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# "It's a Part of Who We Are" New Jersey Superintendents' Understandings of and Approaches to Culturally Responsive District-Level Leadership

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# “It's A Part Of Who We Are”
# New Jersey Superintendents’ Understandings Of and Approaches To Culturally Responsive District-Level Leadership

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# APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

**Danielle F. Mastrogiovanni** has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the **Ed.D.** during this **Spring** Semester.

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The mentor and any other committee members who wish to review revisions will sign and date this document only when revisions have been completed. Please return this form to the Office of Graduate Studies, where it will be placed in the candidate's file and submit a copy with your final dissertation.

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**Lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu.**

**Dedication**

*To my three suns; Gianni, Rio & Luca.*

*You are my "why."*

*May my perseverance prove that you too can do anything you put your mind to.*

*To my mama, the original "culturally responsive teacher"*

*and strongest person I know.*

*I credit all that I have learned to you.*

*I hope that my accomplishments serve as a testament to your own.*

*And to the loving memory of my brother, Marco.*

*Everything I do, I do for you too.*

*We are now Dr. Mastrogiovanni, times two.*

*I love you all, forever.*

## Abstract

A narrative study was used to examine the perspectives and experiences of Superintendents working towards educational justice by addressing the inequities found in schools. Data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews representing a diverse participant pool of 23 superintendents and assistant superintendents who were currently employed in public school districts throughout the state of New Jersey. Using a primarily deductive coding scheme, the data was analyzed around the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership.

Many participants described having impactful experiences as children that subsequently influenced their initial decision to become educators, as well as their leadership practices. Although the depth of their knowledge about culturally responsive practices varied, the approaches they described taking reflected a deeper understanding of culturally responsive leadership. The participants overwhelmingly agreed that the professional leadership standard for equity and cultural responsiveness was foundational to their work and what should be required of all superintendents, however their opinions in terms of its feasibility varied.

Their responses illustrate the need for leaders to receive adequate resources, training, and support to effectively implement complex standards such as this one. Consequently, it is imperative that culturally responsive practices are taught consistently across all state-approved teacher and leadership preparation programs. This study adds to literature on culturally responsive leadership by specifically considering the experiences, knowledge and approaches of superintendents working towards educational justice at district-level.

*Keywords:* Culturally responsive leadership, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching, educational justice, equity

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# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Though schools have been credited as being a "great equalizer" in America, our nation's education system has yet to achieve this goal (Welner and Carter, 2013). Rather than working to ensure that access to an equitable education was afforded to all people, policies such as the Act Passed by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina in 1830 deemed it illegal to teach those who had been enslaved to read or write. While education may have been an equalizer for some, withholding it from others became a means of control and oppression. This was not only true in the South. Schools in the "free" North also suffered under intentionally uneven school funding structures that worked to elevate the rich and oppress the poor (Singleton, 2015). Thus, many of the inequalities still found in our schools today are a direct result of policies and practices such as these, rendering our nation's schools as institutions that systemically and systematically keep people both separate and unequal.

Educated in "factory-model schools" that taught nothing more than "rudimentary skills" (Singleton, 2015, p.7), children of color and those living in economically oppressed communities have historically not had to access to the "stimulating curriculum, personalized attention, high-quality teaching, and a wealth of intellectual resources" that is typically found in schools serving their white and more affluent peers (Darling-Hammond, as cited by Singleton, 2015, p.173). This inequity has continued through to today. Termed "inequity by design," these intentional and longstanding disparities have resulted in what Zaretta Hammond (2018) called an "intellectual apartheid." Decades of federal education reforms, including *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*, have proposed solutions; yet none have proven to be effective at achieving educational equity (Advancement Project, 2010). Thus, the gap in access and opportunity for students of color remains reflective of our nation's longstanding history of segregation (Beachum, 2011).

This inequitable access to quality schools is correlated with higher rates of failure, lower rates of graduation, and disproportionate rates of incarceration, resulting in the perpetuation of a cycle of intergenerational poverty that is increasingly more difficult to reverse (Welner and Carter, 2013).

Though there has been constant conversation around how to go about "closing the achievement gap," many school leaders have chosen to ignore the historical factors that have impacted common practices in education (Khalifa & Briscoe, 2015). This is in part due to the fact that even the most well-intentioned school leaders do not feel that they are adequately prepared to address these root causes and lead this work in their schools (Maloney & Garver, 2020). In response, scholars and practitioners developed culturally responsive practices to help educators tackle this problem. However, due to a lack of understanding of what these practices truly are (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and/or a lack of cohesion between teachers and school leaders, they can be very difficult to implement with fidelity (Young, 2010). Culturally Responsive Leadership emerged as a pathway for administrators who were looking for ways to support teachers with these practices. Primarily theoretical and based on building level leadership, many educational leaders wishing to be more culturally responsive often feel that they are trying to do this work systematically without concrete examples of how to move from theory to practice (Garver & Maloney, 2019).

Likewise, culturally responsive schools can only be sustained within school systems that are designed to support them. Superintendents, whose responsibilities were once seen as primarily managerial, are now being looked at as district visionaries, often having to work as the liaisons between the current trends in education, what is written into policy, and how this is demonstrated in practice (Khalifa, 20018). In the State of New Jersey, the Professional Standards for School Leaders specifically states that equity and cultural responsiveness is an integral part of

every school administrator's work. Specifically Leadership Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness states that school leaders must "confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status" (NPBEA, 2015). Despite this statewide call to action, there is very little information provided to school leaders around how to go about implementing these practices in schools, let alone at the district level.

Although some school leaders may believe in or theoretically understand the tenets of Culturally Responsive Leadership, it can be extremely difficult for some to move these practices from theory to action. Due to the external demands of their job, district-level leaders are often forced to base their decision-making on more easily measured factors, such as standardized test scores, which may stand in direct conflict to this theoretical framework. Therefore, superintendents are oftentimes faced with choosing between meeting the external demands of their job and doing what they believe to be best for their students. This conflict may result in their choosing to implement surface level solutions which do very little to address and mitigate the deeper, underlying issues which are at the root of educational injustice (Khalifa and Briscoe, 2015).

**Problem Statement**

To address issues of educational injustice, school leaders in the State of New Jersey are being held to the Professional Standard for Educational Leaders which demand Equity and Cultural Responsiveness. This standard explicitly states that "effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being." Superintendents occupy a precarious position; often

torn between doing what they believe is best for students and the external demands that influence their jobs. Tasked with the responsibility of trying to make sense of this conflict, even the most equity-driven district-level leaders may find themselves unable to employ the culturally responsive leadership practices needed to interrupt the oppressive practices found in schools.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives and lived experiences of superintendents who are working towards educational justice by addressing the inequities found in schools. The goal of this study is to gain insight into the lived experiences that have influenced their leadership practices, to explore what these superintendents know and believe about culturally responsive leadership and to examine their understandings of and approaches to the Leadership Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness. The existing body of culturally responsive research has primarily focused on building-level leadership. This inquiry adds to the literature on culturally responsive leadership at the district level in order to provide insight on how these factors work together to inform their practice. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What personal, educational, and professional experiences influence the leadership practices of superintendents in the State of New Jersey who are working towards educational justice?
2. What do these superintendents know and believe about Culturally Responsive Practices?
3. How do these superintendents describe their understandings of and approaches to the NJ leadership standard related to equity and cultural responsiveness?

## Significance of the Study

As the longstanding fight for educational equity continues, extensive work around Culturally Responsive Pedagogy has offered classroom-based solutions for educators looking to change the trajectory for students who have been, and continue to be, marginalized and oppressed in school. Though there has been research that has studied Culturally Responsive Leadership, it has mostly focused on implementation at the building level. With limited research focused on implementation at the district level, those working to lead school districts towards equity may struggle to do so. This study endeavored to understand how one's personal, educational and professional experiences influence their leadership practice. It also explored the culturally responsive practices of district-level leaders and analyzed the impact of Leadership Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness with the goal of helping to make equity-focused, culturally responsive leadership a more commonly understood and widespread practice.

## Design

This qualitative study was conducted to directly gather information through a series of first-hand accounts of 23 superintendents who were currently working towards educational justice. By exploring the thoughts and experiences of these superintendents through their own words and stories, I gained an in-depth understanding of the ways that they understand culturally responsive practices and use them to address issues of inequity. I interviewed a diverse range of subjects representing public school districts across the state with varied demographics, to gather information about this topic in as many different contexts as possible. Subjects were recruited via email based on collegial recommendations, professional affiliations, and/or prior participation in educational conferences to ensure that they were already engaging in equity-focused work at the district level.

## Data

Due to social distancing requirements at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I collected data remotely via a series of virtual video interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed via Zoom and then transcribed again using Rev to ensure accuracy. After completing the interviews, I coded the data using a deductive and inductive coding system. My initial coding system was developed based on the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership. As the interviews progressed, I added additional codes to mark themes as they were revealed. I then analyzed and sorted the coded data into thematic spreadsheets that I created based on the research questions.

## Organization of the Study

Chapter I presents an introduction to the topic as well as an overview of pertinent background information relevant to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Leadership. It also introduces the problem statement and further explains the purpose, motivation and significance of this study. After introducing the research questions used to frame the study, it provides an overview of the methodology that was used to collect and analyze the data. Chapter II presents a review of the literature related to the role of the superintendent and explores this role in connection to the state and national leadership standards focused on educational equity and cultural responsiveness. Additionally, it reviews both Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Leadership, with a specific focus on the importance of critical consciousness and self-reflection as they are both included as part of the theoretical framework and the process that was used during the interview protocol. Because these practices are informed by one's knowledge and experiences, this literature review familiarizes the reader with Sensemaking Theory, which sits in direct connection with self-reflective practices. This

framework will be used by the researcher to ascertain how the participants in this study "make sense" of the culturally responsive practices of district-level leaders. It concludes with a summary of the findings and gaps found in the existing body of research which helps to illustrate the rationale for this study. Chapter III outlines the methodology that was used, including the sampling and the selection process of the participants, interview protocol, coding scheme, and methods used to ensure validity. Chapter IV provides a report and analysis of the findings and highlights themes related to culturally responsive district-level leadership. Chapter V discusses the findings, as well as their implications for practice and suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter explores the role that superintendents play as leaders of school districts. It reviews the Standards for School Leaders in the State of New Jersey, as well as the AASA's (The School Superintendents Association) Code of Ethics, which demand that superintendents in the State of New Jersey use their positions to advance educational equity and employ culturally responsive practices and considers the influence that they might have on district-level leaders. Additionally, this chapter defines the tenets of both culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership to establish a shared theoretical understanding of these theoretical frameworks and the ways in which they might inform the participants' leadership practices. Specifically, this chapter explores the concepts of critical consciousness and critical self-reflection, both which are reflective practices that sit at the foundation of culturally responsive education.

Lastly, this chapter makes connections between the reflective practices which sit at the foundation of culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership with the process of sensemaking. For this particular study, consideration of the indicators of sensemaking, such as identity and formative experiences, help us to better understand the influence that they may have had on the participants' understandings of and approaches to culturally responsive leadership. This chapter concludes with an analysis of the gaps found within the existing body of research which provide a valid rationale for this study.

### The Role of the Superintendent

Superintendents wear many proverbial hats. They are responsible for ensuring that every aspect of the district, from organization to instruction, is aligned to ensure achievement for all students (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2006). Though typically seen as a manager, as of late there has been a shift in the roles and responsibilities of Superintendents

that has changed this perspective. Now viewed as the school districts' visionaries, superintendents are often called to use their varied roles to transform school districts. In this sense, the role of the Superintendent is analogous to that of an orchestra conductor; responsible for ensuring a harmonious cohesion between all aspects of the district; curriculum, instruction, finance, personnel, policy, while considering a multitude of reform mandates as well as the needs of their stakeholders (AASA, 2007; Domenech, 2009, as cited by ECRA GROUP, 2010; Khalifa, 20018).

Clearly, balancing these interconnected responsibilities all at once is no easy task, particularly because district-level decisions impact the entire school *system.* However, when superintendents are able to create a cohesive system, they can achieve what Michael Fullan (2014) termed *systemness.* Because school districts are organizations that "include a bewildering array of people, departments, technologies and goals" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 30) without a sense of *systemness*, leaders with even the best intentions may be ineffective in their attempts to make systematic and sustainable change across the district (Fullan, 2014; Bolman & Deal, 1997). No one person can do this alone, therefore district-level leadership is no longer seen as a top-down authoritarian process. Rather, this alignment requires superintendents to work collectively alongside all their stakeholders. As evidenced in the research around district-level leadership, the most effective superintendents share their power by working side by side with their families, community and school board (AASA, 2009; Phillips & Phillips, 2007).

Despite the need for district-level leaders to balance the demands of multiple constituents, accountability measures for district-level leaders are by no means holistic. Success, which has typically been measured by student proficiency on standardized achievement tests and subsequently used to evaluate the effectiveness of superintendents, can sit in direct conflict with

this research. For district-level leaders who focus their work on less measurable outcomes, such as creating inclusive spaces, increasing community engagement or developing a shared vision, data that simply focuses on test scores blatantly ignores the many other factors that contribute to the overall "success" of a school district.

Furthermore, because their position is dependent on their ability to increase student achievement, superintendents may feel pressured to prioritize initiatives geared towards increasing test scores which may come at the expense of other initiatives that they believe to be best for their students. By reinforcing "technical–rational bureaucratic thinking," superintendents are often forced to focus on practices that are more easily visible on the surface while ignoring the more pressing and systemic issues that are at the root of all educational inequities (Khalifa and Briscoe, 2015). This conflict between these external and internal influences, coupled with the use of narrow accountability measures, tends to inhibit leaders who are looking to radically transform school districts.

**Leadership Standards for Educational Equity**

Leadership standards are used to set clear expectations, support institutions, inform policy, assist with establishing licensure requirements and make the public aware of the qualities of effective educational leaders (NBPEA, 2015). The School Superintendents Association released a Statement of Ethics for Education Leaders which asserts that the primary role of the superintendent is to serve "the schools and community by providing equal educational opportunities to each and every child" and to subsequently protect "the human and civil rights of all individuals (AASA, n.d.). Additionally, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders which were developed by The National Policy Board for Educational Administration and are

used statewide in New Jersey, include a specific standard for Equity and Cultural Responsiveness (NPBEA, 2015).

This standard explicitly states that it is the responsibility of school leaders to "confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status" and asserts that this is the type of leadership that "our schools need and our students deserve" (NPBEA, 2015). Furthermore, this standard suggests that educational equity can only be achieved by school leaders who possess a commitment to continuous self-improvement, knowledge needed to develop culturally competent teachers, and the ability to create positive and inclusive school experiences for *all* students (NPBEA, 2015).

Yet, despite being charged with this daunting task, the state offers very limited resources to support leaders in their attempts to meet this standard. This calls into question the feasibility of a standard that is only addressed theoretically without any clear guidance of what it would look like in practice. Thus, superintendents who are focused on achieving educational justice are forced to consider the "overlapping social contexts inside and outside of the school" while attempting to organize equitable school systems that both meet the needs of their students and satisfy the demands of external mandates and initiatives (Ganon-Shilon, S., & Schechter, C. 2016, p. 2).

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Around the world, educators struggle to reverse the systemic inequities found in their schools, yet many have missed the mark when it comes to addressing the root cause of this phenomenon (McInerney, 2009). Often misunderstood, culturally responsive pedagogy is not simply defined by the demonstrative cultural celebrations or inclusion of a few diverse texts

(Ladson-Billings, 2014). While both have their place in culturally responsive schools, culturally responsive practitioners understand that these things are just a part of what students need to be successful. Grounded in the understanding that our schools are a byproduct of our nation's history of systemic oppression, culturally responsive educators use methodologies that can work to reverse the reproduction of these oppressive practices that continue to manifest in them. Whereas students of color suffer under oppression under such norms, culturally responsive pedagogy offers educators a different approach that views education as a path to liberation (Love, 2020).

Paolo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, suggests that one's success cannot be achieved by academic proficiency alone. Rather, Freire believed that the true goal of education was to engage students in a practice of critical thinking, self-reflection, and action that would enable them to question the injustices in our society and ultimately become the driving force of their own liberation (Giroux, 2010). Asserting that the oppressed must "intervene critically in the situation which surrounds them and by whose mark they bear," Freire believed that this would only be possible through a practice of *reflective participation*, which works to raise the *conscientizacao* (awareness) of the student and subsequently propel them to fight for their freedom (Freire, 1968/2018, p.65).

Though Freire's work was initially written in regards to his homeland of Brazil, it has since influenced educators around the world. In the early 1990s, American educators such as Gloria Ladson-Billings began using the term *culturally relevant* to describe "pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17). Building on Freire's work, an important component of Ladson-Billings' work centers the idea of *critical*

*consciousness,* which suggests that a student can never really be successful unless they are guided to "develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.4). This affirms that the true purpose of schooling is to prepare students to be active citizens and that it is the responsibility of educators to create opportunities for them to think critically about themselves and the society that they are living in.

Emerging from her research around the practices of successful teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings (1994, 2014) defined culturally relevant pedagogy for teachers by the following three components: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Like Freire, educators who are proponents of this theory believe that it is their responsibility to not only challenge students academically within the classroom, but also to provide them with opportunities to "take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze and solve real-world problems (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p.75). In doing so, teachers work to ensure that their students become critical thinkers who are prepared to "challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 469) and advocate for a world that is free from oppression (Giroux, 2010).

Terms like "academic success" and "high expectations" have taken on many iterations. As defined by Ladson-Billings (2014), academic success refers to the "intellectual growth that students experience as a result of classroom instruction and learning experiences." This begins with a belief that *all* students are capable of engaging in rigorous instruction and results in classrooms that focus on "student learning and academic achievement" as opposed to "classroom and behavior management" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p.76). However, while it is true that students

need to be challenged intellectually to promote brain development, it has been proven that academically rigorous instruction that is not culturally responsive can further marginalize students and actually increase the levels of disparities that exist between students of color and their white peers (Hammond, 2015). Alternately, culturally responsive educators who see their students as "sources and resources of knowledge and skills" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p.79) create environments that are conducive to learning by leveraging the experiences, knowledge and skills of their students by connecting what students already know to what they are learning in school (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Delpit, 2014). Students who are given opportunities to use their knowledge are better prepared to tackle cognitively demanding tasks that require "complex thinking" and are prepared to make the shift from being dependent to independent learners (Hammond, 2015, p.13).

This requires educators to know who their students are. While there is an existing body of research that "shows that an education workforce that reflects the demographics of the students they teach leads to improved student outcomes, especially for populations of students at-risk," (Goldhaber et al., 2015), with a teaching force that is primarily white and female, this is nearly impossible to attain for students of color. Therefore, it is necessary for all teachers to be culturally competent, which is defined by Ladson-Billings (2014) as "the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture" and by Van Roekel (2008) as "the ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than our own." Culturally competent teachers possess "interpersonal awareness, cultural knowledge, and a skill set that together promotes impactful cross-cultural teaching" (Taylor et al., 2017) which leads to the creation of educational spaces that affirm students' identities, as opposed to those that see success as assimilation. As stated by

Ladson-Billings (2014, p.77), "the ability to link principles of learning with deep understanding of (and appreciation for) culture… is the secret behind culturally relevant pedagogy."

Although Ladson-Billings (1994) work was originally focused on classroom instruction, it has since been applied to other educational spaces. Many educators have acknowledged the need for culturally responsive pedagogy, yet misconceptions around what it is and how to move from theory to practice have continued to impede implementation. Studies have shown that even the most knowledgeable educators often struggle to implement these practices, primarily because they are often not aligned with the demands of their districts or the understandings of their administrators (Young, 2010). Furthermore, as found by Ladson-Billings (2014, p.77), "even when people have demonstrated a more expansive knowledge of culture, few have taken up the sociopolitical dimensions of this work."

Despite being aligned theoretically, many teachers remain focused on building relationships and fall short in their ability to facilitate instructional opportunities that would allow for students to engage in the practice of critical consciousness in their classrooms (Freidus, 2020). Whereas, research has found that when students are engaged in quality school experiences that are relevant to their lives and make them feel valued, they are more likely to become active participants in their learning and agents of their own liberation (McInerney, 2009) those that do not "address the complexities of social inequalities" are more likely to result in disengagement, dropout and failure (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

More recently, anti-racist education scholars such as Bettina Love have added to the research around culturally responsive pedagogy by recognizing that education can either be used as a means of oppression or a path to liberation. In Love's 2019 book, *We Want To Do More Than Survive*, she equates the work of educators to that of the abolitionists. She criticizes

programs that have recently emerged under the guise of social-emotional learning that focus on character education. In such cases, Love states that programs that replace critical thinking with the teaching of behavioral compliance further oppress students.

Though many schools claim to be increasing student achievement by "fortifying their grittiness, modifying their mindsets, and adjusting their emotions," they have shown little to no improved academic outcomes for students of color. Furthermore, these methods have disproportionately subjected Black and brown students to punitive and humiliating behavior modification tactics (Gorski, 2019). Love (2019) asserts that programs such as these teach students of color that good character and citizenship are equated to how well they obey, a concept that stands in direct theoretical opposition to culturally responsive pedagogy that focuses on developing students' sociopolitical consciousness.

**Culturally Responsive Leadership**

The framework for culturally responsive leadership describes practices of educational leaders working to dismantle the oppressive practices of American schooling that have historically worked to marginalize students. The actions of culturally responsive leaders are defined by four tenets; promoting culturally responsive/inclusive school environments, developing culturally responsive teachers, engaging with students, parents and indigenous contexts, and participating in a process of critical self-reflection specific to their leadership behaviors (Khalifa, et al. 2016).

While the literature on educational leadership is laden with calls to engage stakeholders, a culturally responsive leader goes beyond simply including them. Rather, they use their position to reverse deficit mindsets about students and their families and explicitly advocate on their behalf. Culturally responsive leaders account for the "entirety of the children they serve" by

honoring their community, language, culture, behaviors, and knowledge (Khalifa, et al. 2016, p. 1277-78) which has been proven to promote parent and family engagement (Van Roekel, 2008).

This type of engagement, in which leaders "develop meaningful and positive relationships with the community" works in conjunction with the creation of inclusive school environments that "acknowledge, value, and use" the identities of their students to "affirm and protect" them (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1282). This is particularly important when considering the ways in which minoritized populations, such as "Black, Indigenous, Latinx, low-income, LGBTQ, refugee, ELL, and Muslim" have been historically "shamed, decentered, physically removed, and asked to acquiesce to spaces that have not honored them or their cultures (Khalifa, 2018, p. 19-20). As defined by the framework for culturally responsive leadership, this educational oppression can be reversed by "finding culturally responsive ways to connect with the communities they serve" and creating inclusive spaces for students and families in their schools. (Khalifa, 2018, p.21). This can be done by leaders who develop positive relationships, promote inclusive instructional practices, challenge exclusionary discipline policies and hold the voices of their students at the center of their work (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Though many school leaders are driven to improve school experiences for their students, intentions alone do not define a culturally responsive leader. Grounded in a continuous practice of critical self-reflection, culturally responsive leaders think about "how they are positioned within organizations that have marginalized students" and how they can use this position "to personally and organizationally resist this oppression (Khalifa, 2018, p.59). To do this, culturally responsive leaders must be able to "identify and understand" the oppression that their students and their families face and be humble enough to "identify and vocalize one's own background and privilege" (Khalifa, 2018, p.61). Being able to think critically about who they are and how

their identities may influence their decisions assists leaders in ensuring that oppressive practices are not inadvertently reproduced under their supervision (Garver & Maloney, 2019).

While a practice of ongoing reflection is needed for all leaders, "systemic and institutionalized," *critical* self-reflection is necessary for leaders to create and sustain culturally responsive schools (Khalifa, 2018, p.72). As found in previous studies, much of this work has been individualized and focused on identity and positionality. "Courageous conversations" about race, reflecting on the personal roles that educators have had in oppressive schooling, and racial identity work are some of the most common ways that educators have approached this tenet.

However, as argued by Khalifa, this practice must be broadened so that it is "embedded into the horizontal … and vertical structures of schooling." This means it cannot simply happen once a year in response to the release of a district's equity data. Rather, he suggests that a practice of critical self-reflection must run through all facets of leadership: observations, agendas, and "referrals of *any* kind, budgets, hiring protocols, and policies. These structures are what "will either support or challenge oppressive structures that are already in schools" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 72-74).

This work does not rest on superintendents' shoulders alone. While this begins as an interpersonal practice, for this practice to truly be critically self-reflective, they must work collectively with all stakeholders and consider data that can help them to identify inequities in their policies and practices (Khalifa, et, al., 2016, 2018). Much like Ladson-Billings (1994) who calls teachers to engage *with* students in the practice of critical consciousness, and Freire who insists that the true liberatory work between teachers and students is "*co-intentional*" (Freire, 1970, p. 69), Khalifa suggests that critical self-reflection should be a collaborative process.

Through the engagement of all stakeholders, including the students, culturally responsive school leaders use critical self-reflection as a means of establishing trust and a collaborative culture of inquiry that invites the transparent dialogue needed to effectively challenge the status quo. Therefore, as district-level leaders they must have the courage to model this process themselves as a means of allowing other leaders "to see how they are directly involved or complicit in oppressive contexts" and push their colleagues to also "critically self-reflect upon their personal and professional role in oppression and anti-oppressive works" so that collectively they can develop culturally responsive school structures (Khalifa, 2018, p.61,75).

Research has shown that though many district-level administrators express a desire to "eliminate racist trends," overall they have not been successful at doing so (Khalifa & Briscoe, 2015). Some attribute this to differences in educational leadership preparation programs which oftentimes leave participants with a limited understanding of the responsibilities of administrators. Typically, these programs focus on managerial skills, as opposed to providing aspiring leaders with the training needed to identify and respond to the inequitable practices found in schools (Garver & Maloney, 2019). Because many school leaders lack the skills that are needed to combat the oppressive practices and structures found in their schools, they may subsequently end up reproducing them (Khalifa, 2018). Though the conversations themselves are critical, school leaders must ensure that when the inequities surface, they are prepared to address them via their resource allocation, hiring protocols, and policies (Khalifa, 2018).

In Khalifa and Briscoe's (2015) study of district-level leaders, it was determined that they do not typically engage in this work unless they are *forced* by an outside agency, legal action, or mandate requiring them to do so. Additionally, it was found that when district leaders did engage, they tended to be either defensive about the findings, ambiguous in their understandings,

or inadvertently negligent. For example, during this study, racial disparities were unveiled in their discipline data. However, when approached about the findings, their responses tended to protect themselves or their organizations. Consequently, scholars argue that culturally responsive leaders must be able to look to alternate methods so that they can address these issues and stop the reproduction of practices that oppress students and their families (Khalifa, 2018; Garver & Maloney, 2019).

Some aspects of culturally responsive leadership align with New Jersey Educational Leadership Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness. They both task leaders with creating inclusive school spaces that are free of oppression, demand that leaders possess knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy and recognize the need for school leaders to engage with the community (NPBEA, 2015). Alternatively, critical self-reflection, which is a primary component of culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa, 2018) is not evident at all in the leadership standard. Leadership initiatives focused on equity may have begun to reflect some of the components of culturally responsive leadership, but without this element they have been deemed "not good enough" to enact authentic and sustainable change (Santamaria, 2016).

**Sensemaking Theory**

Sensemaking is used by researchers to explore how people "make sense" of complex situations, both consciously and subconsciously. Through their questioning, participants are asked to "interpret and reinterpret events which take place, and put them in a context to make sense of what is happening" (Paull & Sitlington, 2013). Researchers use this theoretical framework to investigate the ways people "come to understand a situation" and the ways in which this process informs how they approach it (Meyer & Rowan, 2006 as cited by Maloney & Garver, 2020, p.84). Much like the process of critical self-reflection, sensemaking is a process by

which people explore who they understand themselves to be and the experiences that they have had in order to help the researcher to better understand "how [individuals] construct what they construct, why, and with what effects" (Weick, 1995, p.4).

In a study of pre-service school leaders enrolled in a leadership prep program, Maloney and Garver (2020) used sensemaking theory to explore how the participants made sense of "school-based equity issues" and grappled "with their role in addressing school-based inequities" by considering the ways in which their personal, educational, and professional experiences influenced their understanding. (Maloney & Garver, 2020, p. 84). The research was focused around the ways that future school leaders "negotiated their experiences," in conjunction with both course-required and self-selected resources, in order to "make sense of equity-oriented leadership" (Maloney & Garver, 2020, p. 84). They found that equity-oriented leaders are "influenced by their content knowledge, professional preparation and experiences, identity and personal experiences, district and school context, and policy mandates" (Maloney & Garver, 2020, p. 85). This study will examine how these factors influence the sensemaking of equity-oriented superintendents.

**Gap in the Literature**

While there is extensive research around culturally responsive pedagogy, studies conducted on culturally responsive leadership have primarily focused on building-level leaders. Though there is research that supports the theory that culturally responsive practices positively impact schools, there is little research that explores culturally responsive district-level leadership and the influence that equity-centered leadership standards may have on culturally responsive leadership.

# CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

While the existing body of research has primarily focused on culturally responsive practices being implemented in the classroom and those of leaders at the building-level, this study adds to the literature on Culturally Responsive Leadership at the district level and provides insight about how these factors work together to inform their practice. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What personal, educational, and professional experiences influence the leadership practices of superintendents in the State of New Jersey who are working towards educational justice?
2. What do these superintendents know and believe about Culturally Responsive Practices?
3. How do these superintendents describe their understandings of and approaches to the NJ leadership standard related to equity and cultural responsiveness?

This chapter begins with a description of the research design, methods, and theoretical frameworks that were used to drive this study. Then, I describe the context for the research and the sampling process that I used to identify participants. Next, I provide an overview of my data collection process and protocols that I used to analyze the data. Last, I discuss the trustworthiness of the study and my role as a researcher. I conclude with the limitations of the study.

## Methodological Approach and Research Design

I chose to conduct an interview study which allowed me to explore the thoughts and experiences of 23 superintendents who were working towards educational equity. The interview protocol (Appendix B) was structured in a way that allowed me to guide the participants through

a process of critical self-reflection in which they recounted their personal experiences and explored their understandings and describe their leadership practices.

I used a primarily deductive coding scheme (Appendix C) based on the theoretical frameworks of culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership to analyze the data. Deductive codes were created to mark the components of each framework. As unanticipated themes and subtopics related to each component of the framework emerged after reading the interview transcripts collectively, I added additional inductive codes as needed (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

This research design was appropriate for this study because it allowed the participants to describe their experiences, as well as what they know and believe, so that I could better understand what has influenced their understandings of and approaches to culturally responsive district-level leadership.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical frameworks of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa, 2018) were used throughout this study. Through a process of guided critical self-reflection, the participants were asked to consider the ways that their experiences have influenced their work as equity-focused district-level leaders. They were also asked to consider the ways that they have used their positions as equity-driven leaders to "personally and organizationally resist this oppression" by describing the actions that they have taken while in their roles as superintendents (Khalifa, 2018, p.59).

As when Khalifa (2018) asserted that critical self-reflection is most powerful when done collaboratively, sensemaking is also a collaborative, retrospective process. When sensemaking is

used, both the participants and the researcher have an opportunity to "make sense" of their thoughts and actions together (Dunford & Jones 2000).

**Context for the Study**

This study took place at the height of 2020, when both the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement pushed many school leaders to address the school-based inequities that were both exacerbated and brought to light by these events. With no state mandates on school openings, superintendents were left to decide what to do about remote instruction, the health concerns posed by in-person learning, and how they could address the heightened academic, social and emotional needs of their students. On top of all that, they had to consider how to respond to the collective movement the was growing in support of Black lives.

A year later, preliminary research has come out that has illustrated some of the more immediate impacts of both events on education. A report released by The Office of Civil Rights in June 2021 found that the COVID-19 pandemic was "deepening divides in educational opportunity across our nation's classrooms and campuses… falling disproportionately on students who went into the pandemic with the greatest educational needs and fewest opportunities—many of them from historically marginalized and underserved groups" (Office of Civil Rights, 2021). Another study affirmed that COVID-19 and systemic racism had "a disproportionate and traumatic impact on Black students, families, and communities" that most schools were not prepared to address (Horsford et al., 2021).

In response, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP) and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) designated 122 billion federal dollars to support the safe reopening of schools and address the "social, emotional, academic, and mental health needs of students resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic" (Office of Elementary and

Secondary Education, 2021). However, even with these initiatives it would be naive to think that any amount of money could mitigate these findings.

Furthermore, the impact of these events has resulted in what is being called a "mass exodus" of educators on all levels. As of 2020, a report published by the RAND Corporation report found that 1 in 4 teachers were considering leaving the profession, which is considerably more than what had been typical prior to the pandemic. Data collected through a National Association of Secondary School Principals' survey showed that 4 in 10 principals are likely to leave the profession in the next three years due to "low job satisfaction" caused by "COVID and the polarized political climate" (Zalaznick, 2021).

This applies to district-level leaders as well. Superintendents across the nation are also leaving in droves, both voluntarily or otherwise, in response to "the COVID-19 pandemic, critical race theory issues and school systems already strained by growing staffing shortages" (Fung, 2021). As these issues continue to further complicate the job of superintendents, particularly those who have been working to organize their districts around equity-focused initiatives and culturally responsive practices, this study is now more relevant than ever.

**Participant Selection and Recruitment**

Purposeful and snowball sampling was used to select the participants as it was necessary for me to ensure that the participants selected were aligned with the goals of this study (Palinkas, L. A., et al 2013; Merriam, 2009). Because it was my goal to understand what was happening in the current moment, the participants in the study had to meet the following criteria: (a) be currently employed as Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent in the State of New Jersey and (b) be actively involved in district-level equity work. This study took into consideration

Professional Leadership Standards for School Leaders in New Jersey, therefore it was critical that the participants were certificated in this state.

To ensure that there were enough participants that met the above criteria, this study uses an expanded definition of Superintendent to include those serving as both Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents. As part of my outreach protocol, at the conclusion of the interview, each participant was asked to make "community nominations." (Foster, 1991 as cited by Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 147) This allowed them to recommend colleagues who they considered to be actively engaged in this work and who they believed would be able to offer additional insight.

Considering that a great deal of equity work being done by district-level leaders is focused on mitigating systemic issues that disproportionately impact students of color, I was intentional in my decision to have a participant pool that was not predominantly white. Based on information collected by The New Jersey Alliance of Black Superintendents, of the 686 operating districts, the number of African-American superintendents is currently estimated to be about 30, or roughly 4% of the total number of superintendents in New Jersey. To ensure that my participant pool did not replicate this disparity, I intentionally reached out to both African-American and Latinx superintendents through their specific affinity groups and professional organizations. However, my efforts to recruit African-American superintendents was much more successful, with Black superintendents making up 57% of the participants in this study.

I was also committed to including the experiences of female superintendents, as they are also historically underrepresented in district-level leadership positions. As I noticed that the participant pool was becoming predominately male, I specifically began asking for community nominations that were women. I also followed up by sending a second email to some of the female participants that hadn't responded and sent out additional emails to female

superintendents who had been present at an equity-focused leadership conference that I had attended the previous year. In doing so, 35% of the participants in this study were female.

Additionally, the participants selected for this study represent both urban and suburban districts with diverse demographics (See Appendix A). To ensure that this additional layer of diversity amongst the participants was possible, I chose to include both Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents in my definition of district-level leaders. This resulted the participant pool being comprised of 16 superintendents and 7 assistant superintendents. In one instance, I interviewed a superintendent and an assistant superintendent from the same district. This occurred because of the community nomination process, by which the superintendent suggested I also interview his assistant superintendent who he credited for being integral to their work.

A letter of solicitation was initially sent to potential participants via their professional email. Those who expressed interest in participating were asked to complete consent forms which allowed me to then contact them regarding their participation in the study. The interview process was completed within two months.

**Data Collection**

I used a semi-structured interview format focused around a set of guiding questions (see Appendix B). This interview protocol allowed me to collect the data I was looking for through predetermined questions, but also allowed for flexibility in the event that the participant felt that the inclusion of additional information would be helpful for the study. Though I had originally planned to collect demographic data on the participants via a short survey, this was unnecessary as the participants' narratives often explicitly included this information. Most interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes each, with some lasting slightly longer than two hours.

Due to restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted via virtual video calls via Zoom. This method allowed us to both see and hear one another, allowing for the interview to include both the verbal and visual inputs of both the participant and myself, which has been found to be most effective when engaging in this type of research (Krouwel & Greenfield, 2019). Interviews were recorded and transcribed first by Zoom and then again by Rev to ensure accuracy. All participant information was de-identified and kept confidential. I gave each participant a pseudonym and described their school districts in terms of demographic information only.

**Data Analysis**

I wrote reflective memos immediately following each interview. As my thoughts naturally arose throughout the process, I wrote about the things that stood out to me or that I found surprising, the ways in which the responses connected to one another and/or to the leadership framework, as well as things that I questioned or that evoked an emotional response whether it be positive or negative. This allowed me to track the themes and patterns as they emerged as well as to account for my own reactions and feelings. Prior to coding, I listened to the recordings and compared them for accuracy against the transcription. Corrections to the transcripts were made as needed. In two instances, participants were contacted to provide clarity about what was said.

Using a primarily deductive coding scheme (see Appendix C), I analyzed the data using Huberman and Miles' interactive model for data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This process consisted of my rereading and coding of the interview transcripts to identify the components of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and/or Leadership that were discussed, as well as to allow me to make note of, and create additional codes for, any themes or patterns that were emerging

collectively as the series of interviews progressed. After the data had been coded, I reflected upon my findings in order to better summarize, interpret, and sort them by theme. Conclusions were drawn based on the analysis of this data which was used to help me answer the research questions posed by this study.

**Validity**

This study incorporated a variety of protocols to ensure trustworthiness of findings. My interview process included my probing for details as needed, which enabled me to collect "rich data" (Maxwell, 2013). To support this process, every interview was recorded via zoom. The interviews were instantly transcribed and saved with the recordings. While I checked these transcripts for accuracy, I realized that there were many places where the transcripts created by Zoom were inaccurate. Therefore, a second set of transcriptions were made via Rev. Transcripts were reviewed and checked for accuracy against one another, as well as the video, throughout the coding process to ensure accuracy. In the few places where I felt additional clarification was needed, I employed the use of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1995 as cited by Maxwell, 2013, p. 126) to rule out the possibility of my misinterpretation of the data. I kept detailed records to ensure consistency of data analysis methods.

**Positionality Statement**

I approached this topic with the understanding that my own identity and experiences have the potential to influence my analysis of the data, particularly because my own professional trajectory is so closely tied to this study. As a graduate of Naropa University, the only accredited Buddhist college in the United States, my foundation in education was built upon the belief in the basic goodness and a commitment to working towards freedom from suffering for all beings.

My program required us to first look at ourselves and how who we are might impact our teaching practice once we got into the classroom. It also required students to maintain a constant practice of reflection through a variety of contemplative practices, such as meditation, yoga, tai chi or traditional Eastern arts. However, as a veteran public school educator, I am also aware of how difficult it can be to maintain these practices and act on what you believe to be true when confronted by the traditional, and often oppressive practices, that plague the American school system. My own experiences as a teacher, and most recently as a district-level administrator, are what propelled me to think what these practices might look like for superintendents who are working at the top of the district-level to ensure educational justice.

As a White woman working towards racial justice in schools that have always been housed in communities of color, I understand that it is important for me to recognize my own privilege. My ability to do this work is an honor and a responsibility that I do not take lightly. During the course of the interviews, there were multiple times where I felt that I was being included in the conversation as a person of color and other times where I was certain that the participants mistook me for Latina. While I have always felt welcomed as a teacher and resident in communities of color, I was concerned that in this context, this assumption might influence the interview process and that participants may have felt more comfortable sharing aspects of their lives with me because of it. This assumption was only explicitly stated in a handful of interviews, however I made sure that when it did come up, I explicitly corrected it.

I am also the mother of three sons who, until very recently, all went to school in Newark, New Jersey. This is also where I spent the bulk of my time teaching and living over the last two decades. The experience of being both a teacher and mother of Black and Latinx children in Newark has greatly influenced who I am both personally and professionally. In both roles, I have

become an advocate for educational justice, whether it be for my biological children or those in my classroom. In doing so, I have spoken publicly on numerous occasions as an advocate of culturally responsive practices. I recognize that my passion for this work could impact my ability to remain subjective, especially in cases where I may have felt that the participants lacked understanding of this work.

For these reasons, I chose to engage in my own practice of self-reflection that was tracked via reflective memos that I wrote following each interview session. This was done to assist me in identifying places where my own positionality may have posed a conflict and/or to reduce the potential for my own subjectivity to influence my interpretation of the data. In instances where I was concerned that my positionality may have an influence on my role as a researcher, such as when I started wondering if my "mistaken identity" posed an ethical conflict, I engaged in reflective conversations with my mentor. In doing so, I adjusted my practice as needed, for example making the decision to name my ethnicity explicitly during the interviews when it became questionable.

**Limitations**

Due to the strict social-distancing guidelines that were in place at the time of the interviews, information was collected solely via virtual interviews. In a recent study that compared in-person interviews to video calls using Skype, there was evidence to support the conclusion that participants are likely to say more during in-person interviews, although the difference was "marginal" and did not impact the topics that they were willing to discuss (Krouwel & Greenfield, 2019).

Additionally, this study was purposely confined to Superintendents certificated and employed in The State of New Jersey. It is important to acknowledge that each state has their

own educational mandates and upholds their own standards for leadership. New Jersey is a state in which those standards explicitly call for Equity and Cultural Responsiveness. Thus, it is entirely plausible that the results of this study would vary if it were to be replicated in a state without these standards.

Finally, though my own work as a district-level administrator may have afforded me access to superintendents, there was a chance that my own experiences in doing this work could influence participant selection. To account for this, I chose to use "community nominations" (Foster, 1991 as cited by Ladson-Billings, 1994) to ensure that my participant pool extended beyond people that I know either professionally or personally.

# CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter introduces the personal and professional experiences of 23 Superintendents in the State of New Jersey who are actively engaged in working towards educational justice. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What personal, educational, and professional experiences influence the leadership practices of superintendents in the State of New Jersey who are working towards educational justice?
2. What do these superintendents know and believe about Culturally Responsive Practices?
3. How do these superintendents describe their understandings of and approaches to the NJ leadership standard related to equity and cultural responsiveness?

As I describe in detail below, almost all participants identified a significant experience as either children or in their early adulthood that impacted their careers as educators and strengthened their commitment to educational justice. When asked directly about culturally responsive practices, many participants expressed a basic understanding of what they were, with a handful of participants providing responses that were more grounded in the research than the others. Though their responses to those specific questions were often incomplete, when discussing the actions that they have taken as district-level leaders at other times throughout the interviews their responses contained elements of both frameworks which illustrated a deeper understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership. Most participants agreed that Leadership Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness reflects a reasonable expectation of all district-level leaders. However, they shared various opinions in terms of its feasibility and potential use as an accountability measure. Despite differences in race, gender, district

demographics, and leadership approaches, the participants in this study shared a similar commitment to equity focused district-level leadership.

**Exploring Their "Why"**

The participants in this study hailed from a range of locations, including New York City, rural Alabama, and Nigeria. Likewise, their race and socio-economic classes varied as well, with some of the participants being raised in affluent, predominantly white suburbs and others growing up in more diverse urban public housing developments. Their family structures, schooling experiences and career paths also varied tremendously. Despite there being no two stories that were exactly alike, I found multiple common threads between them. Most significantly, almost every participant spoke about extremely impactful experiences, whether personal or professional, that inspired them to become district-level leaders who are committed to educational justice.

While one might naturally assume that future superintendents possess a natural inclination towards education, only 8 of the 23 participants in this study expressed that they knew from an early age that they wanted to be teachers. For example, Madeline, the daughter of an English teacher, knew she "was going to be an English teacher, not just a teacher, but an English teacher… there were no two ways about it; that was what I was going to be because I loved it." Multiple participants such as Albert recounted "playing school" as children. He remembered,

> I'm the oldest of six... we played school and I was the teacher...between my brothers and sisters and the neighborhood's children, I had a class of about 16 kids every summer. My neighbor was a teacher and she would always bring me the old dittos and stuff and I taught class. I gave homework, we had recess… that's what we did all summer.

Though stories such as these were only shared by a third of the participants, it was not surprising that superintendents who are committed to this work described their having a natural inclination towards education.

In contrast, the remaining 15 participants revealed that they had never planned on becoming educators. Many initially went to college for something other than education such as engineering, political science or business. Subsequently, many of these participants worked in what might seem like totally unrelated fields as lawyers, law enforcement officers, military officials, factory workers, equipment operators and even an emcee prior to entering the profession. Most described their coming to be educators almost as a surprise.

For example, Charlotte, who graduated with a degree in business, took a job as a teacher after her friend told her about the alternate route. She said until then she hadn't even considered it, but she needed a job at that time and decided to give it a try. Like Charlotte, many of the participants described having taken non-traditional paths to education, yet they were no less dedicated than the participants who knew that they wanted to be educators from a very early age. As she stated, "you don't have to be the kind of person that says 'All my life, I knew I wanted to be a teacher.' I didn't."

Of those 15 participants, multiple described working in seemingly unrelated professional experiences before becoming teachers. For example, Rashad and Jackson both served in the military. Rashad followed that career with one in law enforcement and Jackson became an attorney before rising through the ranks of education to superintendent, neither having spent the bulk of their profession in the classroom. As Khalil suggested, given the complex position that superintendents play, their varied professional experiences may have been critical to their ability to do this work at the district-level. Superintendents are required to utilize a variety of skills; at

times vacillating between being business managers, politicians, advocates and motivational speakers. Their bringing to the table a variety of necessary skills that had been learned in alternate contexts became an asset to them when they stepped into their current roles as district-level leaders.

Multiple participants claimed that equity work requires a lot of courage. District leaders must be confident when speaking publicly about issues that are bound to cause discomfort. As Kevin explained that as an equity-driven superintendent,

> There are times that you are going against the grain if you believe in what you believe in. You have to be willing to stand up to that force and say 'I want leaders, I want teachers, I want central office leaders, who believe every child in front of them matters.

Khalil shared that he "became an emcee at the bar because I wanted to learn how to speak publicly." Though at that time he had no intentions of becoming a superintendent, now that he is he recognizes that his having done this in the past now helps him to be comfortable speaking publicly in front of the board, at community meetings, or more broadly when advocating for changes in state or federal policy.

Participant responses such as these which suggest that this work requires courage, align directly with Khalifa's (2018) finding that courage was a trait of culturally responsive superintendents who must be willing to publicly challenge exclusionary policies and behaviors, as well as their own positionality and practices.

Multiple participants shared that they obtained undergraduate degrees and/or had worked previously in this field, which was helpful when it came to their having to manage million-dollar budgets. As suggested by Michael, educational leadership programs "don't prepare you" for this

part of the job in the same way that a degree in business would. As stated by Charlotte, “As we talk about the work around equity, we also have to speak to it with it with our resources.”

As described by Madeline, the ability to think about their budgets and creatively allocate resources to meet the diverse needs of their students, staff and community is imperative to the success of an equity-minded superintendent. She explained,

> If my teachers are saying to me, 'There are 26 kids. They need different things. Can we get resources to best support them?' and I say, 'No, I don't have money.' and then turn around and say, 'I'm all about equity.' Well, you know what? Shame on me.

Though being courageous enough to have difficult conversations around equity is critical, these responses align with the assertion that to be culturally responsive, a school leader must be prepared to address these inequities as they arise via their resource allocation, hiring protocols, and policies (Khalifa, 2018).

Developing strategic plans is another task required of superintendents that is often learned in business programs but not necessarily studied in-depth in many school leadership preparation programs. However, superintendents are responsible for creating and carrying out complex strategic action plans. Several participants described creating strategic plans that focused on equity, diversity and inclusion. For example, James described that their strategic plans had “equity and inclusivity as kind of the main strand that was going to run throughout.”

Being able to develop and enact these plans is not an easy task, especially when considering the many facets of the district that require their investing both time and money. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that superintendents with little to no experience in business would likely have a harder time trying to strategically plan and design funding structures that will enable them to meet their students’ multitude of needs.

This was especially critical in terms of what began to transpire in schools as a result of the pandemic. As Harrison explained, many superintendents initially had to use their already limited resources "to compensate for many of our children in those areas that they just aren't getting at home." Like many of the participants, he described the measures he took to meet the needs of his students who were receiving virtual instruction. In addition to the costs of providing technology alone, he also had to hire more staff and create additional programs to meet those needs which included providing one to one devices, internet access, family food services, after-hours tutoring, and mental health support.

Although it was initially surprising to hear that the majority of the participants never intended to become educators or that they had worked for years in other fields before even stepping foot in a classroom, as Khalil explained, having a variety of experiences is what enabled them to see through "multiple lenses." In doing so, they have applied the skills that they learned through their previous experiences to address issues of inequity.

For many of the Black participants, teaching was an opportunity for them to provide students with educators who looked like themselves. For example, Harrison described two male African-American educators who both mentored him and helped him develop a better understanding of himself and his history. Based on his own experiences with teachers who he felt reflected him as a child, he thought that his students would be able to look at him and know that they could count on him to "make things right for them." He shared that he decided to become a district-level administrator because at that time there weren't many Black superintendents and he wanted to be in a position where he could impact the most students "particularly those" who looked like him.

Other participants shared that their having felt supported by their teachers influenced them to pay this forward with their students in their own practices as educators. Mikayla, who shared that she'd had both positive elementary experiences in the New York Public School System as well as "problematic" ones in high school, attributed her own success to some "educators along the way." She shared that if they had not been in her life early on "the outcome would have looked very different" and that the work she does today "is directly influenced by what happened then."

Similarly, in both the public schools in Camden and at her college at an HBCU, Charlotte described that she had teachers who she felt "truly believed in her." In turn, she has remained committed to believing in her students "no matter what" since the start of her career. She stated that she "always felt like, if no one else could show the world or anyone else that great things come from Camden, they could see me... I am indeed that rose that grew in the concrete." The importance of students being able to "see themselves" in their teachers was threaded throughout their interviews, in both their personal lives and in their roles as district-level leaders, which aligns with the research that "an education workforce that reflects the demographics of the students they teach leads to improved student outcomes, especially for populations of students at-risk" (Hawk, et.al., 2017).

Many participants described having personal experiences that were reflective of the same issues of inequity that they are currently working to mitigate. Specifically, they discussed the ways that their having experienced racism, linguistic barriers and financial insecurity as children influenced their decisions to become equity-driven educators. For example, there were Black superintendents who described experiencing racism in school as children who went on to become anti-racist educators. Roger explained that when his family moved to the suburbs from Camden

during in the early seventies when the "racial riots" were going on he was placed in the "lowest tier because I was a little black boy from Camden who they assumed didn't know my math facts or could read." Likewise, Albert who grew up in rural South Carolina, stated that although schools in the south were legally desegregated, there was still "a lot of disproportionality on how that looked when it got into the classroom." He shared this example:

> I was always one, maybe two max, students of color in a class. I was always in trouble. I wasn't a bad kid, I just talked a lot… I had a few white friends, when they did the same things, they didn't get the same attention.

These experiences impacted them deeply. Albert shared that when he became an administrator, he "looked at all of that" and shared that while "there was no leniency for certain groups" when he did have to enforce disciplinary consequences, he made sure that it was done equitably regardless of race. In addition, he set up systems designed to "to get to the root cause of what is going on" because his experiences both as a child and later as an administrator led him to believe that there are oftentimes underlying reasons, such as the way that a teacher may treat their students, that might influence their behaviors such as cutting their class.

The early school experiences of the two participants who described growing up in households where English was not spoken explained the impact of being a multilingual learner on the equity-focused actions that they have taken in their respective leadership roles. For example, Khalil who was born in Beirut, described being raised primarily by his grandmother in a home where no one spoke English as a "hurdle that I had to jump over to get where I am now." Subsequently, he has worked extensively to ensure that all district communication be provided in multiple languages and spearheaded efforts to increase their engagement with non-English speaking families so that they would better understand how to meet their needs.

Similarly, Belinda who is of Cuban descent "only spoke the English that I learned outside on the street in my neighborhood" until starting Kindergarten where she became bilingual. She described how her own experience as an English Language Learner led her to become a champion for her bilingual students:

> I feel really adamant about those kids. They're coming in with interrupted learning, no formal education, definitely no language… some of them don't want to be here. My latest special program that I got to develop and manage was to offer different things for our (bilingual) kids who never really had these opportunities.

While Khalil's experience more directly influenced his work with non-English speaking families, Belinda's experience directly influenced her work with multilingual learners. Though the focus of their work differed, both examples showed how being an emergent bilingual learner themselves drove them to be committed to meeting the needs of this subgroup.

Participants who described early experiences with economic insecurity also identified this as being integral to their work as equity-focused educators. While there was only one white participant who shared that she grew up in a culturally diverse neighborhood "in the projects on Staten Island," growing up in economically unstable environments was the one factor that 3 of the 9 white superintendents mentioned having in similar with their students which were influential in their work as equity-focused leaders.

For example, Sharon who grew up in Southern New Jersey, explained that she "grew up in Head Start with parents on food stamps." She explained that this experience shaped her "understanding of education as a way out of that life situation." Sharing that "as a Libra" she has always been committed to justice, Sharon believes that it is her duty to advocate on behalf of her students because "they can't do it themselves."

Michael who grew up in a small town in central New Jersey which he explained "is usually thought of as an extremely homogeneous, white community" shared that after his father left and moved to California, he was one of multiple siblings being raised by a single mother and that they "grew up very poor." Although he recognized that he had the advantage of attending high performing schools and that he hadn't himself experienced racism, he did recall the ways that growing up in an economically oppressive situation prepared him to become an equity-focused leader. He explained,

> In terms of understanding poverty, even though it wasn't like I grew up in Newark or Camden or rural West Virginia, I still remember the insecurity. I still remember not having things. I still remember the humiliation that it can cause sometimes. All of that had a pretty big impact on me… The irony of my career is that I grew up in a town with wealthy white kids, but I just always clicked with the other kids. I think that's because I grew up poor, even though I was white, we had a lot in common… When I got into a leadership position, I think I understood it in a way where I could do something about it.

In his role as superintendent of an ethnically and economically diverse community, Michael has paid specific attention to the school related disparities that were often the result of economic inequities. In doing so, he has allocated district resources and provided additional services to students in need, thus ensuring that all students, regardless of their family's affluence, had access to the same educational and extra-curricular opportunities.

While this was true of multiple participants regardless of race, of the Black participants who mentioned this factor, it seemed to be secondary. For example, Harrison explained, almost in passing, that he "didn't grow up wealthy by any stretch of the imagination" but never elaborated specifically on how that impacted him. However, on multiple occasions throughout

the interview he specifically referenced the longstanding, detrimental impact that race has had on him. At one point he questioned, "Do you know how many things I have not been able to do, the opportunities I was not given, because I was Black?" noting throughout the interview the ways in which his racial identity impacted him personally, as well as professionally.

Of all 23 participants, James was the only one who shared that as a child he was classified as a special education student. Though he also grew up in a relatively affluent and culturally homogenous suburb in Northern New Jersey, he spent his summers in the Bronx working with his uncle, who was a special education teacher and later administrator. Not surprisingly, James' own teaching career began in special education. When asked if he thought his own experiences as a special education student propelled him to work with this population specifically, he explained that it was a combination of both his own experiences as a special education student and the experiences he had working with his uncle. Specifically, he attributes his decision to the conversations he had with his uncle in which his uncle told him how rewarding it was for him working with this population.

Despite the variety in their experiences, another common theme that came out of the interviews was that many of the participants expressed feeling as if this work was something that they were destined to do. Jackson, a former marine and corporate attorney who began teaching social studies via an alternate route immediately after 9/11, shared that "life works itself out the way it's supposed to. I think we all have our experiences to get us to where we want to be." Likewise, Jasper, who began his teaching career working with "emotionally disturbed as-risk youth" after having been employed as an equipment operator, explained that he believes that "the bigger picture, higher power, whatever you want to call it, the universe... has a plan." Multiple

participants, such as Roger, shared feeling like their lives had come "full circle" and their becoming superintendents and doing this work was what they were ultimately meant to do.

**Culturally Responsive Practices**

This section will examine culturally responsive practices through both the pedagogical and leadership lenses. First, I will examine how participants support schools in emphasizing Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) three tenets of culturally relevant teaching. Then I will examine their work in conjunction with Khalifa's (2018) four tenets of culturally responsive leadership.

Of the 23 participants in this study, 12 serve in districts where at least more than half of the students, if not the majority, are Black and/or Hispanic. In the remaining districts, the percentage of white students hovered around 50%, with the remaining 50% varying from either predominantly Asian, predominantly Hispanic or a mix of both Black and Hispanic. Despite the differences in their student populations, all 23 participants spoke about culturally responsive practices being used in their districts.

Overall, though there were multiple participants who stated that, for years, conversations about the need for culturally competent teachers, diverse representation in curriculum, and restorative discipline practices were taking place, they also shared that until recently this was only happening among very small groups of people, if at all. For example, Kevin shared that he has "poured resources" into training a small group of "trailblazers" so that they could go into the schools and "deal with racism and cultural responsiveness."

Jackson, who stated that he believes in a "grassroots up" approach, also shared that in their first few years they worked as a small group before building a district wide equity team, which now includes administrators, teachers and students. The building of equity teams such as those described by multiple participants directly aligns with the research indicating that "equity

teams are a necessary component of culturally responsive schooling" because they assist in the formulation of an equity-focused vision, they can more objectively investigate equity issues and they can create a greater impact as they work collectively work to lead equity-focused reforms (Khalifa, 2018, p. 154).

When the participants were asked explicitly to describe both a culturally responsive classroom and the qualities of a culturally responsive leader, their responses often revealed an incomplete understanding of both frameworks. Most often they mentioned the importance of using diverse texts knowing your students, with varied levels of understanding of how they impact culturally responsive instruction and are critical to academic success.

On the other hand, when describing the work that they are doing as district-level leaders, the actions they described taking reflected a deeper understanding, thus illustrating the ways in which culturally responsive practices can be supported at the district level.

### *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*

Culturally relevant teaching as defined by Ladson-Billings, includes "an emphasis on student achievement, cultural competence, and the development of sociopolitical/critical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2009, 2014). When directly asked to describe a culturally responsive classroom, all participants seemed to default to the importance of diverse texts and knowing who your students are, providing responses that showed a varied depth of understanding. Only two participants spoke about critical consciousness in direct connection to culturally responsive practices.

This directly aligns with the research around the implementation of Ladson-Billing's framework which showed that "even when people have demonstrated a more expansive knowledge of culture, few have taken up the sociopolitical dimensions of the work." Despite

their best intentions, educators are often incomplete in their implementation on culturally responsive pedagogy. They may have embodied the first two tenets, but "rarely pushed the students to consider critical perspectives that may have direct impact on their lives and communities" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 77-78).

While they may not have listed the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy verbatim in response to a specific question, in speaking about the equity-focused initiatives in their districts, the participants described a variety of actions that reflected an understanding of culturally responsive practices.

**Academic Achievement.** Ladson-Billings (2014) defined academic success as intellectual growth that happens in response to a student's schooling experiences. As this can only happen when one believes that their students are capable of learning, a culturally responsive educator engages their students in cognitively challenging experiences within an emotionally supportive environment that is critical to their academic development (Hammond, 2015).

The participants' understandings of this tenet showed in multiple ways throughout their interviews. For example, Kevin worked in a district where much of the staff did not believe that their students could achieve because they were the children of immigrants and oftentimes poor. He shared this response, "Who cares? … All children can learn and all children are special… They're children and we're going to educate them!" Mikayla shared that there have been many times where people have expressed to her that they are surprised that their students are "so articulate." She explained that "children rise to the level of your expectations" sharing "if you tell them they can be in Harvard, they internalize that and then they go."

Roger specifically described the need for teachers to develop a "relationship of high expectations" in so much that caring for the kids alone is not enough if there is not a belief that they can succeed behind it. He explained,

> I've worked in schools where they love the kids, but their expectations aren't very high. They cared for the kids, but how strong was their teaching? ... You could teach and care for them, but I need you to push them all the time… I want them to learn.

This description loudly echoes what Hammond (2015) termed as a "balance of push and care" in her Ready for Rigor Framework which describes the culturally responsive conditions that are needed for students to thrive in classrooms where teachers have high expectations for student achievement (p. 17). In this type of environment, students feel both cared for and safe, allowing them to take academic risks when engaging in rigorous tasks. She affirms that this balance is necessary for them to learn and grow.

Academic achievement is tied to expectations. As James explained, the level of a teacher's expectations is easily visible in their instruction. He stated, "Just by the types of questions that they're asking, you can see if they have high expectations for their students. If they're asking very basic, low level questions, it gives you an indication of their level of expectations." Similarly, Khalil questioned how anyone could be culturally responsive without having high expectations. He asked, "Why in the world are you having your fourth graders read second grade books and, and saying 'It's because they can't read?'" He further suggested that in doing so, educators are not only being "unresponsive culturally," but that in doing so they are being educationally "negligent."

Their expectation that all students regardless of race, economic status, or native language could be successful academically, was evident in the approaches to remediating the

disproportionality that was permeating their Honors and/or Advanced Placement courses that were described by multiple participants. Kevin explained that this disproportionality has historically “impacted two groups of people; people of color and special education students.” Jackson suggested that this particular issue was symptomatic of the more “persistent underlying issues throughout the country.” Therefore, it was not surprising that this was mentioned by almost all participants as an area of primary concern in terms of academic inequity that they were addressing in their districts.

In many instances, the participants described changing the practices that were being used to determine class placement, an action taken to promote academic success for all, rather than a chosen few. Some participants focused on ensuring that students' academic mentors embraced the idea of high expectations. Harrison recounted a conversation he had with his guidance counselors about “placing these young people according to their potential.” He told them that when they are “sitting down with these children and doing their schedules, and you know that he has potential but he's not pursuing those more challenging classes, then you need to say, 'Hey, you need to be in this class!'” He was one of many that spoke to the necessity of changing the mindsets and practices of the staff in regards to who was being encouraged to enroll in these classes.

Russell explained a similar situation in his district, sharing that in some cases his students have refused to take these classes because none of their friends were being placed in them and they didn’t want to be in them alone. Like Harrison, he said it was up to the adults to ensure that they are explaining the process for taking these classes better and to make sure that once the students that were accepted into them that they felt like they belonged there.

Other superintendents, such as James spoke to “removing the barriers” that had historically marginalized students of color and those with diverse learning needs out of these classes. Jasper described “changing the matrix” that was being used to determine eligibility for enrollment in these courses, which had been based previously on teacher recommendations alone. He determined this protocol to be problematic because “bias can creep all through there.” While teacher recommendation still plays a part, it is now coupled with multiple data points and a motivation scale that can be used to determine a student’s readiness. Because of these changes, they have seen “a shift towards a more balanced demographic in those courses.”

Lucas took a different approach. To the root of the problem, he “put together a detailed comparative analysis for the various advanced courses” which they used to start the conversation with the high school staff. In doing so, he hoped that looking at their data would “lead people to reevaluate their practices and examine and evaluate the implicit biases that they might have.” In discussing their approaches, he was the only one that shared that they also made an intentional decision to provide professional development on “microaggressions and implicit biases and things of that nature” in tandem with the focus course placement, noting that “a lot of these things thread together.”

Both James and Jasper shared that in their districts they did not stop simply at opening up access to these courses. They both described designing systems of support specifically to meet the needs of their students who were not typically placed in these classes. Jasper explained, “Once we got them in there, we needed to make sure that the teachers had the appropriate support to scaffold instruction so that those students could be successful.”

The participants' approaches to expanding opportunities in these courses reflect a theoretical understanding of the tenet of academic achievement, as well as an understanding of

the ways that systemic inequities have influenced academic disparities. The participants not only believe that all children can succeed, but they have reconfigured their districts' placement protocols and broadened access to high-level coursework, which directly aligns with Ladson-Billings' (1994, 2009, 2014) and Hammond's research around the idea of academic success both theoretically and in practice.

**Cultural Competence.** Research has shown that "an education workforce that reflects the demographics of the students they teach leads to improved student outcomes, especially for populations of students at-risk" (Hawk, et.al., 2017). In terms of culturally responsive pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (2014) asserted that a culturally competent teacher not only knows who their students are, but that the "secret" to their success lies in their ability to link their learning with an understanding and appreciation of their students and their cultures. Given the racial and socioeconomic gap between teachers and students in communities of color, creating a culturally competent teaching force can be an overwhelming task for district-level leaders (Jennings, 2022).

While they may not have said it explicitly, the participant responses clearly recognized the need for culturally competent teachers, Charlotte shared that they "constantly have to have cultural diversity training." She shared that this is not always well received, particularly by their white teachers who express that they are offended by this training which suggests that they "don't love kids" or aren't "trying their best." Harrison explained that he dedicates "a lot of time and money and resources into training… particularly for the older teachers" because while they are required to be culturally responsive now, in the past "nobody put any value on you being culturally sensitive."

Rather than trying to train teachers to be culturally competent, Kevin recruited and hired staff "from within the community" because they had the advantage of being part of the

community and knowing the students personally. Other participants described developing "pipelines" with HBCU's to attract teachers of color to their districts. While a racial match between students and their teachers can increase cultural competence, Rashad offered an additional perspective when he explained that diversifying your staff successfully requires more than just a surface-level similarity. He explained that even within the same race, there are cultural differences that can have a detrimental impact a teacher's ability to connect and communicate with their students.

Specifically, he described that in his district there are significant differences between the influx of teachers being hired from Africa and his students, who although they are also Black, are primarily of African-American or Caribbean descent. He explained, "At the end of the day, you got somebody that reflects the child but they may not be able to do the work, so it's not always so cut and dry." This aligns with the research in so much as it does not define cultural competence as sameness, but rather an ability to connect with, appreciate and celebrate the cultures of your students in order to scaffolding learning (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Hammond, 2015).

When asked what they would expect to see in a culturally responsive classroom, most participants provided general descriptions of classrooms that outwardly celebrated diversity. For example, Sharon stated that a culturally responsive classroom "acknowledges and celebrates and values all of the children and their backgrounds in the room." Similarly, Meaghan described their initiative to "build classroom libraries and ensure that all of our students are represented in the books that they're reading." While creating environments that are physically reflective of the students contributes to them being culturally responsive, as asserted by Billings' this understanding is "a corruption of the central ideas" that she "attempted to promulgate" (2014, p.82).

While almost every participant mentioned the inclusion of diverse texts as an indicator of a culturally responsive classroom, only a couple of responses showed that they more deeply understood the rationale and methodology for using them. Kevin offered a more thorough explanation of the significance of using diverse texts. While he agrees that texts that reflect the children must be included, he questioned if the books "reflect that they matter." Instead, he explained that a culturally responsive teacher uses diverse texts to promote critical thinking by providing opportunities for students to talk about themselves and their experiences in relation to the texts. Mikayla added that the representation alone is not what makes a text culturally responsive. She explained,

> Being culturally responsive is ensuring that kids see themselves in the literature, but if the only thing that black boys see is a black man mopping the floor, then he thinks he's going to be a custodian. There's nothing wrong with being a custodian ... but they need to be exposed to seeing what their futures can look like and we can do that beautifully in literature by the books that we get them… I don't want them to think that their whole sphere of influence and exposure is black men on the corner and black girls over sexualized. That's not what I want them to read.

Having diverse materials and a representative curriculum are key in culturally responsive classrooms. However, the overall omission of teachers using these texts to promote sociopolitical consciousness aligns with Ladson-Billings' (2014) findings whereas she asserts that having diverse materials alone is simply not enough to deem instruction culturally responsive.

Multiple participants also spoke to the importance of knowing who your students are. This directly relates to cultural competence as it is impossible to celebrate or utilize one's culture if you do not understand what it is. Much like the responses that were provided in conjunction

with diverse texts, many of the participants made generalized statements about this being important, but neglected to provide a rationale as to why this is important in terms of pedagogy nor a description of what this might look like in practice.

For example, when Thomas explained that "the teacher has to have a basic understanding of their values, beliefs, norms, and customs… what's inside of them and understand where their kids are coming from," he didn't provide a rationale as to why this is as he described this as being "number one." Likewise, Albert stated that "culturally responsive teaching is deeper than a lesson, it's getting to know the children," but he didn't explain why knowing your students is integral to culturally responsive teaching.

While it is true that culturally responsive teachers must know who their students are and that building relationships helps to provide safe spaces for students to grow socially and emotionally, without using this information as a scaffold to bridge the gap between who they are and what they already know to what they are learning (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Hammond 2015), this practice will not serve an academic purpose or work to improve student achievement.

Though most of their responses did not reflect this understanding, there were a small number of participants who provided a slightly more thorough explanation of how getting to know your students personally can impact your ability to reach them academically. For example, Michelle explained that "teachers need to do some research" and "ask kids questions about themselves" because "you have to be aware of who your kids are, what they need, and that what you're teaching and how you're teaching may or may not invite them in."

Michael also spoke to the importance of "really understanding the child" in regards to being able to teach them. He invites his teachers to "see race, see ethnicity, see gender expression, see religion, see all of it… so that you see the kid, so that you understand who's

sitting in front of you and create a situation where you can meet their needs." These examples were two of few that explained why knowing your students is important. However, they still fell short in providing an example of what this would look like in terms of culturally responsive instruction.

Kevin was one participant whose own dissertation was focused on culturally responsive pedagogy. Naturally, his responses were at many times much more grounded in the research than those of the other participants. In terms of knowing your students, he stated that "one thing that doesn't get talked about a lot in cultural responsiveness is giving people the opportunity to share their background and to share their knowledge." He explained that "brain research actually connects with cultural responsiveness" and that "kids' schemas' must be connected with what they're learning" in order for them to grow academically. While his emphasis on the importance of getting to know your students was similar to that of other participants, his was the only response that specifically referenced the research (Hammond, 2015) that explains how this information should be used from an instructional perspective.

**Critical Consciousness.** In response to the questions that asked for explicit explanations of culturally responsive practices, only two of the participants shared ideas that that related to critical consciousness, although they did not use that term specifically. The fact that the participants did not mention this tenet much aligns with the research around culturally relevant pedagogy in which Ladson-Billings found that over time "few have taken up the sociopolitical dimensions of the work, instead dulling its critical edge or omitting it altogether" (2014, p.77). Given the context of global events at the time of these interviews, it was notable that pedagogical practices that are used to develop students' critical consciousness were not mentioned by more participants as something that is paramount in culturally responsive classrooms.

The two participants who provided responses that were more closely aligned with the tenet may have done so because they had studied related topics in their doctoral programs. As previously mentioned, Kevin focused on culturally responsive pedagogy, while Charlotte's dissertation focused on Black Feminist Theory which she explained was "steeped in curriculum and instruction." While Kevin shared that in his district they focused on ensuring that their curriculum enabled their students to develop their critical thinking skills by talking about their cultures and experiences in connection to the literature, Charlotte explained the necessity for teachers to "weave in" current events regardless of their content area.

Specifically, she referenced the opportunities that the Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020 provided for teachers to have critically conscious conversations with their students.

> Like when the riots were happening… If we're responsive, we can't just act like, 'Wow, that was crazy last night. Huh? Okay. Well let's look at number 12.' No. How do we weave this in? How do we talk about it? In a culturally responsive classroom, we could have those types of discussions.

As opposed to the majority of responses which left the sociopolitical aspect off entirely, these responses showed a much more thorough understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy and more directly aligned with Ladson-Billings' original intentions in which she implored educators to use culturally responsive pedagogy to "address the complexities of social inequities" and prepare students "for meaningful work in a democracy (2014, p.77).

Although there was little to mention of practices that would encourage students to develop their critical consciousness in response to the question about culturally responsive classrooms, multiple participants described a noticeable increase in student advocacy in relation

to the impact of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement. Their narratives illustrated what critically conscious practices can look like in action.

For example, Michelle who works in a racially diverse yet primarily affluent community with staff that "happens to be very white," described a multi-session "listening summit" that staff had with their "Black student union" after the death of George Floyd. In these sessions, the students not only shared their responses to Floyd's murder, but also unpacked their own experiences as Black students in their district. Her intentionality in organizing this summit coupled with their willingness to engage in these difficult conversations with their students provides an example of the ways in which educators can create opportunities for students to develop their critical consciousness which aligns with Ladson-Billings' (2014) research which asserts that culturally responsive pedagogy should transfer to "beyond-school" applications.

Though multiple participants described situations in which the students used their critical consciousness in response to the Black Lives Matter Movement, they also shared that their teachers were not prepared to facilitate these types of conversations. For example, Eric described a conversation with his teachers in which he told them to be prepared when their students returned to in-person instruction. He warned, "They're going to unleash on you guys and if you're not prepared to deal with what they're going to ask you, you're going to put yourself in some really tough situations."

Similarly, in Madeline's district, she described receiving emails from current and former students that expressed that "one of their biggest concerns was that teachers were not engaging in conversations that were difficult and that it was evident that they didn't know how." While there were a few participants who expressed that they felt that their teachers were relatively prepared to engage in these conversations, multiple participants shared responses that were aligned to the

research that showed that teachers often miss opportunities to engage in conversations that would develop the critical consciousness of their students (Freidus, 2020) or simply choose to omit this tenet altogether (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

### *Culturally Responsive Leadership*

Culturally responsive leaders promote inclusive school environments, develop culturally responsive teachers, engage with students, parents and indigenous contexts, and participate in a process of critical self-reflection (Khalifa, 2016). When asked directly to describe a culturally responsive leader, participant responses were similar to those they provided about culturally responsive classrooms; most of the participants provided vague or incomplete responses. Yet, throughout their interviews, they provided multiple examples of how these tenets are integral to their position as district-level leaders and paramount to their equity-centered work. Overall, the participants described multiple ways in which they were working to create inclusive school spaces, providing their staff with professional development and finding ways to increase opportunities for community engagement, all of which relate in some way to leadership approaches that are learned in most traditional leadership preparation programs.

Although there was not one participant that explicitly named critical self-reflection as a culturally responsive leadership practice nor described reflection as something they were taught to do as educational leaders, being self-reflective was something that most participants stated they do constantly. While there were elements of their reflective practices that aligned with this particular tenet of Khalifa's framework, it was also the one that seemed to be most misunderstood and underutilized.

**Professional Development.** As suggested by Khalifa (2016), culturally responsive leaders can develop culturally responsive teachers in a variety of ways. This may include

offering professional development that is focused specifically on pedagogy and practice, reforming the curriculum and assessment tools, or developing equity-based leadership teams. This requires superintendents to be well-versed in a variety of culturally responsive practices, which can be difficult to move throughout an entire district particularly if their school-based administrative teams and teachers are not. As Raymond explained,

> As much as I can sit on high, for lack of a better word and talk about, 'Yeah, we're culturally responsive.' If the teachers don't believe these strategies, then I can believe one thing, but the actual implementation of it could be a totally different thing.

The participants shared various ways that they have worked to build the capacity of both their teachers and leadership teams, which included everything from grassroots movements to district-wide equity teams to external support gained through a variety of partnerships. The utilization of outside partnerships was suggested by Khalifa (2018) as a means of responding to pushback that may come from either the staff, school board or the community. This suggests that even the most progressive superintendents recognize that it is virtually impossible for them to do this work alone and more so that it requires a collaborative effort.

One way that they have provided equity-focused professional development and increased their teams' capacity to move this work through their district was by creating equity teams. Lucas was one of multiple participants who described doing this in his district. While the responsibilities of these teams varied, in his district this team was responsible for surveying the staff and determining their professional development needs. The team's survey revealed that they wanted training on "implicit bias and microaggressions, decolonization of the curriculum and culturally and racially inclusive teaching practices." The practice of developing equity teams aligns with the leadership framework which states that one way that culturally responsive leaders

can develop culturally responsive teachers is by forming a culturally responsive school leadership team that is "charged with constantly finding new ways for teachers to be culturally responsive" (Khalifa, et al. 2016).

One of the concerns shared by the participants was that culturally responsive indicators are not made explicit in their evaluation tools. They suggested that equity-focused coaching and professional development be embedded via the pre/post observation conferences. However, because school administrators possess varied levels of their understanding, they need clearly defined indicators for implementing culturally responsive practices. Thus, district-level leaders not only have to train their teachers to use them in their classrooms, but they must also teach their building-level leaders to support those teachers.

As Harrison stated, he has had to "train and retrain" his principals to ensure that their evaluations are being used to "determine whether or not the teachers are meeting the needs of the children." Charlotte shared that in her district they have had to train their administrators so that they are "ready to have those conversations with their staff" and able to communicate that there is a "certain way that we're going to tolerate our students being treated." Responses such as these illustrate that the responsibility of providing equity-focused professional development for both teachers and administrators falls on the culturally responsive superintendent.

Most of the participants recognized that this work is new and that they themselves are still in the process of constantly learning and/or expressed that they felt ill-equipped to lead this professional development alone. Therefore, they sought out the help of external organizations who could provide their districts with professional development that, as Jackson shared, helped them to "get through" the complex and difficult task of reframing their districts to be focused on equity. He explained that sometimes a third party is needed to ensure that "equity work" is "done

equitably as well," suggesting that as the superintendent you "can't sit there in front of people and say, 'Do this, do that, do this.'" While they are now at the point where they are "on their own," he feels that having an external partner set up "a very strong foundation for us to grow from."

Michelle explained that her team chose to work with an outside partnership in response to a "challenging, race-related incident" that happened in her district. She said that their partners brought to light "really interesting points of data that I wouldn't have considered" by using "protocols that kind of force you to reflect in a different way." Sharon surmised that districts who have shown marked success in doing this work have always worked with external partners. She explained that having "an outside set of eyes" is critical because "sometimes it's hard to see what's right in front of your own face."

Khalifa (2018) suggests that working with both using data and working with outside partners are effective ways that culturally responsive leaders can address the pushback that they may get for doing this work. Additionally, creating opportunities for educators to objectively look at their data to identify gaps in "achievement, discipline, enrichment, and remedial services" directly aligns with the tenet of professional development in Khalifa's framework (2016). As suggested by these participant responses, the use of hard numbers coupled with an external perspective may help to remove the subjectivity and defensiveness that Khalifa and Briscoe (2015) found to be typical of district-level leaders when confronted with these disparities.

**Inclusive Spaces.** As defined by this framework, culturally responsive leaders utilize their schools as a means of creating inclusive spaces for students and families in their schools. For culturally responsive leaders, there is an intentional focus on minoritized populations who have historically not felt "a sense of belonging" in school. Khalifa argues that culturally

responsive leaders must first understand how these groups have been minoritized and then work to create inclusive spaces that "protect and promote the practices that include minoritized students and the spaces in which they exist" (2018, p. 81). As with the other tenets, there was not one participant who explicitly stated that they were working to create inclusive spaces specifically in connection to the question about culturally responsive leadership. However, their efforts to create inclusive spaces, which ranged from working to reverse the deficit mindsets of their teachers to eliminating exclusionary discipline practices, illustrated their commitment to this tenet

In terms of working towards some of the more implicit aspects of inclusion such as mindset, Michelle explained that she has done a lot of work to create "inclusive, loving, supportive environments" where students are not "criticized, judged or alienated." Though this work started for her as an advocate for students in special education, in her current position as an assistant superintendent, she explained that it is her mission to make this the case for all subgroups of students that may receive the same treatment. This was similar to what was shared by Sharon who shared that when she began working in her district, it was commonplace for teachers to say things such as "I don't teach *those* students" when referring to specific subgroups of students, such as multilingual learners and those in Special Education, who she said were constantly being "pushed aside."

Michael explained that it is necessary to address these implicit biases that may result in actions that make students feel unwelcome such as "smiling more at white kids than black kids." Their awareness of and work towards eliminating these behaviors directly aligns with Khalifa's framework which asserts that culturally responsive leaders must focus on what he identified as

"less direct exclusionary practices" that make students feel unwelcome and are at times just as detrimental as the more explicit and easily identifiable ones (2018, p. 85).

Another common theme that was mentioned by multiple participants was discipline, which was evident in the actions they described taking to reverse exclusionary practices, such as suspension and expulsion, that were disproportionately impacting students of color and as those with special education classifications. Multiple participants shared that at one point in time, their districts had been cited for the over disciplining of both Black students and those in special education.

In Kevin's opinion, negative student behaviors are the direct result "of people not celebrating who you are in your school." He further explained that the subsequent over disciplining of students does nothing but "traumatize" students and perpetuate the cycle of their "always being in trouble." Michael made the connection between discipline and inclusive spaces when he shared, "If you're writing up a thousand behavioral referrals, they don't feel like they belong. They don't feel like they're in a welcoming place. If you have kids who don't feel welcome, they're not going to learn period."

The participants described a variety of approaches that were used to reframe the way student behavior is addressed in their districts and create more supportive and inclusive spaces. Mikayla described a more proactive and restorative approach, using yoga and mindfulness practices to help students "de-escalate internally whatever they're going through." In Albert's district, he created a "disciplinary position called a crisis intervention teacher" who "works with students to get to the root cause of what is going on." These practices aligned with some of those suggested by Khalifa (2018), in which he encourages school leaders to use critical self-reflection as a means of helping students to uncover and understand why they may be displaying certain

behaviors that are often seen as “aggressive” or “insubordinate.” However, his suggestion that they then find ways for students to positively apply these behaviors in learning and leadership situations were not mentioned as part of their approaches.

Others described explicitly changing their discipline policies and creating more objective “student codes of conduct.” Raymond, who believes that the responsibility of handling discipline ultimately falls on the teacher and their ability to build relationships with their students, shared that in order to put the onus back on teachers he reframed infractions by minor and major offenses so that when dealing with incidents in their classroom they could no longer defer to “just kicking a kid out” which had been the most commonly used past practice. Additionally, although provided without much elaboration, there were multiple participants who mentioned using “restorative practices,” which traditionally have been designed to pull students who might be perceived as misbehaving in, as opposed to calling them out.

Their efforts to reverse exclusionary discipline policies and practices are directly aligned with the framework in which Khalifa (2018) states that school leaders are the ones who have the power to challenge these practices which have been historically institutionalized. Though his research focused on building-level leaders, he suggests that superintendents use their power to provide resources to schools that can be used to “combat exclusionary practices” (p. 91). Creating district-wide policies and protocols, as well as resources to support the transition to more restorative practices, were both directly aligned to Khalifa’s (2018) framework and evident in their responses.

School spaces that are truly inclusive hold student voices at their center (Khalifa, et, al. 2016, Khalifa, 2018). Therefore, it was not surprising that multiple participants affirmed the importance of including students, and their voices, in this work. For example, Michelle described

her desire to create educational spaces "where kids all feel heard, where they know their voices matter and where they feel like their needs are met." Likewise, as shared by Raymond including student voice is necessary in helping leaders to see things from their perspective and preparing them to "deal with the issues that you have in your building or in your district."

Though there are some that believe that culturally responsive work should be approached and studied differently for each specific sub-group, Khalifa (2018) argued that while the ways in which each group faces oppression in schools may be different, there are also many places where they intersect. He specifically mentioned multiple subgroups, including LGBTQIA+ students, as a subgroup that is often "othered" in traditional school spaces. Thus, it is the responsibility of a culturally responsive leader to ensure that their approaches account for all of them.

With this in mind, it was surprising that with New Jersey being a progressive state in regards to curricular mandates focused on the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ voices and history, as well as administrative codes designed to protect the rights of LGBTQIA students, that this particular subgroup was barely mentioned. Out of 23 participants, the LGBTQIA+ community was only mentioned by 5 participants. Of those 5 participants, intentional actions related to their inclusion in school spaces were only mentioned by 4, with 2 of those 4 simply mentioning that they have personally spoken with LGBTQIA+ students to better understand their needs.

Those responses, such as when Rashad stated that as leaders they "need to be intentional" in treating their LGBTQIA+ students with "love and respect" or when Raymond said they need to be "looked at as human beings" and not judged "based on what their preferences are" alluded to their having empathy for these students. However, they did not mention any specific actions or initiatives other than speaking to them that were focused on their inclusion.

The remaining two participants addressed their inclusion in terms of curriculum, but mentioned the LGBTQIA+ as one subgroup amongst many. For example, James shared that when it comes to the LGBTQIA+ curricular mandates, "there's a lot of crossover" in the conversations they have regarding this population and others who have been historically marginalized in the sense that these are all "new conversations that typically haven't been happening in school." Similarly, Albert referred specifically to ensuring that students read "rich literature written by people of color, women, men, LGBTQ, et cetera." He then provided this example. "You may be a child in my classroom and you have two mommies or two daddies, so we're going to find something about that." In terms of creating LGBTQIA+ inclusive spaces, he added that in doing so the objective is "not to call you out" but rather that "we're all going to talk and learn about it" together.

Given the alarming rates of bullying, self-harm and suicide for LGBTQIA+ students, it is incredibly important that leaders ensure that they are being treated equitably in school. However, based on the responses of the participants, who for the most part did not describe any actions they took to specifically include this population, it seemed that they were an afterthought, if thought of at all. While inclusive spaces for students of color and those in special education were widely discussed by multiple participants, as per Khalifa's (2018) framework, a leader cannot be considered culturally responsive if their approaches are not inclusive of *all* students.

**Community Engagement.** Community engagement is a major component of educational leadership in general, however for culturally responsive leaders, engaging the community goes beyond establishing positive relationships and sharing information. In this context, leaders serve as advocates for their students and families, using community engagement to reverse deficit

mindsets and "develop positive understandings of students and their families" (Khalifa, et.al., 2016).

At its core, community engagement helps to provide superintendents with important information that they need to make decisions that are best aligned with their needs. As Khalil explained, "the more [superintendents] understand the needs and the issues and the challenges facing that community, the better they will be in serving the district." Kevin agreed that it is critical that superintendents determine what the needs of their families are so that they can "take their reality and shape it" into doing what is best for children. This aligns with Khalifa's framework in which culturally responsive leadership is likened to servant leadership (Khalifa, et.al., 2016), which positions the superintendent as being in service to their students, parents and community.

Although families may want to be involved with what is going on in their children's schools, in districts that have a high population of immigrant families, linguistic barriers can inhibit them from doing so. Madeline chose to contract a company that provides them with Hebrew, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish translators for their meetings and written correspondence. While this came at a cost, she shared that within a week of doing so, she was contacted by the Korean Parents Association who expressed to her that they finally "felt included" and asked if she could join their meetings.

This pushed her to reconsider their methods of parent involvement more broadly. She began asking parents why they weren't showing up to parent meetings which were until then only scheduled "smack in the middle of the day." In doing so, she found out that many of them wanted to come, but could not due to their work obligations. In response, they began to have meetings in the mornings, afternoons and evenings. She shared,

> Little things like that go a long way. It's saying to people, 'You're included here. I want you to be here. We're going to do as much as we can to make it okay for you to be here.' These are the things you have to do.

Similarly, in Khalil's district they created a committee that "made it a point to try to communicate with our Hispanic parents" who had expressed that "they didn't know enough about what was going on with the school." He described how they began to require that every email and text message needed to be translated via Google which he said was "basic, but it was revolutionary for our district." This practice not only increased the engagement of these families, but also helped to change the deficit thinking of their teachers as well. He explained:

> Our teachers were part of that committee and they got to see for the first time that, and I hate to say it like for the first time, but they really got to see that a Hispanic parent is no different than an affluent, white parent or an African American parent. They're all parents that love their kids, they just don't know how to navigate the system.

Their examples illustrate the ways that culturally responsive district-level leaders can make simple adjustments to their districts' practices to meet the needs of their families and increase opportunities for community engagement. These responses embodied aspects of culturally responsive community engagement, in which they were not only able to gain information about what their needs were, but also helped to reverse the deficit mindsets that their staff held (Khalifa, et.al, 2016).

Though there were many participants who described their approaches to community engagement, none explicitly referenced themselves as being a "social activist for community-based causes in both the school and the neighborhood community" which is an integral part of the leadership framework (Khalifa, et.al, 2016). However, multiple participants did describe

making public statements and/or attending community rallies in support of the 2020 BLM Movement. This wasn't always an easy decision for them to make. In Albert's case, he thought a lot about whether he should attend the rally that was being held in the community, ultimately deciding that as a Black superintendent he felt it was his responsibility to be there.

Alternately, other superintendents such as Jasper, chose not to respond publicly. He explained that after consulting with superintendents in other urban districts, who agreed that what was happening at that moment was as a reflection of what had been happening already, he didn't think that his providing a statement at that point was necessary. Additionally, he feared that if he made a statement, it might prompt his students to engage in the protests which were becoming extremely volatile in his area. Though he shared that he doesn't regret his decision entirely, he did say that there was "some pain." Despite his track record of advocacy for his students, he recognized that to some his silence may have suggested that he was complicit, which is not the outcome that he wanted.

Although there were not many that explicitly referred to themselves as "advocates," the equity-focused actions they described taking were certainly done in this spirit. On the other hand, while activism and social justice are inextricably tied to equity work, there was very little mention of their working publicly as social activists outside of the school context which is included in the framework for culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa, et al., 2016).

**Critical Self-Reflection.** Critical self-reflection is a process by which leaders "critically self-reflect upon their personal and professional role in oppression and anti-oppressive works" (Khalifa, 2018, p.61). *Critical* self-reflection is necessary for leaders to create and sustain culturally responsive schools (Khalifa, 2018, p.72). As found by Khalifa (2018) much of this work has been individualized and focused on identity and positionality.

However, as determined by the framework (Khalifa, et al., 2016) this practice must be broadened so that it is "embedded into the horizontal … and vertical structures of schooling." This means it cannot simply happen once a year in response to the release of a district's equity data. Rather, he suggests that a practice of critical self-reflection must run through all facets of leadership: observations, agendas, and "referrals of *any* kind, budgets, hiring protocols, and policies; all of which were discussed throughout the interviews in regards to equity. These structures are what "will either support or challenge oppressive structures that are already in schools" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 72-74).

The participants described a variety of reflective practices that contained various elements of what was found in Khalifa's (2018) research. The participants regularly engaged in reflective protocols with multiple sharing that constantly think about whether they had done right by their students. Many described collaborative practices that used data, such as that collected during district-wide equity audits, to encourage meaningful dialogue about the inequities that were showing up in their schools.

There were an overwhelming number of participants who shared that being reflective about their work and the impact that it has on their students is integral to their work. Roger explained that he has an internal process of "checking himself" as well as an external process of "checking himself against someone else" that he uses when he is not sure what he should do. Harrison described this internal process an internal dialogue in which he is constantly asking himself whether or not the choices he has made were done in the best interest of children. As he explained, "If you can no longer look at yourself in the mirror because you've done some things that you know were wrong, you're not going to last long."

As defined by the framework, critical reflection must also be done in collaboration with others. In this sense, many participants did describe a reflective process that included what Kevin called “a network of some very close people” or whom Madeline referred to as “critical friends.” Engaging in this type of peer reflection requires what Jackson described as being “open to having constructive conversations all of the time.” He explained, “I'm not talking about constructive criticism, I'm talking about constructive conversation. So, if I'm doing something wrong or as though I'm going down the wrong road, I expect someone to tell me.”

Michael shared a similar sentiment, stating that leaders must have a sense of humility when doing this work. He claimed that if you don’t allow others to reflect on your work, “at some point, you'll miss stuff. You won't improve. You won't get better. You'll pat yourself on the back and feel great and tell everybody how great you are, but you won't get the results.”

While this notion of collaborative reflection was described by multiple participants, for many of the Black superintendents having a racial affinity group to reflect on their work has been paramount. At the time of this study, 6 of the participants were part of The New Jersey Alliance of Black Superintendents, a self-organized, collegial organization of Black superintendents. As Harrison shared, “a lot of the issues we deal with as minority superintendents are totally different from those of our white counterparts.”

He explained,

> Just the mere fact that you are Black, or you are a minority, there are issues that we deal with on a regular basis, every single day. You are challenged because people don't believe that you have the aptitude to do the job and you shouldn't be in this position. Even though they may have only graduated from high school, they think that they know

more about educating children and you do. They don't go to any other profession telling people how to do their jobs, but they want to tell us how to do ours.

Although there were many participants that described reflective practices which included their colleagues, no one mentioned including students or parents as part of the process. While there were participants such as Eric who said that they try to "keep students at the center" of this work, no one specifically included student voice in response to the question about their reflective practices. This was misaligned with the framework that specifies that when culturally responsive leaders reflect critically, they use student, parent and community voices to help them gauge the cultural responsiveness of their schools (Khalifa, et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018).

On the other hand, there were a handful of responses that illustrated understanding of systemic oppression and the ways that it impacted their students. Their responses supported Khalifa's (2018) assertion that culturally responsive leaders must be able to identity oppression in order to challenge it. For example, Harrison shared:

> When you start talking about social justice, then you also want to look at what's happening in your schools… the largest number of students being suspended are Black males. Why is that the case? Well, let me just say this way to you in a nutshell, anything negative that you evaluate, my black male students are the highest in those areas… when you start talking about attendance, failure rates, suspensions… they're the highest and you have to ask yourself, why?

Throughout the interviews, the participants identified multiple systemic and school-based inequities, however they did not mention having thought about the ways that *they* may have contributed to them. This was the "missing piece" in terms of self-reflection being *critical*, as

culturally responsive leaders are called to constantly consider how they might be "directly involved or complicit in oppressive contexts" (Khalifa, 2018, p.61).

Although the participants did not name the tenets verbatim, nor did their responses reflect that they all had a deep level of theoretical understanding of the frameworks, it was evident that they had been utilizing culturally responsive approaches to leadership prior to it becoming a buzzword. As Harrison shared, "I have no idea what that means, culturally responsive... you know you deal with these things so many times they come back to you over the years, just dressed up a little different." Their ability to "walk the walk" as opposed to simply being able to "talk the talk" illustrated many culturally responsive approaches that they described taking as district-level leaders.

**Setting the Standard for Equity-Focused Leadership**

When asked directly, multiple participants acknowledged their awareness of Leadership Standard 3., but no one was able to recall off the top of their head much of what it said. However, when I presented them with the standard and asked them to reflect on its role in their work, multiple participants affirmed that this standard was paramount to all that they do in their roles as superintendents. As Lucas explained, the standard "touched all domains and aspects of school operations" while ensuring "that there's an equity consideration woven into each one of them." Many participants shared the same opinion as Raymond who asserted, "This is what you should be doing as a leader, regardless, it shouldn't take a standard to make you do this."

Though they all believed that this standard was doable, a discrepancy in opinion as to who is doing this work and how it is actualized in practice remains. On one hand, there were participants such as Jackson that believed that this standard is "inherent in the being of superintendent" while on the other hand, others such as Belinda, shared that "a lot of people

think these things are innate but they are not. They have to be learned and studied." This difference in opinion helps to support the necessity of this standard, but also affirms that it may be difficult for some to effectuate. While the desire to do this work may be inherent for some superintendents, guidelines that provide insight as to what it looks like in practice may be needed for it to be effectively actualized.

Overall, the participants agreed that this standard was both a reasonable and necessary expectation of all school leaders. However, they were selected for the study specifically because they had expressed an interest in equity-focused leadership, so it is entirely possible that this may not be the opinion shared by all of New Jersey's superintendents. This may be compounded by the fact that this is something that is being studied inconsistently in leadership preparation programs.

Of the programs that they did describe it being addressed in, there was not one participant who stated that this standard was included as part of their educational leadership coursework at any of the universities they attended. However, multiple participants who participated in state sponsored leadership programs, such as NJ EXCEL, stated that studying this standard was a large part of their work. Khalil shared that as part of the NJ EXCEL program "all of these standards are broken down with checklists" and that they were provided with "questions to ask yourself" in order to determine if they were meeting them.

New school leaders seeking permanent certification are required to complete the New Jersey Leaders to Leaders (NJL2L) mentoring program in which Harrison serves as a mentor. He shared that this standard is reviewed in-depth during the mentorship training program. He explained, "When you are mentoring a person, these are some of the things you are asked to talk about." Khalil also shared that this standard "was at the heart" of his mentoring experience.

However, Eric who also went through the program noted that there were still inconsistencies in regards to the extent to which it is covered. He explained, "You can have two mentors who see that same standard and one pushes it and really supports their resident with it and the other just glazes over it**."** Variations in the way that this is covered from program to program, or even within a program itself, help to explain why it can be difficult for district-level leaders to effectuate this standard.

Valerie, who leads workshops for NJPSA (New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association) shared a "crosswalk" that their organization created to illustrate the connections between this leadership standard and some of the more widely used educator evaluation tools. While the crosswalk calls for the consideration for the "academic, social, emotional and behavioral needs," and specifically named both bilingual and special education students as priorities, there was no explicit mention of any additional subgroups. Additionally, the crosswalk did not include anything about expectations for academic success, diversifying the curriculum, restorative discipline practices, or providing professional development, all of which fall under the theoretical umbrella of culturally responsive leadership.

Albert shared that he recently completed the "new superintendents' academy with NJASA" and that while he "loved every workshop that I attended, none of them had this in it." He recommended that "for the new superintendents' academies, this should be one major workshop, if not a few workshops, for the superintendents who know that this is what we need to do, but may not know how... this should be a part of the requirement for us to earn our certificates."

Although this standard has been adopted as an expectation for all school leaders, Michael explained that from a state level, "there's really not been a lot of direction given to school

districts about equity and inclusion issues. There's more recently been a lot of talk, but I wouldn't say direction." He said that this guidance should include developing a common understanding of what being culturally responsive is. He provided this rationale:

> If you lined up a hundred educators, God knows the different answers you're going to get... we haven't had those basic conversations as to what these things are and how do you move forward with them. Granted we have wildly different types of school districts throughout the state that seem to show that this work is doable, but we really haven't gotten it from the DOE (Department of Education).

Though the standard is expected of all leaders, it is being covered inconsistently in leadership programs. This calls into question the feasibility holding leaders accountable to a state standard when there is very little funding, resources or guidance being provided to ensure that they are prepared to do it.

In terms of accountability, the participant responses showed that overall they believed that these standards were both feasible and necessary, but they were divided on how to ensure that all superintendents do so. As Lucas explained, people are not going to do this work simply because a standard tells them to. He believes that "the only way we're going to bring about change in public education is not through mandates or Machiavellian accountability." He suggests that "the only way" that this is going to happen is "by inspiring and motivating people to join up in the cause and be their best selves every day" but asserted that "you can't mandate people in public education to be their best selves."

Kevin explained that he "absolutely" believes that this is something that should be required of all district-level leaders, but shared that while many may talk about "marginalized students, deficit based schooling, expectations, race, and culture... they didn't really do anything"

about it. As opposed to Lucas, he believes that if there were ways to hold people accountable to this work, "then you would then see real movement." He explained, "When you're held accountable, when you inspect what you expect, then you're going to have accountability to it, because then it costs someone something when we don't do it." However, when asked if there were any evaluation tools that explicitly include culturally responsive practices he responded "Nope. Not at all." He then suggested, "if you want to make a million dollars, then make that tool."

Raymond explained that in response to equity and diversity having been moved to "the forefront of education for superintendents" some have begun "writing merit goals" which come with "monetary incentive." Although this seems to be pushing more district-level leaders to employ culturally responsive practices, he questioned, "Would they have done it without the merit goal, out of the kindness of their heart? Maybe." He then added, "But if it takes money to change your outlook and make you dive deeper into it, then so be it."

There were some participant responses, such as Lucas's, that suggested that upholding these standards is not something that can be forced. However, it was more common for the participants to suggest that leaders must be held accountable to this work, which aligns more closely with what was found by Khalifa and Briscoe (2015) in their study of district-level leaders which asserted that educational leaders do not typically engage in this work unless they are *forced* to do so.

This leadership standard was adopted by the state in 2017, years before the monumental events of 2020 both exacerbated and brought a spotlight to the systemic inequities and injustices that have forever been woven into the fabric of our nation's schools. While the participants in this study all shared that they had been committed to equity-focused leadership for years prior to

these events, multiple participants shared that these events specifically propelled the work and instigated what they referred to as a "call to action" that intensified the urgency for all district-level leaders to do the work outlined in this standard. As Thomas stated, "We already had a problem and the pandemic just compounded it."

While multiple participants shared that given their new responsibilities related to the pandemic, equity work became much more difficult, their responses revealed that upholding this standard is not optional or warranted only under certain conditions. Despite everything that was happening, they made sure it did not, as Thomas shared, "die on the vine."

In many cases, such as what was described by Michelle, "the work was happening, but that event made it even more urgent." For Black superintendents in particular, being able to lead towards equity in the wake of George Floyd's murder created what Kevin called, "a new political dynamic" in which he cautioned superintendents of color against becoming "the face" for the district. As he explained,

> Because of all those tensions out there in this country, all this attention, they think they just need to hire somebody of color, but they don't give them the authority… All the uprisings taking place right now is really that. You may see a few leaders of color get hired, but what are they really going to be able to do?

His question echoed what Khalifa (2018) brought to light in regards to Black principals being hired because it was believed that they would "maintain the status quo" as opposed to actually addressing the problems stemming from systemic racism that were prevalent in their districts. Being hired for something other than "face value" is an additional consideration for equity-focused district-level leaders, particularly those that are people of color.

Multiple participants shared that while they believe this work is feasible and necessary, superintendents who choose to do this work must be both resilient and courageous. Harrison shared that this work is not for people who are "thin skinned" and that it requires being able to handle the inevitable pushback. He suggested that "if you don't have the stomach for it, if you're not willing to fight for those kids, then you're not going to be able to do it."

More than one participant also shared that doing this work "doesn't make you a popular person" and that there are times when you are going to have to be willing to go it alone. As summed up by Kevin, "If you want to be a culturally responsive superintendent, just know there's only a few of us out there." These responses directly align with Khalifa's research (2018) which affirmed that courage is a necessity for culturally responsive leaders.

**Summary**

In conclusion, this study showed that the formative experiences of equity-focused district-level leaders often reflect the inequities that they are trying to remediate for their students. In many cases, the participants shared childhood experiences that were, in one way or another, much like those of their students. However, there were also a handful of participants who didn't describe having these experiences per se but did demonstrate their commitment to the principles of Culturally Responsive Leadership. While having these experiences was certainly impactful, it was not necessarily correlated to their level of understanding or commitment to culturally responsive practices.

For the most part, when asked to describe a culturally responsive classroom or leader, the participants did not respond by simply rattling off the tenets of either culturally responsive pedagogy or leadership. Although there were instances in which their responses demonstrated a basic or incomplete theoretical understanding, their approaches to this work shared in context

demonstrated that they were in many ways in which culturally responsive practices were embedded in their leadership approaches. While their responses included a more in depth understanding of the more external/action oriented aspects of the framework, such as those related to curriculum, instruction and community engagement, their approaches to the more introspective/reflective practices, such as critical consciousness and critical self-reflection both fell short in regards to both the pedagogical and leadership frameworks.

Additionally, there were multiple instances where there were inseparable connections between the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy and those of culturally responsive leadership, or even between various components of each framework itself. For example, expanding access to high level courses to include students, spoke to both the pedagogical tenet of high expectations and the leadership component of creating inclusive spaces, but also required them to provide professional development in order to ensure that the implicit bias of their staff did not become a determining factor in their enrollment. This aligns with Khalifa's (2018) findings that assert that culturally responsive practices must be woven throughout all facets of the school system, both horizontally and vertically and is reflective of what Fullan (2018) referred to as *systemness*.

It is evident that these superintendents are using many culturally responsive practices to meet the demands of this standard. Grounded in a belief that all children are deserving of a high-quality education, they are now actively working to dismantle the oppressive practices in their schools that are reflective of the broader systemic inequities in society. Despite being provided with very little guidance from the state or otherwise, the participant responses aligned with Albert who shared, "100% all leaders, all teachers, board members, everyone needs to be held to these standards" and that they are able to do so "because of the dedication to the work that we do, those of us who truly believe in this; we do it because it's right. It's a part of who we are not

because a standard told us to do it." Therefore, effectuating this standard is only feasible, but that which should be demanded of anyone who aspires to lead a school district towards equity.

# CHAPTER V
# CONCLUSION

Chapter 5 provides a brief summary of the purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical framework and methodology. It then discusses the research findings and implications for practice. Finally, this chapter concludes with recommendations for future research on culturally responsive district-level leadership.

## Overview of the Study

To address issues of educational injustice, school leaders in the State of New Jersey are being held to the Professional Standard for Educational Leaders which demand Equity and Cultural Responsiveness. This standard explicitly states that "effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being." Superintendents occupy a precarious position, often torn between doing what they believe is best for students and the external demands that influence their jobs. As district-level leaders this encompasses everything from implementing the local initiatives of their school board to upholding state and federal mandates. Tasked with the responsibility of trying to make sense of this conflict, even the most equity-driven district-level leaders may find themselves unable to employ the culturally responsive leadership practices needed to interrupt the oppressive practices found in schools.

This study centered on the experiences of Superintendents who are actively working to address the systemic inequities found in our nation's schools. The goal of this study is to identify the experiences that have influenced their leadership practices, to explore what they know and believe about culturally responsive practices and to examine their understandings of and approaches to the Leadership Standard for Equity and Cultural Responsiveness. This study

contributes to the literature on Culturally Responsive Leadership by providing insight on how these factors work together to inform equity-focused leadership practices at the district level.

## Discussion of Findings

This study sought to identify the ways in which superintendents might employ culturally responsive practices as a means of developing and sustaining culturally responsive school systems. Because research on culturally responsive district-level leadership is limited, at times I compare the findings from this study to the literature on culturally responsive teaching and building-level leadership. While several themes that emerged from this study aligned with those found in previous research around these culturally responsive practices, my discussion focuses on the ways in which superintendents use their positions to create systems that advance equity and educational justice in in their school districts. I also discuss the impacts of external influences on participants' practices, including the state mandated leadership standards, the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 Black Lives Matter Movement.

### *Personal and Professional Experiences*

In response to the research question, what personal, educational, and professional experiences influence the leadership practices of superintendents in the State of New Jersey who are working towards educational justice, I found that most participants in this study had experiences in their formative years that influenced their decision to become equity-focused educators as well as their approaches as culturally responsive district-level leaders. Of the 23 participants, 18 described childhood experiences that were reflective of those of their students in terms of race, acquisition of English as a second language, special education classification and/or economic insecurity.

Of this group, almost all of the 12 Black participants either referenced having experienced racism in school and/or having positive and influential experiences with Black educators as children themselves. These experiences were extremely influential in their practice as educators and leaders. Oftentimes noting that having an educator of color was a rarity, many participants expressed their desire to either "be that person" for their students or "pay it forward" in terms of using their position to help ensure that their students, or colleagues, of color had access to similar opportunities.

The two participants who lived in multilingual households described how those experiences shaped their work in bilingual education and with immigrant families; whereas the participant who had been classified as a special education student reported how his own experience directly influenced his initial decision to teach that population specifically. Additionally, 3 white participants shared that their experiences growing up in low-income households caused them to see education as a "way out" of poverty which subsequently influenced their decision to become equity-focused educators. These responses add to the research in regards to understanding *why* district-level leaders may choose to pursue a career in equity-focused leadership.

Of the 23 participants, only 8 described knowing that they wanted to be teachers from an early age. The remaining participants obtained degrees and worked in alternate fields prior to entering the field of education. In many cases, these experiences contributed to their having learned skills that were applicable in their roles as superintendents, such as budgeting, public speaking, or advocacy. This aligns with research which shows that superintendents must possess a variety of skills that are needed to balance the educational, financial, and administrative aspects of the district (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2006). It also offers an

additional perspective as to what these aspects may look like from an equity-focused perspective and what may need to be taught in traditional educator and leadership preparation programs.

### *Culturally Responsive Practices*

With respect to research question 2, what do these superintendents know and believe about Culturally Responsive practices, it was evident that all participants believed that all students have the potential to succeed academically when in a responsive environment. This is the first step towards equity. Though they did not specifically name academic achievement as an indicator of a culturally responsive classroom, their understanding and application of this tenet was made clear through the actions they took to expand access to higher level courses, as well by the support that they provided so that they could be successful in them. They also discussed working to reverse deficit thinking and to create school environments where students were recognized for their assets.

The participants' initial responses to questions about culturally responsive pedagogy were often very short and alluded to their having a very basic understanding of the framework for culturally relevant teaching, such as the inclusion of diverse texts and the importance of knowing your students. While these are necessary components of culturally responsive education, educators doing so without fully understanding how to use them to drive instruction or build critical consciousness aligned with research that found that Ladson-Billing's original framework has since become distorted and that representation in texts and cultural celebrations alone are less likely to be impactful if used as standalone practices. (Ladson-Billings, 2014). While superintendents must be aware of the need for diverse representation as they are ultimately the one who approve what resources and materials will be used in their district, without a solid

understanding of how to use these materials, it will be difficult for them to implement a culturally responsive curriculum with fidelity.

In terms of culturally responsive teaching, while most participants stated that diverse texts were critical, there were only a few who went further to describe what types of texts should be used. Very few participants described the importance of choosing diverse texts that were relevant to their students' lives, did not feed into racial stereotypes and would support opportunities for students to develop their critical thinking skills. Texts such as these can create opportunities for students to develop their critical consciousness when used responsively, which would satisfy what is deemed by culturally responsive pedagogues as the true purpose of schooling (Ladson-Billings,1995). The participant responses touched on this aspect of the framework lightly, if at all, in their descriptions of culturally responsive pedagogy, which aligns directly with the research that showed that this tenet is the one that is most often omitted in practice (Young, 2010; Freidus, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Alternately, when participants were asked directly about the impacts of the Black Lives Matter Movement, multiple participants expressed their belief that teachers need to be able to facilitate "courageous" conversations in their classrooms that address current issues regardless of their content area. While the participants often identified this as being necessary, they also spoke at length about their teachers, and at times administrators, not being prepared to do so.

Despite recognizing this as important, their responses did not include examples of professional development that was being provided specific to this skill. Because many teachers may be unfamiliar with both the content that they are now being asked to teach, as well as the pedagogy needed to make their teaching practices culturally responsive, teachers need "a more

systemic, comprehensive approach" to culturally responsive practices in their preparation programs (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Teachers' inability to implement culturally responsive pedagogy may also be due in part to their lacking cultural competence. While cultural competence was never named explicitly by the participants as an indicator of culturally responsive pedagogy, their responses illustrated that they had clearly considered it. For example, when discussing hiring practices, almost all the participants discussed initiatives to diversify the workforce. In some cases, it was suggested that having teachers who were reflective of their students would help to ensure that there was less of a "cultural mismatch," a stance aligned with the research that shows that this can lead to more positive student outcomes (Partnership for Public Education, 2017). The participant responses focused on the importance of building positive relationships and knowing who your students are, which are both important in terms of cultural competence, as it is impossible to know your students if you are not finding ways to connect with them.

However, simply knowing who they are is only part of the culturally responsive puzzle. As found in the research, it is not only important for educators to use positive relationships and celebrations of culture to create inclusive spaces for students to learn (Ladson-Billings, 2004), but also so that their experiences and knowledge can be used to scaffold learning and provide them access to cognitively demanding tasks needed to promote brain development (Hammond, 2015). Much like what was found in this study in regards to the inclusion of diverse texts, the participant responses most often referred to the first layer of this tenet, but did not explain why this is important in terms of academics or how teachers might go about doing this from an instructional standpoint.

Though there is a notable benefit in having teachers that "look like" their students, differences in culture, ethnicity, and language also play a part in a teacher's effectiveness in terms of being culturally competent. As defined by Ladson-Billings (2004), cultural competence is not necessarily defined by racial matching. Rather, she defined cultural competence by the ability to celebrate the cultures of their students and teach them about at least one more. While the first part was included in multiple participant responses, the latter was not. This confirms that the goal of building a workforce should go beyond simply trying to ensure that it is reflective of the students or it could potentially defeat the purpose.

This is where professional development geared at helping teachers, regardless of race, become more culturally competent comes into play. Multiple participants explained that this takes a considerable amount of time and money, which means that this must be prioritized and accounted for in their strategic improvement plans. They also described providing professional development opportunities for their staff to understand their own identities and unpack their own biases, have "courageous conversations" and develop their culturally responsive "tool boxes," which reflect suggestions for professional development made by both Khalifa (2018) and Ladson-Billings (2000).

Additionally, many participants described having developed professional partnerships with external organizations as beneficial to this work, noting that having "another set of eyes" helped them to look at what was going on in their district through a different perspective. In this case, participants' approaches connected the pedagogical tenet of cultural competence to the leadership framework which calls for the development of culturally responsive teachers. This was one of several instances where the frameworks for culturally responsive teaching and leadership overlapped.

There were also instances where the leadership actions participants described fit into multiple components of both frameworks. This overlap between frameworks and the tenets within them illustrates that in order to be a culturally responsive leader, one must understand that these leadership actions cannot happen in isolation. Rather, they must work in tandem with one another to create and sustain a culturally responsive system. This echoes what Fullan (2018) meant when he used the term *systemness*, as well as what some of the participants were referring to when explaining that Leadership Standard 3. spoke to everything they had to do as superintendents with an additional layer of equity woven through it. For equity-focused superintendents working to create equitable school systems, this idea of systemness can only occur if they attend to all components of both the framework for culturally relevant teaching, as well as the framework for culturally responsive leadership.

In terms of creating inclusive spaces, two dominant themes emerged: centering student voices and reversing exclusionary discipline practices. These responses aligned with Khalifa's assertion that for a school space to be truly inclusive, it must hold student voices at their center (Khalifa, et, al. 2016, Khalifa, 2018), as well as research that affirms that student voice is critical when engaging in equity work (St. John, K., et al. 2017). This was especially true when talking about the impacts of the Black Lives Matter movement and the fact that there were multiple participants who explained that at the time of these uprisings, they intentionally created additional opportunities for students to speak about how they were feeling and to share their experiences as students in their schools. This rise in student advocacy propelled what multiple participants referred to as a "call to action."

Although the participants had described being engaged with this work long before 2020, the participants described a new "call to action" by which their students began asking for

educators to better prepare their students to understand what was going on around them., This was described by nearly all the participants despite their demographic differences. Their requests echo what has been found in previous research, as well as in this study, which confirms that when the component of critical consciousness is not understood, culturally responsive practices cannot be implemented to the extent that Ladson-Billings (2014) suggested. Alternatively, had students been involved in this work from its onset, as suggested by Khalifa (2018), perhaps administrators could have identified this need and provided support to teachers proactively in advance of events that called for them to do so, such as what transpired in response to the 2020 Black Lives Matter Movement.

In terms of reconfiguring discipline procedures, multiple participants explained the steps they were taking to move their districts away from exclusionary practices and towards more equitable and restorative ones. More than one participant shared that their districts had previously been cited for disproportionate discipline of both Black students and those in special education, which aligns with the research that shows that this is systemic and historically reflective of the practices most typically found in our schools (Gordon, 2018). Their focusing on dismantling exclusionary discipline practices showed that they had developed culturally responsive approaches that were aligned with both Khalifa's (2018) research and the Leadership Standard.

Alternately, despite the leadership standard's explicit inclusion of all populations "associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status," Black students and those with disabilities were the only populations specifically mentioned by most of the participants. The additional subgroups included in the standard were not mentioned much, if at all. Though language barriers came up a lot in terms of

engaging families, only one participant described her work being specific to the inclusion newcomers to the United States and multilingual learners. Given that most participants described this population as growing exponentially, it was notable that there were not more examples of specific actions that were taken to include these students.

Additionally, of the 23 participants, only four mentioned their LGBTQIA+ populations. When they did, they were mentioned in conjunction with other more general equity-focused topics, rather than by way of describing any specific initiatives that were geared to meet their needs. As suggested by Khalifa (2018), as well as Standard 3, culturally responsive leaders must be intentional in their inclusion of *all* "othered" subgroups. The lack of inclusion of this population suggests that perhaps even culturally responsive leaders need to broaden their understanding of this work which was described by Ladson-Billings (2014) as always changing.

When discussing the ways in which they engage the community, multiple participants noted that it was critical that district-level leaders take the time to get to know the community so that they can best meet their needs. They described actions that were taken to dismantle language barriers and others that were designed to provide more opportunities for working families to be involved in their children's school experiences.

While their goal was most typically to engage with the community as a means of gathering information about their needs, there were also instances where their doing so had an additional impact. For example, in more than one instance the participants explained that in their creating more engagement opportunities for immigrant families, teachers gained a new perspective about their presumed lack of involvement. This helped to reverse their deficit thinking that assumed they simply did not care. This aligns with Khalifa's findings around culturally responsive leadership (2018) in which he stated that the goal of community

engagement was both to include them in the work and to use this work to address deficit mindsets that many educators have about parents and their desire to be involved in their children's educations.

Though critical self-reflection was not identified by name or explicitly in response to naming culturally responsive practices or leadership qualities, it was evident that reflection was a big part of their process, both personally and professionally. Their doing so was almost second nature, with multiple participants stating that this was simply how they were "wired" or as "inherent to the being of a superintendent." They also described a variety of protocols and practices that they use to ensure that they build in time for these reflective practices to happen consistently. This aligned with Khalifa's (2018) assertion that culturally responsive leaders are constantly reflecting on their work.

Also, aligned with Khalifa's (2018) findings that critical self-reflection must be collaborative, most participants stated that they participated in reflective activities with their colleagues, sharing that while being a superintendent is a lonely job, it was much easier for them to do this work with support of their peers. Though there were some elements such as these that aligned their reflective practices with those defined "critical," their descriptions did not explicitly describe their practice being focused on the ways in which they themselves may be contributing to or reproducing oppressive practices. They may have described wanting to make sure they did what was best for kids, but they did not specifically describe ensuring that they did so in this way, making their responses fall a bit short of Khalifa's (2018) definition of critical self-reflection.

### *Leadership Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness*

Regarding research question 3, how do these superintendents describe their understandings of and approaches to the NJ leadership standard related to equity and cultural responsiveness, there was not one participant who stated that this standard was either unnecessary or unrealistic. In fact, most thought that this standard is foundational to all that they do as superintendents, with multiple participants questioning how one could be a successful district-level leader without it.

To that point, while they agreed that this standard was theoretically necessary, there were multiple participants who questioned how it was to be upheld given the fact that there is "no real playbook" for culturally responsive leadership. Garver and Maloney (2019) found that most educational leadership programs do not adequately prepare aspiring leaders with the training needed to identify and respond to the inequitable practices found in schools. Similarly, many of the participants shared that culturally responsive leadership was not something that they learned in school. Additionally, multiple participants stated that without evaluation tools that specifically measure the cultural responsiveness of teachers, school leaders and superintendents, it is difficult to hold people accountable to it.

Although prior research showed that many school leaders will engage in this work only when they are forced to do so (Khalifa, et.al., 2015), these participants suggested that their being equity-focused leaders was not something that was ever forced. Rather, much like what was shared by the participants, there was an overwhelming trend in the data which illustrated that being a culturally responsive leader comes down to who you are, not what you are forced to do.

To that effect, multiple participants shared that upholding this standard requires a lot of personal strength and courage, especially for leaders at the district level, which directly aligned

with Khalifa's (2018) findings that affirmed that courage was a necessary quality of culturally responsive leaders. There were numerous times in which the participants described having to stand strong in their defense of what they thought was "right," even if it didn't make them "the most popular person." Regardless of these difficulties, multiple participants alluded to their doing this work because they believed it is "inherent" in their beings.

Additionally, there were some participants who explained that if their attempts to uphold this standard conflicted with external forces, such as the desires of the community or state mandates, it could ultimately result in them losing their jobs. While Khalifa (2018) considered the pushback a building-level leader may get from their staff, community and school board, the impacts of this pushback on a superintendent require additional consideration as their positions are often dependent on board approval. In districts where they are state-appointed, their ability to do this work may depend on the political initiatives of whomever is in office. This illustrates that something needs to be done to ensure that superintendents are not only aware of what the standard is, but that the practices that are used to support them are better understood across the board. In that respect, a superintendent would be protected if they were to actualize these standards, whereas it would not be a political decision of whether they should engage in equity-focused work and would rather be considered an expected part of their job.

As with any leadership standard, but especially in regards to this one, there are external circumstances that have the potential to impact their feasibility. In the case of this study, there were notable connections between this leadership standard and the unprecedented events of 2020. With both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement bringing issues of inequity to the forefront, participants considered the standard for equity and culturally responsive leadership more pertinent than ever.

The pandemic forced superintendents to quickly adjust their budgets, oftentimes reallocating money to ensure that there was equity in terms of access to devices and technology. In many cases, they also assumed responsibility for providing additional services such as extensive at-home instructional support, in addition to expanding their food service and health care program. While their responses clearly illustrated that they had been engaged in this work prior to the BLM uprisings, a collective "call to action" forced many of them to reconsider if what they had already been doing was enough. Though none of the participants described their work as having started in response to these events, many described the ways in which this work propelled their work as culturally responsive leaders by pushing them to engage the community, provide professional development, and create more inclusive spaces. In turn, multiple participants explained how these events transformed many of their practices, encouraging all stakeholders to become more involved and "part of the process," which shifted their practices to become more closely aligned with Khalifa's (2018) findings around culturally responsive leadership.

Throughout this study there were a multitude of findings that aligned with Khalifa's (2018) research around culturally responsive leadership. While he focused primarily on building-level leadership, this study adds an additional perspective as it considers the ways in which doing this work on a district-level leader may differ. Most importantly, the scale by which some superintendents do this work can be much larger, complex and difficult given that there are school districts in this state serving over 35,000 students. The ability to transform a district, as opposed to a school, can be much more difficult. Not only do superintendents contend with the inequities in a school, they must also address inequities that may arise between schools in the same district and those that run throughout their entire school system. This is where the idea of

*systemness* (Fullan, 2018) becomes imperative for superintendents. Whereas it is necessary for them to understand that the tenets of culturally responsive leadership are interconnected; to be an effective culturally responsive leader, one cannot simply address one component without the others.

Another difference concerns the pushback that a culturally responsive leader may get from their staff, school board and community, Khalifa's study did not address the fact that the impact of this pushback may have on a superintendent, whose position differs from that of a principal in terms of it being non-tenured and dependent on either the approval of the school board or the appointment of the state. While confronting this pushback on all levels requires courage, which was both a finding of Khalifa's (2018) and something that was described by multiple participants, the reality of these consequences can be much graver for a superintendent. As shared by Harrison, a superintendent must be willing to lose their job in exchange for doing what is "right" for children which may sit in direct conflict with board initiatives and/or external mandates

As mentioned by Khalifa (2018), school leaders of color will often get hired if it is believed that they will "support the status quo" (p.190). This is also true in the case of superintendents; however the impact of events such as the 2020 Black Lives Matter Movement, adds an additional caveat. This political movement created what Kevin referred to as a "new political dynamic," whereas school districts may seek to hire a superintendent of color, but may only do so for aesthetic purposes. Kevin cautioned that being put in this position can be very risky for a superintendent and may do very little to change the system if they are not supported in this work. To this end, district-level leaders must understand the politics that relate to this work which is an additional complexity not explored by Khalifa.

Additionally, the findings of this study align with what Khalifa (2018) found in terms of using data and external partners to help diminish the subjectivity that is also attached to this work. Khalifa and Briscoe's study (2015) of district-level leaders found these practices were necessary for district-level leaders who they asserted often became defensive when confronted with data that illuminated the inequities in their schools. Alternately, the participants in this study shared that these are things that they have done themselves as district-level leaders in this work. Their responses suggested that rather than being defensive, they admit when they don't know something and have remained objective when looking at what is going on in their schools.

While their study (Khalifa, et al., 2015) found that many superintendents needed to be forced to do this work, this study illustrates the opposite. Their responses demonstrated that they shared the belief that equity-driven leadership is at the foundation of everything that they do. Furthermore, multiple participants shared that this work is not something that they have been forced to do. In fact, their responses illustrated that they often feel as if they are still going against the grain, despite there being a professional standard that insists that that they do so. This may be because the participants in this study were selected through community nominations because they were already actively engaged in this work, as opposed to the superintendents in their study who were not recruited or selected in the same way.

Rather, the participants' responses suggested that many of them believe that they do this work because it is "inherent in their being," "just who they are," or part of the universe's "bigger plan." While there are undercurrents of reflection and self-awareness in culturally responsive practices, as well as a similarity in believing that ALL children are deserving of school spaces that are free from oppression, the spiritual component of this work has not yet been discussed.

This study adds a new perspective to the existing bodies of research and illustrates a new connection between culturally responsive leadership and contemplative education.

## Implications for Practice

Findings from this study provide several implications for how school leaders can increase their understanding of culturally responsive practices and effectively uphold the standard for equity-driven leadership.

### *Creating Equitable and Inclusive School Spaces*

Though it seems that overall educators have begun to engage in conversations around equity, inclusion, and diversity this study helps to illuminate the fact that leaders concerned with creating inclusive school spaces must think beyond the inclusion of a "diverse text." Given the polarized political climate and the most recent outcry of public opposition to the teaching of what some have called "revisionist history" or an "indoctrination" of students which sit in direct conflict with NJ State Mandates that call for a diverse and inclusive curriculum, superintendents must now pay considerable attention to the ways in which diverse perspectives and equity issues are being covered in their curriculums.

District-level leaders who are committed to equity work must ensure that their curriculum reflects a variety of diverse perspectives, but furthermore that the teachers being tasked with delivering this content understand it themselves and know how to handle what may arise when they begin to have these conversations in their classrooms. This suggests that more attention to culturally responsive pedagogy, both in theory and practice, should be included in leadership courses that focus on curriculum and instruction. Superintendents looking to implement a culturally responsive curriculum should also ensure that their content area supervisors are well-

versed in culturally responsive pedagogy, as it often falls on them to create curriculum and to help guide the instructional component of their work.

Additionally, while representation is important, there were not many participants who explained that just adding some diverse titles alone will not always help them to reach their desired goal. Therefore, the use of culturally responsive curricular audits which provide more in-depth information about the content and themes that are covered in the text, as opposed to a more basic tally of characters by race/ethnicity, as well as the resources that are given to teachers in support of their teaching this new content, would assist them in uncovering both where their curriculum lacks representation, what teacher resources may need to be provided, as well as where the content itself may be questionable despite it being reflective of the students.

In this study specifically, there was minimal mention of intentional leadership practices focused on including students who are in the process of acquiring English as a second language, as well as those that are part of LGBTQIA+ community. In a state with mandates designed to promote bilingual education and protect LGBTQIA+ students, as well as a leadership standard that specifically includes these populations, it was surprising that there was little to no mention of practices and protocols being used to ensure their inclusion as well.

While it is understood that culturally responsive practices originated in response to inequities found in schools that were predominately serving students of color, intersectionality between multiple subgroups has since broadened the scope of equity work. While there was considerable attention paid towards the reversal of exclusionary practices in schools that have had a disproportionate impact on students of color and those in special education, equity-focused leaders who are truly concerned with ensuring that all students feel included need to ensure that they are also paying attention to additional populations as specified by Leadership Standard 3.

Therefore, understanding and addressing the needs of multilingual learners and LGBTQIA+ students should be explicitly included in both the theoretical frameworks and any resources used to promote the use of culturally responsive practices.

Though superintendents are responsible for leading this work, they are often still in the process of learning how to do it themselves. This affirms that leadership preparation programs and leadership resources that are specifically intended to support culturally responsive practices need to be revamped if they are to be successful in their preparation of leaders in the State of New Jersey. There is also evidence to support that due to the lack of consistency in these programs and a lack of resources to support superintendents in effectuating these standards, working with external partners who are considered experts in this field can significantly help to build their own capacity, as well as help to provide professional development and coaching to others in their districts.

### *Building a Culturally Responsive Workforce*

One of the biggest concerns shared by the participants was their inability to both diversify and increase the cultural competence of their staff. While they described a variety of professional development opportunities, waiting to develop cultural competence until someone starts teaching may be too late. As suggested by Ladson-Billings (2000), the development of cultural competence should begin in teacher and leadership preparation programs. That said, with a notable lack of consistency across programs that are approved as satisfying the certification requirements of the state, teachers are currently going into classrooms with widely varying degrees of cultural competence.

District-level leaders may want to reconsider their hiring practices to ensure they are attracting a culturally competent candidate pool. This is especially paramount now, as there is a

notable “exodus” of educators at all levels, which could potentially open the possibility for there to be a significant shift in demographics and a reversal of what has been, and continues to be, a predominantly white workforce (Jennings, 2022). There are some actions that can be taken at the district-level, including several suggested by the participants. To begin with, though the participants described the ways in which they tried to diversify their teaching force, they did not provide any examples of ways that they might have changed their methods for screening candidates. District-level leaders hoping to build a more culturally competent teaching force, may want to evaluate their interview question protocols to ensure that they have questions that could help them gauge a candidate’s understanding of culturally responsive practices.

Another suggestion, which builds on Kevin’s method of recruiting employees from within the community, could be expanded in several ways. Districts may want to consider offering incentives, such as assistance with the certification process and required coursework, specifically to community members who may either already be working in the schools in uncertificated positions or in alternate fields with applicable skills or content area expertise. Another solution might be to develop partnerships with universities that have teacher preparation programs that focus specifically culturally responsive pedagogy and/or approach teacher education through the lens of social justice. Additionally, dual enrollment programs in which high school students wishing to become future teachers can begin taking credits at a local university prior to their graduation, such as the dual enrollment program that has been established between Montclair State University and East Side High School in Newark (*Red Hawks Rising: Dual Enrollment Program*). This program, which allows students to begin their coursework for college while still in high school and provides financial incentives to students that help to buffer the cost of tuition, can also work towards mitigating the hiring shortages and

ensuring that teachers are coming into classrooms with a better idea of how to be culturally competent and responsive.

Additionally, as suggested by this study, some of the most equity-focused educators worked in seemingly unrelated fields before even considering becoming teachers. To that end, considerations for recruitment and hiring candidates who are currently working in other fields, may help them in effectuating this goal. Most recently, a pilot program that allows the state to waive certain certification requirements was signed into state law. Although one of the goals of this initiative is to help district's increase the diversity of their staff, it was signed into law as an attempt to assist district-leaders mitigate the staffing challenges exacerbated by the pandemic (Jennings, 2022). Superintendents hoping to utilize this variance must apply for district approval, thus it is suggested that they familiarize themselves with this law and apply for the variance as quickly as possible, as it will only be awarded to a small number of districts.

Furthermore, given that there are now standards designed to ensure that all students have access to culturally responsive teachers and leaders, universities that are working to prepare teachers and leaders in the state of New Jersey may need to reevaluate their programs and assess the extent to which these standards are being addressed. In turn, the state's licensing department may need to consider reevaluating their evaluation protocols to ensure that there is an accurate way of evaluating consistency around culturally responsive practices in all state approved teacher and leader preparation programs. This would aid in the implementation of culturally responsive practices across the state.

Likewise, tools that are being used to evaluate teachers and administrators should be revised to include indicators that explicitly name and describe culturally responsive practices. Tools with specific indicators of culturally responsive practices that are aligned to the tenets of

these frameworks could be used in order to ensure that educators on all levels are being held accountable to the implementation of these practices as they pertain to their roles at various levels practices.

### *Reflective Practices in Public Education*

Critically reflective practices are paramount to this work, yet their explicit inclusion in traditional educator preparation programs isn't happening. From a pedagogical standpoint, critical consciousness as described by Ladson-Billings, is a practice used to "develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (1994, p.4). From a leadership perspective, critical self-reflection asks leaders to consider "how they are positioned within organizations that have marginalized students" and how they can use this position "to personally and organizationally resist this oppression" (Khalifa, 2018, p.59). Both practices require an awareness of self, as well as a deep understanding of the socio-political context that has shaped the world around us.

Although these practices sit at the core of culturally responsive education, as found in both this study and the existing research (Freidus, 2020; Young, 2010, Ladson-Billings, 2014), these tenets also tend to be the most often overlooked. This omission causes us to consider what can be done to ensure that critically reflective practices are understood and prioritized as part of an effective leadership practice. Although the participants shared many reflective practices, with just a bit of fine tuning they could have fine-tuned them to move them from generic reflection to that which would be defined as *critical.*

Without understanding the systemic inequities at the root of oppression and explicitly questioning one's own role in the reproduction of practices that may contribute to the oppression

of both their students and families, reflection alone cannot be considered critical. This suggests that more attention to the sociopolitical context and the impact that it has on educators, as well as our education system, may need to be studied more closely in educator and leadership preparation programs prior to them introducing methods-focused course work.

Additionally, although there were many participants that described reflective practices which included their colleagues, no one mentioned including students or parents as part of their reflective processes. Adding their voices to this process would make it better aligned with Khalifa's research (2018) which asserts that for reflection to be critical, it must center their voices. Though the importance of reflection may be touched upon theoretically in traditional programs, to my knowledge engaging in a practice of critical self-reflection isn't included at all. Thus, it is imperative that both teacher and leadership preparation programs include critically reflective practices as part of their trajectories and that the standard for equity and culturally responsive leadership be amended to include critical self-reflection as a required part of an effective leadership practice

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study examined the experiences, beliefs and understandings of district-level leaders and the ways in which these influenced their approaches to culturally responsive leadership. More research is needed to further understand their current experiences and approaches as equity-focused leaders.

1. There have been previous studies conducted on the effectiveness of culturally responsive teacher preparation (Young, 2010) and some that have focused on what can be done at the university level to better prepare culturally responsive leaders (Garver & Maloney, 2019). This study showed that there are discrepancies between what is being covered in

educator preparation programs at both the universities, as well as those that are provided by the state. Additional research around these discrepancies and the impacts that they may have on a superintendent's ability to design district-level systems to promote educational equity is needed. Such studies may provide valuable information about what should be required in leadership preparation programs and help to ensure that there is more consistency across them.

2. Multiple participants discussed the lack of a "culturally responsive playbook" for district-level leaders. Research around culturally responsive leadership has primarily focused on building-level leadership with some consideration given to the ways in which superintendents may transfer this work to the district-level (Khalifa, et al. 2016). While this study focused on what the participants said they believed in and what they described as having done in practice, it was not an evaluation of their actions, nor was it intended to be used as a means of determining if what they said they did was true. Additional research is needed to determine whether superintendents do what say they do in regards to culturally responsive practices at the district level. In addition, a more in-depth study of how culturally responsive district-level leaders go about doing the things they said they do, as well as research that looks at the impacts of these actions, could help to provide the "play book" that superintendents who are looking to lead their districts towards educational justice may need.
3. This study focused on superintendents who were actively engaged in equity-work in a state that has adopted a leadership standard that is explicitly inclusive of culturally responsive practices in their professional standards for school leaders. A study of equity-focused superintendents who are working in a state with standards or mandates that stand

in opposition to this work would add an additional perspective to the research around culturally responsive district-level leadership.

4. Multiple participants in this study referenced their being part of The New Jersey Alliance of Black Superintendents, a collective of Black superintendents who formed this group for this purpose. Prior research has shown that racial affinity groups have helped increase retention and professional growth for educators of color (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). In thinking of the ways in which culturally responsive leadership can be supported at the district level, additional research around the impact of affinity groups on the culturally responsive practices of equity-focused leaders of all races is needed.
5. Per multiple participants, upholding Leadership Standard 3. without having evaluation tools that are explicitly tied to culturally responsive practices implementation at the district level can be significantly challenging. Additional research around the impact of using equity-focused standards, culturally responsive evaluation tools, and merit-based incentives as a means of holding educators accountable should be conducted to evaluate their impact on a district-level leader's ability to move this work forward.
6. This study considered the ways in which the COVID-19 Pandemic and the uprisings in support of Black Lives influenced the equity-focused work of district-level leaders. However, in thinking about the most recent reports that allude to a "mass exodus" of educators from the field at all levels, additional research should be conducted to further explore the psychological and emotional impacts that these events have had, and are continuing to have, on district-level leaders.

## Conclusion

This study affirms findings from prior research on culturally responsive approaches of teachers and building level leaders. It also identifies the personal, educational and professional experiences specific to culturally responsive district-level leadership that have contributed to their understandings of and approaches to culturally responsive practices in both theory and practice. The goal of this study was not simply to explore and share these experiences, but also to provide aspiring leaders with information and examples that may assist them in employing culturally responsive practices and organizing for equity at the district-level. Additionally, the findings in this study may help to inform decision making at the state level, in terms of what must be done to ensure that all certificated school leaders are prepared to meet the needs of their diverse student bodies and are held accountable to upholding the standard for equity and cultural responsiveness.

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## Appendix A
## Participant Information

| Pseudonym | Race | Gender | Racial Breakdown of Students in District | % Free and Reduced Lunch | % of ELL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rashad | Black | Male | 87.3% Black<br>10.8% Hispanic/Latino | 60.5 | 3.7 |
| Benjamin | Black | Male | 51.1% White<br>22.6% Black<br>13.0% Hispanic/Latino<br>5.3% Asian<br>7.8% Two or more races | 10.1 | 0.6 |
| Harrison | Black | Male | 20.3% White<br>55.6% Black<br>16.8% Hispanic/Latino<br>2.5% Asian<br>4.1% 2 or more races | 41.9 | 1.1 |
| Charlotte | Black | Female | 3.4% White<br>21% Black<br>73.8% Hispanic/Latino<br>1.5% Two or more races | 60.7 | 32.6 |
| Mikayla | Black | Female | 3.3% White<br>51.9% Black<br>44.4% Hispanic/Latino | 43.2 | 6.1 |
| Thomas | White | Male | 35.9% White<br>32.4% Black<br>25.5% Hispanic/Latino<br>5% Two or more races | 51.6 | 2.8 |
| Valerie | Black | Female | 35.9% White<br>32.4% Black<br>25.5% Hispanic/Latino<br>5% Two or more races | 51.6 | 2.8 |
| Albert | Black | Male | 49.5% White<br>6.6% Black<br>33.3% Hispanic/Latino<br>7.5% Asian<br>2.5% Two or more races | 22.6 | 12.9 |

| Pseudonym | Race | Gender | Racial Breakdown of Students in District | % Free and Reduced Lunch | % of ELL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Khalil | Middle Eastern | Male | 43.9% White<br>8.4% Black<br>44% Hispanic<br>1.8% Asian<br>1.7% Two or more races | 33 | 4.8 |
| Russell | Black | Male | 51.1% White<br>26.2% Black<br>7.9% Hispanic/Latino<br>3.7% Asian<br>6.8% Two or more races | 10.3 | 1.1 |
| Madeline | Black | Female | 52.7% White<br>1.4% Black<br>34.2% Asian<br>7.3% Hispanic/Latino<br>4.%3 Two or more races | 0.9 | 7.7 |
| Michael | White | Male | 44.4% White<br>7.6% Black<br>42.5% Hispanic/Latino<br>3.8% Asian | 24.8 | 16.1 |
| James | White | Male | 52.9% White<br>11.1% Black<br>19.2% Hispanic<br>6.1% Asian<br>4% Two or more races | 21 | 4.2 |
| Jackson | White | Male | 52.9 White<br>11.1 Black<br>6.1 Asian<br>19.2 Hispanic<br>4 Two or more races | 21 | 4.2 |
| Sharon | White | Female | 49.2 White<br>5.4 Black<br>33.8 Asian<br>8.9 Hispanic<br>2.3 Two or more races | 13.8 | 4.7 |
| John | White | Male | 19.4 White<br>36.6 Black<br>4.9 Asian<br>32.7 Hispanic<br>5.9 Two or more races | 26.8 | 3.4 |
| Jasper | White | Male | 25.8 White | 61.8 | 26.3 |

| Pseudonym | Race | Gender | Racial Breakdown of Students in District | % Free and Reduced Lunch | % of ELL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | 11.5 Black<br>1.1 Asian<br>61.4 Hispanic | | |
| Meaghan | White | Female | 52.4 White<br>5.8 Black<br>2.7 Asian<br>3.7 Hispanic<br>1.7 Two or more races | 41.1 | 5.1 |
| Michelle | White | Female | 54.9 White<br>4.1 Black<br>32.8 Asian<br>4.6 Hispanic<br>3.2 Two or more races | 1.4 | 3.1 |
| Eric | Black/White | Male | 40.5 White<br>24.4 Black<br>23.3 Hispanic<br>7.2 Two or more races | 33 | 5.1 |
| Roger | Black | Male | 31.7 White<br>48.4 Black<br>14.8 Hispanic<br>4.1 Two or more races | 53.3 | 2 |
| Raymond | Black | Male | 1.6 White<br>71.2 Black<br>18.2 Hispanic<br>8.32 Two or more races | 36.4 | 0 |
| Joanna | Latina | Female | 5.2 White<br>21.1 Black<br>5.6 Asian<br>68.1 Hispanic | 52.5 | 19.1 |

# Appendix B
# Interview Protocol

Participant Interview Number:
Pseudonym:
District Pseudonym(s):
Date of Interview:
Start/End Times:

| Interview Question | Research Question Addressed |
|---|---|
| So, I am interested in knowing about your formative years. Can you tell me a bit about your background?<br>a. Where did you grow up?<br>b. What was your experience like in school?<br>c. When and where were you educated? (higher ed) | **What personal, educational, and professional experiences influence the Culturally Responsive Leadership practices of New Jersey State Superintendents?**<br>● Establish background<br>● Obtain additional information related to information provided in the demographic questionnaire<br>● Explore childhood experiences that may have influenced their beliefs about education and/or approaches as an educator/leader |
| Everyone has their own path into education. I am interested in learning more about yours.<br>2. What made you decide to become an educator?<br>3. What made you make the transition into leadership?<br>4. What propelled you to become a district-level leaders?<br>5. What/who do you think has been most influential on your work as an educator? | **What personal, educational, and professional experiences influence the Culturally Responsive Leadership practices of New Jersey State Superintendents?**<br>● Establish background<br>● Explore educational/professional experiences that may have influenced their beliefs about education and/or approaches as an educator/leader. |
| There is a lot of talk in schools about equity lately.<br>6. How would you define educational equity?<br>7. Can you tell me about a specific inequity that you have seen in your district?<br>a. What do you think is going on?<br>b. How have you tried to address it?<br>8. What have some of your successes in working toward equity been?<br>a. Would you like to share any district documents/artifacts with me that would help to illustrate that work?<br>9. What have some of the challenges been?<br>10. What work do you still feel you have left to do? | **What do Superintendents in the State of New Jersey who are interested in leading for educational equity know and believe about Culturally Responsive Leadership?**<br>● Exploration of participants' thoughts and beliefs about educational equity |

| Interview Question | Research Question Addressed |
|---|---|
| a. What is your biggest priority?<br>b. What are your next steps?<br>**NOTE:** IF this does not come up organically in the conversation: 2020 has been quite a year in general and specifically for educators.<br>11. Do you think these events (Covid-19/BLM) have influenced/impacted your work around equity? If so, how?<br>12. Now, I invite you to share/discuss with me any documents that you think might help me to understand the work you have been doing to achieve educational equity in your district. (ie: mission/vision, strategic plans, professional development, policies/procedures) | |
| A lot of educators use the term culturally responsive in conjunction with equity work.<br>13. What do you think it means to be "culturally responsive?"<br>a. What would you expect to see/hear in a culturally responsive classroom?<br>b. How would you describe a culturally responsive leader?<br>c. What role do you think you play in this work?<br>d. How have you come to this understanding?<br>14. What role does self-reflection play in your leadership practice?<br>a. Can you tell me about a time/experience where your reflective practices influenced a specific action?<br>b. What was your anticipated goal?<br>c. Do you think that action resulted in your desired outcome?<br>d. What insight did you gain via your reflection?<br>e. How did that insight inform your next steps? | **What do Superintendents in the State of New Jersey who are interested in leading for educational equity know and believe about Culturally Responsive Leadership?**<br>● Exploration of participant's understandings of "culturally responsive" practices<br>● Exploration of participants' process of critical self-reflection and the ways in which who they are and what they have experienced may influence their leadership practice. |
| I'd like to discuss the NJ State Professional Standards for School Leaders in general. On the DOE website, it says that they are both to building level leaders AND applicable to those in district level positions.<br>15. Do you feel that these standards guide you as an educational leader? If yes, how so? If not, why?<br>I'd like to share a copy of Standard 3. (Equity and Cultural Responsiveness) for us to unpack.<br>16. Are there any ways that this standard connects to your work? If so, how?<br>17. Do you think setting this as a standard for all | **What is the relationship between the knowledge, beliefs, and experiences of Superintendents and Professional Standard for School Leaders (3) Equity and Cultural Responsiveness?**<br>● Exploration of their familiarity of the leadership standards in general<br>● Exploration of Standard 3. (Cultural Responsiveness) and its connection to their work around educational equity<br>● Exploration of the ways in which these standards may influence their work |

| Interview Question | Research Question Addressed |
|---|---|
| superintendents is realistic? Why/why not? | |
| Thank you so much for speaking with me. Before we close I would like to make sure I have your correct demographic information. (Confirm any unknown data needed from Appendix D: Demographic Data)<br><br>18. Do you have any questions for me regarding this interview or is there something you would have wanted me to ask you regarding your experience as a Superintendent who is working towards educational equity?<br>19. If after listening to the transcription I need to clarify any of your responses, may I contact you?<br>20. Are there any other NJ Superintendents that you would suggest I reach out to participate in this study? | **Interview Wrap Up**<br>● Opportunity for participants to share additional comments or elaborate on things previously shared during this interview<br>● Opportunity to correct any misinterpretations or add additional comments/insight to study |

**Appendix C**
**Coding Scheme**

| Code | Meaning |
|---|---|
| **I** | **Identity:** Identity/how their identity has influenced their leadership practice<br>• Subtopics as they emerge |
| **SPC** | **Sociopolitical Context:** History of racism, systemic oppression, intergenerational poverty, and the impact that it has had on our system of education/country |
| **SJ** | **Social Justice:** Equates the work of education/leadership to social justice |
| **ALT** | **Alternate Route:** Participant took a non-traditional route/varied professional experiences |
| **TEA** | **Teacher:** Participant always wanted to be a teacher |
| **MEN** | **Mentorship:** Person/people who they credit for their entry into education and/or provides mentorship for other aspiring educators/leaders |
| **ORG** | **Professional Organization:** Participation in a professional organization that has impacted their work as a superintendent working towards educational justice |
| **AA** | **Academic Achievement:** High expectations for all students/Academic Rigor |
| **CC** | **Cultural Competence:** Cultural competence of teachers/scaffolds for learning<br>Subtopics to include connections/diverse texts |
| **CN** | **Connections:** Importance of making connections with students/families |
| **DV** | **Diverse Texts:** Importance of diverse/representative texts |
| **CrC** | **Critical Consciousness:** Sociopolitical/critical consciousness of teachers/students, importance of critical thinking, agency/advocacy |
| **CE** | **Community Engagement:** Ways in which they engage with the community |
| **PD** | **Professional Development:** Equity focused professional development opportunities |
| **IS** | **Inclusive Spaces:** Ways they have worked to curate inclusive spaces in schools |
| **CSR** | **Critical Self Reflection:** Ways in which they reflect on their role as superintendent |
| **STLP** | **Standard/Leadership Program:** Standard included as a part of leadership program |

| Code | Meaning |
|---|---|
| **STEV** | **Standard/Leadership Evaluations:** Accountability measures for teachers/admins |
| **EQ** | **Equity Issues:** Issues that they have noticed/been working on<br>Subtopics based on participant responses<br>• Subtopics as they emerge |
| **ACT** | **Standard/In Action:** Specific examples of ways to put standards into practice<br>Subtopics based on participant response |
| **BLM** | **Black Lives Matter:** Explicitly references the death of George Floyd/Black Lives Matter impacting equity work |
| **C19** | **COVID-19:** Explicitly references COVID-19 Pandemic impacting equity work |
| **WW** | **Words of Wisdom:** Advice offered to others hoping to become superintendents who are engaging in equity work<br>• Subtopics as they emerge |

## Appendix D
## Professional Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness

**STANDARD 3. EQUITY AND CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS**

**Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.**

Effective leaders:

a) Ensure that each student is treated fairly, respectfully, and with an understanding of each student's culture and context.

b) Recognize, respect, and employ each student's strengths, diversity, and culture as assets for teaching and learning.

c) Ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic and social support, and other resources necessary for success.

d) Develop student policies and address student misconduct in a positive, fair, and unbiased manner.

e) Confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status.

f) Promote the preparation of students to live productively in and contribute to the diverse cultural contexts of a global society.

g) Act with cultural competence and responsiveness in their interactions, decision making, and practice.

h) Address matters of equity and cultural responsiveness in all aspects of leadership.

Professiona

National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015). Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015. Reston, VA: Author.

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY
1 8 5 6

December 14th, 2020

Danielle Mastrogiovanni
Seton Hall University

Re: 2021-157

Dear Danielle,

The Research Ethics Committee of the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved your research proposal entitled, "*NJ Superintendents Understandings of and Approaches to Culturally Responsive Leadership*". as resubmitted. This memo serves as official notice of the aforementioned study's approval as exempt. If your study has a consent form or letter of solicitation, they are included in this mailing for your use.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol, informed consent form or study team must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

You will receive a communication from the Institutional Review Board at least 1 month prior to your expiration date requesting that you submit an Annual Progress Report to keep the study active, or a Final Review of Human Subjects Research form to close the study. In all future correspondence with the Institutional Review Board, please reference the ID# listed above.

Sincerely,

Mara C. Podvey, PhD, OTR
Associate Professor
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

Phyllis Hansell, EdD, RN, DNAP, FAAN
Professor
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

**Office of the Institutional Review Board**
Presidents Hall · 400 South Orange Avenue · South Orange, New Jersey 07079 · Tel: 973.275.4654 · Fax 973.275.2978 · *www.shu.edu*



## Appendix F

### Letter of Solicitation

Dear Superintendent:

You are invited to participate in a study on the experiences of New Jersey Superintedents Understandings of and Approaches to Culturally Responsive Leadership.

All Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents who are currently employed in the State of New Jersey and who have shown an interest in working towards educational equity are eligible to participate in this study by completing a short demographic questionnaire and participating in an interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will be conducted via Zoom at a time that is convenient for you sometime between December 1, 2020 and February 26, 2021. During the interview, I will ask you questions about your personal, educational and professional experiences and the ways that these experiences may have influenced your understanding of educational equity and your approach to achieving this through district-level leadership. At the time of the interview, you will be invited to share and describe any district level documents of your choice that you feel will add value to the study.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you grant permission, the interview will be recorded via the Zoom platform. Information from this research will be used solely for the purpose of this study and any publications that may result from this study. All conversations will remain confidential; your name and any other identifying characteristics (such as the name or exact location of your school district) will not be used in reports or presentations.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this study. If you have any questions or would like to participate, please contact me as soon as possible at danielle.mastrogiovanni@student.shu.edu.

Sincerely,

Danielle Mastrogiovanni
Doctoral Candidate
Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, Management, and Policy
Seton Hall University College of Education and Human Services

# Informed Consent Form

**Title of Research Study:** New Jersey Superintendents Understandings of and Approaches to Culturally Responsive Leadership

**Principal Investigator:** Danielle Mastrogiovanni, Doctoral Candidate

**Department Affiliation:** Seton Hall University Educational Leadership, Management, and Policy

**Sponsor:** This research is supported by Seton Hall University Educational Leadership, Management, and Policy.

**Brief summary about this research study:**
The following summary of this research study is to help you decide whether or not you want to participate in the study. You have the right to ask questions at any time.

The purpose of this study is to explore the culturally responsive district-level leadership of Superintendents in the State of New Jersey who are working towards achieving educational equity.

You will be asked to participate in a virtual interview.
You will be in this research study for 60-90 minutes. If clarity is needed regarding information shared during this time, you may be contacted to participate in a follow-up conversation.
The interview topics will include your personal and professional history, your role as a superintendent, culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership, and the work that you are doing to achieve educational equity.
The risk of participation is minimal.
The main benefit of participation is to add to the body of research on culturally responsive district-level leadership.

**Purpose of the research study:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives and experiences of Superintendents who are working to address the inequities found in schools.

You are being asked to take part in this research study because you are working towards educational equity in your role as a superintendent or assistant superintendent in the state of New Jersey. You will be one of 20 people who are expected to participate in this research study.

**What you will be asked to do:**

Your participation in this research study will include:

- One 60-90 minute interview conducted by myself as the primary investigator.
- Sample questions:
    1. What made you decide to become an educator?
    2. What made you make the transition into leadership?
    3. What propelled you to become a district level leader?
    4. What/who do you think has been most influential on your work as an educator?

- Interview will be conducted via Zoom.
- Data will be recorded and transcribed.

- All data will be de-identified and kept confidential.
- During the interview, you will have the option to submit and or discuss any district level documents that you feel will help to provide insight into your work around equity.

**Your rights to participate, say no or withdraw:**
Participation in research is voluntary. You can decide to participate or not to participate. You can choose to participate in the research study now and then decide to leave the research at any time. Your choice will not be held against you.

The person in charge of the research study can remove you from the research study without your approval. Possible reasons for removal include missing study visits, non-compliance with the study procedures.

**Potential benefits:**

There may be no direct benefit to you from this study. However, possible benefits may include contributing to the existing body of research around district-level leadership which may contribute to the furthering of educational equity.

**Potential risks:**

The risks associated with this study are minimal in nature. All data will be de-identified to protect the professional identities of the participants.

**Confidentiality and privacy:**

Efforts will be made to limit the use or disclosure of your personal information. This information may include the research study documents or other source documents used for the purpose of conducting the study. These documents may include district strategic plans, board resolutions, mission/vision statements, curricular documents. All efforts will be made to keep these documents confidential. All data collected during this process will be de-indentified. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that oversee research safety may inspect and copy your information. This includes the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board who oversees the safe and ethical conduct of research at this institution.

This interview is being conducted via Zoom and involves a secure connection. Terms of service, addressing confidentiality, may be viewed at https://zoom.us/docs/en-us/privacy-and-security.html?zcid=3736&creative=430738468993&keyword=%2Bzoom%20%2Bprivacy&matchtype=b&network=g&device=c&gclid=Cj0KCQjw59n8BRD2ARIsAAmgPmJP1JXEe_QsW51SaBmXv7z1ZIIHk7lYeW9FBY-2z_vtKU7jTv6RWUAaAhxtEALw_wcB. Upon completion of the interview, any possible identifiers will be deleted by the investigator. You will be identified only by a unique subject number. Your email address, which may be used to contact you to schedule an interview will be stored separately from your interview data. All information will be kept on a password protected computer only accessible by the research team. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.

**Data sharing:** Data collected from this study will not be shared with anyone outside of the study team.

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**Cost and compensation:**

You will not be responsible for any of the costs or expenses associated with your participation in this study. There is no payment for your time to participate in this study.

**Conflict of interest disclosure:**

The principal investigator and members of the study team have no financial conflicts of interest to report.

**Contact information:**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this research project, you can contact the principal investigator Danielle Mastrogiovanni at danielle.mastrogiovanni@student.shu.edu or the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board ("IRB") at (973) 761-9334 or irb@shu.edu.

**Optional Elements:**

Audio and/or video recordings will be performed as part of the research study. On the recording, subjects will be identified by their unique subject number. Recordings will be transcribed digitally via the Zoom platform. I will be the only person to listen to the recordings. Recordings will be downloaded and saved on an encrypted storage device and stored in a locked cabinet in my home indefinitely. Please indicate your permission to participate in these activities by placing your initials next to each activity.

| I agree | I disagree | |
|---|---|---|
| _____ | _____ | The researcher may record my [audio or video] interview. In understand this is done to help with data collection and analysis. The researcher will not share these recordings with anyone outside of the study team. |

I hereby consent to participate in this research study.

| | |
|---|---|
| Signature of participant | Date |
| Printed name of participant | |
| Signature of person obtaining consent | Date |
| Printed name of person obtaining consent | |