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Culturally Responsive Leadership: The Lived Experiences of Mid-Level Administrators in Public Education Navigating Competing Priorities

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CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MID-LEVEL ADMINISTRATORS IN PUBLIC EDUCATION NAVIGATING COMPETING PRIORITIES

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ABSTRACT

The increasing diversity within the U.S. education system necessitates the presence of influential leaders capable of fostering Cultural Responsiveness (CR) through their leadership strategies. Previous research has underscored the critical significance of implementing CR in achieving effective outcomes for students' needs in today's evolving educational environment. Nonetheless, a gap exists in understanding middle-level leaders' challenges when striving to implement CR approaches in a bureaucratic system. This qualitative phenomenological study sought to delve into the real-life experiences of middle-level district curriculum administrators operating within a bureaucratic structure. The study examines middle-level district curriculum administrators' descriptions of roles, experiences, communication and advocacy, priorities, and constraints. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seven middle-level curriculum administrators. As a result of the thematic findings, three key themes were identified: (a) Navigating Challenges Despite Competing Priorities; Stakeholders And Administrators; (b) Actions and Decisions; Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership; and (c) Communication and Advocacy. The findings demonstrate various challenges and constraints imposed upon participants based upon the nature of a bureaucratic system, coupled with the often difficult process of navigating CRL in the modern socio-political environment of the United States. Notably, one key finding underscores the importance of garnering the buy-in from high-level administration and stakeholders to implement CR successfully.

DEDICATION

For your unconditional love and support, Ashlee, Caitlyn, Gianna, and Angelina.

For Tom, my biggest fan, steadfast supporter, and the driving force behind my perseverance.

This paper is in loving memory of my father, Alfred Farina, whose wisdom and guidance

inspire me daily, and my mother, Gloria Farina, whose enduring love nurtured

the seeds of my ambition.

I also dedicate this work to my father-in-law, Thomas Bucco, whose

legacy of strength and laughter lives on in our hearts!

for the stars. I am eternally grateful for your patience and the sacrifices you have made on my behalf to push me through, even in the darkest times of my life. I truly appreciate you!

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Frances Hesselbein (2002) once said, "Culture does not change because we desire to change it. Culture changes when the organization is transformed – the culture reflects the realities of people working together daily (p. 23)." Culturally Responsive Leaders (CRL) are currently a high priority in education because they help to facilitate cultural change within schools and districts to support diverse learners (Bertrand & Kamenica, 2023). These leaders play a crucial role in fostering cultural change by promoting practices that support the diverse needs of learners from various cultural backgrounds. Cultural change in the United States is needed to address the needs of diverse students, improve equity, and promote positive outcomes for all learners. The evidence supporting this includes demographic shifts, persistent achievement gaps, the positive impact on social and emotional well-being, the demands of a globalized workforce, and research demonstrating the benefits of culturally responsive teaching (Bingham et al., 2023). Embracing cultural diversity in education is a matter of social justice and a practical necessity for creating a more inclusive and successful educational system (Cabral-Gouveia et al, 2023). As Madhlangobe et al. (2012) pointed out, schools are becoming increasingly diverse, calling for innovative approaches to educational leadership in which leaders exhibit culturally responsive organizational strategies, behaviors, and abilities to accommodate the varied and ever-evolving social and cultural needs of their students, families, and communities.

According to Khalifa et al. (2016), culturally responsive leaders must work together to reform school culture to meet the educational needs of diverse children. Gay (2010) pointed out that school reform that transforms school culture and climate requires all parts of the educational system, including policies, funding, and administration, to change. Further, Khalifa et al. (2016)

highlighted that school leaders must work cohesively to cultivate relationships with key stakeholders to create responsive environments. According to Hollie (2017), culturally responsive leaders can educate and support teachers in meeting the needs of lower-income students and racially and culturally diverse students. At the middle level of districts, curriculum administrators can be culturally responsive by proposing policies and making decisions that support culturally responsive literacy instruction. Culturally responsive instruction enables the school to keep and admit more students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Hollie, 2017).

According to Kyei-Blanks (2021), implementing culturally responsive administrative practices and curricula by school districts presents perhaps the most difficult challenge for middle-level administrators in school districts, who must simultaneously meet administrators' demands at the district level and schools alike. Administrators in school systems, excluding superintendents and other district-level officials, simultaneously undertake both leadership and follower responsibilities (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021; Teichler & Cummings, 2015). Accordingly, administrators at the middle level of school district hierarchies are conduits of organizational culture both upward and downward in the organizational hierarchies of the school districts they serve (Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021; Teichler & Cummings, 2015). On the one hand, they must respond in practice to superintendents and other district-level administrators' organizational missions and goals within the confines of the organizational hierarchies they find themselves embedded. On the other hand, they must be responsive leaders to school-level administrators and the concerns and needs of their respective teachers, students, parents, and broader communities (Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021). Accordingly, middle-level administrators have one of the most challenging leadership roles; they must balance

competing norms and expectations for practice and performance from administrators at the district and school levels of their organizational hierarchy (Hill-Jackson et al., 2019).

Though much literature exists about principals and cultural responsiveness, less exists about the role of district-level upper administration, and there is scant literature about mid-level leaders at the district level. The remainder of Chapter 1 outlines the background of the problem, defining the purpose of exploring mid-level public education administrators' lived experiences as culturally responsive leaders and managers within the bureaucratic structures of the school districts they serve. I am adding to the literature to gain clarity about how leaders at the middle level navigate these competing priorities from the balcony and dance floor levels. First, I discussed the background of the problem, which included culturally responsive leaders and middle-level leaders as both managers and followers within a bureaucratic structure. The problem statement, research questions, and purpose statement are presented. The remainder of Chapter 1 supplies an overview of the theories: Culturally responsive leadership and Weber's bureaucratic management theories.

Background of the Problem

Culturally Responsive Leadership

Culturally responsive leadership originated from the idea of culturally responsive pedagogy. According to Gay's (2002) description of culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive teachers must consider students' cultural identities, histories, and world views to educate students from diverse backgrounds effectively. Despite the importance of culturally relevant teaching, Gay (2010) argued that it could not solve or address systemic problems that diverse students face. Further, all facets of the education system, such as funding, policymaking, and administration, need to be reformed and changed to consider cultural differences. If

educational institutions want teachers to be culturally responsive, then leaders at all levels of the organization should be expected to do the same. Culturally responsive leaders, regardless of their position within the organization, play a pivotal role in creating and maintaining inclusive and equitable learning environments that value difference and progress steadily toward the ideal of transformative leadership (Shields, 2010). Middle-level district leaders play a critical role in bridging the gap between the superintendent's goals and the needs of the building-level principals. However, enacting culturally responsive practices can add an additional layer of complexity to this already challenging task (Campos-Moreira et al., 2020). Middle-level district leaders must understand the importance of cultural responsiveness and be equipped with the skills and knowledge to implement it successfully.

Kayser et al. (2020) described CRL theory as articulating practices, policies, and programs that emerge from the leadership behaviors of leaders toward establishing an inclusive education setting for students, teachers, and parents. For Kayser et al. (2020) and Welborn (2019), culturally responsive school leadership encompasses leadership behaviors that concentrate on establishing relationship networks with members from different cultures and creating an institutional environment that readily recognizes, accepts, and celebrates the differences that emerge from different cultural backgrounds. While not mainly focusing on CRL, Welborn (2019) mentioned a culturally proficient framework of leadership that points to four components that recognize and overcome resistance to change in schools, develop values that counteract systemic barriers, recognize unhealthy and healthy cultural practices, and support policies that lead to equitable outcomes for traditionally underserved students (Welborn, 2019).

Schukow (2020) analyzed how white male educational leaders practice CRL, noting that first, they intentionally seek to understand their personal histories and epistemological biases.

Furthermore, the leaders approach leadership from a student-centered perspective, placing the child's outcomes at the focus of all decision-making rationalizations. The leaders in Schukow's study also humanized minoritized students, which the author explained as including and protecting students' identities outside their academic identities. The leaders are usually also keen on separating and promoting the separation of behaviors from identity, thereby delinking the stereotypical assumptions that identity influences behaviors. Lastly, culturally responsive leaders also engage in practices that source cultural awareness for "funds of knowledge" for the different cultural groups in the community the schools serve (Khalifa, 2018, p. 121). Hollowell (2019) commented that culturally responsive leadership theory moves beyond the inclusive classrooms' direction to the larger context of education, especially leadership. Scholars have demonstrated that culturally responsive leadership emerges from culturally relevant pedagogy that seeks not to change the school's culture but to represent more cultures' formal and informal curricula and policies (Fraise & Brooks, 2015).

Leadership within the spectrum of education has been examined and recognized as needing a solid focus on CRL practices, including the application of multicultural education (Hollowell, 2019; Kang et al., 2019). Disparate processes are pertinent to these two spheres of leadership, with the district leadership (represented as leading from a balcony) and school leaders (who perform their roles on the dancefloor) operating to provide needed change to the public school system. While the existing literature does explore CRL and its association within the context of educational leadership practices and positions, research is lacking in exploring CRL for middle-level district curriculum administrators. Nevertheless, in this dissertation, culturally responsive leadership enables me to explore how middle-level leaders enact culturally responsive goals despite contradictory perspectives from the balcony and dance floor.

Middle-Level Leaders, Organizational Change and Culturally Responsive Leadership

Currently, public K-12 administration follows a derivative of Weber's bureaucracy, namely the representative bureaucracy, where bureaucrats are selected from different cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Meier, 2019). In this application, middle-level leaders play an essential role in ensuring that representative bureaucracy effectively promotes equity and inclusion within public K-12 administrations. As district central office representatives, middle-level leaders are responsible for implementing policies and procedures that reflect the organization's commitment to diversity and cultural responsiveness. They must also work closely with building-level administrators to ensure these policies are effectively implemented at the school level.

In addition, middle-level administrators must be responsible for developing and implementing professional development programs that promote cultural competence and support all staff members' ongoing growth and development (Lindsey et al., 2013). They must work to create a culture of continuous learning and improvement and provide resources and support for educators to implement culturally responsive practices. Middle-level leaders are positioned in the hierarchy where strict top-down implementation of education curricula and policies is visible (Cotta, 2021). Thus, balancing the strict top-down implementation of education curricula and policies with the need for flexibility and responsiveness to the building principals' and communities' unique needs becomes challenging (Cotta, 2021).

Max Weber proposed a theory of bureaucratic management explaining that large institutions require rationality, structured hierarchies, competence, structured decision-making processes, specialization, and impersonal interactions between employees (Weber, 2016). Bennis (2017) explained that this system is akin to a vending machine for decision-making, where plea

submissions are inserted, and decisions are made through automated code-based processes, deriving judgments without considering social factors. According to Weber (2016), the machine is impersonal and responds to the human error factor in decision-making, leading to more effective and efficient decisions concerning the strategies and practices to achieve the organization's objectives. Bennis (2017) further argues that this system prioritizes efficiency and consistency over fairness or justice, as it may not consider the complex social and contextual factors in a given situation or circumstance.

Recent scholarship has criticized the application of the theory in organizational management in all fields, with Rutherford et al. (2021) reflecting on its implications in school administration. Rutherford et al. (2021) observed that bureaucrats have similar biases to the public, criticizing their use in teacher performance evaluations. Furthermore, Carpenter et al. (2012) observed that in the education field, administrators, as subordinates, experienced a loss of agency and autonomy while developing a culture of fear towards school leadership. However, Mehta (2014) demonstrated that bureaucratic management practices implemented in K-12 education contribute to professionalism for those in leadership positions and hold them accountable for their subordinates.

Middle-level administrators in K-12 learning institutions engage in administrative functions and roles. Their roles directly support the school's mission, goals, and vision (Teichler & Cummings, 2015). In K-12 schools, for instance, middle-level leaders actively guide and manage administrative units. Some administrators take time to plan a significant part in different traditional service areas, including student services, business services, and external affairs (Teichler & Cummings, 2015). In addition, the leaders can offer guidance and socio-emotional support. The other primary conventional service that most administrators provide is academic

support. Since academics are the primary reason children enroll in K-12 schools, administrators work hard to provide as much academic support as possible. According to Khalifa et al. (2016), all organizational leaders are responsible for reflecting on their practices, providing professional development, fostering an inclusive learning environment, and collaborating with the community. Middle-level administrators, for that reason, can be classified as either non-academic or academic support staff.

The schools mainly base the classification of individuals on the academic and non-academic roles they carry out. In addition to several other things, administrators have the task of promoting innovation in school. To promote innovation and ensure sustained change, middle-level administrators must embrace unity and teamwork by working closely with district and building-level leaders to spearhead creativity, a necessary component for innovation. Gear and Sood (2021) specified that challenge places a heavy burden on middle-level administrators to interact with their coworkers creatively and encouragingly. Research confirms that, in most cases, innovation emanating from the top and bottom management is short-lived (Grubb, 2013). Middle-level leaders in the education field may take on several roles, responsibilities, and approaches. However, no single approach is inherently superior to another (Khalifa, 2018).

The context within using CRL practices for middle-level administrators has become part of the bureaucratic structure for many school districts (Kayser et al., 2020). Culturally responsive school leaders play a pivotal role within the organization and, for the current study, in the public arena. However, the bureaucratic system can create challenges for middle-level curriculum administrators to reach culturally responsive goals. Therefore, exploring these administrators' lived experiences in the school's day-to-day operations is necessary.

Problem Statement

Given the positioning of mid-level leaders as both managers and subordinates within the bureaucratic structure, it can be challenging for middle-level curriculum administrators to reach culturally responsive goals. By nature of their position, they find themselves caught between competing viewpoints of what is happening on the balcony (superintendent) and the dance floor (principals). Yet, few studies have addressed the experiences of mid-level leaders as they try to implement culturally responsive goals within a bureaucratic system. Further research is necessary to explore these administrators' lived experiences in the school's day-to-day operations.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of district mid-level curriculum administrators in public education regarding their experience as leaders and managers within a bureaucratic structure. Specifically, this research aims to illuminate how they enact culturally responsive goals when they have competing viewpoints from what is happening on the balcony and the dance floor. By interviewing district-level assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction employed within public school systems in the New York metropolitan region of the U.S., I describe the phenomenon of these middle-level administrators' experience of working as leaders and managers in a bureaucratic structure while striving to be culturally responsive in their practice.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research:

How do middle-level district curriculum administrators enact culturally responsive leadership while navigating the contradictions of working within a bureaucratic school system?

1. How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe balancing being a leader and follower amidst the competing priorities of the balcony and the dance floor while enacting culturally responsive leadership?

    a) How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe the competing priorities between the superintendent and principals, if any, when enacting culturally responsive leadership?

    b) How do the experiences of middle-level district curriculum administrators who are faced with competing priorities or constraints describe how their actions and decisions show a commitment to cultural responsiveness?

2. How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe their roles as culturally responsive leaders when bureaucratic goals conflict with the ideals of culturally responsive leadership?

    a) How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe their experience dealing with conflicts between bureaucratic goals and culturally responsive leadership ideals?

    b) How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe how they communicate and advocate for culturally responsive leadership practices within their district, particularly when faced with resistance or pushback from higher-level administrators or other stakeholders?

Theoretical Framework

Mid-level district curriculum administrators occupy a unique position within school districts' bureaucratic structures. As a result, they have to find their way around different parts of the bureaucratic system when priorities from the balcony and dance floor diverge. In this study, I

used Weber's (1905) bureaucracy theory and Culturally Responsive Leadership (Khalifa, 2018) to explore how middle-level district curriculum leaders shift back and forth as followers and leaders in the middle of competing priorities. Weber's management theory asserts that a bureaucracy typically has a hierarchical structure in which workers report to each management level. In contrast, CRL asserts that all members of an organization, regardless of rank, play a critical role in developing, decision-making, and sustaining inclusive learning environments that respect diversity and move steadily toward the ideal of transformative leadership. While CRL may be the best option for students in the long run, it places a heavy burden on administrators at the middle levels of an organization. These theories allowed me to make sense of how middle-level district curriculum leaders enact culturally responsive goals when they have competing viewpoints from what is happening on the balcony and the dance floor.

Research Method and Design

This phenomenological study was conducted over three months during the summer of 2023. As stated in the *Sage Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry* (Schwandt, 2007), phenomenology provides context for an individual's lived experience. Phenomenology also considers experiences that occur daily from the perspective of the said individual (Neubauer, 2019). Therefore, the approach was an appropriate method to frame the study that examined the lived experiences of middle-level district curriculum leaders across seven racially diverse districts in the Northeastern United States.

Phenomenological research allowed me to conduct in-depth interviews to use the narratives as ways of knowing and understanding the "lived experiences" of other middle-level district curriculum leaders navigating competing priorities from the balcony and the dance floor from the participant's perspective (Seidman, 2019). The interviews were conducted using the

three-interview series as a guide (Seidman, 2019). A hermeneutic approach helped explore the lived experiences of middle-level district curriculum administrators. In hermeneutics, understanding the meaning of human expression was a key concern and was relevant when trying to understand the subjective experiences of individuals. In addition, hermeneutic philosophy emphasizes the importance of recognizing the context in which an individual's experiences occur and acknowledging that these experiences were shaped by their unique perspectives, social and cultural background, and personal history. Therefore, by using hermeneutic philosophy, I gained a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of middle-level district curriculum administrators by exploring their subjective interpretations and meanings and acknowledging the influence of context and individual perspectives on their experiences (Peoples, 2021).

Population and Method

The study's population comprised seven district-level assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction employed within a New York State public school system. New York State holds over 15,000 schools, including preschools and public charter schools (New York State Education Department, 2023). In this study, the definition of a diverse school consisted of no single race that makes up more than 75% of the school's student body (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022). One participant was employed in the State of New Jersey Public Schools. Each school district employed at least two middle-level administrators, if not more. The population consisted of seven middle-level district assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction and curriculum administrators from racially diverse school districts across the northeastern U.S. In this study, five participants were White, and two were Hispanic Non-White. Participants were 30-59 years old, with five female participants and two male participants.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and individuals could withdraw from the study at any time without risk or consequence. The participant's identity and demographic details remained confidential to safeguard their confidentiality. I conducted two separate one-on-one confidential interviews over two months through Zoom. The first interview was approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes. The second interview was approximately 30 to 45 minutes. I conducted two interviews to help me better explain my subject's experiences, behaviors, and opinions connected to my phenomenon and allow them more time to answer my open-ended questions. In addition, due to the sensitivity of their political position, I opted to interview individuals privately and provide them with the highest level of confidentiality possible. Finally, to fill in any gaps in the data, such as misunderstandings or unclear information, I sent follow-up questionnaires to the participants to reflect on their interviews.

Limitations

Ross and Bibler Zaidi (2019) claim that study limitations are those flaws or weaknesses found within a research study that may impact findings and results. A researcher must be fully transparent about any issues that may occur during the research process and share all limitations. Listing these potential limitations also allows a researcher to present information on how they may create an alternative to the process, thereby avoiding such limitations (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). The first limitation of this study was that participants represented only seven public school districts in the New York metropolitan area. Six were from the same general geographic region. As such, the findings are not transferable to other geographic regions or national contexts. Implications for practice and research to address this limitation are provided in Chapter 5. The second limitation was that the perceptions of participants were constrained to middle-management curriculum administration, which does not include other potentially relevant

populations (e.g., teachers, administrators, parents). Chapter 5 provides recommendations to foster continued research to address these limitations.

Significance

This study demonstrated the perceptions of middle-management curriculum administration in relation to prioritizing and implementing CRL. The research findings showed that resources are critical to developing CRL goals. Furthermore, managing the multiple stakeholder interests was challenging. The study showed that improving upon resources and support needs is vital to overcoming challenges in the U.S. public school system. Fostering support for CRL is vital to addressing behaviors that can perpetuate institutional inequities and racism that have historically favored a White Americanized school system. By sharing the stories of the lived experiences of other middle-level district curriculum administrators, I added to current literature and may inspire other scholars and leaders to conduct similar research to offer insights into their practice when trying to enact CRL while navigating the contradictions of working within a bureaucratic school system.

Conclusion

Middle-level district curriculum leaders play a pivotal role in enacting culturally responsive leadership within a bureaucratic system. Yet, few studies have addressed the experiences of mid-level leaders as they try to implement culturally responsive goals within a bureaucratic system. As such, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of district mid-level curriculum administrators in public education regarding their experience as leaders and managers within a bureaucratic structure. The study included seven district-level assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction employed

within a New York State public school system. A phenomenological approach was employed in which participants supplied responses to a series of two separate interviews.

The next chapter, Chapter 2, provides a more in-depth look at the theoretical framework guiding this research. The chapter reviews the literature on CRL in public school education by all individuals on the hierarchical ladder, from teachers to middle-level administrators to district administrators. I explored relevant research and synthesized studies that showed a gap in the existing literature, thereby suggesting the value of the current study.

Definition of Terms

Bureaucratic management: an organizational structure that features a multitude of regulations, standardized procedures, and demands, a division of tasks and obligations, well-defined hierarchies, and formal, business-like exchanges among staff members.

Culturally responsive education: the practice and commitment to the understanding of the cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds of students and their families and a commitment to equity and social justice

Culturally responsive school leadership: the practice of building systems that not only celebrate our students' cultures and heritages but act as dynamic tools for their socialization into a multicultural and multiethnic country.

Middle-level district administrators: refers to assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction.

Middle-level leaders: the practice leadership and follower roles, acting as conduits of organizational culture both upward and downward in the organizational hierarchies of the school districts they serve (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021; Teichler & Cummings, 2015).

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

In the U.S., schools are increasingly more linguistically, culturally, religiously, and ethnically diverse (Brown et al., 2022). School leaders at all organizational levels have a crucial role in establishing and sustaining culturally responsive learning environments that celebrate diversity and take meaningful steps to collectively work toward the concept of culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016). In addition to the challenge of lacking culturally responsive leadership training, middle-level leaders are also faced with the task of implementing district policies and practices that may not always align with the diverse needs of students and communities (Washington, 2021). Middle-level leaders take on leadership and follower roles, acting as conduits of organizational culture both upward and downward in the organizational hierarchies of the school districts they serve (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021; Teichler & Cummings, 2015), and they must navigate the tension between the bureaucratic system and the need for culturally responsive practice and performance. There needs to be more research in the education field on the district middle-level curriculum administrators' role in enacting culturally responsive goals when they have contradictory views from upper-level administration (superintendent) and lower-level administration (principals).

In this chapter, I review the literature surrounding middle-level leaders in the organizational hierarchy, culturally responsive school leadership (CRL), and the intersection of middle-level leaders and culturally responsive leadership. I begin by presenting a culturally responsive leadership framework, Weber's (1904) bureaucracy theory, and its relevance to K-12 institutions. These theoretical frameworks will help me articulate how middle-level district curriculum leaders enact culturally responsive goals as followers and leaders within the middle of a bureaucratic system.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study examines culturally responsive leadership and Weber's bureaucratic management in contemporary K-12 public education through the experiences of mid-level district leaders. Two theoretical frameworks are introduced here to highlight their incompatibilities and collective usefulness for this research. The first framework is culturally responsive leadership, which focuses on recognizing and understanding the cultural diversity of individuals and communities within the organization to improve performance and promote equity (Khalifa, 2018). The other framework is Weber's bureaucracy theory, which emphasizes merit-based selection, standardized procedures, and adherence to rules and regulations to ensure the effective and efficient functioning of the organization. These two theories can conflict because bureaucracy tends to be rigid and inflexible, making it challenging to incorporate cultural responsiveness. In addition, strict adherence to procedures and rules may not allow for exceptions or accommodations to cultural differences, leading to inefficiencies and inequality. However, given the changing demographics and needs of school stakeholders, it is essential for middle-level leaders to be flexible and enact CRL while being mindful of the more rigid structure of the bureaucratic hierarchy. Middle-level district curriculum leaders have a dual role of leading and following and serve as intermediaries for organizational culture between higher and lower levels of the school district hierarchy. Accordingly, this makes their leadership role highly challenging, as they must navigate and reconcile competing expectations and norms from the district and school levels they serve (Hill-Jackson et al., 2019; Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021; Teichler & Cummings, 2015).

Culturally Responsive Leadership

Culturally responsive leadership is the belief that culturally responsive leaders understand the cultural history of the schools, families, and communities to effectively serve students of diverse backgrounds (Khalifa, 2018). Consequently, CRLs take part in systemic changes and need to have the training, tools, knowledge, background, history, and context necessary to work with and lead a team collectively (Hopkins, 2001) where leadership centers around enacting and sustaining anti-oppression, liberation, and humanity (Kalifa, 2018). Kalifa (2018) uses four tenets as the theoretical framework for enacting cultural responsiveness. These tenets include critical self-reflection, culturally responsive curriculum and teacher preparation, culturally responsive school environments, and community advocacy.

In addition, culturally responsive leadership practices involve creating inclusive and welcoming school environments that promote respect, understanding, and appreciation of diversity. Khalifa (2018) suggested that CRL entails professional development for teachers and staff, community engagement, and policies aimed at addressing systemic educational inequalities are necessary. Further, all facets of the education system, such as funding, policymaking, and administration, must be reformed and changed to consider cultural differences (Shields, 2017). Finally, if educational institutions want teachers to be culturally responsive, then leaders at all levels of the organization should be expected to do the same.

Khalifa (2018) based the idea of culturally responsive leadership on Ladson-Billings' (1995) ideas of culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, and multiculturalism. The importance of the student's home culture, as well as the integration of that student's culture into the overall school community, cannot be overstated (Barakat et al., 2019; Black & Murtadha, 2007; Davis et al., 2005; Furman, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Shields

(2017) pointed out that culturally responsive leaders, no matter where they are in the organization, play a key role in making and keeping inclusive and fair learning environments that value differences and move steadily toward the ideal of transformative leadership. Culturally Responsive Leadership is a set of leadership philosophies, practices, and policies that make schools more welcoming to students and families from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally responsive leadership aims to create a learning environment that values diversity and promotes inclusivity. It is a leadership approach that recognizes and respects students' cultural backgrounds and seeks to integrate them into the school community. This chapter discusses a literature review of the four tenets of CRL in relation to middle-level district leaders.

Culturally Responsive Leadership and Self-Reflection

Recognizing the concept of CRL and how it relates to self-reflection is essential. According to Khalifa (2018), CRL and self-awareness, or what he refers to as "self-reflection," are crucial to identifying oppression personally and within the educational institution (Khalifa, 2018, p. 59). This understanding can lead to a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that supports the growth and development of all students. Educators who incorporate CRL and self-awareness into their teaching practices can help students develop critical thinking skills and become agents of change in their communities. Middle-level administrators often face complex situations that require them to balance the needs of various stakeholders. By practicing self-reflection, they can better understand their biases and make decisions promoting equity and inclusivity for all students.

Khalifa (2018) emphasized that school leaders must critically examine their role in school programs, leading departments, hiring practices, enrichment courses, and other school structures

to avoid repeating oppressive policies, practices, and curricula. Therefore, educators and school leaders need to engage in ongoing self-reflection and critical analysis of their practices to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment that supports the growth and development of all students (Khalifa, 2018). This approach can empower students to become change agents in their communities and contribute to a more just society (Khalifa, 2018). For example, data from an urban high school revealed that high suspension rates, special education referrals, low graduation rates, and standardized testing confirmed exclusionary and oppressive practices using a "school-centric" approach (Khalifa, 2018, p. 27).

School-centric approaches are more concerned with how the school performs, such as test scores and attendance, and with a white school system built on Western epistemology. A community-centric approach is more concerned with working with parents, students, teachers, and leaders to build inclusive learning environments where students feel safe and achieve academically (Khalifa, 2018). By adopting a community-centric approach, culturally responsive school leaders can address the root causes of systemic inequalities and create a more equitable education system. This approach involves building strong partnerships with families and community members, valuing diverse perspectives, and prioritizing the needs of marginalized students. For example, Khalifa's study showed that 60% of Black students were suspended from school, even though they only made up 18% of the student body. According to Brown (2004), schools should create equitable learning environments where all students feel welcomed and have a sense of belonging.

Through critical self-reflection, CRL identifies oppression in the school by analyzing current practices and data to challenge the unjust treatment of the students and communities they serve to create inclusive learning environments where students feel valued and safe (Brown,

2004; Khalifa et al., 2016). By implementing CRL, middle-level district curriculum administrators can work towards addressing the disproportionate suspension rates of marginalized students and creating a more equitable learning environment. This approach prioritizes the needs of all students, promotes inclusivity, and encourages critical self-reflection to challenge oppressive practices.

Culturally responsive school leaders must acknowledge that being culturally responsive is a process and not a quick fix (Khalifa et al., 2016; Miller & Martin, 2015; Theoharis, 2007; Van Hook, 2000). Khalifa (2018) described three critical skills for leaders to develop culturally responsive schools through critical self-reflection:

1. The ability to identify and understand the oppressive context that students and their communities face

2. The willingness and humility to identify and vocalize one's background and privilege, which allows leaders to see how they are directly involved or complicit in an oppressive context

3. The courage to push colleagues and staff to critically self-reflect upon their personal and professional role in oppression and anti-oppressive works and to develop responsive school structures

These skills and approaches create concrete actions to sustain culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments for students, parents, and the community (Khalifa, 2018).

Students, parents, and teachers need to feel like they belong and are treated fairly for critical self-reflection and CRL to achieve their goals. Khalifa (2018) advocates for equity audits to recognize oppressive behaviors or practices. The audits include surveys, data, and policy analysis to help leaders recognize the inequities of funding, racial disparities, and opportunities

for students who are historically marginalized and excluded (Khalifa, 2018). Equity audits can provide leaders with a roadmap for creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students. By identifying areas of improvement and implementing changes, schools can work towards creating a more culturally responsive and inclusive space for students, parents, and the community.

Culturally Responsive Leadership and Teacher Preparation

Middle-level district curriculum administrators may find it challenging to coordinate professional development to meet the needs of diverse students while juggling the superintendent's and building principals' conflicting priorities. In addition, middle-level district curriculum administrators may also face challenges in securing adequate resources and funding for professional development initiatives. These conflicting priorities may be related to school budgets, staffing, assessment and accountability requirements, and compliance with state and federal regulations. As a result, preparing teachers to meet the needs of diverse student populations may be deprioritized or underfunded, resulting in a lack of access to the necessary resources and training which can significantly negatively impact student outcomes, particularly for students from historically marginalized groups (Khalifa, 2018).

According to Sparks (2002), to ensure that school staff development programs are effective, school leaders must go beyond focusing solely on the professional learning of individual employees. They must also address more significant structural issues that impact the success of the programs. This requires superintendents and principals to adopt the roles of *system designers* and *school designers* in addition to being leaders of learning communities and models of career-long learning. By designing supporting structures and creating a culture that encourages high levels of learning for both students and adults, school leaders can facilitate the

success of staff development programs and ultimately improve student outcomes (Sparks, 2002, p. 24). In addition, middle-level district curriculum administrators can provide professional development opportunities focusing on cultural responsiveness, creating opportunities for building principals and teachers to learn about and celebrate different cultures and use culturally responsive teaching practices in the classroom. These practices can lead to a more inclusive and welcoming learning environment for all students, especially those from diverse backgrounds, and can help to close achievement gaps.

Additionally, involving families and community members in these efforts can further support student success and promote a sense of belonging within the school community (Khalifa, 2018). Research studies indicate that English language learners, students of color, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds receive fewer resources and less time to cultivate higher-level cognitive and affective abilities (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Oakes, 2005). Therefore, culturally responsive leaders need to recognize the disparities in education and work towards closing the achievement gap. Furthermore, providing equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their background, will help create a more equitable and just society.

Public K–12 schools and universities must work hard to train teachers to work well with students from diverse populations. For example, one study looked at how educators learned about the various linguistic, cultural, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students and families they serve (Lin & Bates, 2014). The findings indicated that teachers struggled with instructing students of diverse populations. Likewise, Sleeter (2011) noted that teachers' instructional practices aimed toward mandated tests leave little to no time to develop a curriculum and pedagogy that are culturally responsive to the diverse needs of their students, and

teachers felt unprepared. This highlights the need for culturally responsive leaders to provide ongoing professional development and training to ensure teachers have the necessary skills and knowledge to support diverse student populations. Additionally, incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences into the curriculum can promote equity and inclusivity in education (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally responsive leaders need continuous professional development training to become culturally competent leaders (Mayfield, 2017). To achieve this goal, culturally responsive leaders participate in workshops, conferences, and other training opportunities emphasizing cultural competence and educational equity. By doing so, leaders can better support their teachers and create a more inclusive learning environment for all students. Khalifa (2018) pointed out that leaders and teachers must learn about their community to become culturally competent. Leaders must be sensitive to different cultures and keep learning and talking with their community to ensure that their leadership reflects the needs and values of the people they serve. In contrast, Sleeter's (2011) study found that student teachers who thought they knew about culturally responsive pedagogy based their knowledge on getting to know their students without ever leaving the classroom. In short, cultural competence is an ongoing process requiring leaders and teachers to keep learning about their communities. Cultural responsiveness involves both in-classroom and out-of-classroom learning to ensure that leadership and teaching practices are culturally responsive and equitable (Khalifa, 2018). This will enable educators to establish safe and inclusive environments for all students and the community regardless of their cultural background.

Samuel et al.'s (2017) study revealed that teachers recognized the value of culturally responsive pedagogy but had limited exposure to it because administrators needed to provide

models or frameworks for this practice. Nevertheless, the study's findings demonstrate another way to effectively comprehend teachers' perceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy, emphasizing the critical role leaders play in providing professional development opportunities for teachers to understand better what cultural responsiveness looks like inside and outside the classroom. In addition, providing opportunities for leaders and teachers to engage in cultural immersion experiences can also enhance their cultural competence and equity skills as they gain firsthand knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures and perspectives (Khalifa, 2018). Study abroad programs, student voice, community engagement initiatives, or partnerships with local organizations can achieve this. Studies further reveal that inadequate preparation can create a cultural gap between leaders, teachers, students, and the larger community (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Consequently, middle-level leaders typically have more responsibility than frontline workers and less autonomy from top-level executives, which prohibits them from knowledge creation and providing models or frameworks to enact culturally responsive practices (Nonaka I. et al., 2006).

According to Leithwood et al. (2008), establishing leadership teams would facilitate the development of culturally responsive teachers. By instituting teacher leadership teams, principals can motivate teachers to collaborate, exchange experiences, and develop a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. Hoy and Miskel (2008) echoed this viewpoint and stated, "The common perception of teachers at a school working collectively is that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a good influence on pupils" (p. 189). Therefore, creating a collaborative environment that values cultural diversity and promotes teamwork among teachers and culturally responsive leaders is crucial for enhancing students' learning experiences. Furthermore, this approach may foster a sense of community and belongingness among students from diverse backgrounds,

leading to improved academic outcomes. With this in mind, there is a need for culturally responsive school leaders to think about their beliefs so they can begin to recognize their strengths and contributions to the process of change (Jerald, 2007).

Culturally Responsive Leadership and Inclusive Environments

According to Johnson (2007), warm and inviting learning environments are created by school administrators who are culturally responsive and foster a climate of trust. These environments nurture positive relationships between students and teachers and promote environments that embrace student identity and voice. Culturally responsive school administrators recognize the importance of acknowledging and valuing the diverse backgrounds of their students. Creating a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere makes students feel safe expressing themselves and more likely to engage in learning.

Khalifa (2018) described in his autoethnographic study how one principal of an urban high school would not permit teachers to devalue or dehumanize student culture or identity. The principal would return students sent to his office for "aggressive, disorderly behavior" or having "hyper-ghettoized clothing or speech" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 127). In addition, the principal worked with the teachers to express why he felt the student should remain in class. According to the findings from the interviews with the students and parents, traditional schools frequently expose students to the risk of being misunderstood because of their body language or appearance (Khalifa, 2018). When focused on the educational needs of minoritized students, using CRL practices can create a positive school culture and improve student-teacher relationships, leading to better academic and emotional outcomes for students.

Research has shown that school administrators should put the needs of students from underrepresented groups at the top of their list. Because middle-level administrators undertake

leadership and followership roles, they must respond in practice to the superintendent's district goals and missions while simultaneously meeting the building principals' needs. This presents a challenge for middle-level administrators to meet the needs of underrepresented students (Khalifa, 2018). According to Gerhart et al. (2011), one way school leaders and teachers enact cultural responsiveness is to have high expectations for all students regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds and provide the necessary resources and support to help students meet those expectations. Additionally, school administrators must create a culturally inclusive environment by incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences into the curriculum and school policies. This can foster a sense of belonging and promote academic success for all students. Finally, according to Madhlangobe (2009), CRL requires modeling, mentoring, and persistence to maintain and sustain culturally responsive practice within the educational institution.

Shields (2017) conducted a study involving six superintendents who demonstrated their workplace challenges with equity and inclusivity. These challenges included (a) high academic standards for all students, (b) equalized opportunities for minoritized students, (c) equitable access to technology, (d) low-income housing projects, (e) rejecting deficit thinking, (f) implementing approaches to discipline that rejected zero-tolerance policies, and (f) ensure respect for LGBT students. According to the findings, every superintendent was involved in the day-to-day operations of the schools under their supervision and was aware of what was occurring in the various classrooms and with the students individually. The study highlighted the importance of hands-on leadership and awareness of the challenges faced by minority students. The superintendents' efforts to reject deficit thinking, implement equitable approaches to discipline, and ensure respect for LGBT students demonstrate a commitment to promoting equity

and inclusivity in their schools. It also suggests that the findings can be used with the CRSL

framework to promote school equity and inclusivity.

Culturally Responsive Leadership and Community Advocacy

Studies show that leaders need to learn about each community they serve and situate

aspects of their schools so they can celebrate all cultures, as described in Cooper's (2009) study.

By doing so, leaders can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for students and

families from diverse backgrounds, ultimately leading to improved academic and social

outcomes for all students. Therefore, leaders need to prioritize cultural responsiveness in their

schools and continuously work towards building a more equitable education system. Cooper's

(2009) study revealed that school principals who were equity-minded leaders did not confront

the cultural tensions and separatist politics that marginalize ethnic and linguistic students and

their families (Cooper, 2009). Therefore, it is crucial for leaders to actively address and

challenge these issues while promoting a sense of belonging and respect for all students and

families in their school communities. Addressing these challenges can involve implementing a

culturally responsive curriculum, hiring diverse staff, and fostering open communication and

collaboration with families and community members.

According to Khalifa (2018), CRL and community advocacy play a pivotal role in

implementing cultural responsiveness. Likewise, Mayfield (2017) noted that leaders who are

intentional about cultural responsiveness are aware of their students' and families' identities and

that using a cultural lens to interact more inclusively across cultural frameworks enables the

diversity of cultural strength to improve relationships with all stakeholders. For example, CRL

includes a humanizing and critical lens in all work within the school's structure and system to be

anti-oppressive. It entails equitable hiring practices, observations, mentoring, coaching,

professional learning communities, and honoring community-based epistemologies so that parents and students understand that we recognize, need, and value them as school community members (Khalifa, 2018). Moreover, Khalifa (2018) noted that parents of Black students and students of color must feel a sense of safety and assurance when they enter the school building and have confidence that their opinions and concerns are acknowledged. Khalifa and Mayfield emphasized the importance of cultural responsiveness in school environments, and CRL starts with leaders intentionally applying it in their practice (Khalifa, 2018; Mayfield, 2017). By adopting a cultural lens, schools can create an inclusive environment that values diversity and recognizes the unique identities of students and families.

Weber's Bureaucracy Theory

Weber's (1905) bureaucracy theory, the second part of the conceptual framework, positions bureaucracy as highly structured, formalized, and impersonal. Max Weber, a German social theorist from the 1800s, tried, like many classical theorists of his time, to define "modernity." Weber's idea of bureaucracy came from living in a society where economic, political, and social events were changing quickly (Weber, 1904). Weber believed that understanding people's actions is the basic building block of sociology. He looked at factors like religion, social events, and politics, which are all parts of modern life. Weber based his definition of modernity on the observation that society was becoming more organized and that bureaucracy was becoming more critical in everyday life.

Weber (1904) believed an institution is goal-oriented and driven by rationale, not social values and emotions. Weber defined *rationalization* as replacing traditional and emotional thought with reason and practicality. In addition, he instituted the belief that an organization needs to have a clear hierarchy and clear-cut rules, regulations, and lines of authority. Weber's

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bureaucracy theory emphasizes the importance of rationality and efficiency in organizational management, and many modern organizations have widely adopted it. However, some critics argue that strict adherence to rules and procedures can lead to inflexibility and hinder organizational innovation (Fernandopulle, 2021). Fernandopulle (2021) added that in large organizations, communication breaks down, which causes hierarchical structures to have unintended effects like slowing decision-making and reducing flexibility. This leads to missed opportunities, decreased productivity, and a lack of innovation and creativity within the organization.

Fernandopulle's (2021) literature review on medical hierarchical leadership suggested that organizations adopt a less centralized structure that gives teams more freedom and makes working together more accessible and manageable, leading to faster decision-making and increased innovation. His research concluded that flatter structures benefit organizations by cutting out the middle management between upper and lower management. In addition, the findings suggested that trimming down the hierarchy produced a better safety climate for patients. However, the flatter structure's downside is that it increases responsibility and places a heavy burden on the top-level management to communicate efficiently with the staff.

Weber (1904) described six characteristics of bureaucracy. The characteristics include (a) task specialization, (b) hierarchical management structure, (c) formal selection rules, (d) efficient and uniform requirements, (e) impersonal environment, and (f) achievement-based advancement. The following section discusses some of these characteristics.

Task Specialization

Weber (1904) noted that task specialization promotes the timely completion of work at the highest skill level. In Weber's ideal organization, tasks are divided into categories based on

team members' abilities and areas of expertise. Employees and departments have clearly defined roles and expectations in which they are responsible solely for the labor they perform best. Task specialization maximizes efficiency for the organization.

K-12 educational institutions favor hierarchical structures that typically begin with the superintendent and progress downwards to the teachers. Each is assigned distinct roles and responsibilities to carry out the district's mission statement. Decision-making for administrators at different levels of the hierarchy is directly related to Weber's bureaucracy theory and task specialization. Weber (1954) believed this hierarchical structure would result in a more rational, rigid, and efficient organization, with decisions based on a person's expertise rather than personal relationships or biases. In most K-12 public education systems, administrators at various levels understand the proper authority to take orders from and that their function in the school is to abide by their superiors' instructions in all aspects of school tasks (Hanson, 2001; Kean et al., 2017). However, critics argue that this hierarchical structure can lead to a lack of flexibility in decision-making and innovation within the organization (Guan et al., 2017).

Hierarchical Management Structure

There is a direct correlation between Weber's (1904) bureaucracy theory and hierarchical management structure. He believed that the management structure should be layered, with each layer being accountable for the performance of its team. Furthermore, each layer should supervise the layers beneath them while being subjected to the authority of the layer above them. Consequently, those at the top of the management hierarchy have the most power, while those at the bottom have the least. This hierarchical structure delineates communication channels, delegation, and responsibility allocation.

Foss et al. (2023) argued that "designing and operating" hierarchical structures can be challenging because there are often competing forces (p. 73). For example, empowering others, giving them the autonomy to make decisions, and using managerial authority to manage large-scale institutions are two of the opposing forces. The literature review suggested updating the managerial hierarchy and authority for the 21st century. Foss et al. (2023) suggested that a possible solution to these conflicting forces is to adopt a more flexible and adaptable approach to organizational design, such as adopting a network structure that allows for greater autonomy and collaboration among employees. Organizing professional learning communities or mentors may help organizations navigate the complexities of modern institutional environments while maintaining some managerial control (Foss et al., 2023). Further, this approach emphasizes how crucial it is for leaders to be open to ideas from their staff that are outside the scope of their area of expertise when designing structures and systems (Foss et al., 2023).

Impersonal Environment

Weber's idea of bureaucracy and impersonal environments correlates with employee well-being and community building. Weber thought that relationships between employees were only to be professional. In other words, according to Weber (1904), personal relationships and emotions should not interfere with the functioning of an organization and decision-making based on facts and rational thinking, which can lead to a more efficient and effective workplace. There is little discussion of how impersonal environments may be dehumanizing and, more importantly, disadvantageous to one's well-being and exclusionary. For example, suppose one feels excluded from the decision-making process. In that case, it may lead to one feeling isolated and disconnected from others, which can negatively impact mental health and hinder productivity in the school environment.

Students in K-12 institutions typically take directives from teachers, teachers take directives from the principal, the principal takes directives from directors, directors take directives from assistant superintendents, and the superintendent is at the top of the chain of command other than the board of education. In K-12 public school education, the bureaucratic structure may create gaps vertically in the hierarchy, leading to possible misconstrued communication between the various levels of the organizational hierarchy. Because district policies and regulations control decisions and practices at each level of the hierarchy (Morgan, 2006), the sense of community is fragmented, resulting in impersonal, isolating, and unproductive environments that may adversely affect leaders, teachers, students, and parents. In addition, studies have revealed that bureaucratic structures may stifle creativity and innovation as ideas must go through multiple layers of approval before being implemented, which slows up the decision-making process (Fernandopulle (2021).

A growing body of research has shown that building positive employee relationships and fostering a sense of community can improve employee well-being and overall organizational performance (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). Cobb and Krownapple (2019) argued that a more collaborative and decentralized approach to decision-making could lead to more engaged and empowered stakeholders at all levels of the education system. Additionally, studies have suggested that positive employee relationships and a sense of community can increase employee retention rates, decrease absenteeism, and enhance job satisfaction (Ostroff, 2012). When employees feel a sense of connection and belonging to their colleagues and the organization, they are more likely to feel invested in their work and motivated to contribute to the company's success. It underscores the significance of involving employees at every level of the organization

in the decision-making process to leverage diverse perspectives and experiences, enabling the development of more effective strategies and solutions.

Likewise, Khalifa's (2018) research suggested prioritizing and creating inclusive and welcoming spaces that allow individuals to feel valued and supported, unlike Weberian hierarchical organizations that regard employees as mere cogs in a machine instead of recognizing them as individuals with unique talents and perspectives. The lack of personal connection and recognition can lead to burnout, low morale, and high turnover rates. Therefore, organizations need to foster a culture that values and prioritizes the well-being of its employees. For example, organizations can implement initiatives such as employee recognition programs, mental health resources, and opportunities for professional development and growth.

Similarly, Cobb and Krownapple (2019) noted that educators need to change their mindset so that they value students for who they are and not what they can achieve, notably because of high-stakes testing and accountability that hinder leaders and teachers from prioritizing "unconditional belonging or valuing" individual students as a priority (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019, p. 39). Also, K–12 public schools that follow a Weberian structure may make it harder for leaders and teachers to make good decisions that put the needs and experiences of students first in order to build an inclusive learning community and put the well-being of students from different backgrounds at the top of every decision (Nieto, 2000).

In summary, prioritizing students' well-being and experiences from diverse backgrounds requires schools to adopt a student-centered approach. Achieving this requires addressing systemic barriers and biases within the school system, implementing curriculum reform, and offering ongoing professional development (Khalifa, 2018).

<center>**Middle-Level Leaders**</center>

Middle-level district curriculum leaders have one of the most challenging roles as they navigate the competing priorities of the superintendent and the principals. Likert (1961) referred to middle managers as "linking pins" because of their ability to communicate information upwards and downwards while binding an organization's top and bottom levels together (p. 154). Educational institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities have a hierarchical structure, with middle-level managers occupying a vital position between senior administrators and frontline teachers. Middle-level leaders must balance the needs of teachers and students while ensuring that the curriculum and instruction align with state standards and assessments. Effective communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills are essential for middle-level district curriculum leaders to succeed in their roles. In addition, the roles directly support the school's mission, goals, and vision (Teichler & Cummings, 2015).

Middle-Level Leaders as Managers and Leaders

Bush et al. (2007) highlighted the difference between managers and leaders, pointing out that both are critical to the organization. Setting a vision and inspiring others to achieve it is the role of leadership, whereas management focuses on planning, organizing, and controlling resources to achieve specific goals (p. 392). Bennis (1989) distinguished between leading and managing in an organization, arguing that these two distinct but complementary roles are necessary for organizational success. According to Bennis (1989), managing primarily controls resources and processes to achieve specific goals. Managers are responsible for planning, organizing, and controlling resources, including people, time, and money. They focus on achieving efficiency, predictability, order, and a bureaucratic structure, and are responsible for meeting the organization's goals.

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On the other hand, he noted that leading is primarily concerned with inspiring and guiding people to achieve a shared vision. Further, leaders are responsible for creating a sense of purpose and direction, motivating and inspiring people, and creating a culture that fosters innovation, creativity, and growth. In addition, they focus on achieving effectiveness, adaptability, and change and are responsible for aligning the organization's vision and values (Bennis, 1989; Normore & Brooks, 2016). This shift in responsibilities can be challenging for some middle managers, who may need to develop new skills and adapt to different organizational roles.

Wise's (2001) literature review and analysis of the role and responsibilities of academic middle managers in secondary schools draws on the importance of monitoring strategies for academic middle managers. Wise claimed that academic middle managers play a crucial role in monitoring the performance of teachers and the implementation of educational policies and practices. One of the key strategies discussed in the article is using classroom observation as a tool for monitoring teachers' performance. Wise (2001) noted that classroom observations enable academic middle managers to offer teachers constructive feedback, identify improvement areas, and ensure that teachers meet teaching standards. Moreover, the literature emphasizes the significance of conducting classroom observations in a non-threatening manner that does not compromise the relationship between the teacher and the academic middle manager. Finally, according to Wise (2001), academic middle managers must ensure the effective implementation of policies and practices, promptly addressing any issues or challenges that may arise. It requires middle managers to monitor policy and practice implementation, identify areas for improvement, and offer support to teachers and staff to ensure successful policy and practice implementation.

Middle-Level Leaders as Followers and Leaders

Middle-level administrators in public education play a critical role in the success of educational institutions. They work directly under upper-level district administrators and above-building-level principals. As both leaders and followers, they are responsible for managing teams, overseeing educational programs, and promoting student success. Middle-level administrators must be effective communicators who inspire, motivate, and guide their teams toward achieving common goals. They must also be able to think critically, make decisions quickly, and adapt to changing circumstances. In addition, strong leadership skills are necessary for establishing a positive school culture and ensuring that all stakeholders feel valued and respected (Earley & Weindling, 2004).

At the same time, middle-level administrators are also followers. They must take directives from upper-level administrators and implement policies and programs established at the district level (Normore & Brooks, 2016). In addition, middle-level administrators require strong collaboration skills, as they need to work closely with district leaders to ensure that their schools align with the overall vision and mission of the district. They must also be able to provide feedback and suggest improvements to district-level initiatives to ensure that they meet the unique needs of their school community.

Hannay et al. (2001) discussed the challenges of changing the role of middle leaders from traditional department chairs to more collaborative positions in schools. Hannay et al.'s study was conducted in an Ontario school district that required schools to abandon their traditional structures and job descriptions, allowing them to reorganize in their way. The researchers found that schools struggled initially but became increasingly committed to the new approach. Middle leaders became responsible for specific tasks related to collaborative development plans, and a

committee reviewed and defined goals rather than imposing them. Hannay et al. (2001) postulated that restructuring the organization must precede reculturing, and a flatter decision-making structure leads to greater staff satisfaction and empowerment. The study emphasized the importance of facilitating dialogue and accepting different points of view in order to address differences constructively.

Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) extended research on leadership and followership and argued that the traditional view of followers as passive and subordinate to leaders is limiting and outdated. The authors propose a new perspective on followership that recognizes followers' active and dynamic role in the leadership process. The article presents a framework for understanding the complex relationship between leaders and followers, called the leader-follower dance. This framework emphasizes the importance of mutual influence, shared goals, and collaboration between leaders and followers. Furthermore, the authors explored the various types of followers and the factors influencing followers' behaviors, such as power, identity, and emotions. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) concluded by discussing the implications of this new perspective on followership for leadership development and practice, offering new insights into the leadership process.

Middle-Level Leaders Balancing Demands of Multiple Stakeholders

Middle-level district curriculum leaders are positioned at a unique intersection within the district's bureaucratic structure, where they must navigate different levels of decision-making and power dynamics to advocate for the needs of their schools and communities (Wang & O'Day, 2007). Therefore, to have a voice in advocating for the needs of one's school and communities, one must possess a profound understanding of the needs of their schools and communities (Khalifa, 2018) and the skill to navigate complex bureaucratic structures.

According to Normore and Brooks (2016), middle managers in education are caught

between the balcony and the dance floor pressures. As a result, they must balance the demands of multiple stakeholders to achieve organizational goals. One of the challenges these leaders face is the divergence between the priorities of those on the balcony, the district-level superintendent, and those on the dance floor, the principals that directly impact teachers, students, and parents (Hess, 2018). Many middle-level leaders have to balance these competing interests and find ways to reconcile them to create meaningful change and improve educational outcomes. To achieve success, they must possess a fundamental understanding of the decision-making process, identify the decision-makers, and effectively communicate with various stakeholders to establish consensus and gain support for their initiatives (Spillane et al., 2001). For example, if the district administration's focus is on implementing a new technology program, despite teachers' and students' recommendations against it, such as the impact on instructional time and learning outcomes, a middle-level leader may need to work with both groups to find a compromise (Spillane et al., 2001). For instance, one might collaborate with the superintendent and principals to modify the program to better align with the needs of the teachers and students, or they might work with teachers to develop professional development opportunities that will help them integrate the new technology in a way that enhances instruction and supports learning (Supovitz & Riggan, 2012).

Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) pointed out that traditional middle-level managers are typically responsible for providing information and are separate from the decision-making process. However, the literature review provides evidence that middle-level managers' responsibilities go beyond just serving as the connecting links in a chain of communication (Geer, 2014; Heames & Harvey, 2006). Instead, middle-level managers are accountable for driving innovation and value and motivating experienced employees (Ornstein, 2008).

Additionally, a growing body of research demonstrates the positive influence of middle-level managers' decisions on employee performance (Kumarasinghe & Hoshino, 2010). Hollo's et al. (2020) review of the literature on decision-making in complex systems proposed a model that integrates various factors, including individual decision-making styles, team decision-making processes, and organizational culture. They concluded that leadership development programs should focus on developing skills and competencies relevant to decision-making in complex systems to improve leadership decision-making. The proposed framework can assist middle-level leaders in making decisions by effectively balancing the competing priorities of both upper-level district leaders and lower-level building leaders.

According to Bryant and Stensaker (2011), transitioning from professional duties to managerial and change-related responsibilities can challenge middle managers. The shift demands personal growth and creates new role expectations, leading to potential confusion and conflict. In addition, middle-level administrators must align with the superintendent's objective and goals within the organizational structure while simultaneously addressing the needs and concerns of the building-level principals. In doing so, the intricacies of navigating these multifaceted responsibilities add a layer of complexity (Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021).

Culturally Responsive Leadership and Middle-Level Leaders

While there is much research on culturally relevant teaching and a substantial amount on culturally responsive leadership, there needs to be more research on middle-level leaders enacting culturally responsive leadership as leaders and followers within the middle of a bureaucratic system. Studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of culturally responsive leadership on student achievement and engagement with the school environment (Banks & McGee-Banks, 2004; Khalifa, 2018). In educational systems, middle-level administrators have a

unique role responsible for leading and following (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021; Teichler & Cummings, 2015). Consequently, middle-level leaders are intermediaries between superintendents and district-level administrators, school-level administrators, teachers, students, parents, and broader communities. They must balance the district superintendent's organizational goals with the building principals' concerns and needs. This role can be challenging due to the hierarchical structures they navigate.

Middle-level leaders face a conundrum as they balance the demands of district-level administrators regarding organizational missions and goals while also being responsive leaders to building-level administrators and the concerns and needs of the teachers, students, parents, and broader communities (Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021). Accordingly, middle-level administrators have one of the most challenging leadership roles; they must balance competing norms and expectations for practice and performance from the district and school levels of the organizational hierarchy of the districts in which they serve (Hill-Jackson et al., 2019). However, Wyczalkowski's (2020) study contributed significant findings as it was the first investigation of culturally responsive leadership within the structure of the relationship between district-level and school-level administration, a bureaucratic structure. Furthermore, the findings have illuminated several behaviors and practices within culturally responsive leadership that support social-emotional learning (SEL) implementation.

The district, school leaders, and teachers demonstrated a change in attitude by exhibiting collaborative, engaging, and empowering behavior while actively listening and building trust with others personally. During professional development training, they aimed to promote the growth of a community of learners while implementing SEL practices. Both levels of leadership utilized professional learning, modeling, and collaboration to encourage critical self-awareness

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among adults about their practices and behaviors when supporting the social and emotional well-being of both students and adults. Likewise, Bettini et al. (2016) emphasized that if all school leaders seek to be culturally responsive, staff collaboration is crucial in determining the school's positive or negative culture.

Despite the encouraging findings, the study did not use Khalifa's (2018) community-based epistemology to include the community's perspectives and experiences in implementing SEL to promote more inclusive and equitable educational practices. Khalifa (2018) noted that community-based epistemology represents a shift from traditional top-down approaches to knowledge production and dissemination towards more collaborative, inclusive, and community-driven approaches.

Conclusion

The theories and cognitive understandings of culturally responsive leadership and Weber's bureaucracy serve as a blueprint for exploring how middle-level district curriculum administrators enact culturally responsive leadership while navigating the contradictions of working within a bureaucratic school system. More importantly, this study may provide insights into how middle-level district curriculum leaders can effectively incorporate responsive practices within a bureaucratic school system, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes for all students.

Literature indeed provides CRL frameworks to enact cultural responsiveness. However, further research is needed to clarify how other middle-level district curriculum leaders balance being a leader and follower amidst the competing priorities of the balcony and the dance floor while enacting culturally responsive leadership. This is pertinent for my research because many district curriculum administrators in the middle level of the hierarchy are part of a team or

council that makes decisions about the curriculum and struggle with navigating the

contradictions within the bureaucratic school system. Therefore, understanding how they

navigate their roles as leaders and followers and make curriculum decisions while enacting

culturally responsive leadership is essential for developing equitable and inclusive policies and

practices. In Chapter 3, I present the research methods design, rationale, and my role as the

researcher. I discuss the selection of participants and instrumentation along with research

procedures.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methods utilized to describe mid-level district curriculum administrators in public education experiences as culturally responsive leaders and managers within a bureaucratic structure. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this phenomenological study is guided by Culturally responsive leadership and Weber's bureaucratic management theories.

Although there is emerging research on how culturally responsive leaders work toward education reform and social justice (Khalifa et al., 2016), there needs to be more literature capturing the complexity district middle-level curriculum administrators face in a bureaucratic structure. By describing their experiences and perspectives, through my research, I sought to establish a common understanding of what it is like for district middle-level curriculum administrators as leaders and managers attempting to implement culturally responsive goals in a bureaucratic structure when they have competing perspectives from what is happening at the balcony and dance floor levels.

According to Khalifa et al. (2016), culturally responsive leaders must work together to reform the school culture to meet the educational needs of minoritized children. Andrews (2006) believed that building culturally inclusive school environments is the most pressing challenge in the current educational system.

Gay (2010) noted that school reform that transforms school culture and climate requires change within all parts of the educational system, including policies, funding, and administration. School leaders must work cohesively to cultivate relationships with key stakeholders to create responsive environments. Sometimes constituents at different levels of the organizational structure may not harmoniously work toward shared goals because of competing priorities within a bureaucratic system which, in turn, changes the dynamic of culture and climate. Thus, the goal of becoming culturally responsive needs to be clarified. There needs to be more research to show

the public the value of district middle-level curriculum administrators' role when trying to foster cultural responsiveness with key stakeholders at different levels of the organizational hierarchy and what culturally responsive leadership looks like in multiple places and spaces (Donohoo, 2018).

This chapter discusses my research design, including my role as a researcher using a hermeneutics approach to explore how district middle-level curriculum administrators enact culturally responsive leadership while navigating the contradictions of working within a bureaucratic school system. In addition, this chapter covers the approach, study participants, data collection procedures, analysis method, and ethical considerations in greater depth.

Research Questions

I chose a phenomenological study research design because while research builds on what leaders should do to be culturally responsive in practice, there is scant literature about how district middle-level curriculum administrators enact culturally responsive leadership while navigating the contradictions of working within a bureaucratic school system. This phenomenological study aimed to describe the lived experiences of district middle-level administrators in public education as leaders and managers within a bureaucratic structure. The following questions guided this research:

How do middle-level district curriculum administrators enact culturally responsive leadership while navigating the contradictions of working within a bureaucratic school system?

1. How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe balancing being a leader and follower amidst the competing priorities of the balcony and the dance floor while enacting culturally responsive leadership?

a) How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe the competing

priorities between the superintendent and principals, if any, when enacting culturally

responsive leadership?

b) How do the experiences of middle-level district curriculum administrators who are

faced with competing priorities or constraints describe how their actions and decisions

show a commitment to cultural responsiveness?

2. How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe their roles as

culturally responsive leaders when bureaucratic goals conflict with the ideals of culturally

responsive leadership?

a) How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe their experience

dealing with conflicts between bureaucratic goals and culturally responsive leadership

ideals?

b) How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe how they

communicate and advocate for culturally responsive leadership practices within their

district, particularly when faced with resistance or pushback from higher-level

administrators or other stakeholders?

Role of the Researcher

I attended an elementary school in a disadvantaged community, where I encountered

challenges in finding acceptance among my peers. My experience with this institution did not

provide the safety, inclusivity, and warmth that should define a nurturing learning environment.

The absence of a supportive atmosphere, both from my peers and teachers, had a negative impact

on my education and social development. In essence, the school, which should have been a

sanctuary for students to acquire knowledge, forge friendships, and experience a sense of

belonging, fell short of these ideals. At such a young age, I grappled with confusion, trying to

make sense of the dynamics around me. However, despite the adversity I faced during those

formative years, my early experiences have given me the resilience, determination, and empathy

needed to navigate life's challenges. They have reinforced my commitment to promoting

acceptance, inclusivity, and understanding in my interactions with others.

Fast forward to my career as a teacher, literacy coach, principal, and district

administrator, I have developed a passion for connecting with others on a personal and

professional level to foster relationships, self-reflect, and build an understanding of alternative

perspectives to consider new and socially just ways of doing things. As a teacher, I worked

diligently to develop relationships with my students by listening, having empathy, and

establishing meaningful, positive, and trusting interactions that fostered a community of learners.

In my diverse classroom, students found solace in an environment that encouraged fearless

exploration and the sharing of ideas. This sense of security and belonging stemmed from the safe

and welcoming atmosphere I meticulously nurtured. My open-minded and compassionate

teaching style extended far beyond the curriculum. To enrich their educational journey, I often

involved the parents, siblings, and grandparents in the classroom to read, share an experience, or

participate in classroom literacy and math centers. I invited the local business community to

share on career day and share the town's historical background with the class. My early

childhood experiences are part of the fabric of who I am and have shaped how I value one's

identity and continually strive to connect, inspire, and empower others to embrace the beauty of

diversity and the potential for positive change.

Gay (2010) noted that leaders are responsible for cultivating positive school

environments where students see themselves as a mirror, seeing the reflections of themselves,

their identities, and their experiences in the educational setting. Additionally, leaders should facilitate an educational atmosphere that helps students relate their learning experiences to the broader context of the world, making education more meaningful and relevant to their lives (Gay, 2010). As a literacy coach, principal, and administrator, I apply that guiding principle when interacting with others. Far too often, I have witnessed exclusionary practices from administrators at all levels of the hierarchy because of competing viewpoints and not putting students at the center of all decision-making rationalizations. When members of an inclusive environment foster and sustain a sense of belonging by recognizing and affirming their members' abilities, beliefs, backgrounds, and ways of life, they feel validated and acknowledged (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). I want my research design to provide information on how district middle-level administrators balance being a leader and follower amidst competing priorities from the balcony and the dance floor while enacting culturally responsive leadership. Further, how do they make sense of their roles as culturally responsive leaders when bureaucratic goals conflict with the ideals of culturally responsive leadership?

During my tenure as a district middle-level administrator in a diverse district, I navigated the intricate responsibilities of overseeing various educational initiatives and managing the diverse needs of upper-district and building administrators. Juggling the demands of curriculum development and district and building-level needs, I often felt pulled in several directions. My past experiences have shaped my perspective of the world and my passion as a researcher for exploring how other district middle-level curriculum leaders positioned as managers and subordinates enact culturally responsive goals within a bureaucratic system. While educational institutions have initiated efforts to cultivate culturally responsive leaders, my personal experiences have revealed a prevalent discrepancy. Many stakeholders across various

hierarchical levels profess cultural responsiveness through their rhetoric but often remain unaware of their unconscious biases. This dilemma has frequently placed me in the role of balancing the conflicting viewpoints of my colleagues, navigating between the balcony and dance floor levels. At times, the conflicting viewpoints arose due to resistance from teacher unions, where their pushback created significant challenges. On other occasions, while endeavoring to implement the superintendent's visionary initiatives, I often encountered obstacles because not all principals had fully embraced or bought into the proposed changes or initiatives. These behaviors can inadvertently contribute to the persistence of institutional inequities and the historical prevalence of a White Americanized school system.

My research is critical because it enables me to share the stories and lived experiences of other district middle-level administrators trying to enact culturally responsive goals while navigating competing priorities in a bureaucratic system. My objective is for my research to contribute to the scant research literature and the practical growth of other culturally responsive district middle-level administrators, such as myself, by sharing the leaders' stories and providing models or strategies for enacting CRL from within the middle of the bureaucratic system.

Methods

Qualitative research aims to make sense of humans in a social context. A phenomenological study fits well with my research goals because it enabled me to dive deeper into my participants' lived experiences and listen to their challenges and successes when enacting culturally responsive leadership while navigating the contradictions of working within a bureaucratic school system. Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a way of doing research. It is not just a way of knowing things but an intellectual way of interpreting and making sense of people's world (Qutoshi, 2018). Phenomenology allowed me to illuminate rich descriptions and

personal meanings of the lived experiences of district middle-level curriculum administrators. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach proved beneficial for investigating the lived experiences of middle-level district curriculum administrators. This approach strongly emphasizes interpreting and comprehending the meaning of human expression, which was particularly relevant when examining the subjective experiences of my participants. By adopting a hermeneutic philosophy in my research design, I could better understand the middle-level district curriculum administrator's subjective interpretations and meanings and the influence of context and individual perspectives on their experiences (Peoples, 2021).

Participant Recruitment

The participants in this study consisted of seven district-level assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction who were employed in a public school district within the New York metropolitan area. The participants race/ethnicity identity was primarily White (seven participants) and Hispanic Non-White (two participants). Participants ranged in age from 30 to 59 years old. Five participants identified as female, and two identified as male. The participants' years of experience as district-level curriculum leaders ranged from two to 20 years. Requests for participation were sent via email to district-level assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction, as well as curriculum leaders. The selection process utilized homogeneous snowball sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) throughout the New York metropolitan area, commencing with initial telephone calls. However, due to the busy schedules of numerous administrators, they expressed a preference for receiving an email outlining the study. Additional participants were subsequently recruited through snowball sampling, wherein selected participants were asked for recommendations of others who might be interest in participating in the study. These choices expedited the participant recruitment process.

In July 2023, I contacted the seven participants via email and promptly received their consent forms. Subsequently, we scheduled both the initial and second interviews spanning the months from July to September. These interviews were conducted via Zoom, and in late September, a follow-up questionnaire was distributed to all participants. Notably, four of the participants actively engaged in completing the questionnaire.

Data Collection and Sample

With Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval secured, I initiated the data collection process through individual interviews. Employing a phenomenological approach in alignment with the insights of (Schutz, 1967), the in-depth interviews effectively illuminated the participants' experiences from their unique perspectives. The interviewing process mirrored Seidman's three-part interview series, with adjustments tailored to accommodate the time constraints associated with working with this specific sample (Seidman, 2019). The sample, consisted of seven district-level assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction and curriculum leaders employed within the New York State metropolitan region. The phenomenological approach guided the in-depth interviewing and allowed participants to share their lived experiences (Schutz, 1967). Each participant underwent two interviews. The first interview lasted 60-90 minutes, and the second interview lasted 30-40 minutes. Using a dual-interview format proved ideal, providing space for participants to safely delve into their perspectives, reflect on the initial interview discussions, and offer additional insights not discussed in the first interview. I used a notebook throughout to document my viewpoint, opinions, and any potential biases that may have surfaced.

Immediately following the interviews, the files were saved on a password-protected USB drive. Pseudonyms were applied to all participants, which included Alicia, GM, Katherine, Lola,

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Michelle, Philip, and Patricia. Thereafter, the transcripts files were uploaded to Rev.com and meticulously reviewed for grammar and transcription errors. Subsequently, the files were uploaded into NVivo 12 thematic analysis software, facilitating efficient organization and transcription storage. A follow-up questionnaire utilizing Google Forms was distributed to the seven participants. The Google Form questionnaire was saved on a password-protected USB drive. The next section describes the methods employed for data analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

According to Freeman (2011), meaning is not fixed; understanding is how meaning is created and transformed. Discovering meaning in the data requires a flexible mindset to accommodate the possibility of new interpretations emerging from the facts or experiences (Flood, 2010). Researchers that use a phenomenological approach to data analysis often look for themes, patterns, or trends and incorporate participant quotes in their findings (Parahoo, 2014). This study's data analysis included using a thematic approach following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2019) and Saldana (2019). At the conclusion of each interview, the transcripts were uploaded to Rev.com for transcription. Once I received the printed transcripts, I carefully read them and listened to the audio to maintain the integrity of the interviews. The transcripts were uploaded into Nvivo 12 qualitative software. After upload, the following steps were conducted: (a) development of initial codes, (b) refinement to final codes, (c) grouping codes into categories, and (d) presentation of themes as representative of grouped categories. The final three themes identified from the data analysis were (a) Navigating Challenges Despite Competing Priorities: Stakeholders And Administrators, (b) Actions and Decisions: Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership, and (c) Communication and Advocacy: Managing Bureaucracy. A more detailed discussion of the methods employed for data analysis can be found in Chapter 3 and 4.

Trustworthiness

As a researcher, I ensured that my interpretations of the experiences of listening and interacting with others were trustworthy. Persistent observation, listening, and sustained interaction were necessary to establish the trustworthiness of my research in understanding the value and appropriateness of participants' responses (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). To ensure the trustworthiness of my research, I asked a doctoral student to read the transcripts to offer feedback. The feedback ensured that I accurately depicted and interpreted the participants' responses during the interview. Guba and Lincoln (1985) stated that triangulating data enables discovering evidence that disproves my view, establishing credibility. It is human nature to misinterpret one's responses or actions, which could skew the data and how I present the narrative. Member check-in is essential to data collection and analysis to ensure trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Ethical Concerns

All participants were treated according to the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) and Molloy University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Protecting the participants' identities and maintaining their private information was critical for my research (Adams et al., 2022). All participants were given an informed consent form with full disclosure about the research, including the risks and benefits, and allowed to decide if they would participate (Cresswell, 2007). One of the strategies I used to protect participants' identities was pseudonyms. I kept all electronic data and information on a password protected USB drive to ensure their private information was secure.

Limitations

According to Roberts and Hyatt (2019), limitations in research refer to particular features of a study that may affect the results or the researcher's ability to generalize the findings. These limitations include the study's sample size, the methods used to collect and analyze the data, and any potential biases or confounding variables that may impact the results. The study's scope was restricted to a small sample size of seven participants, a necessity to narrow the study's focus. Nevertheless, the limited sample size diminished the ability to generalize findings to broader settings or different research contexts.

The second limitation pertained to geographic constraints. The study's participants were exclusively drawn from seven public school districts in the New York metropolitan area, with six originating from the same general geographic region. Consequently, the findings may not be representative of other public schools or districts. The third limitation arises from the fact that participants exclusively provided insights from the vantage point of middle-level curriculum administration. This focus means that the perspectives presented in this study do not encompass the viewpoints of other district level administrators within the educational hierarchy. To broaden our understanding future research endeavors could delve into more comprehensive exploration of diverse administrative roles beyond middle-level curriculum administrators.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the findings of this study might not be universally applicable to a broader geographic context. The constraints imposed during the study, such as the specific focus on certain puclic school districts in the New York metropolitan area, limit the generalizability of the results. Subsequent research could address and build upon this limitation by considering a more expansive and diverse geographic context, as discussed in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

This study aimed to describe the lived experiences of district middle-level curriculum administrators in public education regarding their experience as leaders and managers within a bureaucratic structure using both Culturally responsive leadership and Weber's bureaucracy as a blueprint. Specifically, to foster a collective understanding of the experiences encountered by district middle-level curriculum administrators as they navigate the dual roles of leaders and mangers while striving to implement culturally responsive goals within a bureaucratic framework. In Chapter 4, I present the study's findings, and my role as the researcher. I discuss the data collection process, complimented by visual representations in the form of tables for enhanced clarity.

CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS

Culturally responsive leaders are vital in education (Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021). The changing demographics of the U.S. require CRL's to be prepared for the best education of students (Campos-Moreira et al., 2020; Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021). However, as demonstrated in chapter 2, research exploring the experiences of mid-level leaders as they try to implement culturally responsive approaches within a bureaucratic system was scarce. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of district mid-level curriculum administrators in public education regarding their experiences as leaders and managers within a bureaucratic structure. I aimed to examine the phenomenon by exploring culturally responsive goals from the viewpoints of mid-level curriculum administrators. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe balancing being a leader and follower amidst the competing priorities of the balcony and the dance floor while enacting culturally responsive leadership?

   a) How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe the competing priorities between the superintendent and principals, if any, when enacting culturally responsive leadership?

   b) How do the experiences of middle-level district curriculum administrators who are faced with competing priorities or constraints describe how their actions and decisions show a commitment to cultural responsiveness?

2. How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe their roles as culturally responsive leaders when bureaucratic goals conflict with the ideals of culturally responsive leadership?

a) How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe their experience dealing with conflicts between bureaucratic goals and culturally responsive leadership ideals?

b) How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe how they communicate and advocate for culturally responsive leadership practices within their district, particularly when faced with resistance or pushback from higher-level administrators or other stakeholders?

The information gathered directly addressed the research questions by examining the phenomenon from the perspectives of middle-level administrators who worked in bureaucratic structures. Sharing the stories of these particular individuals provided a guided understanding of the potential difficulties occurring with and between stakeholders of varying levels of interest. In this chapter, I present the findings of the data analysis procedures. First, the role of the researcher is reviewed concerning data collection and analysis. An overview of participants' demographics is discussed. The following sections detail my procedures for coding, analysis, and creation of initial final codes, categories, and themes. The identified themes are discussed in relation to the guiding research questions alongside participant quotes. A summary concludes Chapter 4 and transitions to the interpretation of results presented in Chapter 5.

Role of the Researcher

As a researcher, I aimed to provide a rigorous and transparent method for conducting all proposed research study elements. In Chapter 3, I delineated information specific to my background and the role I played in this study. Using a phenomenological qualitative methodology, I gathered information from participants to understand their experiences and present their stories regarding culturally responsive district middle-level leaders. Data collection centered around interviews with seven district middle-level curriculum administrators. I used a

notebook throughout to document my perspective, opinions, and any biases that may have arisen. Participants were also supplied with a short qualitative questionnaire to provide additional information, which is discussed in the following sections. The questionnaire was completed by four of the seven participants included in the study. No unforeseen issues arose requiring any deviation from the data collection and analysis methods described in Chapter 3. Throughout this chapter, I review the methods I undertook to analyze the data and present the final themes related to participants' lived experiences.

Participants

Table 1 demonstrates the key participant demographic data.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender Identity
Alicia	30-39	Hispanic Non-White	Female
GM	50-59	White	Male
Katherine	40-49	White	Female
Lola	50-59	White	Female
Michelle	30-39	Hispanic Non-White	Female
Philip	50-59	White	Male

The participants in this study consisted of seven district-level assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction employed within a New York State public school system. One participant was employed in the State of New Jersey Public Schools. The participants race/ethnicity identity was primarily White (seven participants) and Hispanic Non-White (two participants). Participants ranged in age from 30 to 59 years old. Five participants identified as female and two as male.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews conducted with seven participants. Following the guideline discussed in Chapter 3, the population comprised district-level assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction employed within a New York State public school system. The sample included were middle-level curriculum organizers, who often mitigate bureaucratical structures. A phenomenological approach was used for in-depth interviewing, where participants provided their lived experiences (Schutz, 1967). For each participant, two interviews were conducted. The first interview lasted 60-90 minutes. The second interview lasted 30-40 minutes. Using a series of two interviews was ideal for allowing them to provide a space to safely discuss their perspectives, consider the information discussed in the first interview, and provide additional details not discussed in the first interview.

After completing each interview, interview files were saved on a password-protected USB drive. Pseudonyms were applied to all participants, which included Alicia, GM, Katherine, Lola, Michelle, Philip, and Patricia. After all interviews were completed for each participant, the transcript files were uploaded to Rev.Com and then checked for grammar and transcription errors. I carefully read and reread each transcript to ensure that all information presented was accurate to the audio recordings for the corresponding interviews. The next step was the process of uploading each of the files into NVivo 12 thematic analysis software. I conducted all thematic analysis procedures, but the software allowed for effective organization, transcription storage, and linking of each code, category, and theme to the corresponding participants. In the following section, the methods for data analysis specific to the development of initial final codes, categories, and themes are discussed in detail.

Coding

The method employed for data analysis in this study was thematic. The guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2019) and Saldana (2019) were followed to guide the thematic analysis procedures. The transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 12 qualitative software. After upload, the following steps were conducted: (a) development of initial codes, (b) refinement to final codes, (c) grouping codes into categories, and (d) presentation of themes as representative of grouped categories. In the next section, the methods and decision rules for each coding procedure are discussed in detail.

Initial Codes

The process of initial code development involved reading and rereading each of the transcripts to gain familiarity with the interviews conducted with each participant. The initial codes were developed per the multiple concepts of the theoretical framework and the research included in the literature review. After I uploaded the files into NVivo 12, I read each file to ensure I was familiar with the participant's responses. As a decision rule, I read each of the transcripts twice to ensure my familiarity per the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2019). After the familiarization phase, I moved to *initial coding* procedures. According to Saldaña (2019), initial codes are discrete elements of text, typically words or phrases, repeatedly spoken by participants across each interview. During initial coding, I used a decision rule to review each of the transcripts twice for initial codes. Each initial code was tagged as a code in NVivo 12 software. Table 2 shows each of the codes developed based on participants' reflections.

Table 2

Initial Codes

Initial Code	Description
Theory-Based Descriptive Codes	
(1) Cultural Responsiveness	Participants reflected on CRL practices and the intersection of their roles.
(2) CRL Practices	
(3) CRL Roles	
Bureaucratic-Oriented Descriptive Codes	
(4) High-Level Administrators	Participants provided experiences negotiating with high-level administrators and stakeholders while mitigating the bureaucratic nature of the educational system.
(5) Stakeholders	
Action Oriented Descriptions	
(6) Decisions	Various actions, decisions, and collaborative approaches were used to navigate curriculum development and implementation.
(7) Actions	
(8) Collaboration	
Challenges Based Codes	
(9) Competing Goals	A variety of challenges were experienced by participants in terms of resistance, constraints, and competing goals.
(10) Constraints	
(11) Resistance to Change	

Strategy Based Codes	
(12) Student Needs Identification	Differing strategies were used to overcome challenges, negotiate with stakeholders, and mitigate the arduous bureaucratic structure of the educational system.
(13) Prioritization of Goals	
(14) Resources	
(15) Strategies	

Per Table 2, each initial code group is categorized by a critical phenomenon from the theoretical framework and research addressed in the literature review, including theory-, bureaucracy-, action-, challenges-, and strategy-based codes. Out of the seven interviews (and two interviews conducted per participant), 15 codes were identified from the initial thematic analysis. The codes demonstrated various actions used to overcome constraints and challenges specific to the bureaucratic system and experiences applying CRL as a leadership and goal-oriented practice within their professional experiences. After developing initial codes, the second phase of thematic analysis was conducted to group initial codes into final codes, which I discuss in the next section.

Final Codes

The second thematic analysis phase involved grouping initial codes into *final codes* based on conceptual similarity. As a decision rule, I reviewed each initial code twice to review for codes that could be grouped based on their similarity. After review, I inducted a decision rule that each final code should have a minimum of two initial codes to ensure thematic rigor (Clarke & Braun, 2019). In some cases, an initial code is used for more than one final code, which is

acceptable when the final code represents actors with agency who fulfill multiple roles (Saldana, 2016). Table 3 presents the grouped initial codes, final codes, and associated definitions.

Table 3

Final Codes

Initial Code	Final Code	Definition
(1) Cultural Responsiveness (7) Actions	(A) Actionable Cultural Responsiveness	Participants' cultural responsiveness (CR) actions were based on experiences, practices, and personal definitions of CR.
(2) CRL Practices (13) Prioritization of Goals	(B) Strategies	Various strategies were used to allow participants to navigate bureaucratic structures, such as practices of CRL, as well as prioritize desired goals.
(8) Collaboration (11) Resistance to Change	(C) Collaboration to Overcome Resistance	One strategy to overcome the challenges faced was collaboration, which allowed multiple stakeholders to come together despite resistance in the general educational environment.
(10) Constraints (5) Stakeholders	(D) Challenges	The challenges faced by participants were often focused on multiple stakeholders with constrained educational goals and priorities.
(9) Competing Goals (4) High-Level Administrators	(E) Competition amongst Administrators	Administrators held competing ideologies for educational outcomes. As a result, participants navigated challenging environments using their experiences, skills, and motivation to incorporate CR.
(13) Goals (16) Strategies	(F) Strategic Decision Making for Goal Attainment	Decision-making practices varied according to each participant. However, their goals were most often dependent upon the bureaucratic nature of the educational system in which they worked.
(7) Actions (14) Resources	(G) Resource Acquisition	Participants and administrators took actions to acquire the resources required to implement the strategies fort goal attainment.

(12) Student Needs Identification (4) High-Level Administrators (3) CRL Roles	(H) Administrative Identification of Student Needs	Administrators focused on students' needs when advocating for the appropriate solutions within the school's curriculum development and programs.
(6) Decisions (11) Resistance to Change	(I) Advocacy for Change	Participants reflected on their advocacy of CR decisions taken to implement programs, and their commitment to improving CR. implementation within education.
(13) Prioritization of Goals (3) CRL Roles	(J) Prioritizing of Goals and Roles	Participants' experiences were grounded within their prioritization of CR. Focusing on the priority of CR while implementing their experiences based on previous and current roles was vital for many participants.

Examples of final codes categorized together included *decisions* in response to *resistance to change*. Moreover, the initial codes of *strategies* in pursuit of *goals* were combined as a final code. Participants' responses indicated that the bureaucratic nature of the educational system was best navigated with clear goals for accomplishing program implementation or curriculum changes. The initial codes of *high-level administrators* and *identification of student needs* were combined as a final code. In total, the 16 initial codes elicited ten final codes. After the completion of the final coding analysis, the process of category development was initiated. Category development involves the combination of final codes into categories. Next, each of the category development procedures was reviewed.

Categories

Category development, the next phase of thematic analysis, was completed by combining final codes into discrete groups. A decision rule was implemented to review each last code twice to ensure a thorough review of the available data. After reviewing each final code, concepts of

similar value were grouped into categories. As a rule, each category must contain two final

codes. In some cases, a final code is used for more than one category of codes, which is

acceptable when the final code represents actors with agency who fulfill multiple roles (Saldana,

2016). Table 4 demonstrates the categories, combined final codes, and key definitions.

Table 4

Categories

Final Codes	Categories	Definitions
(E) Competition amongst Administrators (C) Collaboration to Overcome Resistance	(i) Stakeholders and Administration Resolving Differences to Work Together	The stakeholders' administrators were significant in guiding the policies and practices of the four CR and CRL. In some cases, collaborating with these influential stakeholders and administrators was vital to overcoming challenges.
(F) Strategic Decision Making for Goal Attainment (G) Resource Acquisition	(ii) Actions and Decisions to Acquire Resources for Goal Attainment	The actions and decisions made by the participants in this study showed a reliance on experiences and activities that place the needs of students first.
(A) Actionable Cultural Responsiveness (J) Prioritizing of Goals and Roles	(iii) Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership	Employing CRL required leadership experience and dedication from participants.
(I) Advocacy for Change (H) Administrative Identification of Student Needs	(iv) Advocacy for Change to Meet Student Needs	Communicating with stakeholders, parents, and other bureaucratic structures was vital to advocating for the inclusion of CR and emphasizing the importance of creating a diverse leadership and student-orientated practice within education.

(D) Challenges (J) Prioritizing of Goals and Roles	(v) Navigating Challenges to Prioritize Goals and Roles of Participants	Multiple challenges were evident across each participant's expressed stories. It was important for participants to idealize their priorities to navigate these challenges.
(B) Strategies (E) Competition amongst Administrators	(vi) Managing Bureaucracy	Bureaucracy was an essential element of many participants' stories. Using strategies and carefully guided language was crucial for managing bureaucratic structures.

The category development led to six categories from the 15 final codes. Each of the identified categories provided unique insights regarding the participants' lived experiences with managing bureaucratical structures and negotiating stakeholder and administrator interests while upholding the needs of students with a focus on CRL. The developed categories are the foundation for creating the emergent themes discussed next.

Themes

The final step of data analysis involved the combination of categories into themes. The identified themes were grouped based on the decision rule pattern analysis. Pattern analysis involves identifying categories of congruent value and grouping these based on similarity or difference (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As an additional decision rule, each developed category was reviewed twice to ensure a thorough assessment of potential patterns emergent from the categories created in the previous phase of thematic analysis. In some cases, a category is used for more than one theme, which is acceptable when the category represents actors with agency who fulfill multiple roles (Saldana, 2016). Table 5 delineates the final themes elucidated, the associated combined categories, and definitions.

Table 5

Themes

Categories	Themes	Definitions
(i) Stakeholders and Administration Resolving Differences to Work Together (v) Navigating Challenges to Prioritize Goals and Roles of Participants	Navigating Challenges Despite Competing Priorities: Stakeholders and Administration	Theme one demonstrates the various challenges participants experienced. The ability of individuals to navigate such challenges was based upon their prioritization of goal-orientated needs while mediating the preferences and competing interests of stakeholders and administrators.
(ii) Actions and Decisions to Acquire Resources for Goal Attainment (iii) Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership	Actions and Decisions: Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership	Theme two recognizes participants' decisions and actions when enacting culturally responsive leadership. The decision-making process varied according to school, administration, and the individual. However, when CRL was prioritized, it was more likely to be valued within the educational structure.
(iv) Advocacy for Change to Meet Student Needs (vi) Managing Bureaucracy	Communication and Advocacy: Managing Bureaucracy	Theme three showed that the management of bureaucratic structures required participants to be active communicators. For many participants, advocating for their communities and student needs was vital to managing bureaucratic structures while emphasizing the importance of CRL.

The final themes identified from the data analysis process were: (a) Navigating

Challenges Despite Competing Priorities: Stakeholders and Administrators, (b) Actions and

Decisions: Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership, and (c) Communication and Advocacy: Managing Bureaucracy. The final three themes were directly associated with the purpose of the study in the guiding research questions, which are discussed throughout the remainder of this chapter. I elucidated specific patterns regarding challenges, priorities, administration, advocacy, and strategies through combining categories. Each theme is discussed individually and alongside participant quotes. The *thick description* (Saldaña, 2016) supplied by presenting participants' quotes alongside a definition of each theme exemplifies the complexity of the topics reviewed.

Theme 1: Navigating Challenges Despite Competing Priorities: Stakeholders and Administration

Information obtained from the first theme supplied an overview of the challenges and competing priorities experienced by middle-level district curriculum advisors. Participants reflected upon the potential difficulties of managing challenges associated with stakeholder and administrator groups. Specifically, the information obtained from theme one directly addressed RQ1a: *How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe the competing priorities between the superintendent and principals, if any, when enacting culturally responsive leadership?* Participants' lived experiences, as expressed in this study, provided unique information concerning challenges, nuanced communication with stakeholders and administrators, and the strategies employed that allowed for effective and comprehensive CRL implementation.

Participants supplied an understanding regarding their experiences working in a bureaucratic structure. Participants also discussed how changes created difficulty, struggles, and conflict in the workplace when encountering differences of belief, as well as attempting to integrate a diverse method of teaching and leading. Amongst the topics discussed by participants

were the challenges of CRL. According to G.M., "Some people believe in it, and some people are kind of like, 'Eh?' Because I want to cover my standards, so I want my minute or two back to class," and Lola said, "There have been times where there's resistance or different opinions or ideas." However, Michelle reported relatively few constraints:

> I feel like I am blessed because it is not. I mean, the truth is that our learners are number one, and anything they need is our driving force, and everything that we preach, or push is all in being responsive to that kid.

However, after further discussion, Michelle did see some potential issues at high school levels. As she explained, "High school, in general, is always where you will get the most resistance. As a former high school teacher, it upsets me that much more." Katherine also reported some difficulties with parental support: "A parent, an irate parent, called a board member, wants to know why *White Fragility* was on the summer reading list." Patricia corroborated some push-back from parents as well:

> Last year, we had a parent at one of the elementary schools. The principal put up a banner that said "Diversity Our Strength" right outside the door where the students get picked up. A parent went nuts over the Diversity statement and said, "You should care about all people and not just those people."

The push-back regarding the title *White Fragility* was not only from a singular parent. In response to the concern, the superintendents agreed that the book should be removed from the reading list to avoid further concerns. Katherine emphasized that the district's demographic makeup, consisting primarily of affluent White parents on one side of town, could be a contributing factor to the ongoing resistance against the inclusion of the book, even with the implementation of CR methods

Participants' experiences, such as those of Michelle and Katherine, demonstrate that difficulties implementing CR practices can be found both in negotiating with parents, and other stakeholders. As a result, the difficult interactions between leaders, teachers, and stakeholders, can create tension that fails to support the increased support for diversity or CRL within the educational system.

Participants pointed out the constraints often associated with implementing CRL or CR practices when discussing challenges. According to Alica, improvements are needed deeper: "…just doing these gimmicky, flashy things and putting it on paper because it sounds good, but we really aren't putting in the work…" G.M. indicated that troubleshooting such issues often required non-formal approaches "…knowing that there would be some, I guess, resistance towards it, we did not make it mandatory. It was more like an optional thing during the day for people." Lola explained, "When you have all the programs, and you are doing all the work and then nobody comes, it is very defeating. So you have to start to think differently."

When reflecting on specific challenges, participants noted that some stakeholders often served as roadblocks to CR implementation efficacy. Participants discussed the difficulty of implementation when other individuals within the educational workplace are not fully supportive. For example, some participants described how when attempting to implement CR within the classroom, other educators themselves were hesitant, or even against the idea of inclusion of specific books or pedagogical materials supporting CR. Participants emphasized that such resistance was incredibly difficult to manage, while also ensuring that CR was implemented appropriately to support the needs of students.

Alicia emphasized that various stakeholders play a role in difficulties: "I see the resistance on all levels. I work with teachers, I work with specialists, I also work with principals,

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and I manage content area supervisors, and I would say it manifests very differently." G.M. corroborated these difficult conversations: "The admin had some goals in mind. Teachers had a different goal in mind." Katherine recognized that stakeholder interests varied based on a variety of district changes as well: "I had no complaints on one side of town because they're wanting to learn about this and wanting to find ways in which they can help their students and be more culturally responsive where others are not."

For many participants, the conflicting priorities of stakeholders concerning CR or CRL, or even diversity initiatives were a major constraint. According to Alicia: "I would say, I know why people get burned out and give up in these positions. Literally, you are at the monster; the monster's just eating your time, eating your energy." Administrators could either be a helping hand or a barrier to CR implementation. Katherine pointed out the difficulties of managing their job roles and approval issues:

> Because I was never told no before, and now I am like, "I have all these beautiful books, and now I can't use them." We have a good budget. I am able to buy things that teachers need. But now, I have to go through the process of getting things approved, which used to be, "Isn't that my job? Isn't that why you hired me?" To be in this position to do that?

G.M. conversely felt support from higher-level administration: "In our community, luckily, we are not impacted by that. I got to say, blessed, the board of Ed, the community, all supportive in everything that we are trying to do, and it is actually goals that they have." Patricia agreed with positive administrative support: "The administrative staff is very open to learning and embracing the entire concept."

Collaboration was critical for some participants to overcome challenges and constraints. Alicia recognized some barriers and opportunities to change: "I would say the biggest resource is

time and space, which may be limited. I do not necessarily feel like material things are going to drive school improvement or push culturally responsive practices." Philip agreed and noted that constraints can be challenging: "…I'm caught in between, but I have to stick to my guns." Participants also emphasized that difficulty in collaboration was ensuring that other individuals held the same definition and recognizing the importance of CR in the workplace. A key element of the collaboration process was ensuring that leadership was aligned with CR. However, if leaders were not aligned with CR, the efforts to improve collaboration were more difficult for participants.

Prioritizing the needs of students often led to more effective implementation tactics. Specifically, participants used their expertise to assess the best strategies to navigate challenges. Lola recognized that it was vital to continue pushing for CR: "You have to be visible; you have to be in it; you have to roll up your sleeves in the trenches. What do you need? I am your servant. How can I support you?" G.M. recognized that addressing issues may require collaboration: "You could probably have a staff member or staff members as part of their assignments dedicated to coaching others and helping achieve that goal." Michelle also employed professional development to foster in-house training initiatives: "Teachers are constantly meeting with teachers. We are constantly in communication with teachers. We do have P.D. offered in three different forms per cycle." Katherine also targeted the administration: "We did a book study with the administration first."

Regardless of strategy, resistance was a factor that all participants recognized in some aspect inherent to implementing and guiding efficacious CR curriculum, training, or workshops. G.M. noted that initial implementation is sometimes difficult: "…some kids will say, "Well, don't really see the purpose of it because even my facilitator doesn't see it." You know what I mean?"

For some, such as Lola, families can also be a source of resistance: "The majority of people were like, this is great because it will maximize our opportunities for teachers, which directly benefits students, but then families were concerned with the change in times." Patricia recognized that "…to get buy-in without the administrators being wholly on board is very difficult." Philip also realized that each situation is unique: "Sometimes it starts with state initiatives; they mention X, Y, and Z and want you to implement them. But every district is at a different place."

Participants' reflections illustrated challenges, often unique to the district or the specific individuals guiding the implementation. All participants indicated that it was critical to stay committed, rely on their expertise, and navigate challenges through in-house and student-focused training. The bureaucratic nature presents as a potential constraint, as participants discussed. However, depending on the importance of prioritizing, CR may be one method that is ideal for managing competing interests in the educational sector.

Theme 2: Actions and Decisions: Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership

The information obtained from the second theme demonstrated participants' varied experiences concerning actions and decision-making processes that underpinned the activities of CRL. Participants relayed their experiences with school administration, other key stakeholders, and the prioritization of CRL. The information obtained from the second theme aligned with RQb1: *how do the experiences of middle-level district curriculum administrators who are faced with competing priorities or constraints describe how their actions and decisions show a commitment to cultural responsiveness?* Participants' perceptions provide keen information to support understanding of how CR is implemented and what challenges may arise within the educational system.

Participants used various strategies to apply CRL in their educational districts. Participants described diverse strategies, such as selecting books themselves, attending professional development, as well as collaborating with others within the educational system to support CR implementation. Alicia applied hands-on development techniques: "I love the curriculum. I get to actually work closely with our district interventionists and our gifted and talented programs. I support our schools with their annual school planning and all of the compliance stuff." Lola similarly focuses on various CR developments: "We've done a lot of curriculum mapping, vertical and horizontally, to bring the school districts together as a whole." For Michelle, strategies are already a vital component of the school's programming: "It's integrated, so it's purposefully designed to be culturally responsive."

Participants also fostered training to target administration and stakeholders. For individuals implementing CR, using methods such as professional development can be critical to overcoming potential resistance from individuals such as teachers or even leaders. Katherine focused on methods for educators: "I do professional development for the teachers. I bring in different consultants," and Patricia also targeted administrative training. "I also run a mentoring program in the district now for all new administrators that I designed." However, For Alicia, strategies may depend on the context and the individual: "But I do make little notes about things and then try to when I next interact with that person, approach them in a particular way."

The specific bureaucractic nature of each individual's educational district ultimately constrained the strategies, actions, and decision-making processes. The participants shared stories that demonstrated difficulty in providing CRP for students while overcoming barriers associated with the bureaucratic nature of the district. Individuals noted that while all leaders emphasize the importance of CRP, their actions, as well as lack of collaboration, seemed

contrarian to their reported belief in diversity initiatives.Alicia described, "I don't mind being a follower as long as I'm following something that's going to be good for our students." G.M. reported that the structure of the system can be daunting:

> It gets more and more political as you get to that next level. And sometimes that is not really... I do not want to be a politician, so I enjoy working with teachers, students, and parents and helping students meet their goals and prepare for the future.

Lola also recognized a noticeable pattern in the bureaucracy "…because in my time in the district, in five years, there have been three superintendents and three business officials, and it had typically been a revolving door." Michelle countered that her district is relatively good at communication: "…they might be a little dismissive, "Oh, yeah. I got this." But we do a pretty great job in holding them a little bit more accountable for it..." Katherine, however, felt that listening to the needs of the students was required to overcome such strict systems. "I feel like that's probably what I wish more than anything, is that the adults and the leaders in these positions would really listen to what the kids have to say."

Regardless of the strategy employed, differing decision-making processes were implemented based on constraints or other leadership interests in the educational district. The process of implementing CR initiatives was incredibly difficult for many participants who struggled with providing appropriate material to students, while also overcoming bureaucratic decisions which limited the implementation of CR or CRL practices.Katherine stated:

> We are getting there, slowly but surely, millimeter by millimeter. At least we are moving forward, in a sense, not as quickly as I would like and not to the full force, but I feel like I had to compromise in the way in which I see things and the way in which I have to approach them.

Alicia stated that time plays a role in the feeling of pressure: "I feel like things move faster than we actually have time to sit and reflect through some of the decisions that are being made." Lola argued that time may also play a role: "…I think we need to give people time to slowly digest new things…"

Employing culturally responsive leadership requires effective leadership experience and strong goal-oriented practices. Philip stated, "I went into teaching because I believe that literacy empowers students and contributes to our democracy." Lola also focused on her central goals: "I am very highly passionate, and I take pride in the work that we do right for kids. But you cannot take things personally." Katherine also recognized the importance of pushing through difficulties with the goal of CLR in mind when considering prior challenges: "My three strikers, they probably have respect for me, but they are just not ones that are ever going to show that empathetic side of themselves or the vulnerable side of them. So, that is their prerogative. I cannot make them. But, I do not stop offering times to do that." G.M. further corroborated these statements of prioritization: "…It's a matter of curriculum work and what's right for the kids, what's right for the teachers, what's right for the community."

Participants' reflections demonstrated a variety of decision-making processes that underpinned the implementation of CRL within an educational context. While constraints and resistance exist, prioritizing student needs was vital to enacting CR practices and guiding leadership training and development. The challenges identified indicated the complexity of participants' roles. Yet despite difficulties, each individual reported a strong sense of dedication to enacting CRL in educational contexts.

Theme 3: Communication and Advocacy: Managing Bureaucracy

The findings from the third theme demonstrated various strategies employed by participants to advocate for CRL via communication. The management of bureaucratic structures was handled by allocating unique strategies that would be effective for stakeholders and high administration and to support students' needs. Alignment with information addressing RQ2a (a) *How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe their experience dealing with conflicts between bureaucratic goals and culturally responsive leadership ideals?* RQ2b (b) *How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe how they communicate and advocate for culturally responsive leadership practices within their district, particularly when faced with resistance or pushback from higher-level administrators or other stakeholders?* Participants' lived experiences, reflected in the third theme, demonstrate a goal-orientated approach to managing bureaucracy through advocating and communicating.

Communication was considered a necessary and ideal approach to advocating for CRL. For many participants, communication was important to ensure individuals were aware and understanding of the specific practices implemented to ensure students were supported. Furthermore, communication allows other people who are potentially hesitant regarding CR to provide their support and agreement with CR practices in the educational context. According to Alicia, "…a lot of what I feel is the work that could help mitigate some of those challenges is building my team up." G.M. also argued for the importance of communication:" The method I've been using is transparency, clear communication, make sure that people involved in the work have a seat at the table to have those discussions just way they could share out the importance of the work."

Participants also expressed that commitment to CR the needs of students, and the implementation of CRL was critical to their effective approaches in an educational context. Alicia stated, "I'm just trying to build some opportunities for them to see that, to see their colleagues doing this work." Lola agreed, "When people feel valued that way, they're more likely to buy into your recommendations." Patricia also implemented initiatives to help with advocacy: "We tried to embed some district-wide days to slowly bleed it all out. We are all doing the kindness initiative at the beginning of the year, a welcoming and affirming environment."

Stakeholders, such as community members and board members, often expressed concern over the implementation of CR. Michelle stated "I 100% still feel that we could be a little bit more intentional about CRS practices. I do think that we do a great job 100%. But…getting the results that I got, it was a little bit hurtful." As a means, some participants felt that changing semantics and navigating language barriers was vital in showing the importance of diversity and CR. processes. Patricia employed a unique strategy: "We did not promote DEI from the word DEI perspective but more from culturally responsive teaching because it's what people were comfortable with, and we didn't want to scare anybody or create naysayers, so we maintained that title." Katherine also argued that aligning with goals can improve how stakeholders view initiatives: "You have to know the stakeholders. You have to know what the vision is of the community and the district office and say," Lola agreed that inclusion of these goals is vital. "the district needed to prioritize our needs, and so we were able to create that role."

Though serving a purpose in terms of alignment and structure, bureaucratic structures were noted to be best managed when prioritizing CR and implementing experience-based systems. Some participants discuss stories associated with navigating structures, which as particularly difficult. For some individuals, when particular hesitancy or pushback was

recognized, effective communication was not a necessarily enough to ensure CR practices were implemented. For other participants, speaking out at boards, with leaders, and other stakeholders, was critical, but not necessarily effective. Patricia stated that the inclusion of their voices could be effective. "It's not realistic here in my district, but I think if I had the option to choose who sat on committees sometimes and create a more diverse conversation, it would help me." Katherine recognized the difficulties of navigating these structures: "I am always torn between ... just because being in this position, what my real true heart feels and what I can actually do, is very difficult." Phillip agreed that experience is vital to navigate the difficulty of competing needs:

> That dance between what the board's interests are for a school district and then what [the state] would like us to do and then locally here, what we know needs to be done. I think it is that balancing act. And then that is in building a budget, right? Determining our priorities for the following year. We cannot have everything.

Resources were noted as a potential method of improving the CRL implementation to reach out through bureaucratic structures and improve implementation approaches. Some participants described difficulty in regard to overcoming the lack of resources, while continuing to implement appropriate methods. Participants frequently relied on their previous experience in professional development to guide the continued implementation of CR regardless of budgetary or resource restrictions. However, the lack of resources can also lead to reduced professional development, thus, leading to further resistance from uncertain parties. G.M. stated, "A little intentionality of making sure there's allocation for those new books, including what we get from state aid. So the burden's, at least in my opinion, not drastic in terms of a financial burden to a district." Lola agreed with funding issues: "Budget is always an issue, especially in my current district. Funds are limited, so we have to look to any grant funding." For Michelle, funding was

not an issue, but to her, "I think the only real factor is time. We do not have limited resources. We are really good in terms of providing teachers with resources or things that they might need. Time is always the biggest battle. How do I go about that? I do not know." Michelle emphasized that management of systems requires considering what is most important:

> There's always room for growth, and the work is never done; we constantly have to advocate for culturally responsive practices in our classroom because I do not care if the kids are labeled or not labeled. The kind of kid that is in front of you today, it matters.
>
> Participants' lived experiences showed commitment and dedication to the needs of

students. Regardless of resources, all participants reflected on the importance of CR-based initiatives. Furthermore, participants emphasized that implementation for the best of students' needs is complex without higher administration and stakeholder buy-in. Communication and advocating for the deeper-rooted importance of CR, such as inclusion and diversity, is one potential approach to overcoming challenges. However, the stories participants shared illustrated battles often based upon managing differing and competing priorities.

Additional Follow Up Survey Data

I also conducted a follow-up survey of participants during the interview process. The follow-up survey was considered voluntary and based upon a reflection of the interviews conducted with participants. Out of seven interviews, four respondents provided thoughts on the survey. First, participants were asked to review a general synthesis of some challenges and difficulties identified throughout my discussions—table 6 details participants' answers and detailed responses resulting from the synthesis provided for their review.

Table 6

Review of Constraints

Question: The curriculum administrators who participated in this study identified three top themes as the most challenging for individuals or groups when trying to embrace or implement culturally responsive practices within the organization. They are navigating time constraints, balancing tensions between compliance with district policies and practices, and innovative approaches to promote cultural responsiveness.			
	Agree	Disagree	Partially Agree
Responses	3	0	1
Why do you agree or disagree?	Most districts are not prioritizing this initiative, leading to stakeholder tension.		In my district, there is a common belief to hold teachers accountable for CRS practices, yet we are not being as intentional with the framework as possible. It is constantly promoted to embrace most practices but not specific to the CRS framework.
	Implementing any new initiative presents itself with the themes indicated above. We have been discussing culturally responsive teaching as a practice as a district. Once you add policies and regulations/requirements, it makes it different for those receiving the information.		

The participant's responses (though limited) indicated difficulties in transitioning due to the need for intentionality prioritization and emphasizing the importance of CR in terms of district-wide practice. In response, a secondary survey question was supplied to participants regarding challenges elucidated from the interviews with participants. Participants were asked to rank if they *agreed, disagreed,* or *partially agreed* with identified challenges. Table 7 demonstrates the responses, of which all agreed, and three clarifying statements.

Table 7

Review of Challenges

	Agree	Disagree	Partially Agree
Another challenge curriculum administrators face is ensuring effective communication and coordination across different levels of the organization because information flows and decision-making processes may vary.			
	4	0	0
Can you talk more about why you agree or disagree?	Many districts want to put their heads in the sand and hope culturally responsive practices and DEI letters will go away. Curriculum Administrators can write policies and discuss implementation plans; however, building culture and community receptiveness drive Implementation is critical. Personal bias also comes into play in many ways, making unified implementation challenging.		

	There must be a common belief in implementing CRS practices and holding teachers and administrators accountable.

The four participants who supplied responses to the survey question argued that

challenges were based upon the difficulty in implementing CR based upon practices within the

higher administration and stakeholder basis. Other challenges indicated potential for personal

bias and a lack of buy-in to fully implement CR practices. The third survey question examined

participants' responses to situations in which decisions that were potentially biased against CR

goals were made. Two respondents selected *yes,* and two selected *no*. Additionally, two

respondents provided additional details. Table 8 reviews the responses.

Table 8

Review of Competing Goals

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you had to support a decision made by others, even when you had reservations or did not fully agree because it went against culturally responsive goals?		
	Yes	No
Responses	2	2
If yes, can you explain further	When my department wanted to use a certain picture book for our literacy launch unit, I was told we could not use the book. I had to support the decision of my boss even when my teachers and I did not agree with the banning of the book in our unit.	

| | All the time. Coordinating and managing compliance is difficult. Complying with state guidelines for high-stakes accountability often is a contradiction to culturally responsive teaching and learning practices. |

Participant responses (Table 8) indicated that compliance can be complex due to competing ideologies from state guidelines and high-stakes accountability for stakeholders and administration. One participant emphasized that the book was previously approved but later rejected without understanding why it was considered inappropriate. These two responses delineate experiences that corroborate the thematic research discussed in this chapter regarding difficulties navigating CRL implementation while managing conflicting bureaucratic ideologies. The final survey question participants were asked to respond to was on a scale of 1-5, how each participant perceived their role as a district curriculum leader as effective for enacting CRL principles. Table 9 demonstrates the survey results.

Table 9

Effectiveness of Role

On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate the extent to which you believe your current role as a middle-level district curriculum leader allows you to enact culturally responsive leadership principles. (1 = Not at all, 5 = To a great extent)	
Scale	Total Responses
1 (Not at All)	0
2	0
3	0
4	2
5 (To a Great Extent)	2

Out of seven respondents, only four completed the survey scale response. Two of the four chose a 5, and two chose a 4 when assessing their ability to meet CRL principles as middle-level district curriculum leaders. The responses from participants showed that on a scale of 1-5, participants were most likely to rate a 4 or 5 when reflecting upon their ability to enact CRL practices in their current roles. Concerning the thematic analysis discussed in this chapter, participants' responses show that for some, the inaction of practices is effective but requires competent strategies, communication, and advocacy while managing bureaucratic structures.

Summary

In this chapter, the seven interviews conducted with participants were reviewed. The specific strategies used for thematic analysis were discussed in detail. The data collected from participants underwent thematic analysis to illustrate initial final codes, categories, and themes. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of district mid-level curriculum administrators in public education regarding their experience as leaders and managers within a bureaucratic structure. The final themes identified from the data analysis process were: (a) Navigating Challenges Despite Competing Priorities: Stakeholders And Administrators, (b) Actions and Decisions: Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership, and (c) Communication and Advocacy: Managing Bureaucracy. Participant stories shared with the researcher demonstrated a variety of challenges, actions, and the ultimate prioritization of CR Based on these findings, various implications for practice and research are available. In the next chapter, Chapter 5, I will review the implications of these finding's in relation to theoretical and empirical literature. A discussion regarding potential recommendations for change is also supplied.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The growing diversity of students in the U.S. educational system requires influential leaders who can equip CR through their leadership approaches (Campos-Moreira et al., 2020; Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021). Previous researchers showed that the implementation of CRL is of utmost importance to the effective outcomes for student needs and the modern educational landscape (Schukow, 2020). Yet, a gap persisted regarding the experiences of mid-level leaders as they try to implement CR approaches within a bureaucratic system. This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experiences of mid-level district curriculum administrators within a bureaucratic structure. The purpose of this study was addressed via a series of proposed research questions, which examined middle-level district curriculum administrators' descriptions of roles, experiences, communication and advocacy, priorities, and constraints.

Data was collected via interviews with seven middle-level curriculum administrators. I additionally provided participants with a series of short follow-up questions to garner supplementary perspectives, which four participants completed. Data was analyzed thematically following the recommendations of Clark and Braun (2019) and Saldaña (2016). The thematic findings were: (a) *Navigating Challenges Despite Competing Priorities: Stakeholders And Administrators, (b) Actions and Decisions: Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership,* and *(c) Communication and Advocacy: Managing Bureaucracy.*

The thematic findings from the analysis of participants' reflections are reviewed concerning implications and recommendations in this chapter. In the upcoming sections, I discuss the implications of the findings, specifically through the organization of the guiding research questions. Relevant empirical and theoretical knowledge are discussed when reviewing

the implications of the thematic findings. Separate discussions are provided to review the proposed recommendations for policy and practice. The recommendations related to future research and study limitations are also presented. The fundamental message from the dissertation is supplied in a summary that concludes this chapter.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of district mid-level curriculum administrators in public education regarding their experience as leaders and managers within a bureaucratic structure. As a result of the thematic findings, three key themes were identified: (a) *Navigating Challenges Despite Competing Priorities: Stakeholders And Administrators, (b) Actions and Decisions: Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership,* and *(c) Communication and Advocacy: Managing Bureaucracy.* Each key theme identified in this section is reviewed in relation to the guiding research questions. Empirical and theoretical literature is reviewed to assess for corroborating or dissimilar information with the research findings.

RQ1. How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe balancing being a leader and follower amidst the competing priorities of the balcony and the dance floor while enacting culturally responsive leadership?

Theme one, *navigating challenges despite competing priorities: stakeholders and administrators, and* theme two, *actions and decisions: enacting culturally responsive leadership* addressed RQ1. Participants' reflections provided information about employed strategies, difficulties, constraints, and the importance of prioritizing CRL despite a highly bureaucratic structure. The following section discusses information specific to empirical and theoretical literature supporting the findings of this study. Of crucial importance, the current study provided

information to address a notable gap in the literature regarding the perceptions of middle manager curriculum administrators when implementing CRL while managing competing priorities.

RQ1a. How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe the competing priorities between the superintendent and principals when enacting culturally responsive leadership?

Information obtained from the first theme, *navigating challenges despite competing priorities, stakeholders, and administrators,* addressed RQ1a. Specifically, participants provided their lived experiences regarding challenges, constraints, and the need to manage bureaucratic structures while guiding strategies for students and teachers. Weber's (1905) bureaucracy theory showed that hierarchical structures are often associated with worker constraints. Conversely, CRL theory demonstrated that all workers are critical in organizing and leading change (Khalifa, 2018). Information obtained from the first theme indicates that to implement CRL justly, the support of middle-level managers in implementing effective change within the educational system is required.

In this study, participants discussed the challenges of implementing CRL. Other participants discussed constraints according to stakeholders, and CRL implementation was face-value alone. Stakeholders often faced resistance regarding difficulties with teachers, administration, and board members. Research from Shields (2017) and Mayfield (2017) showed that resistance and challenges are expected when implementing CR curricula. Most notably, the leadership's perception of diversity and open-mindedness can impact how well-supported others are regarding the implementation of CR. However, when multiple stakeholder interests are present, effectively implementing CR becomes increasingly difficult.

Some participants felt relatively supported by administration stakeholders, but resources, either via funding or time, were a desire for all participants. Khalifa (2018) recognized that resources are essential for implementing effective outcomes and inclusive spaces. Bennis et al. (2002) also found that many middle-level leaders struggle with resources to achieve goals. However, Wang and O'Day (2007) argued that prioritizing goals among stakeholders and administrators can effectively lead to access to appropriate resources required to implement effective change.

All participants reflected on the importance of prioritizing student needs to implement CR navigate challenges through their training, and prioritize outcomes for the betterment of students. Khalifa (2018) corroborated the importance of prioritization of inclusivity. Cobb and Krownapple (2019) argued that prioritization of the student is one effective measure to improve acceptance of CR in the educational context. Similarly, Spillane et al. (2011) argued that collaboration with multiple stakeholders can potentially foster improved outcomes when a singular goal, such as student needs, is identified. The lived experiences of participants (elucidated in the first theme) are congruent with previous empirical and theoretical literature regarding the importance of student needs resources, as well as difficulties in implementing CRL dependent upon the educational context. However, the findings also provide new information that supports the experiences of middle-level district curriculum administrators who must navigate bureaucratic structures when implementing effective initiatives to support students.

RQ1b. How do the experiences of middle-level district curriculum administrators facing competing priorities or constraints describe how their actions and decisions show a commitment to cultural responsiveness?

The second theme, *actions and decisions: enacting culturally responsive leadership*, addressed RQ1b. Participants' stories showed an emphasis on using CRL as well as the specific decision-making processes used to guide CRL interventions effectively. Khalifa (2018) argued that CRL must be implemented on an advocacy and teacher-preparation basis. Participants' attempts to implement CRL with a focus on training, communication, and student advocacy align with the CRL framework's tenets. However, Weber's Bureaucratic Theory (1905) delineated that hierarchical societies are most likely to use rationalization to adhere to procedures, which are inflexible and can hinder the implementation of new processes and innovative decision-making. Considering the theoretical framework, the findings of this study show that communication and advocacy are essential, but the continuing bureaucratic structures may be complex to overcome as they limit flexibility and decision-making.

Participants employed strategies to implement CRL, such as targeted training for administrators and stakeholders, professional development, and prioritizing student needs as a motivator for CR intervention. Previous literature showed that strategies employed could often focus on observation (Wise, 2001), training (Bettini et al., 2016; Washington et al., 2021), and professional development (Supovitz & Riggan, 2012). The strategies participants employed in this study align with previously suggested approaches for implementing CR throughout an educational context but demonstrate substantial constraints to full implementation.

All participants identified difficulties in implementation and decision-making based on bureaucracy. Support was partially present, but for actual performance to occur, buying in from

stakeholders was absent. Bryant and Stensaker (2011) recognized that managerial duties can be complex when a middle-management position requires constant mitigation of multiple structures and interests. For managers of this study, the issue of implementing CRL is further complicated, showing corroboration with the potential difficulties of implementing CRL (Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021). However, the findings from this study expanded upon previous literature but provided new insight regarding the specific strategies used, difficulties, and how middle managers navigate the bureaucratic structures.

The middle-level administrators in this study emphasized experiences of pushback from stakeholders concerning CR , while other middle-level administrators mainly faced pushback from teachers and administrators. Kyei-Blankson et al. (2201) and Hill-Jackson et al. (2019) acknowledged that CRL requires consideration of stakeholders, including parents, when implementing CRL. Considering challenges, this study provides further information regarding the difficulty of addressing multiple concerns, which limited the practices implemented. However, a driving factor for participants in this study was motivation to implement CRL for students. The motivation for CR practices in the educational context was the critical force for continually using decision-making processes that would address the concerns of stakeholders and administrators while providing some form of CRL implementation for the betterment of education.

RQ2. How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe their roles as culturally responsive leaders when bureaucratic goals conflict with the ideals of culturally responsive leadership?

The third theme, *Communication, and Advocacy: Managing Bureaucracy*, addressed RQ2a (a) regarding experience dealing with conflicts between bureaucratic goals and culturally

responsive leadership ideals? And RQ2b (b) how they communicate and advocate for CLR when faced with resistance. In the third theme, middle-level administrators reflected upon bureaucratic structures, challenges, constraints, and the critical role of communication and advocacy.

RQ2a. How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe their experience dealing with conflicts between bureaucratic goals and culturally responsive leadership ideals?

Middle-level administrators' experiences demonstrated that goal-oriented approaches were vital to overcoming difficulties associated with a bureaucratic structure. Participants who could set specific goals, which higher administration and stakeholders perceived as effective, were more likely to be successful. Furthermore, allocating resources is essential to support training and professional development and garner buy-in from stakeholders and high-level administration. Implementing effective resources can support better CRL outcomes (Washington, 2021). Advocacy for the importance of CRL via training, professional development, and clear communication may be one method to overcome some of the constraints and challenges that occur when serving as a middle manager academic curriculum developer within a highly bureaucratic structure (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021; Teichler & Cummings, 2015).

Communication allowed for the ability to overcome obstacles while demonstrating the importance of CRL to potentially hesitant stakeholders, thus supporting the needs of students. For some participants, communication required careful language and sensitively toned terminology. Participants found that explicitly using the terms CRL or DEI was often accompanied by pushback. As a result, some participants used language (that, while still following regulations) was more palatable for stakeholders. Other participants argued that CRL

is challenging to implement as some stakeholders perceive CRL as being pensive or unnecessary for educational contexts. Gay (2022) argued that incorporating CRL is difficult but that effective communication and advocacy are vital to supporting effective implementation.

Despite various strategies, a significant amount of pushback was often experienced by middle-level administrators in terms of implementing CR-related initiatives such as DEI. While previous researchers recognized difficulties with CRL implementation (Washington, 2021), the research of this study provided insight into the complexities of managing a bureaucratic structure. For example, some participants argued that improved resources could allow for better discussion and education regarding the importance of CRL. However, all participants noted that the nature of socio-political landscapes often leads to stakeholders' concerns with CRL initiatives. Participants emphasized that implementing CRL would continue to be difficult for many educational middle managers without the appropriate support and buy-in from stakeholders and administrators. Previous research also corroborated that CRL, though vital for diversity representation and support, is often viewed as controversial by parents, some stakeholders, and higher-level administrators (Washington, 2021). If buy-in is not achieved, implementation is surface level, which proves challenging to foster impactful outcomes if all members of the educational arena do not conceptualize the importance of CRL. The findings of this study specifically show that a tremendous amount of restraint is placed upon middle managers despite the state or federal-based requirements for improving educational cultural responsivity. Regardless of experience and roles, middle managers may be unable to fulfill their jobs effectively until all stakeholders approve.

Affluence also played an important role in regard to the demographics and struggles that some curriculum developers faced. For example, one middle manager served in an affluent area

with substantial funding. The participant described little difficulty regarding navigating bureaucracy due to the economic and social advantage experienced by the school. Conversely, middle managers who served in less affluent areas struggled with buy-in from parents, difficulty navigating stakeholder structures, and little resources or funding to support outcomes. As a result, such struggles demonstrate the difficulties regarding to navigating community demographics while ensuring the effective implementation of CRL. Improving resource funding for such areas can be critical to reducing the power disadvantages often perceived and experienced between different school districts. One method of overcoming such issues may be ensuring buy-in from administrators and stakeholders, which can ultimately support the management and navigation of a bureaucratic structure while considering factors related to affluence, social capital, and economic advantages.

RQ2b. How do middle-level district curriculum administrators describe how they communicate and advocate for culturally responsive leadership practices within their district, particularly when faced with resistance or pushback from higher-level administrators or other stakeholders?

Middle-level administrators' experiences demonstrated that goal-oriented approaches were vital to overcoming difficulties associated with a bureaucratic structure. Participants who could set specific goals, which high administration and stakeholders perceived as effective, were more likely to be successful. Furthermore, allocating resources was essential to supporting training and professional development, garnering buy-in from stakeholders and high-level administration. Implementing effective resources can support better CRL outcomes (Washington, 2021). Thus, advocacy for the importance of CRL via training, professional development, and clear communication may be one method to overcome some of the constraints and challenges

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that occur when serving as a middle manager academic curriculum developer within a highly bureaucratic structure (Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Kyei-Blankson et al., 2021; Teichler & Cummings, 2015).

Four middle-level administrators, via the follow-up survey administered, recognized challenges specific to lack of prioritization, difficulty in teacher accountability, and struggles with implementing CRL when it has yet to be an effective or official policy and recommendation. Through survey follow-up questions, participants recognized the significance of garnering the full buy-in of support from administrators and stakeholders. Policies must be effectively implemented through official means to assess the appropriate methods for overcoming challenges. The same reflections are identified when examining empirical literature that recognizes complexities and managing bureaucratic structures when ineffective or informal goals are employed rather than recognizing policies that can be followed and implemented across all stakeholder systems (Washington, 2021).

The consideration of the findings in relationship to the theoretical frameworks is crucial, especially within the discussion of culture and responsive leadership. According to Weber's framework, communication, as well as leadership, is *intentionally impersonal.* Bureaucracy in itself, is effective in regard to being both impersonal and ineffective in regard to how participants describe their ability to implement CR and CRL effectively. The design of the system is created to pervent the inclusion of diverse perspectives. Indeed, based on historical literature, white supremacy is deeply embedded within all elements of modern culture in America (Washington, 2021). Thus, one can infer that the current bureaucracy is working exactly as intended by way of supporting a system that does not prioritize diversity. As a result, the difficulty in navigating such bureaucratic structures is in itself not surprising, insofar as these systems have historically
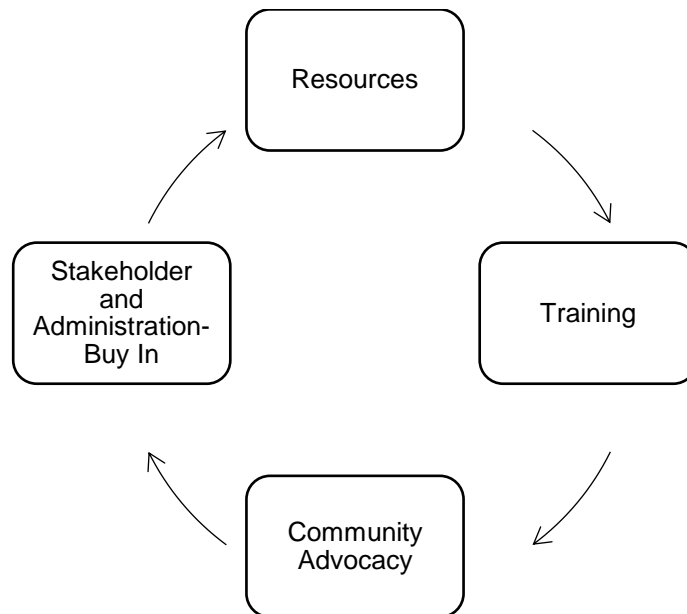
supported White supremacy and denied diversity. Resultantly, despite efforts and intentions to overcome such oppressive structures, the ability for individuals to navigate the bureaucratic structure is ultimately subverted by the system itself. The inferences guided by the difficulty in participants ability to navigate such structures may hold critical implications in regard to improving and overcoming such structures through reform to the system itself while developing resources and interventions to aid educators and curriculum developers and implementing CR and CRL practices.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

In this section, recommendations for policy and practice are overviewed. The recommendations for policy and practice are designed to emulate the perspectives of the experiences shared during this study. Policy and practice recommendations are also guided to potentially supply information that can benefit the stakeholder and higher administration buy-in required for effective CRL. Figure 1 supplies an overview of the policy and practice recommendations.

Figure 1

Overview of Policy and Practice Recommendations

Note. Developed for this study.

The participants described experiences and implications regarding theory and practice, demonstrating bureaucracies' ultimate effectiveness and preventing educators from implementing CR effectively. The system itself provides a framework in which White supremacy is upheld while the implementation of CRL and CR practices are subverted. Ultimately, the system is a circular structure in which resources are limited, stakeholders lack the education needed to overcome potential hesitancy, and those in charge of navigating the bureaucracy are often discouraged, demotivated, and generally prevented from implementing CR as desired. From a leadership perspective, substantial change must occur to ensure a top-down approach that effectively overcomes systematic issues while providing appropriate resources for stakeholders to implement CR effectively. From a leadership perspective, a top-down approach, guided by CRL, may be vital to overcoming the challenges and barriers

reported by participants in the current study. Recommendations for policy and practice are supplied, specifically focusing on addressing middle manager curriculum administrators, providing resources, training, and community advocacy to overcome such a structure.

The first recommendation for policy in practice is to assess appropriate resources needed by middle manager curriculum administrators. Participants in the study recommended that resources, such as funding, time, and training, are effective for improving upon implementation of CRL. Researchers also recognized that training and professional development are critical processes in CRL implementation practices (Cotta, 2021). Thus, supplying appropriate resources through the evaluation of policy guiding oversight through CR initiatives may be a practical first step for improving upon CRL and the ability of middle managers to navigate bureaucratic structures.

The second recommendation is improved training for all levels of educational contexts. Training and professional development are identified factors that many participants found effective for guiding decision-making processes and navigating bureaucratic structures. Furthermore, researchers determined that training professional development is critical for buy-in from all stakeholders in the educational system (Kang et al., 2019; Weber, 2017). As the second element of the proposed recommendations, training, and professional development should occur regularly for higher-level administration and stakeholders such as teachers and staff members. If the training and professional development is effectively implemented, CRL may likely become an established and recognized model within the educational system, which can alleviate middle managers' potential constraints when navigating the bureaucratic system.

The third recommendation is for community advocacy. Participants recognized that parents could often be a first-level constraint when unaware or unfamiliar with CR techniques.

Including the community and parents can allow for a better understanding amongst the community when attempting to implement CRL. Community members involved in their children's education are more likely to support initiatives (Barakat et al., 2019; Black & Murtadha, 2007; Davis et al., 2005; Furman, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Community inclusion is a critical element of CR techniques and may be central to aiding middle managers' efforts when implementing CR practices (Khalifa, 2018).

The recommendations' final element is to garner buy-in from stakeholders and administration. Thus, by completing the recommendations suggested here, buy-in may be more successfully achieved. When community members are supportive of CRL (Davis et al., 2005) and teachers and staff members are trained and prepared for implementation (Khalfa, 2018), the constraints identified by middle managers in this study may be reduced due to more effective and overall support from all stakeholders in the educational context. The recommendations here for policy and practice may be one element of potential strategizing that supports CRL as implemented within educational systems while acknowledging the complexity of the bureaucratic system.

A key recommendation, based upon the framework discussed within this section, is to provide a method for training and implementing CRL from a top-down approach. Superintendents, leaders, and even individuals serving in educational boards must be empowered to prevent bureaucracy from disrupting the efforts of curriculum developers and implementing CR. Improving social capital and economic capital within the system itself can be important to ensuring that CR is considered an effective program that can overcome barriers experienced by students (Barakat et al., 2019). Furthermore, implementing appropriate methods of buy-in from stakeholders with more social and economic capital, such as affluent White parents, may be

essential to overcoming such barriers experienced in regard to navigating bureaucracy. Power structures that are effectively implemented towards the support of marginalized and often disempowered groups, can be vital in disrupting ineffective bureaucratic structures. As such, in alignment with both gaining community buy-in, implementing appropriate top-down approaches may be substantially important to ensure effective outcomes in regard to the implementation of CR.

Recommendations for Future Research

The first recommendation for research is to expand upon the population included in this study. As noted, the current study was constrained to a focus on middle-management curriculum administrators. This particular population is vital to CRL implementation. However, examining other stakeholders, administrators, and employees within the educational system may play a role in identifying effective CRL. Expanding on participants included in this topic is vital to gaining a nuanced perspective of CRL educational initiatives.

The second recommendation is to expand upon this study's sample size and geographic location constraints. As discussed in limitations, the constraints of the geographic location and specific sample size can limit the complexity of multiple perspectives from possible participants. Future researchers should address this limitation to provide further information on CRL implementation and education. Quantitative research may be one method to extend the transferability of the study by gathering information through surveys or other wide-reaching techniques.

The third recommendation for future research is to assess the outcome of training and development initiatives upon buy-in by stakeholders in high-level administration. Either via a qualitative or quantitative approach, it is imperative to know how current training and

professional development methods support the understanding and acceptance of CRL amongst potentially hesitant stakeholders. As was identified in this study, push-back can prevent appropriate implementation and affect student education due to the lack of CR approaches. As such, exploring this topic further and assessing the outcomes of training and professional development approaches among stakeholders in high-level administration buy-in is recommended.

The fourth recommendation is considering the role of school district funding, resources, and affluence. Though not the particular aim of this proposed study, the information supplied by participants demonstrated that school districts with more funding residing in potentially less conservative regions receive increased support and less pushback. Resultantly, future researchers are recommended to explore such a topic as the demographic, school district, and potential beliefs of surrounding neighboring areas, may play a crucial role in terms of how bureaucracy is navigated and implemented.

A fifth recommendation is to examine subversive or implicit ideologies which leadership that may potentially impact bureaucracy navigation and initiative implementation. Based on participants' experiences, some leaders appeared to have prior conceptions regarding CR or CRL. For example, when an individual brought specific CR pedagogy to a leader, the pushback was received based upon what seemingly was their own implicit bias towards the book's contents. Thus, I recommend that future researchers examine such topics, either through a quantitative or qualitative methodology, to examine how implicit biases amongst leaders can potentially impact the ability of educators, curriculum developers, middle-managers, and other stakeholders to navigate the bureaucracy structure and to implement CR effectively.Improving upon such a

recommendation may offer a model to understand how to navigate bureaucracy, improve power structures for the benefit of marginalized communities, and improve community responsiveness.

Limitations

The study was limited to a small sample size, which was necessary to confine the focus of the study. However, the small sample size reduced transferability to more extensive settings or other research contexts. The second limitation was concerning geographic constraints. The participants in this study were employed at seven public school districts in the New York metropolitan area. Six were from the same general geographic region. As such, the findings may not represent other public schools or districts.

This study's findings are not transferable to a larger geographic context due to the limitations imposed in the study. Future researchers may find it helpful to expand upon this limitation, as was discussed previously in this chapter. The third limitation is that participants' experiences were focused on middle-management curriculum administration. Their perspectives are not inclusive of other administrative perspectives. Thus, future research may expand upon the premise of this study by exploring perspectives that go beyond those of middle management curriculum administration.

<div align="center">

Summary

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The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of district mid-level curriculum administrators in public education regarding their experience as leaders and managers within a bureaucratic structure. As a result of the thematic findings, three key themes were identified: (a) *Navigating Challenges Despite Competing Priorities: Stakeholders And Administrators, (b) Actions and Decisions: Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership,* and *(c) Communication and Advocacy.* In this chapter, the lived

experiences of participants shared with the researcher were discussed with consideration of theoretical and empirical literature. Recommendations were supplied to address the current study's limitations and potentially provide a viable solution to difficulties experienced when navigating a bureaucratic system and attempting to implement CRL.

The findings of this study demonstrate various challenges and constraints imposed upon participants based upon the nature of a bureaucratic system, coupled with the often difficult process of navigating CRL in the modern socio-political environment of the United States. To improve children's education, representation, and academic outcomes, middle management curriculum administrators must be supported in implementing CRL to ensure the desired practices can be accomplished without substantial constraints. Garnering the buy-in from high-level administration and stakeholders is crucial for CRL leaders to succeed in implementation.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Letter

MOLLOY UNIVERSITY

1000 Hempstead Ave., PO Box 5002, Rockville Center, NY 11571-5002
www.molloy.edu

Patricia A. Eckardt, PhD, RN, FAAN
Chair, Molloy University Institutional Review Board
Professor, Barbara H. Hagan School of Nursing and Health Sciences
E: peckardt@molloy.edu
T: 516.323.3711

DATE:	July 6, 2023
TO:	Ann Bucco
FROM:	Molloy University IRB
PROJECT TITLE:	[2072304-1] IRB Application
REFERENCE #:	
SUBMISSION TYPE:	New Project
ACTION:	APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE:	July 6, 2023
EXPIRATION DATE:	July 5, 2024
REVIEW TYPE:	Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY:	Expedited review category # *7*

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Molloy University IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of July 5, 2024.

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Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Patricia Eckardt at 516-323-3711 or peckardt@molloy.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,

Patricia Eckardt, Ph.D., RN, FAAN
Chair, Molloy University Institutional Review Board

This letter has been issued in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Molloy University IRB's records.

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocols

Protocol 1

<u>I. First Interview</u>

1. Tell me about your experience as an educator.
2. How did you come to be an administrator for curriculum?
3. Describe your role and responsibilities
4. I know that culturally responsive leadership is a priority in many districts like yours. What do you try to do as a district administrator in relation to cultural responsiveness and the curriculum?
5. Can you share any initiatives or projects you have participated in promoting cultural awareness?
6. Describe how you ensure that the integration of cultural responsiveness in the curriculum aligns with the diverse needs and backgrounds of the students.
7. Many curriculum administrators must balance leadership and followership responsibilities. Could you please identify the competing priorities and conflicts that you have encountered when navigating these dual roles?
8. How do you manage and address these competing priorities and conflicts?
9. Describe the outcomes, valuable lessons, or insights you acquired while balancing competing priorities and conflicts.
10. Identify a situation where bureaucratic goals conflict with the ideals of culturally responsive leadership?
11. How do these challenges, if any, impact your ability to lead and make decisions?
12. In light of the challenges, can you provide an example of how you navigated potential tensions between compliance with established bureaucratic processes and advocated for innovative approaches to promote cultural responsiveness?
13. If you could change the ways that people work together in your organization to make things run more smoothly towards culturally responsive goals, what recommendations would you make?
14. Do you have any additional thoughts or insights you would like to share with me regarding this topic of being a curriculum leader striving to be culturally responsive but also being caught between these levels or share anything else you would want to say that I did not ask you about.

Protocol 2

<u>**II. Second interview**</u>

Questions for the second interview will be developed from themes drawn from the first interview. I anticipate the major themes will be as follows. It is anticipated that the questions will be approximately as follows:

- Resistance
- Limited Resources and time constraints
- Negotiation skills
- Communication

1. How have you been doing since we last met? Have you been working on anything related to cultural responsiveness?
2. As I have done these interviews, I have noticed several participants shared details about the nature of resistance from individuals or groups within the organization towards embracing or implementing culturally responsive practices. Describe a specific example of resistance you encountered while promoting culturally responsive practices within your organization.
3. How did you address or navigate this resistance, and what were the outcomes or lessons learned from that experience?
4. Participants have also discussed managing competing priorities and responsibilities regarding limited resources and time constraints. How do you prioritize and allocate limited resources and time to effectively address the diverse needs of your district, including promoting culturally responsive practices?
5. Are there any specific strategies or frameworks you have found helpful in managing these competing demands?
6. As a curriculum administrator, you may have encountered a situation where you needed to negotiate with various stakeholders to achieve your objectives. Can you describe a situation where you had to utilize your negotiation skills to navigate competing interests and reach a mutually beneficial outcome to promote culturally responsive goals? What strategies did you employ, and what lessons did you learn from those experiences?
7. Describe a situation where you effectively utilized communication strategies to build rapport, actively listen, and promote open dialogue with stakeholders to promote culturally responsiveness.
8. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. After thinking about all of this, what would you want a future curriculum leader to know as they are embarking on doing this work and wanting to do cultural responsiveness but be sensitive to all people they work with?