorative practices were in place at least 50% of the time; it was also one of two only components with any ratings as always in place by participants, albeit only by two.

Table 3. *Survey Data Practice Area Averages and Highlights*

		Average	SD
<b>Practice Area 1A:</b>	<b>Awareness</b>	<b>2.170</b>	<b>0.227</b>
Highest Component:	Know and own your cultural lens	2.438	
Lowest Component:	Recognize your brain's triggers around race and culture	1.875	
<b>Practice Area 3IP:</b>	<b>Information Processing</b>	<b>2.208</b>	<b>0.300</b>
Highest Component:	Use formative assessments and feedback	2.625	
Lowest Component:	Help students process new content using oral traditions	1.75	
<b>Practice Area 2LP:</b>	<b>Learning Partnerships</b>	<b>2.365</b>	<b>0.283</b>
Highest Component:	Help student cultivate positive mindset and self-efficacy	2.688	
Lowest Component:	Give students language to talk about their learning moves	1.938	
<b>Practice Area 4CE:</b>	<b>Community of Learners and Learning Environment</b>	<b>2.700</b>	<b>0.204</b>
Highest Component:	Use restorative justice principles to manage conflicts	3.00	
Lowest Component:	Build classroom culture/learning around communal talk	2.438	

Three of the practice areas had ranges within three tenths of three on the five-point rating scale, indicating a similarly dispersed range of responses. Practice area three, Information Processing (Hammond, 2015, p.17), stood out with an average range of 2.33. In this practice area, five of the six components directly reflect connections between cognitive neuroscience and

culturally responsive teaching; survey participants, on average, thought these practices and strategies were present less than 50 percent of the time. The sixth component, the use of formative assessment, engendered greater confidence in participants (with a weighted mean of 2.65) and, as an instructional practice, has been more significantly supported by school district and school level professional development.

Hammond's (2015) first practice area, Awareness (p. 17) engendered the least amount of implementation confidence of any of the practice areas, with a weighted mean of 2.170. This was driven by lower presence of three components: "recognizing your brain's triggers around race and culture, recognizing cultural archetypes of individualism and collectivism, and understanding the three levels of culture, surface, shallow, and deep" (p. 17-22). These three components, and three components in practice area three were six of the seven items in which survey participants had the least amount of confidence in current educator implementation.

Within group standard deviation for each of the practice areas ranged from 0.2044 (practice area four) and 0.300 (practice area three), leading to no significant difference within practice areas between components. Across all 24 components, the weighted average was 2.339 with a standard deviation of 0.315. Outside of the one weighted average being significantly different (as previously noted), this distribution of means, coupled with the Pareto chart, indicates there is no significant difference between the components in terms of administrator confidence in current implementation and understanding within the staff that they supervise.

## **Phase 2, Interview Data Results**

During interview analysis, response categories were organized into one of Hammond's (2015) four practice areas in her Ready for Rigor framework; responses were also coded to

whether the administrator framed their response as a staff strength or potential area for growth. During the interview, each time an interviewee returned to a specific response category, it was treated as a separate occurrence of the item, allowing for a response category to be counted several times within the interview if it came up in different contexts and in response to a different interview question. The results tabulating responses by practice area for strengths and areas of growth are displayed in Table 4. Although this is qualitative data, one of the research study goals was to seek out patterns. By tabulating responses by practice area and number of total responses, the data can help frame further discussion.

Table 4. *Ready for Rigor Framework: Strengths and Growth Areas*

<b>Practice Area Quadrant</b>	<b>Described As</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>% of Responses</b>
Awareness	Strength	10	6.37%
Learning Partnerships	Strength	21	13.38%
Information Processing	Strength	15	9.55%
Community of Learners/Learning Environment	Strength	15	9.55%
Awareness	Growth Area	44	28.03%
Learning Partnerships	Growth Area	1	0.64%
Information Processing	Growth Area	12	7.64%
Community of Learners/Learning Environment	Growth Area	39	24.84%

Individual response categories are further delineated into strengths and growth areas, as reported in Tables 5 and 6. The included response categories comprise 77.7 percent of all responses, reflecting the most reported reflections by school leaders. Collectively, the strengths listed in Table 5 represent 29.3% of the total number of responses categorized (and the top six most frequently arising categories) whereas the growth areas represent 48.41% of the total (and the top eleven most frequently arising categories.) A complete listing of codes and response rates

are included in Appendix E. This tabulation was not conducted for significance; it was conducted merely to see quantity of responses arising within code-defined themes.

Table 5. *Interview Response Categories, Significant Strengths*

<b>Response Category Description (Strengths)</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>% of Responses</b>
<b>Responsive relationship</b> – Genuine connection between educator and student; interest in student potential	RR	16	10.19%
<b>Moral leadership imperative</b> – Conviction that it is a moral imperative to use culturally responsive practices	MLI	8	5.10%
<b>Connected school community</b> – Students feel safe and connected across different racial and social groups	CSC	6	3.82%
<b>Connect student lives to learning</b> – Educators make Intentional connections between student life and school	CLL	6	3.82%
<b>Build parent relationships</b> – Educators make proactive and intentional connections between school and home	BPR	5	3.18%
<b>Ongoing curriculum adjustment</b> – Systems for updating and questioning instructional choices to reflect needs	OCA	5	3.18%

Consistent with both Hammond’s (2015) framework and Khalifa’s (2018) characteristics of culturally responsive school leaders, interview subjects identified two clear strengths needed for sustaining CRP in school improvement planning. Building responsive relationships where there is a genuine and authentic connection between teacher and learner was one of two response categories identified by every subject. One veteran White elementary school administrator noted that her core group of teachers leading this work were never satisfied with the work they did to improve learning relationships with students; they always viewed their own improvement as a work in progress. She noted when these invested teachers made a mistake, they would own it

Table 6. *Interview Response Categories, Significant Growth Areas*

<b>Response Category Description (Growth Areas)</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>% of Responses</b>
<b>Personal awareness of bias</b> - Educators recognize and address the roots of their own biases; vulnerability	PAB	13	8.28%
<b>Center student identity</b> - Keeping student identity at the forefront when developing relationships and tasks	CSI	10	6.37%
<b>Loss of student voice and agency</b> - Students fear sharing their voice or ideas in a classroom	SVA	9	5.73%
<b>No investment or support</b> – Educators unwilling to implement CRP; do not engage in critical self-reflection	NI	8	5.10%
<b>Valued in voice, not action</b> – Educators voice support of CRP in voice, but cannot identify actions supporting CRP	VVA	6	3.82%
<b>Surface understanding of CRP</b> - Limited understanding of what CRP; cites simplified vision of multi-culturalism	SU	6	3.82%
<b>Aligned school experience</b> –Students can articulate alignment between learning tasks and their lives	ASE	6	3.82%
<b>Embedded in strategic plan</b> – Thoughtful inclusion of CRP throughout strategic planning; not a stand-alone	ESP	5	3.18%
<b>Safe climate focus</b> - Student-focused climate and culture plan; actively seeks to be inclusive using CRP	SCF	5	3.18%
<b>Systems of accountability</b> – Plan for addressing staff who are less willing to know and own their own bias	SoA	4	2.55%
<b>Common language and shared ideals</b> – Deliberate work establishes shared understandings around key concepts	CLI	4	2.55%

in full transparency with their students, saying:

So, when teachers actually have to take ownership of a mistake and pull a student aside and actually apologize, I tell them it's okay because you are actually doing your own work. It's difficult work, and it can be challenging, but I support my teachers by telling them you have to own it and not skip over that moment, because that child will never

forget that moment. You walked in, had that conversation, and you took ownership and apologized. It will stay with you the rest of your life, but will also stay if you don't.

The recurrence of moral leadership being imperative and the importance of having responsive relationships was regularly repeated throughout the interviews, arising eight and sixteen times across the five interviews, respectively. Often, the two topics intermingled, as leaders explored the moral importance of authentic, responsive relationships. This extended explanation from an interview subject, a veteran White male middle school administrator, highlights the intersection of critical self-reflection and increasingly complex understanding of learner/teacher relationships:

Something that I notice happening is teachers will lack the resilience in this work. Here's what I mean. So, maybe, as a teacher, I reach out to make a connection with a student. And so I think, as a White male it's maybe important (I'll racialize it, as I am a White male) that I see a Black male student in class who looks like, you know, they need help. So I go out of my way to help him academically and build a relationship with it. And that initial invitation is not immediately accepted. Then I experience rejection and I start putting up walls because I'm, you know, I'm going to blame him for it, right? Well, I tried. I came over and tried but, really, I can't get over this notion that my benevolence was rejected, and it becomes almost like a narcissistic injury. So, I have to realize it's all problematic, as my knowledge of race should tell me that it's going to take some time for me to earn that relationship as a White male with a kid who's showing up that way in my classroom. It's not going to be automatic. I'm going to have to prove it, I'm not going to

be able to just say it. I'm going to have to prove it and that is going to take time and work on my part.

In faculty or school improvement meetings this can show up when teachers ask if results are due to low socio-economic status, rather than bias and racism within a school system. It also highlights what interview subjects collectively identified as the biggest growth area, personal awareness of bias, showing up as 8.28 percent of the total responses. Satterfield administrators describe this challenge as educators being able to recognize and address the roots of their own biases and having the willingness and vulnerability to be able to do so.

One interview subject, a veteran Black male school administrator, displayed both the vulnerability and complexity of being able to recognize and address your own personal bias. His explanation serves as an example of why it is so important for educators to do the personal work *before* doing the organizational work focused on learning preceding implementation. He noted:

I always used to remember as a kid watching the TV show *Happy Days*. I don't know if you remember the episode where they wanted Fonzie to say that he was wrong. Now, he did not say he was wrong, you know, even though he knew he was wrong. And I remember when I was in SEED, speaking to one of the other guys in SEED and we talked about that. He's a White guy and his daughter went to Lewis Elementary at the time and he talked about having conversations with his friends around the cultural connections and cultural understanding. We both used that analogy of Fonzie's inability to say that he was wrong. I think I understand it from the perspective of me being a male. Sometimes things happen with women or with other ethnic groups and I feel a certain cynicism and I feel that cynicism because of who I am as a Black man and, you know, I can see my

oppression. Sometimes I don't want to see others' oppression for whatever cynical reason pops up in me. I think it's really hard for us as individuals to really, really go into that space of really seeing ourselves for who we might really possibly be.

This highly personal, vulnerable, and powerful insight highlights the complexity of how identity and bias interact. It also highlights what interviewees saw as the biggest growth area for their staff, centered in Hammond's (2015) practice area, Awareness (p. 17). Organizing coded responses into Hammond's Ready for Rigor Framework provided deeper insight into the challenges faced by Satterfield School District leaders, reinforcing the survey data that also identified awareness as an important area for growth. Interview data identified Hammond's fourth practice area as the next most challenging area of growth. Not surprisingly, as building a community of learners and a culturally sustaining learning environment depends on awareness of student needs and identities.

The interview data also revealed the importance of centering student identity. While strengths arose in making connections between students' lived experiences and the curriculum (connecting student lives to learning, 3.82%; ongoing curriculum adjustment updates reflecting current student needs, 3.18%), these strengths are juxtaposed with significant growth areas (centering student identities in relationship building and learning tasks, 6.37%; loss of student voice and agency when students do not feel safe to speak up in class, 5.73%; students seeing and feeling an aligned school experience that connects learning tasks with their own lives, 3.82%.) Satterfield administrators recognize these challenges must be taken up in a systematic fashion, with one noting that "the instructional core must center on identity, community, and relationships."



Another interview subject, a Latinx female administrator who worked across different school settings echoed how understanding the community is at the heart of both honoring student identity and giving it safe harbor for risk taking in learning. When asked for her opinion of what is the most critical aspect of systemically developing support for culturally responsive teaching, she said:

It has to be student-centered. I know a lot of people say, “I’m student centered,” but there’s a lot of things that come with it. If we are student-centered, we hear their voice. We hear the parents’ voice. That feeds into instruction. A huge part of this is we need to create a sense of people belonging and having empathy. And, no offense, but people have to be authentic. I just know that some people are afraid to be themselves and you can’t have culturally responsive teaching practices if you can’t be yourself. I was working out of fear in my previous district. I was afraid if I spoke up or if I called somebody out on their racism or their bias, I would get in trouble. But here, I don’t.

She went on to explain how she felt that safety at the district level as an administrator and felt it was the collective work of school leaders to make sure that same sense of safety was felt by educators and leaders at the school level. This was also reflected in the interview data, where respondents identified both the need for a safe climate focus, where school climate and culture is developed with student needs and identities specifically in mind (3.18%) and there are systems of accountability for staff members who are either slow or resistant to making needed changes that align with CRP (2.55%).

## Discussion

Although the survey results did not provide a statistically significant difference between any of the practice area components, they did provide potential starting points for school improvement teams to consider and, in some cases, paint a different picture than the survey data. Grouping the responses into practice areas helped to highlight general growth areas, making Hammond's (2015) fourth practice area, Community of Learners and Learning Environment, an area of relative strength on the Pareto chart. Yet when organizing interview responses into categories aligning with the Ready for Rigor Framework, the fourth practice area identifies as a growth area, with nearly a quarter of the responses indicating so. In fact, when paired with Hammond's first practice area, Awareness, a little more than half of the total interview responses identified these two quadrants as areas for growth, more than double of any other area of practice, either as a strength or growth area.

The main goal of using the Ready for Rigor Framework in this fashion is to provide school improvement teams with concrete choices for strategy and improvement planning. Taking a team through this process allows teams to lift two of Khalifa's characteristics for culturally responsive school leadership (2018): critical self-reflection and prioritizing culturally sustaining pedagogy a part of school planning norms. Rather than entering the process with a blank slate and no defining categories as to what these practices might look like, the intersection of Khalifa's characteristics with Hammond's Framework provides teams with a menu of choices from which to develop action items that can be planned, developed, and sustained *within the context of the local needs for students, staff, and families*. Using the framework would not preclude other ideas from being generated; the goal of this process is to generate discrete, time-

bound, actionable strategies that “promote inclusion and anti-oppression,” another key characteristic of culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa, 2018).

Digging deeper into the interview data reveals responses that have strong alignment with sustaining culturally responsive leadership. Leaders identified both the culturally responsive relationships educators build with students and the moral imperative for school leaders to embrace these practices as the two biggest areas of strength. This demonstrates an authentic reflection of the tenets stressed in both Khalifa’s and Hammond’s frameworks. Leaders invested in culturally responsive pedagogy must make the work urgent, clear, and a necessary part of continuous school improvement (Khalifa, 2018). By extension, this work establishes both the conditions and the expectation for teachers, enabling them to build authentic, invested academic relationships with students (Hammond, 2015). The intersection of these two frameworks creates a learning catalyst where students are more comfortable taking learning risks, knowing they are in an environment that is safe and supportive of their identity as a learner.

When interview subjects connected leadership to community presence, it reflected Khalifa’s (2018) assertion that culturally responsive school leaders are more than school leaders, they are also community leaders. Although this theme did not resonate explicitly as much as others, it remains an important aspect of culturally sustaining school leadership that cannot be underestimated or lost. Relationships are built on connections; connections can be strengthened when they are reinforced across multiple settings and contexts.

The importance of relationships did arise in the interviews, in several lengthy descriptions. These descriptions demonstrated why the right kind of authentic connections are so critical, as when Ladson-Billings (2006) famously described as “it’s not the culture of poverty,

it's the poverty of culture... [where teachers] hide behind child poverty as an excuse for why they cannot be successful with some students" (p. 105). School leaders must have the moral leadership to immediately recognize and intervene when teachers are unable to see their own bias when they hide behind child poverty as Ladson-Billings describes. When researchers point out that educators often don't have the experience or expertise to effectively address race and equity within their own schools (Irby, 2021; Lewis and Diamond, 2015), it is these types of situations where leaders need the learning and understanding to build their courage to address the inequities they see in their daily work with teachers and students.

This type of moral leadership also reflects Khalifa's assertion that it is what leaders do in their daily work, with urgency, that makes a difference (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa, et al., 2016). Believing that this work is part of a school leader's moral imperative was the only other response category identified by all interview participants. Part of this moral leadership imperative is to demonstrate publicly, with vulnerability and humility, how this complex work forces culturally responsive school leaders to be critically self-reflective (Khalifa, 2018), especially as educators work to "integrate a more sophisticated understanding of how race matters and how race works in the contemporary moment" (Lewis and Diamond, 2015, p. 172).

The results also reveal a juxtaposition that many schools face. Both the survey and interview data reveal that leaders are relatively confident in the climate educators set in their classrooms, identifying culturally responsive relationships and the use of restorative practices as strengths. Conversely, one of the biggest growth areas is for educators to dig into and recognize how their personal bias influences their teaching practices. Presumably, these issues are at loggerheads. But, digging deeper, the interview data reveals that four of the top six growth areas

are associated with developing greater awareness in staff. This is the reality of equity work, especially in places that have invested in professional learning as Satterfield School District has. Committing to having a welcoming classroom is one thing; committing to dismantling your own personal biases is altogether a far more difficult endeavor.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching students the importance of building a community and, by extension, a society that sustains a diverse range of cultures, identities, and abilities is necessary if we are to achieve the goal of a just and equitable society for *all* members of our collective communities. Organizational change must be preceded by personal change; personal change cannot begin without awareness of one's own biases. Other areas identified by leaders as growth areas include being able to better center student identities in climate and curriculum work, having more than a surface understanding of CRT and CRP, and the challenge of working with staff who value equity work only in voice and not in action. Again, these are all symptoms of being at the beginning of the journey, with educators not yet able to be fully vulnerable in the roles we all play in perpetuating systems of bias and oppression.

As teams work through these kinds of questions, they must expect and accept non-closure along the way (Singleton, 2014). Although Khalifa and Hammond provide frameworks and roadmaps for concrete actions that can align culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership with school improvement planning, the process will still be messy. So, the question is, what actions do these results inspire, especially if they seem reflective of the staff you have and the communities you serve? Taking these results (identification) to action requires the kind of organizational coherence envisioned by Forman and colleagues (2017), especially in terms of

seeing coherence as a function of learning, not one of implementation. Leaders must accept that the fundamentals of change begin with personal change; personal change is more accessible when the frameworks and protocols are clear; it is analogous to setting learning objectives and success criteria for students.

Recognizing and communicating these to all stakeholders – students, staff, and community – is enhanced by the use of an established framework. Methodically identifying and acting upon targeted, concrete behaviors develops greater familiarity with what is being done and, in turn, greater confidence in communication. Verbs matter in communication: identifying, recognizing, communicating, and acting all communicate a sense of urgency. Leaders can develop a clear vision for their purpose and can practice addressing systemic racism and marginalization in their work as a community leader. When educators face challenges (and they will) the underlying systems provide the rationale and reason. When leaders face challenges (and they most certainly will) the time spent building a foundation in school policy and practice grounded in research is an investment. Just as an elite marathoner improves in every race, leaders will improve in their communication each time they counter attacks from those opposed to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging initiatives.

Just as students learn, so must educators. School leaders and teachers must make equity-based decision making transparent to all stakeholders, especially students. Sustaining students' cultural heritage is grounded in action. Showing students we are committed to carrying our identified actions out is not only a model for sustaining culture, it is a model for sustaining the next generation of civil rights advocates.

## ARTICLE 2: DISMANTLING ROADBLOCKS TO EQUITY

School leaders, especially new school leaders, face a critical challenge when implementing systems to update and change ineffective systems and practices within a school setting. When those challenges involve tackling systems of oppression, bias, and racism, those challenges can feel especially acute, as many school leaders and teachers do not feel equipped to tackle topics that produce the kind of discomfort that dismantling systemic racism can (Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Irby, 2021). When faced with performance gaps between White, Black, and Brown students, the discomfort can feel exacerbated due to the urgency that comes with school reform supporting marginalized students and families. Every moment of inaction can potentially perpetuate and do damage to students' futures, especially concerning the academic and social success of Black and Brown students and the safety and success of LGBTQ+ students, staff, and families. When tackling change in schools, leaders need a plan, and they need it fast.

In the summer of 2021, critical race theory (CRT) appeared at the center of many politically fueled and social-media driven debates around kindergarten-twelfth grade (K-12) teaching and school policy (Gross, 2021; Schwartz, 2022). Critical race theory is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the definition of race as a social construct and asserts racism is not merely a function of individual biases and actions but is embedded in social and legal systems (Delgado and Stefanic, 2012). Driven by sensationalistic media and misinformation, increasingly organized groups such as Citizens for Renewing America, the Alliance for Free Citizens, and similar right-wing advocacy groups develop tool kits outlining how to oppose how the inherent

nature and structure of racism are studied, portrayed, and understood in schools, including legislation guidance to promote to lawmakers (Schwartz, 2021a).

When state legislators enacted legislation that would fine teachers 5,000 dollars for promoting one side from a list of controversial issues, making instructional decisions that affect students and their families, particularly around accurately teaching issues involving racism, became even more difficult (Schwartz, 2021c). Educational leaders – especially district administrators and school boards – remain entangled in these debates, defending equity initiatives, particularly when approaching pedagogical discussions around learning the history of race, equity, and LGBTQ+ issues in classrooms. Saxman, et al. (2021) point out that one of the goals of anti-equity school reform efforts such as the current crop of anti-CRT legislation is to create a climate of fear where teachers practice self-censorship, silencing dissent before it has a chance to even be raised.

Concurrent to these debates, what were school improvement efforts like for teachers and schools continuing in their efforts to better engage students in meaningful, rigorous, and responsive learning, supporting the needs of a diverse range of students and families served within district boundaries? While race and culture are often the initial focus of culturally responsive pedagogy and equity initiatives, intersections across school communities and individual identities necessitate thoughtful consideration and support in educational decision-making, including those concerning language, family composition, gender expression, sexuality, belief systems, socioeconomic status, faith, and learning needs. As classroom educators and school administrators in Satterfield School District (pseudonym), a medium-sized suburban school district in the Midwest, worked through the challenges of schooling during the different



phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, many expressed alarm at the tone and tenor of criticism targeting equity efforts in schools.

The debates continue to this day, as the politicization of critical race theory and work involving diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) plays out in local school board meetings, district, and school offices around the country (Gross, 2021; Schwartz, 2021a, 2022). Understandably, efforts to address equity and develop thoughtful pedagogy that is supportive of all students and protective of traditionally marginalized populations often feels threatened. Against this backdrop, as a researcher, I examined this question: how can school leaders, with urgency, continue moving forward with action-based school improvement planning and address the minefield of challenges and opposition to culturally sustaining pedagogy as a framework for creating safe and thriving school environments?

As reports gain prominence in traditional mass media, accurate or not, they are amplified through social media. Those committed to equity in their instruction, classrooms, and schools feel emotions ranging from discomfort to outright fear and working conditions spanning from disquiet to direct threats of violence (Gross, 2021; Will, 2022). In Satterfield School District, already years into a professional learning commitment to equity and culturally responsive teaching practices, the national rhetoric led to local unease and threatened to have a chilling effect on the open dialogues and sense of safety educators worked to maintain for all students. School leaders, new and old alike, maintained a simple, but effective philosophy to guide communication, support, and decision-making: until all students and families feel safe, none of us are safe, channeling the sentiments shared by WNBA player Brittney Sykes (2022) in a heartfelt blog post, “What Does Pride Mean to Me?”. It is the responsibility of those who have

the protections of privilege to ensure those protections are extended to those who have been traditionally marginalized.

This is not an abstract issue; for a civil and democratic society to thrive, educators must constantly and critically examine what cultures are portrayed in school, how they are portrayed in terms of societal norms, what cultures are absent or inappropriately minimized, and what influence that has on the students and communities served by a school district. Most often, this kind of critical examination is most apparent in the texts and tasks presented to students, most notably in their literacy development across the curriculum (Keehne, et al., 2018; Lankshear and Knobel, 2009; Tatum, 2011). As students develop their academic identity—and their image of what success means to them within that identity development—it is linked to how they grow as learners, how they respond to the internal challenges they face, and how they overcome external pressures arising from peers, stereotype threats, and bias (Cadinu, et al., 2003). To overcome these internal and external challenges, learners are most readily engaged when learning is meaningful and relevant. And, when we examine student engagement through the lens of affective and cognitive neuroscience, the link is clear: *how* the brain learns is significantly influenced by *how* the learner feels (Immordino-Yang, 2013, 2105, 2016).

My research study explored how school leaders develop school improvement plans with internal coherence (Forman, et al., 2017) that are clearly understood by staff, students, and community alike that are rooted in an established framework for culturally responsive pedagogy and school leadership. Through this research, my findings look to provide further evidence of the characteristics and qualities that school leaders need to develop a more robust and protected setting for culturally sustaining pedagogy across a school setting. If teachers are to set the tone

for culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms, it reasons to follow that school leaders must set the tone for a school (Khalifa, et al., 2016). This is especially salient as “research suggests students of historically oppressed groups are still marginalized in school” and that school leaders often are not only “unprepared to lead in diverse schools”, but they also often cannot identify what steps they would need to take to be prepared (p. 1279). Actions associated with instructional and operational decisions made in school matter. School leaders today must be able to address disinformation aimed at interrupting culturally responsive pedagogy and practice, using established frameworks and systems to deliver clear, coherent, and ongoing daily guidance to the educators and students they serve.

### **Addressing Disinformation Distractions**

Untangling and addressing these challenges involves attacking disinformation, even in districts where critical race theory is not being discussed or considered during curricular planning. For many, critical race theory has “become a catch-all term for discussions of race” (Will, 2022, para. 6) and a way to stop public discourse around uncomfortable subjects for many White people: the many different facets and forms of systemic, historical, and overt racism and sometimes more subtle conditions fueling oppression, including gaslighting, stereotype threat, and implicit bias. Actively working to disable disinformation and its deleterious effects must involve understanding what critical race theory is and isn’t and why culturally responsive and sustaining practices are essential for the well-being of all students; the work to disable and disrupt information begins having foundational understanding of key concepts that is strong enough to have both impromptu and formal conversations with any key stakeholders.

Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002; Hammond, 2015) recognizes that when teachers “recognize students’ cultural displays of learning and meaning making,” they can design and deliver instruction that connects content to students’ funds of cultural knowledge.

Additionally, teachers place high value on student/teacher learning relationships to create learning spaces that encourage taking learning risks and build the safety nets to make that happen. (Hammond, p. 15). Culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris and Alim, 2014) builds on strength-based approaches such as culturally responsive teaching and extends our collective advocacy for students to be “more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires...support in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence.” In other words, educators meet students in their cultural and linguistic world and help them connect to and thrive within a broader society, seeking to celebrate *and sustain* “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as a part of the democratic project of schooling” (p.95). For students to be college and career ready, they must be able to work in a pluralistic, diverse society. Preparing students for a monocultural life is educational malpractice.

Critical race theory, like other theoretical frameworks, is used by academic researchers to give context to a problem they are studying. Educators benefit from having a clear understanding of the three main tenets of CRT when confronting cases of misunderstanding and misapplication of the concept. The first of these tenets maintains that to study, address, and undo systemic racism, we must understand that racism is an ordinary condition rather than an exceptional one. Second, systems of power and privilege often do not change until there is shared interest between those who hold power and those who do not. Third, and of significant note, it must be recognized

as scientific fact that race is a social, rather than biological construct (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017).

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) is another important nuance to CRT; recognizing how marginalization is compounded by gender expression, faith, language, sexuality, and other aspects of personal identity ensures that everyone who works with students must actively avoid assigning generalizing characteristics to any group. Recognizing and elevating the unique voice and perspective that people of color have in experiencing systemic racism must also be appreciated. Actively exploring intersectionality allows educators to better appreciate the individual gifts each student brings to their school and classroom (Keehne, et al., 2018; La Guardia 2009; Nasir, 2009; Shih, 2009).

It is important to note that some critics of CRT and culturally sustaining and responsive pedagogical practices make the faulty argument that curriculum and instruction should be colorblind or that “divisive concepts” or topics such as race, culture, and identity should either limited or eliminated (Young and Friedman, 2022, para. 30). Even though the work to develop culturally responsive classrooms has gone on for decades before the CRT debate started, legislators are, in some cases, making penalties for teaching these so-called divisive concepts (which are described vaguely enough to make interpretation subjective and unclear) more punitive, where “55 percent of bills (in 2022) have contained some kind of explicit punishment for violations” (para. 25). Making schools equitable for all children means educators must constantly wrestle with how to make school increasingly accessible and respectful to students and families whose lived experiences have been traditionally marginalized by mainstream society and school culture. While polarization across social and traditional media platforms,

political campaigns, and school board meetings is making equity-focused work benefiting students more challenging, it is also making it more essential than ever.

When threats of censorship take over school board meetings and online forums (Gross, 2021), school leaders must be conversant in clear, concise, and uncertain language on how CRT informs academic research. The danger in letting these complaints go unchecked is when critics conflate CRT with culturally sustaining pedagogy and DEIB efforts. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, at all levels of school organization, is critical to developing safe and engaging classroom learning that dismantles barriers built by systemic racism and implicit bias; not using these strategies and practices will likely lead to reinforcing and edifying those barriers. As Evans (2021) tweeted, “The people who threw rocks at Ruby Bridges for trying to go to school are now upset their grandchildren might learn about them throwing rocks at Ruby Bridges.”

Knowledge of past and current injustice doesn’t require feeling shame; shame comes from having knowledge of past injustice and censoring our collective ability to institute positive progress and change. In short, critical race theory helps academic researchers apply a context to their work; culturally sustaining pedagogy and practices help educators develop inclusive, engaging environments that support all students in becoming productive, respectful members in our pluralistic society.

As schools improve their ability to respond to the diverse communities they serve, implementing systemic understanding of culturally sustaining and responsive practices is essential. These practices, grounded in Ladson-Billing’s research (1995, 2014), are characterized by three main criteria or conditions for teaching and three conceptions or mindsets that educators should hold in relation to those criteria. The three criteria include (a) teaching with a focus on

academic development; framing instruction with a student's progress in mind as opposed to content coverage; (b) understanding how to develop collective capacity for cultural competence in teachers, school leaders, and students alike; and (c) developing the ability to actively consider the context that sociopolitical consciousness brings to education.

These criteria must be continuously examined by educators; leaders must actively monitor staff awareness and application of these criteria and what influence that awareness, or lack thereof, has on school climate and curriculum. Organizational change must be preceded by personal change; leaders – and especially new leaders – must be critically *and regularly* self-reflective. Leaders must actively and continuously examine how relationships between schools, educators, students, and families influence learning and the role of knowledge, both what knowledge is valued in our schools and what knowledge is represented throughout history in our broader education systems. This examination should be regular, alternating courses of personal reflection and resulting actions. These practices help teachers build stronger social-emotional connections with students, create a culture and climate for productive, risk-taking learning relationships, and actively teaching habits of learning for a growth (as opposed to deficit) mindset. Most importantly, intent is not enough. Speaking endlessly of taking action yet not outlining the steps and success criteria to do so is potentially just as damaging as ignorance or inaction.

A critical step that precedes action planning (and should be maintained throughout the change process) is both an appreciation for time needed and a commitment to urgency. During systems analysis, school leaders must balance the time needed to successfully implement improvement plans with the ability to anticipate what hurdles will impact time-focused planning.

Improvement teams can analyze each proposed action and consider both the importance of the issue and the calculated effort it will take for a school staff to collectively embrace and implement. In this manner, a school improvement team might decide to begin with an item of medium importance that would require less collective effort to build successful coalitions before tackling a change of high importance but needing a higher level of effort and commitment.

The action steps below will emphasize systems, relationship analysis between collected data and ongoing initiatives, and active planning around anticipating and addressing challenges and barriers. As a school leader, the daily, visible commitment to equity and anti-racist work must be transparent and present throughout this work on a daily basis (Khalifa, 2021). The moral imperative leaders display will drive the urgency; the systematic approach will provide the organizational structure needed to meet deadlines and build educators' confidence that school improvement planning is an active, participatory process rather than a compliance issue for a district's strategic plan. New leaders must be especially attentive to the timelines for improvement planning; transparent communication about what will happen when results are achieved must be balanced with an explicit, time-oriented strategy when goals are not met.

### **Action Steps**

Even without the current politicizing pressures, the road to change is marked by many detours (Gorski, 2019) that educators and systems often take to avoid addressing the issues of bias, race, and marginalization of the students in their care. The key to avoiding these detours—in addition to clear, objective education, communication, and accessible resources for staff and community alike—is having an informed, articulated action plan that commits adequate time and support to carry it out in a timely fashion. This process can include three general steps: systems



based on an established tool or framework, relationship analysis, and anticipating and addressing potential challenges. Included in the final step are the metrics for success to focus the design of success criteria, timelines and milestones, and those responsible for each phase of action planning.

### **Systems**

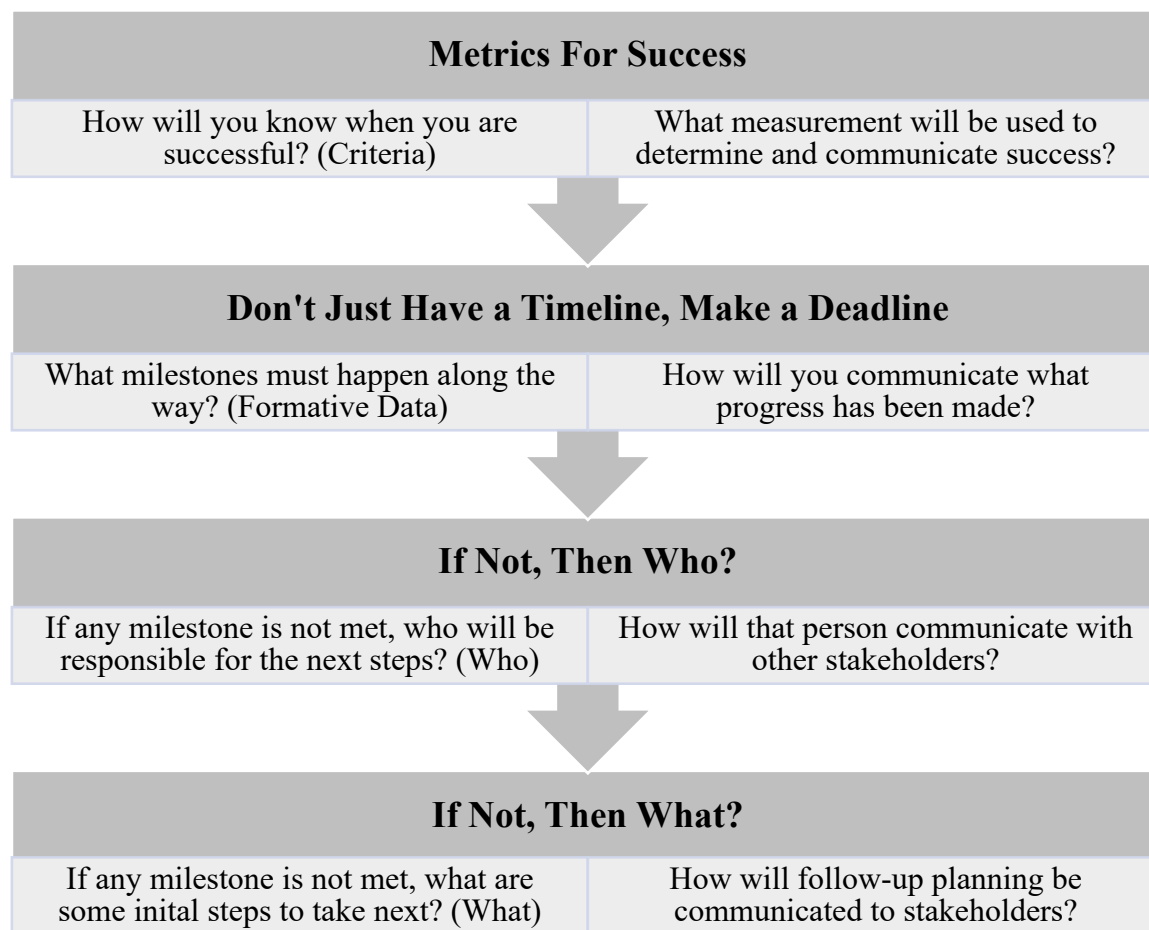
Using an established tool or framework to identify an organization's strengths and areas for growth facilitates identifying where to start. As Irby (2021) notes, even when educators are ready to engage in the challenging work of disrupting bias and racism in their systems, they often do not have the requisite experience and expertise to do so. An established framework builds learning into the improvement equation, rather than leaving initial decision-making to chance. In Satterfield School District, educators were already familiar with Hammond's (2015) Ready for Rigor Framework, as her book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, a critical resource in their multi-year professional learning focus. This facilitated a research study, using the components and descriptors within her framework to identify potential items for greater attention in school improvement plans and continuing professional development. By using a survey, school leaders can self-assess to what extent different best practices are in place and what practices need attention.

### **Relationship Analysis**

A key step in analyzing the information collected from a tool or framework is using a lens that focuses analysis on educator practices and student learning. As school and district leadership teams tackle the data and information collected, the following questions can help focus strategic planning on action steps. As school improvement teams plan specific actions

based on insights gleaned from multiple sources, they must ask how does this information: (a) relate to our current improvement planning and organizational goals; (b) prioritize what systems and practices need improvement, especially in cases where past practices have marginalized students; (c) help our school employ community-based practices that capture student and family voice; and, (d) aid in employing Gorski's (2019) direct confrontation principle to determine how is racism operating here?

Figure 3. *Three Steps for Coherence and Equitable Action Planning*



## **Anticipate and Address**

A key part to action planning for school improvement is embedding mechanisms to anticipate and address challenges and barriers that may arise during implementation of any change efforts. In other words, make sure the plan doesn't end with the plan. For each issue school leaders find they must address, using the steps outlined in the Figure 3 will help leaders be better prepared for the potential challenges that are sure to arise.

Time will likely be one of the major challenges that arise, especially with staff who are committed to improvement but are not ready for the complexity of doing equity-embedded school improvement work. Using an established framework or tool for racial equity analysis will allow leaders to answer two key questions, what should educators be doing and what should they be looking for to be successful? Articulating those two elements of the plan, along with benchmark times (for example, do this now, this semester, this school year, or by the end of our three-year plan) can help school improvement teams make their action plan realistic and concrete, two qualities that will make those plans easier to communicate to other stakeholders, including students. For example, a new leader might want to begin with developing a shared understanding around key concepts in the first semester of the school year. Taking the time to develop solid, thorough definitions on the front end will help make the long-term plans more achievable.

Those who are involved in equity work with students, schools, and communities know that it is an ongoing journey. While planning for a journey makes for a more productive and efficient trip, the work really begins when you start. In the current climate, educators must also plan for the roadblocks and detours that will arise by providing accessible, concise explanations

on the role that culturally sustaining and responsive practices play in making our schools and society a better place. Leaders can arm educators with the knowledge needed to inform public discourse and combat systemic racism and disinformation. Districts and school boards can support school leaders with thoughtful, consistent policy that serves as a district's backbone to decision-making. Those who seek to maintain the status quo, even when its flaws marginalize our students and communities, can be convinced when action plans are organized and defended with thoughtful words, actions, and integrity.

ARTICLE 3: “NONE OF US ARE SAFE”: HOW LEADERS SUSTAIN CULTURALLY  
RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT  
PLANNING

**Abstract**

School improvement planning depends on establishing shared, common understanding of important concepts. When concepts are ubiquitous, school leaders must be especially cognizant of attending to purposeful learning of important concepts before attempting implementation to establish internal coherence (Forman, et al, 2017) around school action plans. Coherence is especially important for equity-based school improvement planning, as opponents to critical race theory have become increasingly vocal and often lump all equity work together under their opposition to critical race theory, attempting to limit school districts’ ability to do anti-racist improvement planning (Will, 2022, para. 6; Gross, 2021). School leaders can methodically and systematically use an established framework, such as Hammond’s (2015) Ready for Rigor Framework to identify current strengths and growth areas within their staff, using that information for targeted action planning and strategic communication strategies to establish and sustain culturally responsive leadership practices.

**Introduction**

Enter any meeting of educators from different parts of the country and ask them to identify what they call a carbonated, sugary beverage served from a fountain, can, or bottle and you are likely to get a range of answers. From the author’s experience, those from the Northeast

will say soda, the Midwest will say pop, and those of us from the south will order a coke, even if it is not part of the Coca-Cola brand. If something as simple as a drink can evoke different vocabulary and understanding, imagine the challenge school leaders face when developing common understanding around topics as complex as race, equity, inclusion, and culture. Each year, schools develop improvement plans with the help of school leaders, educators, and other stakeholders. This article will explore how using an established framework to help identify and prioritize school improvement efforts is critical to developing coherence and unity around action planning designed to identify, address, and dismantle inequity in educational design. A key part of this process is developing a shared understanding around critical concepts, as implementation depends on deep learning (Forman, et al., 2017). This article will also explore the unique challenges and backlash that school leaders can face when school improvement efforts seek to end historical frameworks and practices that contribute to systemic racism, whether intended or not. School leadership that sustains and supports all cultures present within a school, community, and society is an important goal if schools are to prepare students to live, learn, work, and succeed in a pluralistic society.

Schools and school systems are among the most visible organizations in our society. By extension, school administrators and teachers are among the most visible leaders in our communities. The visibility educators have as community leaders and familiarity stakeholders have with schooling (as most have gone to school) can make leading change in schools difficult. People are not necessarily resistant to change, but people do struggle with loss, especially with something that feels familiar. Since schools are often unprepared to tackle addressing equity and disrupting existing structures that perpetuate bias and marginalization (Khalifa, et al., 2016),

those who work for change often find significant barriers to overcoming systemic racism and bias embedded in school systems, from misconceptions and color-blind policies within their own organization (Lewis and Diamond, 2015) and from organized opposition from forces both from within and outside the community (Gross, 2021; Young and Friedman, 2022).

Forman and colleagues (2017) help educators understand that for schools to lead change, they must have internal coherence around their beliefs, philosophies, and practices. Key characteristics of schools organized for effective change and improvement include a focus on the instructional core, understanding that improvement is a function of educators learning more than one of implementation. Changing beliefs and behaviors is predicated upon educators having the time and space to work through mastery experiences rather than simply listening to inspiring rhetoric. Applying this kind of thinking around systems change to culturally sustaining leadership is critical, as professional learning is often long on inspiration and aspiration and short on action planning for changing beliefs and behaviors.

Many aspects of school governance are technical and complex in nature: building schedules, updating grading practices, or balancing class lists, for example. Leading schools through a lens of culturally responsive and sustaining practices, though, is a challenge of adaptive leadership. Heifetz and colleagues (2009, p. 19) provide foundational conditions to consider when leading school organizations through a change process embedded with culturally responsive and sustaining practices, noting that “adaptive changes can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties.” Organizational change must be preceded by personal change. There are no shortcuts around this; there is neither time nor space for inaction or delay.

Facilitating personal change is a critical aspect of implementing authentic, thoughtful, and effective culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). In this article, I will use the concept of CSP as defined by Paris and Alim (2012, 2014), building on the rich tradition of “resource pedagogies,” (Paris and Alim, 2012, p. 94) most specifically the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, and the many researchers and scholars who have developed and continued this work over the last 25 years. Resource, or strength-based pedagogies, focus on the funds of knowledge and strength that reside within “the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices of working-class communities—specifically communities of color—as resources to honor, explore and extend” (Paris and Alim, 2014, p. 87). The history of these pedagogies is important, as CSP *emphasizes* “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change” (Paris and Alim, 2014, p. 88).

The backlash against CRT is one of the roadblocks that school leaders are forced to address when updating and implementing practices aligned with culturally sustaining pedagogies. This article examines what school leaders can do to establish and sustain culturally responsive teaching in kindergarten through grade eight (K-8) schools during a politically driven climate that, at best, diminishes the work of anti-racist educators and, at worst, seeks to eliminate and ban educators’ collective efforts to address and diminish the deleterious influence of systemic racism. The goal of culturally sustaining practices is to encourage the thoughtful development of a supportive school climate and culture, buttressed by identifying, developing, and maintaining teaching and learning practices that address the needs of all students. In a heartfelt blog post, WNBA player Brittany Sykes (2022) explains what pride means to her in



terms of establishing rights for the LGBTQ+ community. School leaders would do well to employ the mantra she espouses within their local school communities: until *all* students feel safe, supported, and recognized within our communities, *none* of us are safe.

Of particular focus will be the use of an established framework to assist in identifying areas of strength and areas for growth for a school or district's staff. Information gleaned from using an established framework allows school improvement teams to dig more quickly into what needs to be done, facilitating strategic planning for both individual and collective professional development and, by extension, improvement in student outcomes. In this case, Hammond's (2015) Ready for Rigor Framework was used to examine a medium-sized suburban school district in the American Midwest. The goal of this work is to provide school leaders with a vehicle to take school improvement plans from theory to action and to have concrete strategies to guide teachers' professional development and learning.

In this article, I examine how school improvement planning benefits from developing organizational understanding of how CSP and the neuroscience behind learning are important to a school's planning and pedagogy, how that understanding informs school improvement planning, and what implementation of that improvement planning could potentially look like. As part of this research, a research study conducted in Satterfield School District, a medium-sized school district near a major metro area in the Midwest United States, will provide insights into how school leaders consider their schools' strengths and growth areas when conducting school improvement planning aligned with culturally sustaining pedagogy. Part of this research involves using Hammond's (2015) Ready for Rigor Framework as an established framework for

identifying what work needs to be done in a local school setting. Also informing this research are interviews with a cross-section of Satterfield School District administrators.

### **An Important Intersection: Connecting CSP and Neuroscience**

Teaching and learning through the pandemic still provide us with numerous lessons in access, agency, and equity around student learning. As the pandemic wore on and wound down, a common sentiment was a collective desire to get back to normal. A seemingly simple wish, but what would schools and society be returning to that was desirable? Ladson-Billings (2021, p. 68) concisely points out that “normal is where the problems reside.” Since the pre-pandemic conditions were rife with unaddressed systemic racism and active resistance to overcoming the damage wrought by stereotype threat and bias, why would we return to those conditions when we have the capacity to build the conditions all students need to live, survive, and thrive in our rich, diverse world? Discussion isn’t enough; without attention or action, systems of oppression will merely replicate themselves and continue to operate unfettered and unchanged.

Critical literacy theorists provide a helpful lens through which to examine what role culturally sustaining pedagogy can play as school administrators and teacher leaders develop and implement school improvement plans. Since, as Bishop (2014) notes, critical literacy is “built on exploring personal, sociopolitical, economic and intellectual border identities” (p. 52), it is well situated as a theoretical framework for guiding school improvement. Students bring identities that are complex and multi-faceted; no learner is but a single story. Understanding how a learner is both defined by and defines their identities (and the intersections of those identities) is crucial to engaging students in significant learning, especially in terms of literacy development.

Vasquez, Janks, and Comber (2019) also argue that “critical literacy should look, feel, and sound

different in different contexts” allowing for community agency and voice, as educators look to improve and change how schools meaningfully engage the students sitting in their classrooms (p. 300).

Teachers (and, by extension, students) must understand how our society continues to struggle addressing issues of equity and anti-racism, most notably in how we structure governance, community access, and schooling (Irby, 2021; Lewis and Diamond, 2015). Critical literacy theory focuses on the role identity plays in learner engagement, which is critical if school improvement work is to disrupt systemic racism, inequity, bias, and stereotype threat (Freire and Macedo, 1987; Lankshear and Knobel, 2009). Clearly, and especially in K-8 settings, literacy development is foundational to overall school success. How students see themselves as readers influences their personal and academic identity in all subject areas (Nasir, et al., 2009). Critical literacy theory also establishes that texts and tasks are never neutral, recognizing where the power lies in text and task selection (Janks, 2000; Vasquez, et al., 2019) can be the first step in sustaining student cultures as a part of everyday practice.

School improvement work, identity development, and culturally sustaining pedagogy is also informed by neuroscience, specifically research into the affective learning domains. Understanding the role that emotion plays in learning is critical for identifying both the potential in and the effectiveness of culturally sustaining pedagogy when it is applied as a framework for instructional and school climate design. Immordino-Yang (2016) asserts, “the legacy of our intelligent brain is our social and emotional mind” (p. 69). Her work is crucial in ensuring that our students’ academic and literacy development is not just tied to assessments and measurements reducing student growth and progress to mere data points. Greater student

engagement, understanding the role of student identity in learning, and aligning practices with culturally sustaining pedagogies are both incredibly complex and inextricably connected to meaningful student growth and stronger performance on important learning outcomes.

Throughout our evaluation of student learning, educators look for evidence of understanding; it is our hope that the evidence helps identify the specific instructional moves and interventions that contribute to measurable growth. Immordino-Yang (2016) asserts “learning is dynamic, social and context dependent because *emotions* are” (p. 17). She goes on to build an impressive case, through experimentation and research, demonstrating that it is “neurobiologically impossible to build memories, engage complex thoughts, or make meaningful decisions without emotion” (p. 18). To teach without considering emotion is folly; learning is most fully engaged and effective when learners care about and are emotionally connected to the content they are learning. Finding ways to leverage the power of Immordino-Yang’s work and research is a key connection to culturally sustaining pedagogy and school leadership.

Leveraging the relationship between emotion, learning, and self-image is especially important, because as students develop the ability to read, write, and problem-solve, they are also developing their academic and social identity as learners and global citizens. Educators and students alike must be well versed in how to work with a wide range of cultures, especially those whose cultural backgrounds differ from their own. Indeed, students need to know their own culture but also understand cultures other than their own; no one’s future can be isolated to a single culture. Understanding that awareness is an initial (but important) step is also critical; awareness must lead to action, or else the effects of stereotype threat on student learning will continue to influence student performance and confidence (Cadinu, et al., 2003). In short, mere

awareness and exposure to diverse cultures is not enough; knowing *why* cultures' stories are important must be a standard part of lesson delivery. Just as critical for all learners is understanding *how* a text, task, event, or figure influences our collective and individual learning in the context of how the lesson is framed and delivered.

In his research on stereotype threat and bias, Steele (2011) notes how crucial it is for teachers to understand and address bias in their classrooms. First, although we see “ourselves as autonomous individuals, evidence consistently shows that contingencies tied to our social identities do make a difference in shaping our lives” (p. 14). When faced with a task that students are invested in successfully completing, the bias against any group they may belong to (identity threat) can negatively influence their performance as learners. This realization must be made transparent to students in all age groups of K-8 education. How can we be transparent about the curriculum, instruction, and school environment choices we make – especially the texts and tasks we make available – to help students see how these choices can have a positive influence on their performance and growth?

Steele's research also demonstrates that stereotype threat, especially when left unchecked, hinders educators' ability to address “the racial, social class, and gender achievement gaps that persistently plague and distort our society” (Steele, 2011, p. 15). Luckily, there are promising directions for intervention that, if implemented properly and consistently, may help ameliorate the effects of societal and institutional bias that students are burdened with. At the heart of these interventions and instruction are texts and tasks that value individual student identities and highlight the contributions made by both notable community and historical figures from a variety of cultures and life experiences, especially those contributions outside of

stereotypical sociopolitical contexts found in school curricula. This means searching out Black scientists and entrepreneurs in addition to civil rights activists. It means highlighting the local Hispanic heroes championing sustainability and environmental efforts in addition to the stories of immigration awareness. It is sharing the contributions of scientists who break the stereotypes of gender expression and sexual orientation. If educators don't normalize the diverse roles our diverse communities fulfill, then we continue to be part of the problem and not part of the solution.

Although these strategies have clear, strong foundations in culturally sustaining pedagogy, they are strategies that support all students, not only students from marginalized populations (Hammond, 2015, Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021). As America has an increasingly diverse student body being taught by teachers and systems that are largely shaped by White, middle-class, heteronormative, and historically Protestant values (NCES, 2022; Schaeffer, 2021), it will be increasingly important to demonstrate how the benefits of diversity in curriculum and instruction is good instruction for all students and helps fill the opportunity gaps that marginalized populations regularly and consistently face.

The influence findings from affective neuroscience could have on examining culturally sustaining pedagogy is equally important. Looking at literacy development through the dual lens of critical literacy and affective neuroscience is, in a manner of speaking, to witness the development of consciousness. If we are to examine the forces of bias and stereotype threat on the development of self and self-image, understanding how the brain encodes meaning is an important piece of the puzzle. Dehaene (2014) works to crack open what consciousness truly is, focusing on three key elements: vigilance, attention, and conscious access. These three

conditions correspond to being awake and aware, the ability to focus our attention on specific information, and the process by which we store and relate information in our brain (p. 8-9).

Through experimentation, Dehaene reports on how the study of consciousness reveals insights into how our mind processes, encodes, stores, and relates information in the brain and in the body's neural network. By examining three qualities associated with conscious thought (conscious access, manipulating conscious perception, and awareness of introspection), Dehaene and other experimenters can peel back the mysteries associated with conscious and unconscious processing. Understanding this branch of neuroscience is another important foundation in our study of culturally sustaining pedagogy and how our self-image forms. If we are all suspect to the forces of stereotype bias and threat, understanding how the mind processes information both consciously and unconsciously provides valuable insights.

### **Through the Intersection and on the Road: CSP in Action Planning**

Long before each school year starts, school and district improvement teams sit down to identify how their professional learning and school improvement plans will have a positive influence on students' experience and growth in the coming school year. Many may have even done the work to review the research around culturally sustaining pedagogies and found resources aligned with promising findings in the learning sciences. But, as they explore the intersection of these best practices, look at the students in front of them, and consider what story their data sources reveal about current student performance, one question quickly arises: Now what? Additionally, if that school is in a community where protests fueled by discontent and misinformation campaigns around critical race theory and advocacy for LGBTQ+ students, family, and staff consume precious time and resources, anti-racist equity work in school

improvement planning can seem even more daunting (Giroux, 1993; Gross 2021; Young and Friedman, 2022).

Gorsky (2019) highlights several “equity literacy principles” that school improvement teams can employ as they lead change efforts, most notably direct confrontation and prioritization (p. 60). If schools are to truly build a new normal that dismantles racist practices both past and current, the fastest path is the most direct one. Having the courage to examine where inequity is showing up in school performance helps teams prioritize exactly where to prioritize disrupting systems that marginalize students or groups of students.

Table 7. *Office Discipline Referrals, West School*

	Black			Latinx			Multi-Racial			White			Total
	N	<i>n</i>	Risk	N	<i>n</i>	Risk	N	<i>n</i>	Risk	N	<i>n</i>	Risk	
<b>M</b>	38	16	42.1%	48	12	25.0%	22	6	27.3%	76	16	21.1%	<b>184</b>
<b>F</b>	32	12	37.5%	50	10	20.0%	27	4	14.8%	62	12	19.4%	<b>171</b>
<b>NB</b>	0	0	0%	2	0	0%	1	0	0%	2	0	0%	<b>5</b>
<b>Total</b>	70	28	40.0%	100	22	22.0%	50	10	20.0%	140	28	20.0%	<b>360</b>

A specific example is examining school data on office discipline referrals and calculating a referral risk index by racial subgroup. This calculation takes the number of students within a subgroup (assuming they are of significant size) with at least one office discipline referral and divides it by the total number of students within that subgroup. The resulting percentage indicates the risk of a student in that racial group receiving an office discipline referral for a behavior incident. Consider the data in Table 7 above (Satterfield School District is a



pseudonym; data is representative of historical data in a suburban elementary school in the Midwest.)

As the school improvement team sits down to analyze the numbers, if they do not have the referral risk calculation, at first glance they could say the rate of referrals is similar for Black, White, and Latinx students. But, when looked at as a percentage of the population, Black students are overrepresented. Using another one of Gorsky's (2019, p. 61) principles, the team recognizes their efforts should not focus "on fixing students of color, but on eliminating racist conditions." Why are Black students being reported for behavior incidents at a rate twenty percent higher than White or multi-racial students and eighteen percent higher than Latinx students? This is not a technical issue; it is an adaptive one for adults to identify and address. To fix the bias and racism in the system, we must first look within and make personal change.

### **Identify and Address**

When fear and misinformation fill hallways, homes, and school-board meetings (Schwartz, 2021c, 2022), well-established frameworks and clearly communicated policies can become a school system's bulwarks to maintain safety for students and integrity in curriculum and instruction. To prioritize and prepare those defenses, leaders must be able identify both internal needs and potential external challenges. The intentional use of an established framework to regularly assess current conditions can both facilitate and expedite the process, giving leadership teams specific action items on which to focus (Forman, et al., 201; Heifetz, et al., 2009). This article will focus on one such resource, Hammond's Ready for Rigor Framework (2015). Before using such a framework to identify school strengths and areas for growth though,

school leaders must be conversant in knowing what challenges they may face both from within and outside of their school community.

In 2022, legislators increased the number of educational gag orders by over two hundred percent and in over 70 percent of the states. (Young and Friedman, 2022). Even in few school communities where legislation has not been passed, the manufactured and stoked outrage fueling them remains a potential and powerful influence for many members of a school community, especially for those opposed both to teaching about race, racism, and LGBTQ+ issues and examining the treatment of marginalized groups in the context of past and current events in American society.

Building a response to counter such narratives begins with understanding how the language and intent of these gag orders are built. Typically, gag orders and other misinformation tactics designed stoke fear: (a) employ vague language, (b) create a climate of fear, often leading to self-censorship, and (c) target race, gender expression, American history, and LGBTQ+ issues and identities (Saxman, et al., 2022). Of the 137 gag orders introduced in 2022, 136 of them were sponsored by Republican lawmakers, many of whom previously championed the idea of free speech on college campuses, complaining that important issues to their cause and beliefs were being censored (Young and Friedman, 2022). This is an important context to consider and speaks to why the mantra “none of us are safe until all of us are safe” (Sykes, 2022) is so important in developing clear policy and communication around issues of school climate and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Opponents of anti-racist work, not surprisingly, are often not concerned with equity, and are prone to believing that such work is unfair to those who currently reap the

systemic benefits afforded to those both accustomed to and unaware of how privilege is conferred in the absence of anti-racist efforts (Gross, 2021; Young and Friedman, 2022).

There are many resources available to school leaders to develop strategies to counter misinformation and censorship attempts, notably through resources available from PEN America, the American Library Association's "Fight Censorship" web site, and the Western State Center (2022) resource, *Confronting Conspiracy Theories and Organized Bigotry at Home: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers*. School districts must use policy (informed by objective, peer-reviewed research from recognized experts) developed in consultation with these types of resources as both the first and final lines of defense against these kinds of attacks, allowing debates to focus on the issue (safety for all) rather than the person or the personality making the complaint.

With policies and procedures in place to protect anti-racist and culturally sustaining practices, school improvement and leadership teams are better positioned to employ an established framework for determining organizational strengths and areas for growth around developing equity-focused policy, practice, and educational philosophy (Forman, et al., 2017). When organizations know what they are up against, they become better positioned to counter disinformation with thoughtful, ethical, and informed decisions in school climate and instructional planning (Saxman, et al., 2022). There are numerous tools available, including the Racial Equity Impact Assessment (2009) from Race Forward, NYU's Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard (2019), and many others, including the one this article will focus on, Hammond's Ready for Rigor Framework (2015).

Appendix A, Hammond's (2015) Ready for Rigor Educator Self-Assessment, shows how a framework can be applied as a tool for collective self-reflection. Aggregating the data from a staff leadership team, or even a small group of administrators, provides schools with the opportunity to identify what strengths educators believe to be in place and what areas of growth should be examined. Results can be ranked individually and by the four different areas: awareness, learning partnerships, information processing, and community of learners and learning environment. At that point, school improvement planning can analyze and rank the findings in terms of both potential benefit and projected level of effort. For example, a team's analysis might indicate starting with a short-term initiative that has a medium level of benefit, but a lighter projected level of effort or lift. This effort might feed into a longer-term initiative that has a high level of potential benefit but has a heavier effort and time commitment to implement.

As an example of this kind of analysis appears in Appendix C and displays the results from surveying Satterfield School District leaders on the state of culturally responsive pedagogy in their schools. The data is organized by both framework area and individual component using a Pareto chart to help prioritize organizational planning around either areas of greater need or using identified strengths as a foundation to build upon. The straight Pareto line indicates that in this case, there is not a statistically significant difference between the components surveyed and the distance between component rankings is not large. So, while at the individual component level school leaders could choose any component as a starting point, it is just as helpful to see how the framework areas also cluster. Area four, Community of Learners and Learning Environment, clusters to the left side of the chart as a relative strength, while areas one and three,

Awareness and Information Processing, tend to cluster towards the right side of the chart as potential areas for growth.

Since successful improvement planning depends on focusing time and effort on a discrete number of specific goals, the narrowing that the area clusters provide helps improvement teams select meaningful starting points for professional learning and institutional focus. In this case, at one school, educators decided to explicitly teach students how cognitive routines shape learning (Information Processing) within the context of understanding the “socio-political context around race and language” (Awareness) as the two primary components to focus on from Hammond’s (2015) framework (p. 17). While the analysis (and lack of statistical significance) allowed educators the opportunity to have free reign when identifying *any* component(s) from the framework, the discussion and relative ranking of framework areas helped focus the conversations, planning, and actions to more specific, discrete strategies.

### **Build Foundations**

To build a foundation for successful school improvement, the work must begin with the learning – establishing a common understanding of key concepts and terminology (Forman, et al., 2017). Although building foundations is a distinct phase of school improvement, it begins in the identification stage and continues through action planning. A key aspect of foundation building is clear communication to all stakeholders, establishing the shared understanding of concepts associated with the targeted strategies being used to guide improvement.

In the case of South School in Satterfield School District, which chose understanding the brain’s natural learning systems as one of its foci, having a shared common understanding of the fundamentals of both cognitive and affective neuroscience (and their relation to learning, from a

student-friendly perspective) meant working together to establish what key terminology would be most especially meaningful for students to understand. The exercise of going through the terminology and working through success criteria for students deepened teachers' understanding of key concepts; debating the shared understanding of the terms sharpened the strategies used to make concepts accessible to students.

Developing a deeper, shared understanding is also crucial for stakeholder communication; making the connections between cognitive neuroscience, affective neuroscience, and culturally responsive practices in objective, layperson language helps educators better communicate with guardians and families in correspondence, school open houses, and in public forums. Communicating *why* a school teaches curriculum within a specific context depends on thorough familiarity of *what* is being taught, both conceptually and philosophically. Confidence comes with repeated exposures not just to the concepts, but the ways in which educators successfully communicate it to different stakeholder audiences. Clear communication comes from repetition; educators must ensure there are plenty of dress rehearsals *before* any high stakes communication is delivered.

One activity that helps frame the importance of common language to staff is to bring groups together around a common cause and, before providing participants in professional learning with an established definition of a concept, have them participate in a meaning-building activity as follows. First, after using a framework to identify key areas for instructional and/or school climate improvement, identify key terms associated with the concept (for example, culturally responsive teaching.) Next, before providing participants with a working definition, have individuals write their own definition or understanding of the concept. Third, before sharing

with a larger group, have small groups of participants work together to come up with a common, shared definition. Following the small group defining process, take the definitions from each group and work collectively to develop a single shared definition. Finally, share with the group the definition of the concept as written or developed by an established expert in the field. Ask participants to reflect on what are the similarities and differences between the established definition and the group's definition were.

The goal of this exercise is to illustrate how different perspectives of an established concept are developed. Taking a staff through this exercise and using a combination of the established definition and the local expression of that definition will aid in communicating organizational goals to community stakeholders. Having an appreciation for the challenges informed educators must overcome to develop shared understanding – and the importance of voice and agency in that process – can go a long way in developing thoughtful communication for the community, along with an understanding of the time it takes to develop shared knowledge across groups.

Once the terms have been identified, a working glossary should be developed with audience in mind; how can important terms and concepts (and the rationale for using them) be developed as consumable and accessible for students, families, and community members invested in having safe and successful schools for all students? The more time and effort dedicated to building this foundational understanding and communication on the front end of an initiative, the sturdier the final framework will be.

## Action Planning: Beyond Book Studies

Gorsky (2019) identifies detours that well-meaning organizations take when attempting to develop more equitable and just school climates. Undergirding each of the detours named is the pacing-for-privilege detour which “coddles the hesitancies of people with the least racial equity investment while punishing the people with the most investment” (p. 57). Whether unrealized or intentional, when a “wait and talk about it more first” approach is taken, it can be just as damaging as the most vocal, bigoted opponents to equity work at a school board meeting. When the area for growth is identified, a book study or a focus group must not impede nor delay the clear actions aimed at achieving outcomes, especially the actions needed to dismantle racist systems and change biased practices. We know the work is a marathon, but we must run the race at a pace that communicates the urgency the effort requires for success.

Table 8. *School Improvement Planning Considerations*

Systems	Relationship Analysis	Anticipate and Address
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select and use established tool(s).</li> <li>• Identify a specific system in advance to gather information from multiple sources.</li> <li>• Determine how information will be organized.</li> <li>• Use protocols and systems to maximize time spent on analysis, not mere data collection.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask how information gathered relates to current goals.</li> <li>• Use information to strategically prioritize what systems or practices need attention most urgently.</li> <li>• Be purposeful and mindful to examine how racism and bias are operating in the system, based on the evidence gleaned from collecting information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sure the established action plan identifies the following:</li> <li>• <i>Metric</i> – How will success criteria be determined and measured?</li> <li>• <i>Timeline</i> – What milestones must be reached at each stage of the action plan?</li> <li>• <i>Who</i> – Who is responsible for each phase and milestone, including implementation, evaluation, and support?</li> </ul>

Even though it is the third stage in this organizational protocol, action planning begins in the first stage’s identification process and runs throughout all stages of improvement plan development. Keeping the action portion of the process simple and clear makes achieving goals



more accessible and, in turn, more realistic. Like any machine or system, the fewer parts there are to manage in this complex, unfolding task, the better those who manage the parts can remain focused and productive. The three steps in Table 8 allow for tightly articulated short-term goal planning that can serve multi-year plans.

### **Conclusion: Carter Threw a Fit**

School improvement efforts focusing on increasing meaningful student engagement, must attend to student voice and agency using culturally sustaining pedagogy as a foundation to the work. If school leaders and improvement teams find that colleagues are worried that organizational change is happening “too fast,” return to both Ladson-Billings’ (2021) concerns with returning to a normal that has been fundamentally flawed in schools and Gorsky’s (2019) guidance, which highlights how we cannot meet “people ‘where they are’ when ‘where they are’ is fraught with racial bias and privilege” (p. 58). In other words, if current schooling practices continue to contribute to the marginalization of students, especially students of color and LGBTQ+ students, how can we identify and remove those practices with urgency, *so they do no more harm*.

An anecdote, again from South School in Satterfield School District, illustrates the process of following this work from identification to action. Carter, a successful Black eighth grade student, joined a lunch recess review session for his science class. Upon entering, his classmates who were also in the review shared their amazement that he was there, being that his identity to them was one of academic success.

“Do you think I don’t work at this?” he told them, without hiding the frustration in his voice. “Do you think this is supposed to just come easy? I work every day studying this after

school before I go hang at the park with you all. I'm here because I want to be successful, not because someone told me to be here.”

Carter then went straight to work; the power of his outburst resonated with his classmates more than words from a teacher or parent could. They were authentic, meaningful, and no nonsense; he broke through the stereotype that success is a gift rather than effort and that his effort defined who he was as a young Black man. As our team, a science teacher, instructional coach, and a special education co-teacher reflected on that event, we planned for a unit of study to capture what Carter so clearly expressed. Planning for the fall of a new school year we entered grade-level action planning, reflecting our school- and district-level priorities. Beginning again with self-analysis through Hammond's Ready for Rigor Framework we followed each stage in the school improvement planning considerations featured in Table 8.

First, for identifying a system, we focused on two components in the Awareness quadrant, “understanding how the brain learns and acknowledging the socio-political context around race and language” (Hammond, 2015, p. 17). Second, for the relationship analysis, our team developed learning experiences to help students understand key concepts within these two components; the long-term goal was for greater engagement in learning around the eighth-grade science content. By helping students identify the strategies, behaviors, and mindset they need daily to be successful in class, with authentic personal and scientific connections, we decided to call out the “socio-political context around race and language” and how these lessons would help teachers and students to collectively work together to break down those barriers. Inspired by Carter's passion, we developed curriculum and learning experiences through different cultural lenses, prioritizing the needs of our Black and Hispanic students, all while emphasizing how

these efforts will help all students grow. In our lesson planning, we were also explicit about how racism operates in society, as well as how systemic racism and bias creates conditions that are not conducive to learning and sharing positive examples of how cultural strengths can be centered as a foundation for success.

Finally, for the final anticipate and address state, we knew time was limited and we staying tightly focused on our learning objectives was important. Before planning lessons, we designed a rubric to use with a pre- and post-test design (Table 9, below), followed by a timeline for the unit delivery, and identifying who would be responsible for each phase of curriculum development and evaluation of student learning. We also made plans to make this learning available to other classrooms, resulting in similar planning spreading to other content areas and grade levels. In accordance with district level content area standards, we also planned to look for relationships between performance on the assessment for this introductory unit and performance on subsequent curriculum-based measurements.

Students at all grade levels deserve the transparency culturally sustaining pedagogy provides to learning experiences and school climate design. When educators can articulate *why* they believe culturally responsive teaching is valuable but cannot accurately explain *how* they would carry that out, it leads to frustration for teachers and lack of understanding across the community. This frustration and lack of understanding, perhaps, are seeds and fertilizer to the opposition equity efforts often face. When there is a deficit of knowledge around our teaching practices, the space is filled with existing systems of comfortable oppression, further entrenching practices we know to be harmful.

Table 9. Student Rubric, Ready for Rigor: Awareness

1 Beginning	2 Approaching	3 Meeting	4 Exceeding
<p><i>I have <b>little to no understanding</b> of the concepts around:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>how a learner’s mindset influences their effort and performance</i></li> <li>• <i>the connection between emotions (affective) and thinking (cognitive) learning processes and how they influence my work as a learner</i></li> </ul>	<p><i>I have a <b>partial understanding of some of the concepts</b> around:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>how a learner’s mindset influences their effort and performance</i></li> <li>• <i>the connection between emotions (affective) and thinking (cognitive) learning processes and how they influence my work as a learner</i></li> </ul>	<p><i>I have an <b>accurate understanding</b> of:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>how a learner’s mindset influences their effort and performance</i></li> <li>• <i>fundamental concepts demonstrating how my brain learns (cognitive neuroscience) and what influence emotions (affective neuroscience) have on learning</i></li> </ul>	<p><i>In addition to having an accurate understanding of everything listed in the “Meeting” category, I also can identify and apply strategies to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i><b>improve my mindset around learning</b> (understanding the emotion/learning connection)</i></li> <li>• <i>use my <b>understanding of how the brain best learns</b> to enhance my learning process</i></li> </ul>

## CONCLUSION

In my personal experience, equity efforts are often long on talk and short on action. This is important from a research perspective, as it potentially contributes to bias in my outlook, data, and research analysis. Coupling this potential source of bias with the non-random convenience sampling used to gather participants (as I am both an employee of the school district and the primary researcher) means that I had to take extra measures to guard against the influence of bias. These steps and measures included first ensuring that no survey or interview participants had any current or previous experience with me as their supervisor. This was facilitated by the fact that I stepped down from my role as a school administrator before conducting the research. Also, the two buildings in which I worked were also eliminated from the participant pool.

Next, I also completed the independent and rigorous IRB process with both Loyola and the school district. As an added layer, the administrator in charge of the school district IRB had no previous professional nor personal contact with me (as they were new to the district) and conducted a meticulous review and had thorough questions about every contact and communication with participants. This helped ensure that there was not a “rubber stamp” nor an expedited process simply because I had personal work history in the district. Additionally, follow up interviews were conducted via video conference; all interview participants were able to participate voluntarily as a condition to the research study. Interviews were conducted in a timely fashion following the survey implementation and all data was anonymized and kept private and confidential. Most importantly, there was no input or direction from school district

administration or professional colleagues on conducting research and sharing results. In other words, there was no formal nor informal pressure to cast district operations in a positive light and avoid any challenging findings.

Not surprisingly, the data revealed many intersections in the challenges facing leaders as they implement and sustain culturally responsive teaching practices. The interview data especially revealed conflicts between survey and interview responses, where generally survey data was more positive about collective educator efficacy and interview data revealed more pointed, critical feedback of what teachers and schools need to do. For example, school leaders identified teachers as establishing a solid community of learners and learning environment in alignment with Hammond's (2015) practice area four, on average developing the strategies and environments identified most of the time (50-74%). Conversely, of the top ten response categories indicating potential growth areas, four aligned with practice area four while five aligned with practice area one, Awareness. So, simultaneously there is both confidence and concern. As teams dig deeper into a root cause analysis of reflection data, they may well wonder how strong learning communities and environments are being built when the following growth areas arise: (a) staff lacking a personal awareness of bias; (b) a need for greater centering of student identity, voice, and agency in curriculum and climate work; (c) lack of staff investment in culturally relevant pedagogy and only a surface understanding of culturally responsive teaching; (d) culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching valued in voice, but not clearly in action.

It is precisely those discussions, looking for the roots to these different data points, where leaders can begin to define the scope of their school improvement work. It is also important to

point out that both data sources, the survey and interview data, are all self-reflections, which amount to perceptions of progress and barriers to success. As this data was collected from both a limited number of school leaders, from different school sites and varying in their length of tenure in the target school district, we cannot ascertain if these results provide actionable data for an individual school site within Satterfield School District. Rather, they paint a picture of the process and the conversations generated by the process. At least one of the interview subjects readily admitted that some of their answers might be biased by experiences in previous school sites and districts, since they were still new (less than two years) in their tenure in Satterfield.

What these results do point to, though, is how the self-reflection tool could be used within a school site to reflect any local context more accurately during improvement planning within a school community. Although there wasn't a statistically significant difference between the components, grouping the responses by practice area helped further see patterns and clusters, as components in each practice are interrelated. More importantly, they give educators a starting point for concrete discussion. At one school, educators were able to use feedback from the survey tool to identify specific areas to first develop capacity as a teacher; then to plan and deliver strategies tailored to their students and with defined success criteria.

There were also technical aspects to writing in the three-article format that provided some challenges, as the style and templates for individual journals did not necessarily align with Loyola's dissertation format. What that led to, though, was another opportunity to rewrite and dig deeper into the results and literature review. This was necessary, as the confusion interview subjects communicated around defining and understanding key concepts covered in this research, most notably culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching, was also reflected

in my own understanding. If learning must precede implementation for coherence, it certainly must precede and be part of research and inquiry. As the work associated with disrupting inequity and sustaining culturally responsive practices is layered and complex, it is not surprising that the data generated from this research is also layered and complex. There is ample opportunity for me to return to these interview transcripts to develop further insights.

Although I took the unusual step of quantifying the qualitative data, I tried to approach it as a school leader would, doing their daily work associated with school improvement planning. As school's improvement team works to develop and implement a school's action plan, the school leader circulates, visits team meetings, checks in with teachers both informally and through the evaluation process. Throughout all this work, they are collecting input from their staff, looking for patterns in what is being successfully implemented and what still needs deeper attention. Are the core concepts understood, or are educators using different interpretations? So, while quantifying the qualitative data does not likely produce results that could be generalized to the local population or other similar populations, it still produces an exercise that school leaders need to go through, being both continuously aware of and critically self-reflective on the work being done to disrupt systems of bias, inequity, and marginalization.

One reflective quote from the interview portion of my research study stands out for its reflective nature and his awareness, both personal and collectively for the educators that he leads. This veteran Black male administrator reflected on his work with teachers across settings in an especially personal manner:

I'm from New Orleans and my grandfather's in the French Quarter. So, we like to talk about food, right, and where it comes from. For example, we think of the exotic dishes



that everybody loves from New Orleans: gumbo, jambalaya, etouffee. All of that came from a place, and I know this just from my family background. It was poor people. And just think about all the different indigenous foods. It all comes from poor people who have to make, as they say in the Black church, make something out of nothing. The interesting thing for me is the connection that when you're talking about schools and foods. I think a lot of times when I think about exotic, I think about Black kids are either hypervisible or they are invisible. That plays out a lot when we think about culturally relevant teaching. We make kids who are exceptional exotic but, if he is quiet, struggling academically, and not a behavior problem, teachers say "Oh, he's well-spoken, he's this, he's that." But he's invisible. It's the same thing when we see Black women in powerful positions, we love the exotic, but we don't love the regular, the every day. We embrace the exotic but we don't really, truly embrace it, because we don't really know it.

### **Implications and Future Research**

As a quasi-experimental case study, with a non-random convenience sampling using a naturally forming group of participants within the researcher's own school district (Creswell, 2014), the results of this study may not be applicable for making informed decisions about schools in other districts or, quite frankly, even other schools not represented in the study survey or interview data within Satterfield School District. That notwithstanding, the power in the reflections by the randomly selected, voluntary participants does inform the *why* behind why it is important to take a structured, strategic, and reflective approach to school improvement planning.

Researcher's findings that teachers and leaders are often not prepared, nor have the expertise (Irby, 2021; Lewis and Diamond, 2015) was amplified by each interview participant. While implied most implied at their own vulnerability and willingness to examine and share their own shortcomings in addressing race and equity with their own staff, a future point of research (both locally and more broadly) would be to examine the role of leader vulnerability in framing their own development and needs as a culturally conscious and culturally sustaining school leader. This is especially important for leading those who are also reflective and self-critical. It may be even more critical for leading those who are resistant or unwilling to change their mindset towards being more critically anti-racist. This would be another line of potential research: how do our strategies differ when approaching anti-racist work in supportive communities and in those who are actively opposed to acknowledging and dismantling systemic racism? When we think about the influence this has on students, I would also be curious to see how students' stances towards anti-racist work differs when they spend formative years in institutions that embrace culturally sustaining pedagogy as compared to institutions that choose not to use culturally relevant teaching frameworks and practices.

In the end, the goal of this study was to help move school improvement planning from talk to concrete actions with direct student impact. The Ready for Rigor Framework provided direction; Khalifa's leadership characteristics reveal the stance that school leaders can take when guiding this work. Combined, these tools help define and deliver the rationale needed for sustaining culturally responsive leadership and pedagogy. The interview data bears this out, as leaders identified needing to have CRP embedded in strategic planning, the importance of

focusing on developing a safe school climate, having systems of accountability for reluctant and slow-moving staff, and the development of common language and shared ideology.

### **Personal and Local Implications**

Action-based research should have an impact on the researcher, especially involving personal efforts related to school improvement. This study amplified my understanding of how critical personal learning is when implementing equity-based school improvement efforts. As a member of our school's improvement team, I am already reviewing the survey tool with our staff and actively applying findings from this research with our own staff and students. We will be using the Ready for Rigor Framework survey tool to identify what practices could potentially develop from deeper study and purposeful action. Even though the survey results did not produce a statistically significant finding, I do believe the process *itself* is significant. When our school improvement team examines our own survey results, the important conversation is not just *what* stands out, but *why* we think it stands out and *how* the evidence provides us with a narrative to listen to or a challenge to solve.

Although this research began before the COVID-19 pandemic, the events in Satterfield School District and the anti-CRT narrative that dominated traditional and national media in 2021 and 2022 definitely influenced my own personal narrative around social justice. Forman and colleagues' (2017) internal coherence framework resonated with me even more when considered through an equity lens. What our school and district need, even with the work we have done, is even greater coherence around how we define the concepts critical to anti-racist efforts and culturally sustaining pedagogy. As school leaders and educators, it is incumbent upon us to define both the work and the urgency with which it needs to be done.

Each of the needs identified as growth areas by interview participants, if deemed high priority by a school improvement team or building leader, would benefit through applying protocols and processes to build coherence using established tools. Developing coherence facilitates having an articulated plan, bound by time and success criteria, for repeated development, practice, and application of strategies aligned with targeted tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogy. The iterations this process creates helps educators develop the confidence and familiarity needed for improved communication and that is where the heart of this work lies: the repeated daily actions we undertake because waiting to act is not acceptable. This work is then buttressed by clear, unambiguous communication in support of inclusive, culturally sustaining practices, organized using protocols introduced through this research study. As practice develops collective confidence, confidence in shared philosophy also grows, and both strengthen education leaders to lead by the maxim: until all of us are safe, none of us are safe.

APPENDIX A

READY FOR RIGOR FRAMEWORK SELF-ASSESSMENT

Use Hammond's (2015) Ready for Rigor Framework to rate how often (collectively) educators in your organization apply these principles of culturally responsive pedagogy.

<b>5 (All the Time)</b>	<b>4 (Most)</b>	<b>3 (Often)</b>	<b>2 (Occasionally)</b>	<b>1 (Not Often)</b>
90% or more	89%-75%	74%-50%	49%-25%	Less than 25%
<b>Awareness</b>				
<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Learning Partnerships</b>				
<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Information Processing</b>				
<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Community of Learners and Learning Environment</b>				

APPENDIX B

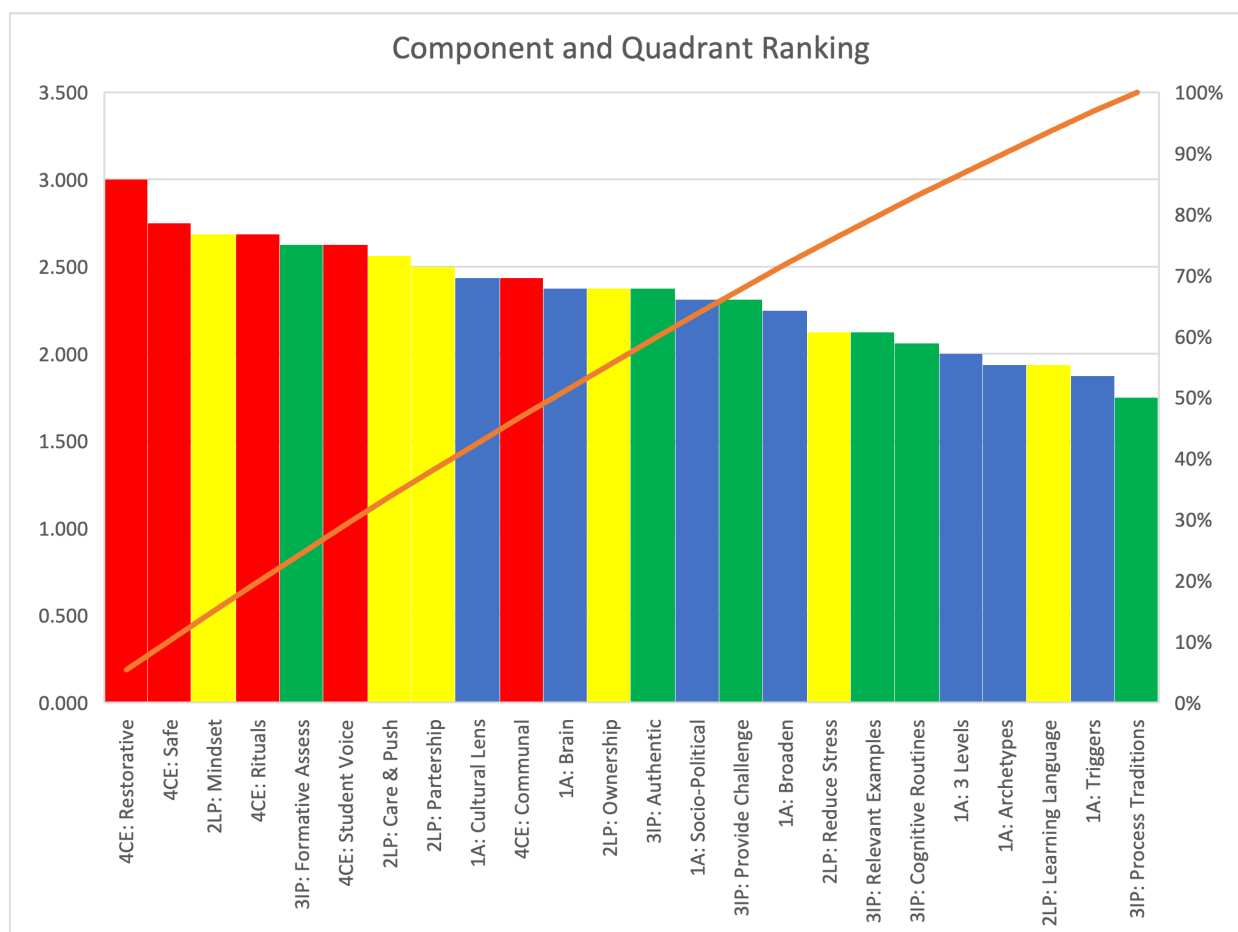
POST SURVEY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

1. Describe your understanding of and comfort with culturally responsive teaching. What is your working definition of culturally responsive teaching?
2. How important is culturally responsive teaching to:
  - a. You as a school leader
  - b. Teachers in your school
  - c. Students in your school
  - d. Families and guardians in your school community
3. In terms of culturally responsive teaching, what strengths do you see in practice with the educators in your school? What conditions help those strengths develop?
4. In terms of culturally responsive teaching, what areas of growth do you see for your school and staff? What conditions will be necessary to help that growth take place?
5. What practice(s) do you feel are most critical to establishing culturally responsive teaching in your school?



APPENDIX C

SATTERFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT, READY FOR RIGOR RANKINGS



### Area 1: Awareness (1A)

Understand **3 levels** of culture  
 Recognize cultural **archetypes**  
 Understand how the **brain** learns  
 Acknowledge **socio-political** context, race  
 Know and own your **cultural lens**  
 Recognize brain's **triggers**, race and culture  
**Broaden** interpretation of diverse students

### Area 3: Information Processing (3IP)

**Provide** appropriate **challenge**  
**Process** new content using oral **traditions**  
 Connect using **authentic, culturally relevant**  
 Provide **authentic opportunities**  
 Teach **cognitive routines**  
 Use **formative assessments** and feedback

### Area 2: Learning Partnerships (2LP)

Student/teacher relationship as **partnership**  
 Balance giving students **care and push**  
 Help students cultivate a positive **mindset**  
 Support student to take **ownership** of learning  
 Give students **language** to talk about **learning**  
**Reduce social-emotional stress** and microaggressions

### Area 4: Community of Learners (4CE)

Create intellectually and socially **safe** environment  
 Make space for **student voice** and agency  
 Build culture around **communal** structure  
 Use class **rituals** and routines  
 Use principles of **restorative justice**

APPENDIX D  
SURVEY RESULTS, DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	AVG	Range	SD
<b>Practice Area 1A: Awareness</b>	<b>2.170</b>	<b>3.00</b>	<b>0.227</b>
Understand the three levels of culture (surface, shallow, deep)	2.000	2	
Recognize cultural archetypes of individualism and collectivism	1.938	3	
Understand how the brain learns	2.375	3	
Acknowledge the socio-political context around race and language	2.313	4	
Know and own your cultural lens	2.438	3	
Recognize your brain's triggers around race and culture	1.875	3	
Broaden interpretation of culturally and linguistically diverse learning behaviors	2.250	3	
<b>Practice Area 2LP: Learning Partnerships</b>	<b>2.365</b>	<b>2.67</b>	<b>0.283</b>
Reimagine the student and teacher relationship as a partnership	2.500	3	
Balance giving students both care and push	2.563	3	
Help students cultivate a positive mindset and sense of self-efficacy	2.688	3	
Support each student take greater ownership of learning	2.375	3	
Give students language to talk about their learning moves	1.938	2	
Take responsibility to reduce social-emotional stress from stereotype threat	2.125	2	
<b>Practice Area 3IP: Information Processing</b>	<b>2.208</b>	<b>2.33</b>	<b>0.300</b>
Provide appropriate challenge to stimulate brain growth/intellective capacity	2.313	3	
Help students process new content using methods from oral traditions	1.750	2	
Connect new content to culturally relevant examples and metaphors	2.125	2	
Provide students authentic opportunities to process content	2.375	2	
Teach students cognitive routines using the brain's natural learning systems	2.063	2	
Use formative assessments and feedback to increase intellective capacity	2.625	3	
<b>Practice Area 4CE: Community of Learners / Learning Environment</b>	<b>2.700</b>	<b>3.20</b>	<b>0.2044</b>
Create an environment that is intellectually and socially safe for learning	2.750	3	
Make space for student voice and agency	2.625	3	
Build classroom culture and learning around communal talk and task structures	2.438	3	
Use classroom rituals and routines to support a culture of learning	2.688	3	
Use restorative justice principles to manage conflicts/redirect negative behavior	3.000	4	
<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>2.339</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0.315</b>

Adapted from Hammond (2015) Ready for Rigor Framework

APPENDIX E  
INTERVIEW CODES, DESCRIPTIONS, AND RESPONSE RATES

<b>Descriptor, Strength Areas</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>RfR</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
Responsive relationship – authentic connection between educator and student	RR	LP	16	10.19
Moral leadership imperative – leaders are committed to prioritizing CRP	MLI	AW	8	5.10
Connected school community – students feel safe and connected to each other	CSC	CL	6	3.82
Connect student life to learning – intentional connection to student experience	CLL	IP	6	3.82
Build parent relationships – intentional work to build home/school connection	BPR	LP	5	3.18
Ongoing curriculum adjustment – continuous updating of learning tasks	OCA	CL	5	3.18
Authentic opportunities to connect – provide multiple ways to process content	AOC	IP	3	1.91
Broad cultural representation – authentic and accessible in school setting	BCR	IP	2	1.27
Exposure experiences – purposeful extracurricular CRP opportunities	EE	IP	2	1.27
Preparation for diverse communities – Ready students for working with others	PDC	AW	2	1.27
Provide appropriate academic rigor – Challenging work, grade level + learning	AAR	IP	2	1.27
Joy in the classroom – Having a sense of joy aligned with learning engagement	JOY	CL	2	1.27
Visible in school – Students see physical representations of culture in school	VS	CL	1	0.64
Core teacher leadership – Established, visible core of teacher leaders for CRP	CTL	CL	1	0.64

<b>Descriptor, Growth Areas</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>RfR</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
Personal awareness of bias – vulnerability to examine personal sources of bias	PAB	AW	13	8.28
Center student identity – keeping identity at forefront of learning relationship	CSI	AW	10	6.37
Loss of student voice and agency – students voice fear of lack of acceptance	SVA	CL	9	5.73
No investment or support – educator unwilling to support/implement CRP	NI	CL	8	5.10
Valued in voice, not action – educator voices support but does not enact it	VVA	AW	6	3.82
Surface understanding of CRP – Limited understanding; shallow representation	SU	AW	6	3.82
Aligned school experience – students articulate personal connection to tasks	ASE	IP	6	3.82
Embedded in strategic plan – authentic inclusion across improvement plan	ESP	CL	5	3.18
Safe climate focus – active, student-focused climate and culture plan	SCF	CL	5	3.18
Systems of accountability – clear expectations; plan for reluctant educators	SoA	AW	4	2.55
Common language/shared ideals – deliberate work done to define concepts	CLI	CL	4	2.55
Bias conflation – adults who conflate others' complaints with their own bias	BiC	AW	3	1.91
Leaders promote flexibility – giving teacher agency to question biased systems	LPF	IP	3	1.91

<b>Descriptor, Growth Areas</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>RfR</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
Student engagement, low – students actively complain about task relevance	NSE	CL	2	1.27
Curriculum-influenced constraints – purchased curriculum as CRP barrier	CIC	IP	2	1.27
Parent/guardian distance/disconnect – No feeling of connection to school	PGD	CL	2	1.27
Funding commitment – public commitment by district administration to CRP	FUN	CL	2	1.27
Localize learning norms/beliefs – Regular practice of adjusting to local norms	LOC	CL	2	1.27
Parent/guardian resistance – active parent resistance to anti-racist/LBGQT+	PGR	IP	1	0.64
Avoiding equity detours – planning accelerates actions rather than delay them	AED	LP	1	0.64
Imbalance in representation – overrepresentation of stereotypes/single story	IMB	AW	1	0.64
Collective v. individual – valuing collective progress over individual gains	COL	AW	1	0.64

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## VITA

Dr. Jerry B. Michel graduated from Loyola University Chicago in 2023 with a Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction. He has been an educator for over twenty-five years, serving as an elementary school principal, middle school principal, academic instructional coach, fifth grade teacher, and special education paraprofessional. He has Bachelor of Arts in English from Western Carolina University (1986), a Master of Arts in Elementary Education from the University of South Florida (1993), and a Certificate of Advanced Studies in Administration and Supervision from National Louis University (2006). In 2012, he was the co-author of *Can You Hear Me Now? Applying Brain Research and Technology to Engage Today's Students*. His most recent conference presentation was entitled "Sustaining Culturally Responsive K-8 Leadership" at the Courageous Conversations About Race National Summit in Washington, D.C in October of 2022 and "The Data Will Be Visualized: How Data Interrogation Energizes Relationships, Outcomes, and School Improvement" at the Illinois Reading Council's annual conference in Springfield, Illinois in March of 2023.

Dr. Michel remains committed to developing equitable school improvement planning that disrupts systemic racism and unaddressed bias. His work continues to support school leaders in their efforts to become culturally sustaining school leaders. He is also the Region 3 Director for Operation BBQ Relief, a disaster relief organization, where he unites his passion for service with social justice by helping build awareness and application of culturally responsive practices in the non-profit disaster relief field.

## DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

The Dissertation submitted by Jerry B. Michel has been read and approved by the following committee:

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