

2023

## School Administrators' Perceptions of Leadership Practices Promoting Culturally Responsive Learning Environments

LaTasha M. Cook  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

LaTasha M. Cook

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

School Administrators' Perceptions of Leadership Practices Promoting Culturally  
Responsive Learning Environments

by

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EdS, Augusta University, 2005

MS, Troy University, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Walden University

February 2023

## Abstract

A number of kindergarten through Grade 12 (K–12) administrators face challenges promoting culturally responsive learning environments. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K–12 administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. The conceptual framework was informed by the tenets of culturally responsive school leadership. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with seven middle school administrators in a southeastern U.S. school district. Participants were principals or assistant principals with at least 1 year of administrator experience working at a school where more than 50% of the student population belongs to a non-White demographic group. A combination of a priori and open coding within Yin's five-phase cycle was used to analyze the collected data. Participants indicated modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors and building community using open communication and establishing meaningful relationships with all stakeholders were key to culturally responsive learning environments. The insufficient understanding of cultural responsiveness, the lack of culturally inclusive materials and related teaching strategies and resources, and personal biases and resistance to change were challenges the participants faced. School leaders interviewed recommended ongoing professional development for all school and district staff to help develop culturally responsive learning environments. Implications for positive social change include appropriate learning environments promoting educational equity and academic success for the diverse populations of students.

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## Dedication

I dedicate the completion of this advanced degree to my present and my past. To my present, my son, Ryan Cook. I know mommy spent a lot of time working on her computer, but the time was well spent. I want you to know that you can do anything that you set your mind to, and I hope that I have shown you just that. Yes, it takes time, it takes courage, and it takes commitment. Ryan, let me be a real-life example to you that with God's help, YOU can accomplish anything that your heart desires.

To my past, my mother Elease Reid. Though my mother has been deceased for several years now, she lives on in me. My mother instilled in me to work hard, never give up, believe in myself, achieve great things, keep God first in my life, and to always SMILE. She was My biggest cheerleader. My biggest champion. My mom was so proud of all of my accomplishments that she was able to witness. Mom, you would be so proud of this one. Thank you for giving me everything you had before leaving this world.

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The doctoral journey has truly been a humbling experience. Thank you, God, for giving me the grace, perseverance, and tenacity needed to begin, continue, and complete this process. God gave me who and what I needed for this journey. Dr. Kate Swetnam has been a blessing to me. She meticulously guided this process and helped me to enhance my scholarly voice along the way. She prayed for me during the process as I weathered life's storms. I am grateful that God chose her for me.

Thank you to my family, friends, and colleagues who blessed me with their continuous encouragement and spoke life into my journey. Your support has meant everything to me and kept me along the way. I am grateful that God chose you for me. SURELY goodness and mercy shall follow me ALL the days of my life – Psalms 23:6. Thank you all.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

A school's learning environment is an important contributing factor for academic success. The learning environment contributes to students' success by promoting meaningful learning experiences, encouraging positive social interactions, increasing practice for high-level critical-thinking skills, and fostering attributes that can affect students' self-efficacy. The skills attained in schools support students in transitioning throughout their educational journeys and into jobs, careers, and society. School administrators (i.e., principals and assistant principals) have a significant role in students' academic success. Researchers' findings have indicated that school leadership can have a positive influence on school and student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020); however, the increasing diversity of public schools in the United States has made cultural responsiveness a pertinent educational issue (Brion, 2019; Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Nadelson et al., 2020). Little is known about school administrators' perceptions and use of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments.

The United States is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. By 2044, more than half of the population is projected to belong to an ethnically diverse group, with 1 in 5 of the nation's total population projected to be foreign born by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Subsequently, demographic shifts in the nation's populace have led to demographic shifts in the nation's public schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (2022) reported that 49.4 million students were enrolled in U.S. public schools in the fall of 2020, and of this amount, 22.6 million identified as White and 26.8 million (54%) identified as being of other racial groups. Despite the growing

diversity of students in U.S. public schools, no correlating shifts have occurred within the public educational system for persons of color related to closing enduring achievement gaps, increasing access to gifted education, or reducing overrepresentation in special education and discipline (Broussard et al., 2016; Scribner et al., 2021). Researchers' findings suggest the practices of U.S. educators have not transformed in response to the nation's increasing diversity (Bottiani et al., 2018; Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Spikes, 2018). Therefore, educators need to be culturally competent and culturally responsive concerning the educational needs of increasingly diverse student populations.

The increasing diversity of U.S. classrooms has created the need for educators to incorporate culturally responsive practices to meet students' academic requirements. Culturally responsive practices are derived from the methods of culturally relevant pedagogy and include strategies that support the learning of ethnically diverse groups of students (Johnson, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021). The theoretical idea of cultural responsiveness is based on the premise that students' cultural and social experiences should be used in structuring their educational experiences (Hesbol et al., 2020; Karatas, 2020). Although researchers' findings have indicated that culturally responsive practices promote positive educational experiences for students of color (Khalifa et al., 2016; Mahari de Silva et al., 2018; McCarther & Davis, 2017), some school administrators may not be using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments.

A limited amount of research has been published on culturally responsive leadership practices used by administrators in public schools. Some public school

administrators may be using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments, yet others may not be using these practices because of a limited understanding of cultural responsiveness. Most of the research concerning cultural responsiveness predominantly has addressed teacher practices, rather than administrator practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). Marshall and Khalifa (2018) proposed the importance of culturally responsive leadership practices in promoting the academic success of diverse populations of students but confirmed that a gap exists in research on such practices, which fosters a gap in practice for school administrators.

Although the demographics of students in the United States have become more diverse, the racial composition of school administrators has not. In U.S. public schools during the 2017–2018 school year, 78% of school principals were White, 11% were Black, 9% were Hispanic, 1% were Asian, and 1% were another race or multiracial (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The limited diversity of school leaders warrants exploration of how school administrators conceptualize cultural responsiveness and use leadership practices in demographically changing schools to meet the educational needs of the growing population of diverse students.

Scribner et al. (2021) conducted a field-based study on a principal of a large urban high school in Virginia to explore the perceptions and use of culturally responsive leadership practices. The school was the largest high school in the district and served the district's highest percentage of economically disadvantaged students and students of color. The 2-year study resulted in increased knowledge of fundamental leadership beliefs and practices but revealed a need for further research to carefully examine the

relationship between school administrators' beliefs and practices and culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) practices. Increasing school administrators' knowledge of specific leadership practices and strategies that promote cultural responsiveness is needed for the increasingly diverse populations of students attending public schools.

This basic qualitative study centered on gaining an understanding of school administrators' perceptions and use of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. The results of this study can increase knowledge of specific leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students and inform educational leaders of the challenges that school administrators encounter with implementing such practices. By increasing knowledge of specific leadership practices used to promote cultural responsiveness, this study may lead to changes in school administrators' behaviors and address the gap in practice—that some are experiencing challenges in using leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. The findings of this study may be used to inform future research on how educators can use specific practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments for an increasingly diverse population of students in public schools.

This chapter includes background information for this study, the problem and purpose, research questions, an overview of the conceptual framework, and the nature of this study. Additionally, I define specialized terms and state the assumptions, scope and



delimitations, limitations for the study, and potential implications for positive social change from this study.

### **Background**

For this research, I selected a large urban school district in a southeastern state as the study site because of its diverse population of students and concerted efforts to increase equity by promoting culturally responsive policies and practices for equitable educational opportunities for all learners. Comprised of more than 100 schools, as of 2021, based on public school district records, the district serves nearly 200,000 students from more than 180 countries, speaking over 100 different native languages. The student diversity within the district has increased over the last decade, with Black and Hispanic students totaling more than 65% of the student enrollment in 2021. The demographics of school administrators have remained consistent with national demographic data (Bal et al., 2019), as approximately 60% of school principals and assistant principals in the district are White, based on 2021 district records. Table 1 displays the race of students and school administrators in the local school district. The data show a disproportionately higher rate of White school administrators in the urban district.

**Table 1**

*Enrolled Students and School Administrators in the Local School District in 2021: Percentage by Race*

Race	Enrolled students	School principals and assistant principals
Asian	11	1
Black	32	34
Hispanic	33	5
White	19	60
Other	5	0

*Note.* Data from the local school district public records, 2021.

In the local school district, racial disparities also persisted in the disproportionate representation of non-White students in school discipline and suspension rates. Data retrieved from the state department of education show disproportionately higher suspension rates for students of color in the local school district. Tables 2 and 3 show a comparison of in-school and out-of-school suspension data by race and ethnicity for 4 consecutive years. The data show a consistent and disproportionately higher rate of in-school and out-of-school suspension for Black students than White students or students of other races. For example, although Black students represented 32% of the student population in 2021 (Table 1), in the 2019–2020 school year, they experienced 45% of in-school suspensions (Table 2) and 49% of out-of-school suspensions (Table 3).

**Table 2**

*Four-Year In-School Suspension Data of Kindergarten Through Grade 12 Students in the Local School District: Percentage by Race*

Race	2016–2017	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2020
Asian	3	3	3	3
Black	49	48	50	46
Hispanic	33	33	32	36
White	12	13	11	11
Other	3	3	4	4
Total enrollment	188,132	186,120	186,584	189,225

*Note.* Data from the discipline dashboard of the state department of education for the

local school district under study, 2021. During the school years listed, Black students

represented roughly 32% of total enrollment, Hispanic students 33%, and White students

19%.

**Table 3**

*Four-Year Out-of-School Suspension Data of Kindergarten Through Grade 12 Students in the Local School District: Percentage by Race*

Race	2016–2017	2017–2018	2018–2019	2019–2020
Asian	2	3	3	3
Black	52	50	50	49
Hispanic	30	31	30	32
White	12	12	12	11
Other	4	4	5	5
Total enrollment	188,132	186,120	186,584	189,225

*Note.* Data from the discipline dashboard of the state department of education for the

local school district under study, 2021. During the school years listed, Black students

represented roughly 32% of total enrollment, Hispanic students 33%, and White students

19%.

The disproportionate representation of Black students in school discipline has been a local and national educational concern. Public schools in the United States have

had a persistent educational equity problem regarding racial disparities in school discipline because Black students historically have received disciplinary actions more frequently and more severely than their White counterparts (Bal et al., 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016; Larson et al., 2018; Samuels et al., 2019). The disproportionality of unequal discipline experienced by Black students may have resulted from school leaders' lack of understanding of the cultural norms of students who do not look or act like them; such leaders may have struggled to effectively and successfully support students who are members of cultures different from their own (Kemp-Graham, 2015). A large percentage of principals had little connection to the histories and cultures of the students they serve, which might contribute to achievement gaps and disproportionate discipline rates for students of color, particularly Black students, in the United States (Kemp-Graham, 2015). School administrators need to understand and demonstrate cultural competence and responsiveness in their leadership practices.

At a 2015 local school district board meeting, the need for leaders to acquire cultural competence was articulated. Although committees were established to study this issue, much remains to be accomplished. District leaders acknowledged having a limited understanding of the depth and breadth of the leadership practices and strategies used by administrators in local schools to promote cultural responsiveness for the increasingly diverse populations of students in the district.

In a July 2021 school board meeting, district leaders again articulated the increasing diversity of students and stated a need to continue to examine the practices for ensuring inclusiveness and cultural responsiveness in schools. The levels of culturally

related practices among school personnel were identified as being on a continuum from (a) damaging, (b) nonexistent, and (c) lacking sensitivity to (d) demonstrating competency. Some school administrators experience challenges because they have limited knowledge of the leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive environments (Brown et al., 2020; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018; Sutchter et al., 2018). This study is needed to increase the knowledge, understanding, and practices of school administrators in cultivating and promoting culturally responsive learning environments for the diverse populations of students in public schools. This study can contribute to the mitigation of the gap in practice concerning school administrator use of leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments, as well as the challenges school administrators experience with implementing such practices.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem investigated in this study is that some kindergarten through Grade 12 (K–12) administrators experience challenges in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments. School leadership is a crucial component to educational reform (Khalifa et al., 2016) because school leaders influence student outcomes through their leadership practices and provide guidance in times of change (Uysal & Sarier, 2018). School administrators' ability to create conditions of equity and high expectations for all learners, amid transforming demographics, can seriously affect the schools they lead (Liou & Hermanns, 2017). The role of cultural responsiveness is increasingly recognized as an educational approach to promote

equitable learning environments and outcomes. Increasing interest in schoolwide approaches to improving schools' cultural responsiveness (Bottiani et al., 2018) increase the need for further research concerning administrators' culturally responsive practices to increase school reform (Khalifa et al., 2016). The limited knowledge of the specific culturally responsive leadership practices and strategies can be challenging for public school administrators in promoting learning environments that meet the needs of diverse populations of students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K–12 administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. Culturally responsive leadership practices must be a priority for urban school administrators to become effective instructional leaders and to have a positive impact on student learning, regardless of students' race or ethnicity (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). However, limited research exists on how urban school administrators conceptualize cultural responsiveness and use leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments. The findings from this study increase understanding of the challenges school administrators encounter with implementing culturally responsive practices, as well as increase knowledge of specific leadership practices and strategies used by K–12 school administrators that promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do K–12 school administrators describe leadership practices used to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

RQ2: What challenges do K–12 school administrators encounter in implementing practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

RQ3: What support or resources not currently available are perceived as needed by K–12 administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

### **Conceptual Framework**

This basic qualitative study was based on the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016). The CRSL framework provides exemplary leadership practices for administrators to use to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students. CRSL addresses issues associated with the educational improvements for students of color and marginalized students and categorizes the framework into four dimensions of leadership where school administrators (a) critically self-reflect on leadership behaviors; (b) develop culturally responsive teachers; (c) promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments; and (d) engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016).

The CRSL framework provided the foundation for this study, as well as the basis for addressing the research questions. I conducted semistructured interviews with seven school administrators at the middle school level to gain an understanding of leadership practices used on their campuses that promote culturally responsive learning

environments. Additionally, I explored administrators' perceptions of the challenges encountered with implementing practices, as well as supports or resources needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments. When I analyzed the data from the semistructured interviews, I used a priori codes based on the four dimensions of CRSL leadership behaviors to help me identify patterns, categories, and emerging themes. I used the CRSL framework to analyze the results of this study and offer answers about the practices and strategies administrators use in the local school district to employ CRSL practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments for the diverse populations of students in the district. In Chapter 2, I provide a detailed discussion of the conceptual framework obtained from peer-reviewed literature.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a basic qualitative study design to answer the research questions. This qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because I wanted to explore the perceptions of leadership practices of K–12 school administrators in an urban school district who promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students. Ravitch and Carl (2016) described the use of qualitative research to explore perceptions of participants. The basic qualitative study design aligned to the problem and purpose statements of this study and reflected the qualitative approach, on which problem-based research is designed, to investigate issues and present findings based on participant interviews that answer the research questions (see Yin, 2016).

After receiving Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and the local district's authorization to collect data, I invited seven school administrators



at the middle school level to participate in this study. Using the purposeful sampling method, I sought out and recruited administrators who led schools with a majority non-White student population and who did or did not participate in the district's inaugural cultural responsiveness training. Interviewing is a key qualitative research method that allows researchers to obtain data from those who have knowledge of or experience with the problem of interest (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I used semistructured, one-on-one interviews with the participants to gather data on school administrators' responses concerning the leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students. I used a videoconference call program for interviews that lasted 45–60 min. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Using the transcriptions, I used content analysis to code and categorize the data to identify themes from the study based on the research questions. I then summarized the findings and reported the results based on the CRSL framework and other peer-reviewed literature (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

School administrators could provide background knowledge of experiences to answer the research questions because the experiences of school administrators represent a phenomenon in a naturalistic setting of the school environment. The attributes of a qualitative study design allowed me to explore the gap in practice in public education concerning school administrators' use of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students and the challenges some administrators experience with implementing such practices. The attributes of a qualitative study include studying the meaning of people's lives under real-world

conditions, representing the perspectives of the participants in the study, covering the contextual conditions in which people live, contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human behavior, and striving to use multiple sources of evidence rather than one single source (Yin, 2016). I explain this approach in depth in Chapter 3.

### **Definitions**

Terms unique to this basic qualitative study are defined as follows.

*Administrators or school administrators:* In the southeastern state where the study was conducted, refers collectively to K–12 principals and assistant principals, based on public records from 2021 of the study district.

*Cultural competence:* In the local school district where this study was conducted, a cross-functional team of school and district educational leaders established a common definition of cultural competence as the recognizing, valuing, and leveraging of cultural differences to interact effectively and better serve the districts' students and community. This definition is provided in public records from 2021 of the district.

*Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL):* CRSL practices are specific behaviors and strategies used by school administrators to promote equity and inclusion of diverse populations of students through culturally responsive learning environments (Khalifa et al., 2016). CRSL includes four main themes of behaviors and practices: (a) engaging in critical self-reflections; (b) developing culturally responsive teachers; (c) promoting culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments; and (d) building

community advocacy by engaging students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016).

*Marginalized:* Individuals who are perceived as excluded or devalued based on factors such as culture, ethnicity, income, language, or religion (Gorski, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016).

*Minoritized:* Individuals belonging to racially oppressed groups who have been marginalized because of their nondominant race, ethnicity, citizenship, language, or religion (Khalifa et al., 2016).

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are understood truths in a qualitative study that are believed but not verified or demonstrated to be true (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Assumptions are relevant to answering the research questions to reveal the findings of this study. Inaccurate assumptions can critically affect the meaningfulness and trustworthiness of a scholarly study.

The basic qualitative study approach I used for this research included three assumptions. First, I assumed principals and assistant principals would be willing to participate in this study, and those who participated would be truthful and accurate in their responses to the interview questions. Second, I created the interview questions based on the conceptual framework and research questions and assumed the instrument would accurately assess participants' perceptions of leadership practices used to promote culturally responsive learning environments, as well as participants' perceptions of challenges encountered in implementing such practices. The third assumption was that

participants used or attempted to use leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in diverse schools in an urban district.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The research questions focused on increasing knowledge of the leadership practices used by K–12 school administrators who promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse groups of students, as well as the challenges administrators experience with implementing such practices. The research questions framed the scope and boundaries for this basic qualitative study (see Burkholder et al., 2016). This study was conducted in one urban school district in a southeastern state. I used a purposeful sampling method to select seven school administrators at the middle school level to participate in this study. I conducted one semistructured interview with each participant, lasting 45–60 min and recorded and transcribed all interviews using a videoconference call program.

Delimitations are factors or boundaries that narrow the scope of a study regarding participants, data collection, time, or locale (Burkholder et al., 2016). The first delimitation in this study was the field of education; I narrowed the scope of the participants to K–12 school administrators identified as principals or assistant principals. This study further delimited participants to school administrators at the middle school level who led schools with a majority non-White student population. I did not consider teachers, district-level administrators, or administrators who did not lead schools with a diverse demographic student body because the nature of this study was to explore school

administrators' perceptions of leadership practices and strategies used to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse groups of students.

The second delimitation narrowed the data collection method to semistructured interviews. The interview time for each participant was 45–60 min. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, additional time was allowed so participants could thoroughly respond to interview questions.

The third delimitation of this study was a narrowed scope to one locale; the participants came from one urban school district in a southeastern state. The scope and delimitations of a study may affect the degree to which the findings can be transferred to other settings (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013). The decision to limit the scope of this study was based on the exploratory nature of the research questions. The boundaries of the scope may limit the transferability of the findings of this study to other administrators, contexts, or school districts.

### **Limitations**

Qualitative researchers must acknowledge limitations, or potential weaknesses, of research studies (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Limitations may affect the transferability and dependability of a study as well as inform potential problems related to future research of a similar nature. The basic qualitative approach for this study included the following limitations: (a) a small number of participants, (b) semistructured interviewing as the data collection method, and (c) potential researcher bias.

Participants in this study were a small sample of seven K–12 public school administrators in an urban school district who led schools with a majority non-White

student population and who did or did not participate in the local district's inaugural training on cultural responsiveness. The perceptions and leadership practices of the participants may not reflect the leadership practices of a larger population of school leaders. Limiting the sample size of this study to seven participants was a potential weakness in obtaining data representative of the leadership practices of school administrators in a large urban school district. A loss or lack of participants could have further affected the sample size of this study. However, in qualitative research studies, a sample size of 1–10 participants is expected and can result in a vast amount of data (Boddy, 2016; Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

The second limitation of this study was the data collection method. Semistructured interviewing allows for in-depth responses but also limits the data to a set of participants who choose to self-report their behaviors, beliefs, and perceptions through interactions with a researcher (see Yin, 2016). By using semistructured interviewing to collect data, I provided participants the opportunity to give in-depth responses regarding the perceptions, practices, and challenges of using leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. Additionally, the participants were interviewed via a videoconference call program in which the setting of the interview was at the participants' discretion and might not have been completely free of distractions and interruptions. Additional factors undetected through a limited view of the camera by me, the researcher, could have influenced the participants' responses to interview questions.

The third limitation of this study was the potential for researcher bias. As the researcher, I was the primary instrument for this study. My personal bias could have

affected data collection and analysis and limited the outcomes of this study because I am an employee of the local school district and a member of a non-White racial group. My presence during data collection could have affected the participants' responses. I employed objective means to address all potential weaknesses of this study and remove biases in a scholarly manner. I provided a detailed research plan and practiced reflexivity and bracketing (see Ahern, 1999). Reflective journaling and bracketing allowed me, as the main conduit of this research study, to engage in an ongoing and systematic assessment of my thoughts, beliefs, and experiences related to this study, as well as the overall research process (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Wall et al., 2004).

Limitations may affect the dependability and transferability of the results and findings of this study. For dependability, the data collected through semistructured interviewing must be true and free of bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) and properly analyzed so the conclusions accurately reflect the real-world context that was studied (Yin, 2016). The findings of this study may be pertinent to the local school district but may not be applicable or transferable to a broader context (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016), such as other school districts in the United States. Therefore, I provided detailed measures throughout the research process to ensure trustworthiness of the research findings of this study.

### **Significance**

This study was conducted to address the gap in practice concerning K–12 school administrators' use of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students, as well as the challenges some administrators experienced with implementing such practices. Administrators might have

experienced challenges because of their limited knowledge of the leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive environments (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). The findings of this study may provide evidence of the leadership practices school administrators use that promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students and the challenges some administrators experience with implementing such practices. The implications of this study can inform future research and have the potential for positive social change by increasing knowledge of leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments to meet the needs of diverse populations of students.

Based on the analysis of the findings, I present the results and make recommendations to leaders in the local school district who influence school decisions, as well as district-level policies, procedures, and programs. This study may provide an original contribution for positive social change in the local school district by increasing the cultural competence of administrators and by identifying practices and strategies used to promote culturally responsive learning environments for the diverse population of students in the district. This study fills a gap in the research about practice because current peer-reviewed literature concerning cultural responsiveness predominantly has addressed teacher practices, rather than administrator practices (Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020). Additionally, this study addressed an underresearched area of public education. The increasing diversity in public schools requires new approaches to educational leadership in which leaders exhibit practices that address students' cultural



needs (Khalifa et al., 2016; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Nadelson et al., 2020) to improve educational opportunities.

### **Summary**

This basic qualitative study centered on increasing knowledge of the leadership practices used by school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse groups of students. The problem investigated in this study is that some K–12 administrators experience challenges using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments. Public schools in the United States have become increasingly diverse. The inception of culturally responsive practices began more than 20 years ago (McCarther & Davis, 2017) with a focus on teacher practices. However, racial disparities continue to exist in educational practices, particularly regarding the overrepresentation of Black students in suspension data, as evidenced in the local school district under study. School administrators are vital in shaping the education experiences and environments of diverse populations of students but lack substantial guidance on how to promote culturally responsive learning environments (Minkos et al., 2017). Some school administrators in the local district under study were experiencing challenges because they had limited knowledge of the leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive environments. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K–12 administrators’ perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. The CRSL framework was the conceptual framework for this study. In Chapter 2, I provide a comprehensive review

of the conceptual framework and peer-reviewed literature concerning cultural responsiveness and leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K–12 school administrators’ perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. K–12 student populations have become increasingly diverse, resulting in the necessity for educators to expand their knowledge, skills, and practices related to meeting students’ needs through culturally responsive learning environments (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). However, the literature supports the problem of practice that some K–12 school administrators experience challenges because of their limited knowledge of specific leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive environments (Khalifa et al., 2016; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). With this study, I sought to increase knowledge of specific leadership practices that school administrators use to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse groups of students.

In this chapter, I examine scholarly literature on the leadership practices used by school administrators in K–12 schools to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students, including students of color and historically marginalized students. Additionally, I provide a historical overview of cultural responsiveness and examine current and peer-reviewed literature pertaining to the influences of culturally responsive practices on students’ learning environments. I provide a detailed critical analysis of CRSL, the conceptual framework for this study. I also explore scholarly literature on professional learning opportunities through leadership

preparation programs and in-service professional development to support school leaders in understanding and implementing CRSL. Finally, I address how this study may contribute to the gap in research concerning the leadership practices used by school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse student populations.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I employed several strategies to search for relevant and trustworthy literature pertaining to this research study. Using the Walden University library, I searched various databases such as EBSCO, Education Source, ERIC, ProQuest, Sage, and Thoreau and narrowed my search indicators to full text, peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2016 and 2021 for the most current literature. I also used Ulrich's Periodical Directory to verify that the articles I found were peer reviewed. Additionally, I expanded my search to entities outside of the Walden University library to include Google Scholar and government and public access websites such as the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the state and local departments of education for the district under study. I reviewed journal articles, books, and published dissertations outside the field of education but related to my topic to find additional references. As I searched for literature addressing the conceptual framework and the qualitative research design, I did not limit the date range.

The keywords I used to search for literature during this iterative process were *culturally responsive*, *culturally relevant*, *educational leadership*, *school leadership*, *culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership*, *educational leadership and culturally*

*responsiveness, diversity, racial inequities in schools, and disproportionality*. The combination of terms increased access to related journal articles and generated additional searches using the keywords *marginalized students, socially just, socially just leadership, and urban schools*. Literature obtained through this comprehensive review contributed to my knowledge of the conceptual framework and selected methodology to investigate the leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse student populations in public schools.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this basic qualitative study was the CRSL framework. The CRSL framework identifies leadership practices used by school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students, including students of color and historically marginalized students (Khalifa et al., 2016). This framework was appropriate for this study because it supported the investigation of why some school administrators were experiencing challenges in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments, despite the increasing diversity of U.S. public schools.

Leadership is an important aspect of education and fundamental to school and student success. Scholarly evidence has indicated the beliefs, dispositions, and practices of school administrators influence student learning and contribute to school effectiveness (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020; Uysal & Sarier, 2018; Wilson et al., 2020; Young et al., 2017). Leadership frameworks have emerged from empirical evidence of practices that influence student learning. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure

Consortium established a national set of standards addressing the roles and practices of school administrators as educational leaders promoting the success of all students (Murphy, 2015). Marzano et al. (2005) performed an extensive meta-analysis investigating the relationship between specific school leader practices and student achievement. The behaviors and competencies of Leithwood's (2012) Ontario Leadership Framework have been widely referenced and implemented at school and district levels to influence positive student outcomes. However, such frameworks focus on instructional, transformational, and transactional leadership principles and do not address the leadership practices regarding cultural backgrounds, norms, and proclivities concerning the educational needs of diverse student populations. The growing diversity of U.S. public schools raises the importance of educational leaders and scholars expanding educational leadership frameworks and principles to include practices and contexts that are responsive to the needs of increasingly diverse groups of public school students.

The CRSL framework emerged from a synthesis of literature on exemplary leadership practices that promote cultural responsiveness for the diversity of students in schools. Khalifa et al. (2016) employed an extensive search methodology of scholarly literature published between 1989 and 2014 to find empirical evidence of culturally responsive leadership practices that had a direct effect on school climate, curriculum, policy, pedagogy, and student achievement. The researchers focused on specific leadership behaviors, practices, and school-level policies implemented by practicing principals to be responsive to the educational needs of students of color and marginalized students. Khalifa et al. (2016) used their findings to develop four themes of the CRSL

framework based on school administrators who (a) critically self-reflect on their leadership behaviors and practices; (b) develop culturally responsive teachers; (c) promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments; and (d) engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts.

The first theme of the CRSL framework is critical self-reflection. School administrators reflect on individual behaviors and practices to determine how they demonstrate commitment to cultural responsiveness. Cognitively processing these outcomes helps to assess and measure student inclusiveness and cultural responsiveness concerning school-level policies and practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). As a result of increased awareness, or critical consciousness, school administrators engaged in such practices as continuous learning of cultural knowledge use school data and equity audits to eliminate inequities and marginalization of groups of students within their schools and make evidence-based decisions to promote equity for all learners (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Nadelson et al., 2020; Skrla et al., 2004). By engaging in critical self-reflection, school administrators increase awareness of individual beliefs and practices that affect students' learning environments.

How school administrators develop culturally responsive teachers is the second theme of the CRSL framework. This theme focuses on the leadership practices used by school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments by developing teachers' capacities for culturally responsive pedagogy (Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). School administrators are responsible for supporting and developing the instructional capacity of teachers in ways

that improve student achievement and ensure the learning needs of all students are met (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Wilson et al., 2020). School administrators develop culturally responsive teachers by implementing such practices as providing in-service professional development, as well as opportunities for mentoring and modeling of culturally responsive practices (Nadelson et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). By developing culturally responsive teachers, school administrators support educational equity and inclusion and promote culturally responsive learning environments for all students in their schools.

The third theme of the CRSL framework addresses the leadership practices school administrators use to promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments. The research-based strategies collected by Khalifa et al. (2016) focused on how school administrators build relationships (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012), model culturally responsive practices (Khalifa, 2011; Tillman, 2005), promote a vision for inclusive instructional and behavioral practices (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Webb-Johnson, 2006; Webb-Johnson & Carter, 2007), and leverage the diversity of students and stakeholders in their schools (Antrop-González, 2011; Khalifa, 2011, 2012; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Additionally, this theme identifies school administrator practices used to discover disparities in academic and disciplinary data for students of color (Skiba et al., 2002; Skrla et al., 2004; Theoharis, 2007) and challenge school-level exclusionary policies and practices (Khalifa, 2011; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012).

The fourth theme of the CRSL framework addresses how school administrators engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts. Khalifa et al. (2016)



synthesized research concerning the leadership practices used by school administrators to connect and develop meaningful, positive relationships with students, parents, and community stakeholders (Capper et al., 2002; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Khalifa, 2012). Additionally, this theme identifies how school administrators serve as servant leaders (Alston, 2005; Johnson, 2006) advocates, and social activists concerning the needs of their school communities (Capper et al., 2002; Khalifa, 2012).

The CRSL framework provided the foundation for this basic qualitative study. The CRSL framework explores leadership behaviors and practices used by school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments and served as the rationale to explore the gap in practice concerning K–12 school administrators' use of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students, as well as the challenges some administrators experience with implementing such practices. Each of the four major themes of the CRSL framework is supported by empirical evidence found in scholarly literature and aligned to the methodology, problem, and purpose of this study. I used the indicators and themes of the CRSL framework to design the research and interview questions for this study. I coded data obtained through this study initially based on the four themes of CRSL to identify patterns, categories, and emerging themes related to the leadership practices and strategies used by school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments for the diverse students in the district under study.

## **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables**

CRSL has emerged as an important aspect of educational research on leadership practices concerning cultural responsiveness to the learning needs of diverse populations of students. As the demographics of U.S. public schools continue to change, school administrators are challenged with promoting culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments for diverse student populations (Minkos et al., 2017). To provide a historical context for CRSL practices, in the first section of the literature review, I present background information concerning racial disparities in public schools and the emergence of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. In the next section, I share scholarly literature on each theme of CRSL practices. In the final section, I discuss peer-reviewed literature on professional learning opportunities designed to support school administrators in promoting culturally responsive learning environments.

### **Racial Disparities in U.S. Schools**

School administrators face challenges regarding the racial disparities of U.S. public schools. Concerns about unequal educational opportunities and outcomes for students of color and historically marginalized students have been documented in court cases, national policy reports, and research literature for many decades (Dee & Penner, 2017; Hung et al., 2019). *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 promoted the notion of separate but equal and supported racial segregation in social, political, and educational institutions in the southern United States for many years (Mahari de Silva et al., 2018; Wishon, 2004). In *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court eradicated the notion of separate but equal and determined that separate educational facilities were inherently

unequal (Mahari de Silva et al., 2018; Wishon, 2004). The outcomes of the court cases were steps toward promoting equality in public education, yet challenges related to inequitable resources persist in U.S. public schools.

The allocation of federal funds was an attempt to stimulate educational equity in U.S. public schools. As a part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was signed into law to promote educational equity for U.S. public students to have equal access to quality education (Paul, 2016; Young, 2018). Through ESEA, federal funds are allocated to schools and school districts with high percentages of students from low-income families (ESEA, 1965; Paul, 2016; Young, 2018). The Title I program is a provision of ESEA and was created to close achievement and learning gaps between students from low-income households who attended urban or rural school systems and their peers from middle-class households who attended suburban school systems (ESEA, 1965; Paul, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The increase of federal funding was an attempt to leverage educational equity in public schools, but academic disparities among students of color and marginalized students remained prevalent in U.S. public schools.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was a reauthorization of ESEA centered on increasing accountability for school performance using annual standardized tests to measure achievement of all student subgroups (NCLB, 2002; Paul, 2016; Young, 2018). NCLB focused on students' test scores rather than academic growth and progress and contained a uniform series of interventions for schools that did not make adequate yearly progress by closing achievement gaps between underserved student groups,

including students of color and marginalized students (NCLB, 2002; Paul, 2016; Young, 2018). Schools that failed to meet adequate yearly progress received punitive or corrective measures. By 2015, The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) replaced NCLB. ESSA gave states flexibility and authority over their educational systems and tasked them with developing state plans to support closing achievement gaps with traditionally underserved subgroups. School districts within states had the autonomy to promote educational environments that met the needs of their students.

Challenges persist despite decades-long attempts by U.S. legislators to provide equitable learning experiences for the diverse groups of students in public schools. Pervasive gaps in achievement concerning diverse groups of students continue to plague the nation's schools (Hung et al., 2019). Educators' minimal knowledge about diverse cultures has contributed to deficit views and failure to meet the educational needs of diverse groups of students. Deficit views have resulted in low expectations, inadequate resources, and poor academic achievement for students of color and marginalized groups of students (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Stone-Johnson et al., 2021). School administrators continue to address the challenges concerning how to promote equitable learning environments to close prevalent academic and learning gaps between diverse groups of students.

Promoting educational equity for diverse populations of students has been an ongoing challenge for school administrators. Students of color and marginalized students from low socioeconomic backgrounds historically have experienced gaps in learning and educational opportunities in comparison to their White and more affluent peers (Darling-

Hammond, 2000; Ford, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006). For example, students of color and marginalized students often have less access to highly qualified educators (Rittle-Johnson et al., 2021). Data have indicated that some educators of students of color and marginalized students have deficit views of students' abilities, attributing school and learning difficulties to factors related to students' families and communities, rather than to factors under the educators' control (Brooks et al., 2019; Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Jackson et al., 2017). Additionally, students of color in U.S. public schools historically have received disciplinary actions more frequently and more severely than their White peers (Bal et al., 2019). School administrators have the responsibility of promoting culturally responsive learning environments that are equitable for all students. As the diversity of U.S. public schools grows and students of color become the majority, the implementation of culturally responsive practices has increased in importance for meeting the educational needs of diverse groups of students.

### **Historical Context of Cultural Responsiveness**

Cultural responsiveness emerged in the field of education around 2000. The context of cultural responsiveness represents a synthesis of practices concerning culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy. Culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy have focused primarily on instructional strategies and skills related to addressing the unique learning needs of students of color and marginalized students (Hesbol et al., 2020; Khalifa et al., 2016; McCarther & Davis, 2017). Following the educational reforms of NCLB (2002) and ESSA (2015) that focused on closing achievement gaps through standardized measures, educational researchers began to

explore the process of learning for diverse groups of students to address cultural needs that may have contributed to pervasive academic and learning gaps and increased representation in school discipline matters.

The learning needs of diverse populations of students have been and continue to be explored through culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy. The research findings of Ladson-Billings (1995) evolved into culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy focused on students' learning environments and how the learning process promotes academic success, cultural competence, and the critical consciousness of all students, particularly students of color (Adams & Glass, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; McCarther & Davis, 2017). The beliefs, practices, and strategies of classroom teachers can influence the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Some classroom teachers have used culturally relevant practices to promote academic success for all learners, particularly students of color. Several studies have been grounded in Ladson-Billings's (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. For example, Whaley et al. (2019) investigated instructional strategies used by elementary teachers to promote the reading achievement of students of color. The findings of their study resulted in an understanding of effective culturally relevant instructional practices and strategies that increased reading achievement for African American male students.

Language and cultural barriers have made culturally relevant pedagogy challenging for teachers. Garcia (2019) examined the practices and strategies used to facilitate learning in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms for English learners. Garcia's research findings revealed that encouraging English learners to use their native

languages, draw upon family values and traditions, and read and write about topics that are relevant to students' lives promoted culturally relevant pedagogy and enabled teachers to assess their students' abilities while honoring student cultures and languages. Culturally relevant pedagogy encompasses teacher practices within classroom settings, whereas cultural responsiveness takes a broader expansive approach.

The theory of culturally responsive pedagogy is similar to culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally responsive pedagogy promotes educational equity by connecting school and community experiences for racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse students (Gay, 2010). Gay (2010) found that culturally responsive practices fostered learning environments that promote not only academic achievement but also cultural competence. Cultural competence can affirm and cultivate a learning atmosphere of care and integrity and positively influences the self-identifications and abilities of diverse learners (Gay, 2013; Khalifa et al., 2018). Culturally responsive practices are specifically designed to enhance the learning experiences of diverse student populations.

Culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies are important aspects of educating diverse groups of students. Teacher application of culturally responsive practices has resulted in students of color achieving at higher levels and attending school more regularly with higher attendance patterns and decreased disciplinary suspensions (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). The implementation of specific practices that enhance the teaching and learning of students is a growing necessity for educators to ensure equitable and inclusive learning environments for increasingly diverse public school classrooms.

The implementation of culturally responsive practices cannot belong solely to classroom teachers. School administrators need to practice culturally responsive practices to transform public education to meet the cultural, learning, and social needs of diverse student populations (Gay, 2010, 2013). School administrators must employ culturally responsive practices that ensure equity and inclusion for all students throughout the school environment (Gay, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). However, to promote equitable learning environments and mitigate disparities between groups of students, school administrators must learn how to effectively incorporate culturally responsive leadership practices.

### **School Leadership and the Learning Environment**

The role of school administrators influences students' learning environments. In recent years, the central focus of school leadership has shifted away from managerial elements of practice towards practices that promote student learning and school improvement (Uysal & Sarier, 2018). National policies such as NCLB and ESSA required school administrators to lead with a narrowed focus on increasing academic accountability between groups of students and improving students' overall performance on standardized tests (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; ESSA, 2015; NCLB, 2002; Young et al., 2017). The atmosphere of learning environments plays a critical role in students' abilities to learn and thrive regarding academic development (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Manns, 2021). As increased accountability shifted to state agencies, additional attention has been given to students' learning environments and how the leadership of school administrators promotes positive learning environments.



School administrators play an important role in promoting positive learning environments for all students. Learning environments are shaped by the climate and culture of schools. Positive school climate fosters a sense of belonging for students, improves academic achievement and student engagement, and helps to reduce the negative effects of poverty on student learning (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Manns, 2021). The beliefs and practices of school administrators influence the climate, culture, and organizational structure of schools, including teacher practices. School administrators make a difference in school and student outcomes because of the strong influence their leadership practices have on students' learning environments (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018; Uysal & Sarier, 2018; Young et al., 2017). Therefore, student learning is directly influenced by the leadership practices of school administrators (Nadelson et al., 2020; Uysal & Sarier, 2018; Young et al., 2017). School administrators shape the climate and culture of schools, which influence school and student outcomes.

School administrators have the capacity to create cultures of learning that promote educational equity and positively affect students' achievement and learning outcomes. School administrators can lead the development of school-wide practices, policies, and procedures that support students' social, emotional, and cognitive skills as well as foster a sense of equity, inclusion, and belonging (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Nadelson et al., 2020). School administrators can affect student learning through their influence on the school's climate and culture, as well as through their ability to inspire or suppress learning environments that encourage equity and

inclusion of all students (Khalifa, 2018; Nadelson et al., 2020). By promoting equitable learning environments, school administrators can demonstrate responsiveness to the cultural needs and experiences of diverse populations of students.

Changes in the demographics of public schools require educators to promote learning environments that are culturally responsive to the needs of diverse student populations. Educators serve students from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and with varied abilities, challenges, and support systems (Stillman et al., 2018). School administrators have the increasing responsibility of promoting culturally responsive learning environments for all students. Uysal and Sarier (2018) suggested that student achievement and school effectiveness are directed by the behaviors and leadership practices of school administrators. Nadelson et al. (2020) found that school administrators who supported culturally responsive learning environments did so by creating a climate and culture of equity and inclusion for all students. Nadelson et al. categorized the practices demonstrated in the study as the school administrators' (a) engagement in instructional leadership, (b) influence over organizational culture and climate, (c) advocacy of collaborative leadership and evidence-based decision-making, and (d) behaviors that promoted educational equity for all students. The results of the study offered preliminary evidence on leadership practices used by school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments. Public schools continue to increase in diversity, thereby making the implementation of CRSL practices a necessity for school administrators leading schools through cultural changes.

## **Culturally Responsive School Leadership**

The United States has increasingly become a diverse multicultural society. Public school administrators face mounting pressure to meet the educational needs of increasingly diverse populations of public school students (Braun et al., 2017; Gordon & Ronder, 2016). Public school administrators face escalating concerns pertaining to achievement and learning gaps for ethnically and culturally diverse students in addition to persistent challenges such as teacher shortages, inequitable funding, and accountability testing (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Researchers have found that culturally responsive learning environments promote educational equity for all students by valuing cultural identities and fostering inclusive learning environments that allow all students to thrive (Khalifa et al., 2018; McCarther & Davis, 2017; Nadelson et al., 2020). As U.S. schools continue to grow in diversity, implementing CRSL practices is a necessity for promoting culturally responsive learning environments to meet the educational needs of diverse public school students.

CRSL practices are vital for cultivating culturally responsive learning environments for all students. School administrators who use CRSL practices demonstrate a commitment to diversity and mitigating barriers that may have contributed to systemic inequities in public schools, including deficit thinking concerning diverse populations of students (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Through their roles as educational leaders, school administrators have a unique and critical responsibility to sustain or transform the climate and culture of schools by promoting cultural responsiveness to advocate for the success of all students and to increase

education equity within their schools (Hesbol et al., 2020; Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020). School administrators' implementation of CRSL practices encourages equity and inclusion for all students.

In a seminal case study, Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) explored CRSL practices. The researchers found that CRSL practices used to promote culturally responsive learning environments for racially and linguistically diverse students were evidenced by a commitment to caring for others, developing positive relationships, and modeling CRSL practices to foster an atmosphere of inclusion for all (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Gordon and Ronder (2016) explored leadership strategies and practices used by school administrators who implemented CRSL to determine how those practices promoted equity and inclusion for all students in their schools. The practices and strategies used by school administrators changed school structures pertaining to academic rigor, student grouping, and use of data to increase accountabilities for all students' learning. Additional leadership strategies included providing professional learning opportunities for teachers on cultural diversity and equity, fostering a welcoming school environment to build relationships with students, engaging families and the community, and changing hiring practices to reflect the needs of the diverse learning community (Gordon & Ronder, 2016). In an ethnographic case study conducted by Newcomer and Cowin (2018), school structures were changed to promote a learning environment to welcome and engage diverse students and families, increase the quality of teacher and learning through modeling culturally responsive practices, and create professional learning opportunities to develop culturally responsive teachers. The behaviors and

practices of school administrators promoted culturally responsive learning environments that demonstrated value and equity for diversity by creating a sense of belonging and promoting academic success for all learners.

School administrators can transform a school's culture and climate by promoting culturally responsive learning environments. Researchers have suggested that the implementation of culturally responsive practices in schools can be fragmented or deficient if not demonstrated and supported by school administrators (Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally responsive school administrators exhibit leadership behaviors that improve the lives and education of all students (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018) and respond effectively to the educational, cultural, and social needs of students (Khalifa et al., 2016). The synthesis of research on culturally responsive school leaders and CRSL addressed four main themes of behaviors and practices: (a) engaging in critical self-reflections; (b) developing culturally responsive teachers; (c) promoting culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments; and (d) building community advocacy by engaging students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016). Each of the four CRSL themes is discussed in the next sections.

### ***Employs Critical Self-Reflection***

School administrators who employ CRSL practices engage in ongoing critical self-reflection. Khalifa et al. (2016) suggested that self-reflection precedes any leadership actions concerning CRSL. Critical self-reflection allows school administrators to demonstrate a commitment to the continuous learning of cultural knowledge and contexts (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006) that lead to displays of critical consciousness in leadership

practices (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Johnson, 2006). Engaging in ongoing critical self-reflection affords school administrators the opportunity to examine how their cultural backgrounds and experiences affect their leadership behaviors and practices concerning the students and communities they serve (Khalifa et al., 2016; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). School administrators must understand how their assumptions, beliefs, perceptions, and values about diverse groups of people and cultures influence their actions and inactions regarding equity, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness (Samuels et al., 2019). School administrators can use their self-reflective practices to guide decisions, policies, and practices that advocate for equity and inclusion and promote culturally responsive learning environments.

Critical self-reflection can result in a transformation of leadership practices concerning equity and cultural responsiveness. Bonner et al. (2018) argued that educators must continuously reflect on their own beliefs and biases to become more culturally competent and responsive to supporting diverse groups of students. Furthermore, Brooks et al. (2019) suggested that critical self-reflection allows school administrators to explore topics concerning cultural diversity and disproportionalities related to school policies and procedures in academics and discipline. For example, Khalifa et al. (2016) discussed how the disproportionate number of disciplinary actions for students of color can be connected to teachers' and administrators' biases or lack of understanding of cultures different from their background. The discipline gap between White students and students of color has increased demand for educators to expand their knowledge of culturally responsive practices (Larson et al., 2018).

Bal et al. (2019) explored how critical self-reflection led to the development of practices addressing school discipline in an urban middle school. The researchers found that, in comparison to White students, students of color received exclusionary disciplinary actions more frequently and more severely throughout public schools in the United States. Bal et al. found this trend to be represented in one urban middle school they studied, which led school administrators to develop a schoolwide discipline system to address the issue. School leaders, teachers, and community stakeholders collectively examined existing disciplinary practices and created a schoolwide culturally responsive behavioral intervention system designed to address racial disproportionality at their school (Bal et al., 2019). As a result of implementation, discipline infractions involving students of color decreased on the school campus. School administrators demonstrated how using school data and equity audits to measure inclusion and CRSL policies and practices is a result of critical self-reflection.

Using school and student data, as well as equity audits, to measure student inclusiveness and the influence of CRSL practices is a strategy that stems from school administrators engaging in critical self-reflection of their leadership practices. School administrators have the responsibility of using data to make informed decisions about school policies, procedures, and students' learning outcomes, and administrators have access to an array of data on student achievement and demographics that can be used for equity audits (Nadelson et al., 2020). Brooks et al. (2019) suggested that equity audits are useful in helping school administrators identify inequitable practices and procedures in

their schools and to offer evidence that can lead to implementation strategies to address these issues.

The use of school data and equity audits can increase educators' awareness of areas of improvement in practices concerning diverse student populations. In their research on inequities in public education, Samuels et al. (2019) revealed how equity audits helped educators analyze practices and identify inequities in their schools. Through equity audits, the participants' awareness of inequities increased, particularly with the revelation of disproportionalities in discipline negatively affecting students of color (Samuels et al., 2019). Participants in the study shared the findings of equity audits to increase awareness and leverage professional learning opportunities for colleagues to understand how culturally responsive practices might help to mitigate inequities.

Equity audits can support the implementation of culturally responsive learning environments to mitigate inequitable learning outcomes. Braun et al. (2017) examined the degree to which schools were able to close intraschool achievement gaps between students of color and White students, while exploring educator beliefs and practices regarding the implementation of gap-closing strategies. The researchers investigated the use of equity audits to identify the influences of intraschool inequities on student learning outcomes. The equity audits focused on (a) setting a schoolwide vision, (b) monitoring students' progress, (c) developing teachers' capacity to teach and collaborate, and (d) reorganizing schoolwide processes and procedures (Braun et al., 2017). The results led to high levels of internal accountability and a schoolwide focus on promoting culturally responsive learning environments to eliminate inequitable learning outcomes



for all students in their schools. The findings of the study revealed an overall increase in student achievement and a decrease in the variance between student groups by race.

By engaging in critical self-reflection, school administrators can examine how their leadership practices influence policies and procedures that affect the learning environment of diverse populations of students. Ezzani's (2021) case study on urban school leadership practices revealed the importance of critical reflection. The findings of this research study indicated that the practice of critical reflection was an iterative process that could be used to explore how school administrators' beliefs, behaviors, and practices affect school procedures and policies, particularly concerning historically marginalized students. As a result of the leader's critical self-reflection, professional development engaged staff in reflective practices to bring awareness to attitudes and behaviors that might have negatively affected historically marginalized students. As a result, the staff participated in continuous critical examination and learned to promote advocacy for marginalized students. The implementation of ongoing critical reflection practices allowed school leaders to respond to systemic and oppressive practices and promote learning environments that were culturally responsive to diverse groups of students.

The beliefs, decisions, and practices of school administrators influence equity, inclusion, and the promotion of culturally responsive learning environments. To promote equity and inclusion through culturally responsive learning environments, school administrators must engage in critical self-reflection. School administrators who advocate for educational equity and inclusion address issues concerning race and culture as a part of their CRSL practices and intentionally probe student data to eliminate inequities and

marginalization of groups of students within their schools (Nadelson et al., 2020). Using school and student data, as well as equity audits, enables school administrators to make evidence-based decisions that promote success for all and increase the equity of educational outcomes in their schools (Nadelson et al., 2020). A critical aspect of CRSL is for school administrators to reflect on their leadership practices and use data to promote culturally responsive learning environments. Critical self-reflection is a CRSL practice interwoven in school administrators' development of culturally responsive teachers.

### ***Develops Culturally Responsive Teachers***

The second theme of CRSL is the school administrators' commitment to developing culturally responsive teachers. School administrators provide instructional leadership and support the development of teachers' instructional skills and practices. Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all factors that influence student learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). For more than 50 years, educational leaders and scholars have explored the relationship between school leadership and teacher quality and found a relationship between the leadership practices of school administrators and student academic achievement (Uysal & Sarier, 2018). School administrators use their roles as instructional leaders to cultivate learning environments that ensure students can develop analytical and critical-thinking skills as well as to build creative problem-solving skills to grow as independent thinkers (Nadelson et al., 2020). Through building the capacity of classroom teachers, school administrators can improve students' learning

experiences. The instructional leadership practices of school administrators contribute to students' learning outcomes.

School administrators recognize the importance of pedagogical practices in culturally responsive learning environments, which makes the need for culturally responsive teachers critical. Educator preparation programs and in-service professional development opportunities can cultivate the knowledge and skills to enhance the understanding of students' needs and how educators can support students' learning. (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). However, many teachers are not innately culturally responsive to students. Many teachers do not enter the field of education culturally responsive or lack access to culturally responsive training through teacher preparation programs or job-embedded professional development (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Gordon & Espinoza, 2020). In their study, Bottiani et al. (2018) suggested that few educators are proficient at bridging cultural differences to promote equitable and inclusive learning environments designed for all students to learn and succeed. As instructional leaders, school administrators have the responsibility of developing and refining teachers' instructional skills in ways that reshape behaviors, practices, and strategies to result in improved student outcomes (Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2020). The skills and practices of teachers influence the learning atmosphere and learning outcomes for all students. Therefore, mentoring and modeling culturally responsive teaching and offering professional development opportunities are CRSL practices needed to develop culturally responsive teachers (Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Teachers need to develop

the knowledge, skills, and competencies to teach children from various backgrounds as K-12 public schools increase in diversity. School administrators who employ CRSL practices need to create job-embedded opportunities to develop culturally responsive teachers.

One of the ways school administrators can create job-embedded opportunities to develop culturally responsive teachers is by providing in-service professional development. With in-service professional development, school administrators can communicate their vision for educational equity and inclusion for all students, as well as demonstrate their commitment to enhancing teacher practices by investing in teacher knowledge and skills. Developing teacher capacities by providing professional development centered on inclusion and cultural responsiveness is a characteristic of CRSL practices (Khalifa et al., 2016; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Farinde-Wu et al. (2017) indicated that many practicing teachers lack formal training on culturally responsive practices, through either their teacher preparation programs or in-service professional development opportunities. Having minimal knowledge about students' backgrounds can serve as a barrier to teachers' cultural responsiveness, particularly when teacher and student backgrounds differ.

The barriers and challenges school administrators encounter related to staffing can influence in-service professional development opportunities. Reed and Swaminathan (2016) elaborated on the necessity of school administrators to develop the capacity of teachers who work with diverse populations of students and addressed the challenges to find high-quality teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners, particularly in urban

schools. In their analysis, novice teachers expressed a preference and preparedness to teach in suburban schools yet were more likely to be placed in an urban setting and less likely to be prepared to address the instructional needs of diverse students. Reed and Swaminathan found that when novice teachers were placed in urban settings, the teachers' expectations of students' behavior aligned with the ideology of suburban, middle-class, White dispositions. Reed and Swaminathan indicated that high rates of teacher turnover were associated with urban schools, thereby providing additional challenges for school administrators to plan for appropriate professional development, foster collaborative relationships, and implement long-term school improvement.

Developing cultural responsiveness is not contingent on an educator's race or ethnicity. Culturally responsive preparation is necessary even when teachers are from the same cultural, racial, and socioeconomic background of students (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). School administrators who practice CRSL commit to developing culturally responsive teachers whose behaviors and practices promote equity, inclusion, and academic achievement of all learners. Such administrators often offer collegial mentoring and modeling opportunities.

School administrators can develop culturally responsive teachers by fostering mentoring and modeling opportunities with teachers who implement culturally responsive practices. Culturally responsive teachers exhibit characteristics that positively affect students' learning environments and consequently raise the potential for increasing students' academic performance (Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020). Teachers can empower students to reach their fullest potential. Broussard et al. (2016) explored

how culturally responsive instructional practices can contribute to closing achievement gaps, increasing access to gifted education, and reducing overrepresentation in special education for Hispanic and African American students, who historically have scored below their White counterparts on standardized tests in every subject. Broussard et al. found that that culturally responsive practices increased students' academic achievement and overall school engagement and reduced achievement gaps between students of color and White students. Teachers who practice cultural responsiveness can support the development of their colleagues by modeling strategies through mentoring relationships.

School administrators encourage mentoring relationships between colleagues and can use this strategy to promote the development of culturally responsive teachers. Culturally responsive teachers influence the practices of other teachers. Newcomer and Cowin (2018) discussed the importance of teachers learning from other teachers how to promote culturally responsive learning environments to increase awareness and create an environment of mutual mentorship. Highly effective teachers are sought after by colleagues for their expertise and guidance concerning instructional practices, including real-world learning approaches and classroom-management practices that validate all learners (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). Teachers become change agents by positively affecting school climate and culture. Sharing the expertise of teacher leaders builds mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships among staff members and fosters a supportive and collaborative environment (McBrayer et al., 2018). School administrators are instrumental in fostering mentoring relationships between colleagues and can

leverage opportunities for and the modeling of culturally responsive practices that create positive learning environments.

School administrators can promote positive student outcomes on their campuses by developing teachers' behaviors and practices. Culturally responsive teachers validate students' cultural differences and promote learning environments where all students can thrive. Tanner et al. (2017) examined the relationship between teachers' level of cultural responsiveness and the diversity of a school's student body. They found that teachers demonstrating higher levels of cultural responsiveness taught in schools with higher percentages of students of color. Their findings suggested that culturally responsive practices improved when educators had greater exposure to diverse learners. Similarly, Waly (2020) found that teachers who learned about their students' backgrounds made instructional modifications to reflect and build upon student backgrounds to create familial, communal classrooms where everyone's experiences and cultures were valued. Such practices resulted in higher levels of student engagement and achievement. The implementation of culturally responsive strategies and practices can improve student outcomes including higher achievement.

By developing culturally responsive teachers, school administrators promote cultural learning environments and potentially increase student achievement between subgroups of students. Culturally responsive teachers implement strategies and practices that contest the disparities in urban school (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020). Farinde-Wu et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative analysis examining the teaching strategies used to cultivate culturally responsive classroom

environments in urban schools. The strategies used by culturally responsive teachers may inform pedagogical practices, which can assist in closing achievement gaps. The participants in the Farinde-Wu et al. study were nationally recognized educators deemed highly effective and recognized for their outstanding teaching qualities and work ethic. The researchers revealed common strategies and practices to actively engage students and promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse students in urban schools. The four major themes that emerged from the study suggested teachers who practice cultural responsiveness (a) implemented strategies of respect, communication, and encouragement; (b) cocreated a familial-style classroom culture of support; (c) promoted student-first learning; and (d) used critical multicultural content in lesson delivery (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). The participants exhibited specific practices and strategies associated with increased academic performance among diverse learners. Such strategies promoted culturally responsive learning environments and enhanced students' overall learning experiences, thereby demonstrating that students benefited from instruction by culturally responsive teachers.

Developing culturally responsive teachers is a CRSL strategy used by school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments. As instructional leaders, school administrators must ensure the learning needs of every student, from all cultural groups, are met each day by identifying and cultivating the instructional behaviors and practices of teachers (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2020). There is a relationship between school leadership practices, teacher quality, and student achievement (Uysal & Sarier, 2018). School administrators have the



responsibility of supporting and developing the instructional capacity of teachers in ways that improve students' achievement (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). Culturally responsive practices may assist in closing long-standing achievement gaps between subgroups of students (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). Through such strategies as providing in-service professional development, mentoring, and modeling culturally responsive practices, school administrators can develop culturally responsive teachers within their schools. School administrators guide instructional decisions that support culturally responsive learning environments and promote conditions of educational equity for all students in their schools (Nadelson et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). The CRSL practices of school administrators expand beyond developing culturally responsive teachers in individual classrooms to promoting an overall culturally responsive and inclusive school environment.

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

The third theme of CRSL practices explores how school administrators promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments. In addition to developing culturally responsive teachers, school administrators who practice CRSL cultivate a culturally responsive school context with a pervasive emphasis on equity and inclusion (Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Having an educational equity mindset guides the promotion and support of equitable learning environments in which school administrators have direct and indirect influences on students' achievement (Nadelson et al., 2020). Culturally responsive school administrators support equitable education and promote students' achievement by

modeling CRSL practices for staff, communicating a vision for inclusive instructional and behavioral practices, using school data to reveal disparities in academics and discipline, and offering professional development to change climate and culture by promoting cultural responsiveness throughout all aspects of school.

Establishing a culturally responsive school environment is a CRSL strategy. The role of school administrators in developing culturally responsive learning environments can dispel systemic structures and practices that have marginalized diverse groups of students in public school systems (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Nadelson et al. (2020) suggested that when culturally responsive practices are modeled for school staff, school administrators increase influence over transforming attitudes, mindsets, practices, and strategies designed to be more inclusive of diverse populations of students, particularly students of color. By modeling CRSL practices for staff, school administrators can influence the climate and culture of schools and promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse groups of students.

The behaviors and practices of school administrators influence the climate and culture of schools. School administrators who strive to provide students with culturally responsive learning environments integrate CRSL practices throughout all school operations to develop schoolwide practices that make learning meaningful for increasingly diverse populations of students (Gordon & Ronder, 2016). A welcoming school environment communicates inclusion through systemic processes. School administrators demonstrate a commitment for inclusion of all learners, particularly those

deemed historically marginalized, by creating welcoming school environments for students and families (Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020; Shields & Hesbol, 2020). Shields and Hesbol (2020) examined leadership practices used by school administrators and argued that CRSL practices created inclusive schools where all students felt respected and valued, including those who were economically disadvantaged or from historically marginalized groups. School administrators with a mindset for promoting equitable education through culturally responsive learning environments established mutually respectful relationships with students, staff, families, and community stakeholders and worked with the teaching staff on implementing culturally responsive strategies (Gordon & Ronder, 2016). The behaviors and practices of school administrators influence the climate and culture of schools as well as affect students' learning.

School administrators who implement CRSL practices influence the climate and culture of schools and provide guidance for how students will learn. School administrators need to be cognizant of the needs of their students, staff, and the local community to promote positive learning environments (Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). The behaviors and practices of school administrators direct the organizational climate, as well as the instructional organization of the school, all of which indirectly affects student learning (Uysal & Sarier, 2018). When CRSL practices are emphasized, school administrators can improve the educational experiences and achievement of culturally diverse students in K-12 public schools (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020).

The leadership behaviors, strategies, and practices of school administrators have both a direct and indirect effect on students' achievement and learning environments. Culturally responsive schools have a variety of culturally sensitive assessment methods as well as school data to inform culturally responsive school policies and practices and distinguish between underachievement due to disability and underachievement due to cultural incongruence (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). The use of school data provides a means to examine cultural gaps in students' disciplinary referrals as well as in students' achievement to include remediation and enrichment (Skrla et al., 2004). School administrators can examine and apply data to determine whether appropriate conditions, processes, and practices are in place to offer learning environments that promote cultural responsiveness and educational equity for all students (Nadelson et al., 2020). Goddard et al. (2017) revealed how the use of school data promoted collective efficacy to reduce educational inequity and resulted in closing mathematics achievement gaps between Black and White middle school students by more than 50%. The leadership behaviors and practices of school administrators are critical elements of CRSL practice for school administrators to promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments.

### ***Engages Students, Parents, and Indigenous and Community Contexts***

The fourth theme of CRSL is the importance of school administrators engaging students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts in culturally appropriate ways. Building strong, positive relationships with teachers, students, parents, and the local community is essential for CRSL (Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). School administrators who practice CRSL collaborate with

stakeholders to establish positive relationships. Building positive relationships between schools and surrounding communities promotes culturally responsive school environments by increasing background and cultural knowledge to create authentic communication between school personnel and families (Bertrand & Rodela, 2017; Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016). Through cross-cultural interactions, school administrators can engage in continuous learning that enhances CRSL practices.

When school administrators engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts, knowledge and perspectives on cultural diversity increase. The engagement between schools and families creates opportunities for parents to play integral roles in schools. Culturally responsive school administrators welcome parents in schools to consult with educators, assist with student learning, and serve in various leadership and supportive roles (Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). The collaboration between school and family can deepen educators' understanding of cultural values, perspectives, and practices that affect students' learning, increasing a sense of inclusion within the school community (Bertrand & Rodela, 2017; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). A deeper understanding of cultural diversity promotes continuous learning and reflection of culturally responsive practices.

School administrators who practice CRSL engage in continuous learning about their students, students' families, and the surrounding community. Engaging in continuous learning opportunities allows educators to reduce cultural misunderstandings and identify opportunities to embed elements of cultural responsiveness throughout the process of teaching and learning (Khalifa, 2018). Culturally responsive school

administrators support an inclusive curriculum that incorporates students' cultures and languages (Gordon & Ronder, 2016) and help teachers design instruction around community issues (Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Additionally, by engaging in continuous learning, school administrators seek ways to honor the backgrounds of students, create school structures and processes that accommodate the lives of parents, and demonstrate understanding of community-based issues (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). By establishing school–community relationships, school administrators who practice CRSL can promote overlapping contexts to meet the specific needs of marginalized students.

Collaborating with the surrounding community is a CRSL practice that promotes engagement. School administrators who demonstrate CRSL practices develop skill sets that create authentic overlapping school and community relationships (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Waly, 2020). Gordon and Ronder (2016) noted that school administrators who practiced CRSL sought and implemented feedback from the community to provide more equitable, inclusive, and responsive school environments. Through community collaborations, school administrators cultivate culturally responsive learning environments beyond the school day. Culturally responsive school administrators build bridges between the school and community to foster communal relationships and serve as advocates for community-based issues.

Community advocacy and engagement are central to CRSL. Culturally responsive school administrators ensure offerings of school-based or school-related services, participate in community development endeavors, and seek ways to use the community as a culturally responsive learning environment (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Khalifa, 2018;

Khalifa et al., 2016; Waly, 2020). Community advocacy and engagement in authentic community-based events are centered on improving the lives of residents, including students. Gordon and Ronder (2016) noted that CRSL participation in community-based activities may include collaborating with local recreation centers, marching for migrant workers' pay, and rallying against neighborhood crime. Demonstrated efforts by school administrators promote community–school relationships and foster responsiveness to the cultural needs of students and communities.

School administrators who practice CRSL engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts to develop meaningful and positive relationships. By exploring opportunities for schools and the surrounding community to engage in shared spaces, school administrators increase knowledge of the cultural backgrounds and needs of students. Shared spaces allow school administrators to develop understanding of students and families, serve as advocates for community-based causes, and share information that enhances the lives of students and their families (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Developing strong relationships with students, families, and the community has benefits that extend beyond the boundaries of school to positively affect students' learning (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017).

For school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students, meaningful relationships must be established with parents, students, and communities. Arguably, for school administrators seeking to engage students in culturally responsive practices, developing meaningful relationships is

an endeavor that precedes all attempts to present academic content (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). Being educated by highly qualified teachers is essential for all students, yet these benefits alone do not transcend the need for diverse populations to be valued in schools. School administrators who practice CRSL create welcoming spaces to promote equity and inclusion through meaningful engagement.

School administrators are responsible for constructing authentic experiences to promote cultural responsiveness. By investing in authentic and meaningful engagement, genuine compassion and mutual concern may supplant the cultural dissonance that has historically influenced teaching and learning practices (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). Gordon and Ronder (2016) concluded that culturally responsive school administrators foster a way of thinking and being that demonstrates value for equity, diversity, and inclusion and facilitates a positive learning environment for all members of the school community. Engagement in culturally responsive practices demonstrates acceptance and validation of Indigenous cultures to foster equity and inclusion for all.

### **Professional Learning Opportunities for Culturally Responsive Practices**

The growing diversity of public schools has increased the necessity for school leaders to be cognizant of the cultural backgrounds of diverse student populations to meet their learning needs. Although the demographics of public school students have changed rapidly, the achievement of marginalized students and students of color has remained the same or lower in comparison to White students (Hernandez & Marshall, 2017). Culturally competent school administrators are essential for improving the educational experiences of diverse populations of students in U.S. public schools (Ezzani, 2021; Spikes, 2018).



However, many school leaders do not begin their roles as school administrators with prior knowledge of or formal training on culturally responsive practices.

School administrators' lack of demonstrated knowledge of culturally responsiveness suggested an exploration of leader preparation programs. Leadership preparation programs need to prepare school leaders to meet the challenges concerning persistent achievement gaps between students of color and White students and rapidly diversifying school demographics (Hernandez & Marshall, 2017). However, Sutchter et al. (2018) noted in their research study that many school administrators have not received professional training related to leading schools that are culturally diverse, and some principals have a limited understanding of how to implement CRSL practices. Furthermore, Brion (2019) found that traditional leadership programs consistently offered courses on school law, school finance, and organizational theory yet did not address cultural responsiveness. Educational leadership programs have increased course offerings related to cultural responsiveness, yet many leadership programs continue to offer traditional courses that do not address the role culture plays in teaching, learning, curriculum, or environmental aspects of students' learning (Brion, 2019). Some leadership programs offer optional courses related to diversity, and others do not explicitly address equity or cultural responsiveness through program offerings (Barakat et al., 2019; Brion, 2019; Stone-Johnson et al., 2021). School administrators must be equipped with knowledge and skills to create an equitable and culturally responsive learning environment for diverse populations of students.

School administrators who do not receive training on CRSL practices may lack a contextual understanding of CRSL practices. Brooks et al. (2019) associated school administrators' lack of CRSL awareness with leadership training institutions that failed to offer leadership programs including knowledge of culturally responsive leadership. Liou and Hermanns (2017) explored leadership programs to determine how aspiring school leaders were prepared to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations and found variance in programs, resulting in the creation of individualized frameworks to address systemic practices. Newcomer and Cowin (2018) noted that leadership preparation programs that offered minimal content in CRSL also had leadership faculty members with little knowledge of or interest in cultural responsiveness and tenure systems with little value for research in cultural responsiveness.

Newcomer and Cowin (2018) suggested that few candidates enter leadership programs with an orientation towards cultural responsiveness. Stone-Johnson et al. (2021) indicated that as a part of the admissions process, leadership preparation programs should examine applicants' inclinations towards cultural responsiveness and their ability to critically question the inequities found in schools. Barakat et al. (2019) reviewed U.S. leadership preparation programs and found that 70% of programs reported having a formal procedure for assessing leadership dispositions, which varied between institutions, and few assessed candidates' cultural competence. Little research is available on in-service and preservice school administrators' beliefs concerning CRSL practices (Barakat et al., 2019; Stone-Johnson et al., 2021). With the increasing diversity of U.S. public schools, leadership preparation programs need to emphasize CRSL (Brown et al., 2020;

Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). School administrators must increase their knowledge and practices of CRSL to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse student populations.

Leadership preparation programs are designed to train and prepare school administrators for their roles in school leadership. Leadership frameworks studied in leadership preparation programs address specific behaviors and practices that influence students' learning. The principles of instructional, transformational, and transactional leadership practices investigate the relationship between school leaders' behaviors and practices and students' achievement (Leithwood, 2012; Marzano et al., 2005). CRSL is a theory for leadership practices much like transformational leadership. The themes of CRSL are similar to the dimensions of transformational leadership, yet CRSL is not widely studied in leadership preparation programs (Brown et al., 2020). The leadership practices and principles that address the cultural backgrounds and norms concerning the educational needs of diverse students have not been widely addressed in leadership preparation programs.

As a result, some school administrators are ill prepared to provide culturally responsive learning environments for the increasingly diverse population of public school students. Brion (2019) revealed school administrators' lack of preparedness in offering culturally responsive learning environments was due to lack of knowledge on cultural proficiency and CRSL. Brion suggested ongoing training and support from the local school district to increase the cultural competency of in-service school administrators.

Professional development opportunities are designed to enhance learning and skillsets. Spikes (2018) explored professional development on racial equity and cultural competency for in-service school administrators. The study revealed the need to transform mindsets, practices, and unconscious biases that impede equitable structures and practices in schools. Spikes recommended that school leaders engage in ongoing, job-embedded staff development on cultural competence and responsive practices. Additionally, Spikes found that although U.S. school districts have begun introducing in-service professional development on cultural competency for school administrators, no substantial evidence is available on transformative practices or ongoing development and support for in-service school administrators.

Many educators do not enter the field of education with the knowledge or experience of implementing culturally responsive practices. The lack of administrator training in and exposure to culturally responsive practices, both from educator preparation programs and in-service professional development, has resulted in few practicing educators with a strong understanding of culturally responsive practices (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). Though school administrators can influence the climate and culture of schools by promoting equity and inclusion through culturally responsive learning environments, many have a limited understanding of how to implement CRSL practices.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In Chapter 2, I provided an in-depth review of scholarly literature on how school administrators use CRSL practices to promote equity and inclusion through culturally

responsive learning environments. The literature review was divided into three sections. The first section provided background information on long-standing disparities in public schools concerning diverse populations of students, leading to the emergence of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy. The second section provided a detailed review of the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016), which served as the conceptual framework and guide for how school administrators used leadership practices in previous studies to promote culturally responsive learning environments. Finally, the third section contained peer-reviewed literature on preservice and in-service professional learning opportunities designed to equip school administrators with an understanding of culturally responsive practices. The literature review provided a rationale for conducting this research study to understand the challenges perceived by school administrators with using leadership practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments.

The literature revealed long-standing disparities in U.S. public schools. Concerns regarding the equity and inclusion of all students have been documented in court cases for more than 2 centuries (Dee & Penner, 2017; Hung et al., 2019). National policies such as ESEA (1965), NCLB (2002), and ESSA (2015) have attempted to mitigate inequities in public education for diverse populations of students. Historically, students of color and marginalized students have had lower academic performance in comparison to the dominant culture. This ongoing trend led to the emergence of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogical practices to address the learning needs of diverse populations of students.

The emergence of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy provided evidence of the importance of educators' practices in fostering equitable and inclusive learning environments for diverse student populations. Culturally responsive practices benefit all students by promoting academic achievement and cultural competence (Gay, 2013; Khalifa et al., 2016). However, the implementation of culturally responsive teaching alone cannot affect an entire school culture and climate (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). The leadership practices of school administrators are necessary to promote equity and inclusion throughout schools.

The CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016) served as the conceptual framework for this study. Khalifa et al. (2016) examined empirical evidence of leadership practices with a direct effect on school climate, curriculum, policy, pedagogy, and student achievement to develop the CRSL framework. Specific to this study, the CRSL framework served as a guide for how school administrators can use leadership practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments, as well as the perceived challenges school administrators face with using CRSL practices. Unlike other leadership frameworks, many school administrators have not received formal training on CRSL and therefore have demonstrated a lack of knowledge and implementation of CRSL practices (Brown et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018; Sutchter et al., 2018). The literature supported the problem of practice that some K-12 school administrators have limited knowledge of CRSL practices that promote culturally responsive environments (Khalifa et al., 2016; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). The literature review

revealed minimal preservice and in-service professional learning opportunities for school administrators to gain or enhance their skill set concerning CRSL.

The increasing diversity of U.S. public schools confirms the need for school administrators to promote equity and inclusion through culturally responsive learning environments. School administrators must understand and employ CRSL practices to meet the needs of diverse populations of learners (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Nadelson et al., 2020). CRSL practices are specific behaviors and strategies used by school administrators to promote equity and inclusion of diverse populations of students through culturally responsive learning environments. CRSL is needed in all settings, including those not dominated by students of color (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Leadership is central to student and school success. The behaviors and practices of school administrators affect students' learning and contribute to schools' effectiveness (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020; Uysal & Sarier, 2018). Culturally responsive learning environments can promote educational equity and inclusion (Nadelson et al., 2020). School administrators must increase knowledge and practice of CRSL in response to the changing demographics of public schools. School administrators have experienced challenges because they have limited knowledge of the leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive environments (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018).

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K-12 administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that

promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. This study was designed to increase knowledge of specific leadership practices that school administrators use to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse groups of students. The findings of this study can inform district and school leaders of specific leadership practices used in providing diverse population of students with culturally responsive learning environments that promote equity and inclusion, as well as increase understanding of the challenges school administrators encounter with implementing culturally responsive leadership practices.

In Chapter 3, I explain the research methodology used to investigate school administrators' perceptions of challenges in using leadership practices and strategies to promote culturally responsive learning environments for the district's diverse population of students. I describe in detail the research design and rationale for this study, as well as my role as researcher, selection of participants and instrumentation, data collection, and the data analysis plan. Lastly, I explain the measures I employed to ensure trustworthiness of the research findings of this study and use of ethical procedures.



### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K–12 administrators’ perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. Researchers have documented ongoing racial inequities in U.S. public schools, with marginalized students and students of color historically demonstrating lower academic achievement in comparison to their White or affluent peers (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Mahari de Silva et al., 2018; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Additionally, historical data reveal that students of color in U.S. public schools, particularly Black students, received disciplinary actions more frequently and more severely than their White peers (Bal et al., 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016; Larson et al., 2018; Samuels et al., 2019). Over the years, the federal government has attempted to leverage educational equity in U.S. public schools through court cases, funding, mandates, and other policies, but academic and discipline disparities persist among marginalized students and students of color.

With the increase of diverse populations of students entering U.S. public schools, educators are challenged to meet students’ educational needs in culturally responsive ways. School administrators must address the challenges concerning how to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students. Increasing research has recognized culturally responsive practice as an educational approach to promote equitable learning environments and outcomes (Hesbol et al., 2020; Khalifa et al., 2016; McCarther & Davis, 2017). However, the research base is limited about how school administrators understand and implement CRSL practices, and some

K–12 administrators experience challenges in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments.

In Chapter 3, I explain the research design and rationale for choosing a qualitative approach for this study. Additionally, I describe my role as the researcher and address the methodology for conducting semistructured interviews, including participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. I also discuss strategies I used to ensure the trustworthiness and ethical procedures of this study. Finally, I present a summary of Chapter 3 and introduce Chapter 4.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

School administrators need to understand and implement CRSL practices. The use of CRSL has been recognized as an educational approach used to promote equitable learning environments and outcomes. With increasingly diverse populations of students in public schools, school administrators are challenged to increase their implementation of CRSL practices. However, many administrators have not received formal training on CRSL and demonstrate a lack of knowledge and use of CRSL practices that promote culturally responsive environments (Brown et al., 2020; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018; Sutcher et al., 2018). The following research questions grounded in the CRSL framework were used to guide this study:

RQ1: How do K–12 school administrators describe leadership practices used to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

RQ2: What challenges do K–12 school administrators encounter in implementing practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

RQ3: What support or resources, not currently available, are perceived as needed by K–12 administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

The findings of this study provide evidence of specific administrator practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students.

Additionally, the findings of this study inform district leaders of perceived challenges and recommendations for support and resources to increase the cultural competence of school administrators with providing culturally responsive learning environments for the district's diverse student population.

Inquiry and intent are the basis for the chosen methodology for a research study. Each research approach serves a different purpose. The quantitative research design involves analyzing numerical data through statistical or other mathematical means. Quantitative research is grounded in the positivist paradigm view of the world and comprises unchanging, universally applicable laws and the belief that life events and social phenomena can be explained by knowledge of universal laws and immutable truths (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Qualitative researchers are interested in people's subjective interpretations of their experiences. Yin (2016) described five features that distinguish qualitative research from other types of research as (a) studying the meaning of people's lives in a real-world context, (b) examining the view and perspectives of study participants, (c) analyzing real-world conditions, (d) offering insight from existing or new concepts to explain a phenomenon, and (e) using multiple sources of evidence rather than a single source. Qualitative research emerged as an alternative paradigm to positivism (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2013) and is based on the methodological pursuit of understanding how people view, approach, and experience the world and make meaning of their own experiences. People's experiences and perspectives are deeply embedded in the contexts that shape their lives (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

How people experience aspects of their lives is subjective and can change over time. Therefore, qualitative researchers do not believe or claim there are universal, static truths but rather multiple truths and perspectives (Kahlke, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative research is a set of complex interpretive practices and has no theory or paradigm distinctly its own (Kahlke, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative research offers immense possibilities for inquiry because it is not limited to any one discipline, theoretical perspective, or approach.

A qualitative research design was appropriate for this study. Qualitative research is used to examine the perspectives of people's lived experiences under real-world conditions to offer insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human behaviors (Yin, 2016). Yin (2016) identified 12 specialized types or variants of qualitative research; Creswell and Poth (2018) identified five designs. Common qualitative research approaches are ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, phenomenology, and case study.

Ethnography is an in-depth investigation of the experiences over time of participants belonging to the same cultural group. Grounded theory is based on a rigorous set of procedures to conduct research on a social phenomenon resulting in a new theory. Narrative research creates themes, plots, and drama to reveal the identity of actors and

relatedness of actions from a small sample of participants. Phenomenological study expresses the commonality of everyday life experiences of individuals as a single concept. The case study allows investigation of an individual case in a real-world context and uses multiple sources of data collection such as observations, documents, interviews, or other sources (Yin, 2016). These approaches are appropriate for a qualitative study, but they did not meet the timeline or provide the type of data needed to answer the research questions for this study.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K–12 administrators’ perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. This study aligned most with a basic qualitative approach. I chose a basic or generic qualitative research approach because the research was not guided by an established set of assumptions or methodologies and used one data collection method focused on understanding an experience or an event (see Caelli et al., 2003). By studying people in their natural setting, qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of phenomena by discovering and describing what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2016). The experiences of school administrators in the school environment represent a phenomenon in a naturalistic setting (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The attributes of a basic qualitative research design allowed me to explore K–12 administrators’ perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse

populations of students in an urban school district. A basic or generic qualitative approach was the most appropriate approach because data were collected through semistructured interviews (Kahlke, 2014). The daily professional roles of school administrators provided background knowledge of experiences to answer the research questions.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I served as the main instrument in data collection for this study. The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection in qualitative research (Yin, 2016). I developed the questions used in the semistructured interviews. Through this process, I gathered, analyzed, and interpreted data and then drew conclusions based on the research questions. As the sole interviewer for the study, my presence during the interview processes placed me as an observer.

Clarifying a researcher's positionality is important in a qualitative study. Positionality refers to the researcher's role in relationship to the study and how that role may influence various aspects of the study and effect the study's findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). How a researcher relates to potential participants and acknowledges bias influences a research study.

I have worked in the district under study for 16 years. The first 9 years I worked as a middle school teacher in a nonTitle I school. I have spent 7 years in my role as a middle school assistant principal at a Title I school. My teaching and administrative experiences were at different schools within the district. Although the potential participants in this study were school administrators I might know and might have

interacted with in various capacities within the study district, I do not evaluate school administrators and have not served in a supervisory role of any participants in this study.

To avoid researcher bias and ensure researcher integrity, I developed a strong ethical standard to monitor my work and followed a detailed research plan (see Yin, 2016). Additionally, I practiced reflexivity and bracketing (see Ahern, 1999). Researcher reflexivity refers to engaging in methodological self-reflection of the researcher's role and influence throughout the research process concerning biases, personal experiences, research setting, selection of or relationships with participants, and theoretical preferences related to the study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Bracketing is a reflexive approach used to eliminate potential bias that could negatively affect the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data (Ahern, 1999; Wall et al., 2004). I used a research journal and bracketing to reduce bias throughout the research process. Reflective journaling and bracketing allowed me, as the main conduit of this research study, to engage in an ongoing and systematic assessment of my thoughts, beliefs, and experiences related to this study, as well as the overall research process (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Wall et al., 2004). By using these strategies, I limited researcher bias to ensure the trustworthiness of the research process and findings.

### **Methodology**

In this section, I describe how I used a basic qualitative study approach to explore K–12 administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. First, I explain how I selected participants for the study. Next, I describe

the instrumentation used to collect data. Then, I detail the procedures used for recruitment, participation, and data collection. Lastly, I describe the data analysis plan.

### **Participant Selection**

I used purposeful sampling to identify seven middle school administrators to interview. Purposeful sampling allows for a selection of participants based on their anticipated relevance to the study's research questions (Yin, 2016). To explore K-12 administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district, I sought school administrators with experiences that could answer the research questions (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2016). As the sole researcher for this study, I chose participants with knowledge and experiences within the scope of the study.

The purposeful sample for this study included seven participants. A sample size for qualitative research can include 1 to 10 participants because individuals are able to generate a multitude of ideas and words, resulting in a vast amount of data not requiring a larger sample size (Boddy, 2016; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). By using the purposeful sampling method, I identified school administrators who were able to provide data to answer the research questions. To meet the selection criteria for participation in this study, candidates were (a) principals or assistant principals in the district under study, (b) had at least 1 year of experience at the administrative level, and (c) worked at a school where more than 50% of the student population belonged to a non-White demographic group.



The district under study provides public access to the racial distribution of enrolled students, and the demographics of each school population are available via the district and school web pages. I reviewed the web pages for elementary, middle, and high schools to identify campuses where more than 50% of the student population belonged to a non-White demographic group and composed a list of school administrators who met the criteria. Upon receiving IRB approval from Walden University and the local district's authorization to collect data, I purposively chose seven participants and sent each person an email to request their participation in this study.

For each email invitation, I clearly denoted a request to participate in a study in the subject line. In the email invitation, I shared the purpose of the study and selection criteria. Additionally, I explained that data would be collected from participants through semistructured interviews to gain an understanding of leadership practices used on their campuses that promote culturally responsive learning environments, as well as to explore their perceptions of the challenges encountered with implementing such practices. I requested the voluntary consent of participants in their response email to me. I did not send a follow-up email because all invited participants responded within 5 business days.

Upon confirmation of participation, I scheduled one-on-one interviews with each individual participant using a videoconference call program. I sent an electronic confirmation to each participant with their scheduled interview date and time. Interviews lasted 45–60 min, depending on participants' responses to the open-ended questions in the semistructured interview. The participant selection process allowed me to collect data

from school administrators in the district under study who had knowledge and experiences that answered the research questions of this study.

### **Instrumentation**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K-12 administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. As the sole researcher and primary instrument in this qualitative study, I collected data from individual interviews with seven participants. Interviewing is a qualitative research method that enables researchers to collect data from those with knowledge or experience concerning the problem of interest (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The structure of a qualitative interview includes main questions, probes, and follow-up questions to gain clarity and precision in the acquisition of data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Main questions ensure that research questions are answered, and probes encourage participants to provide clarifying details and examples on the subject. Follow-up questions are used when necessary to allow participants to elaborate on key concepts, themes, ideas, or events that they have mentioned to provide the researcher with more depth of understanding (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Yin, 2016).

I used an interview protocol to guide the procedures of the interview process and used open-ended semistructured questions during interviews to obtain data from school administrators (see Appendix). Semistructured interviewing allow participants the opportunity to provide in-depth responses regarding the perceptions, practices, and challenges of using leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning

environments (see Yin, 2016). I developed eight open-ended semistructured interview questions based on the CRSL framework on which this study was grounded.

Additionally, I formulated questions derived from the literature review to establish sufficiency of the data collection of this study to answer the research questions concerning the perceptions and use of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. As the interviewer, researcher, and creator of the instrument, I rephrased questions and used probes or changed the order of questions based on participants' responses during the interview process (see Yin, 2016).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument, I used the professional expertise of two colleagues to review the interview protocol and questions. Both colleagues are employed by the district under study, but neither were participants in the study. Both reviewers are district-level leaders with educational doctoral degrees, have worked in their current executive roles for more than 10 years, and have demonstrated extensive knowledge and experience concerning leadership practices in the district of study. Additionally, the first reviewer previously served as an assistant principal and principal in the district. The second reviewer served as an assistant principal and principal in another district. During their tenure as school administrators, both colleagues led schools with a majority non-White student population. Both colleagues have more than 20 years of experience in the field of education and reviewed the interview protocol and questions for clarity, validity, and alignment to the research questions of this study. I made modifications to the protocol and interview questions based on the feedback received by both district-level leaders.

After identifying participants for the study, I began collecting data through the interview process. The characteristics of a qualitative interview require the researcher provide a clear explanation and information on how the interview will proceed, use open-ended questions, balance rapport and neutrality, and display appropriate body language (Yin, 2016). The interview process allowed me to collect data from participants about their real-life experiences that answered the research questions (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used the semistructured questions I developed to conduct a 45- to 60-min interview with each participant. I scheduled one time to interview a participant. However, because of the exploratory nature of the study, additional time was allowed for participants to respond thoroughly to interview questions.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Qualitative researchers are interested in people's interpretations of their experiences. Participation in a qualitative study must be voluntary, cause no harm to participants, assure confidentiality, and follow an equitable selection process to ensure that no groups of people are unfairly include or excluded from the research (Yin, 2016). To explore K-12 administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district, I sought school administrators with relevant experiences who could answer the research questions (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2016). In this section, I describe the procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection for this study.

### ***Recruitment and Participation***

Participants for this study were recruited from a large urban school district in a southeastern state. The recruitment of participants included school administrators who (a) were principals or assistant principals in the district under study, (b) had at least 1 year of experience at the administrative level, and (c) worked at a school where more than 50% of the student population belonged to a non-White demographic group. The steps I used to recruit participants for this study were as follows:

1. I obtained IRB approval from the district under study.
2. I obtained formal Walden University IRB approval.
3. I reviewed the public records of elementary, middle, and high schools in the district under study to determine which schools had a majority non-White student population.
4. I confirmed the school approved by the district met the criteria for the study.
5. I sent an electronic invitation to recruit school administrators to participate in this study, including the consent form.
6. Each confirmed participant provided informed consent by email.
7. I scheduled one-on-one interviews with each participant using a videoconference call program upon confirmation of participation.

The approval from the district under study gave me permission to conduct this study in one school in the district. Additionally, I applied for formal approval from Walden University's IRB to conduct this study. Walden University's IRB approval was necessary to confirm the protection rights of the participants in this study. Upon receiving

IRB approvals from the district under study and Walden University, I reviewed the web pages of the local school to confirm that 50% of the student population belonged to a non-White demographic group. The demographics for each school in the district under study are available as public records and accessible via the district and school web pages.

Participants for this study included only (a) principals or assistant principals in the local school, (b) who had at least 1 year of experience at the administrative level, and (c) who worked at a school where more than 50% of the student population belonged to a non-White demographic group. All the school administrators at the local school met the criteria and were purposively selected to participate in this study. I extended an electronic invitation to each potential participant.

Upon sending the initial email invitation to potential participants, I used my Walden email address and clearly denoted a request to participate in a study on the subject line of the email. The consent form was included and contained the study's purpose, selection criteria, examples of questions that may be asked, potential benefits of participation, and a possible interview timeline. The consent form explicitly stated that participants' identity and responses would be kept confidential and addressed Walden University's requirements for storing data at least 5 years beyond completion of the study. To obtain informed consent, I asked the persons who accepted the invitation to participate in this study to reply to the email with the response "I consent" to acknowledge their understanding of the nature of the study as well as their voluntary participation. I also requested that participants secure a location that allowed for privacy without interruptions during the videoconference interview.

The consent form explained that participation in the study was voluntary, and persons could choose to leave the study at any time for any reason without question (e.g., before the interview, during the interview, or after the interview had taken place). No participant chose to exit the interview process. I expressed my thanks to each participant for their time and provide evidence of this notification and report any incidences in the data collection section of Chapter 4.

Upon confirmation of participation, I scheduled one-on-one interviews with each participant using a videoconference call program. I sent participants an electronic confirmation of their scheduled interviews to remind them of the date, time, and approximate duration of the interview, which was 45–60 min based on participants' response to open-ended questions in the semistructured interviews. Data were collected during one interview session per participant. The selection of participants provided insights to answer the research questions for this study (Kahlke, 2014) and therefore no follow up interviews were required.

### ***Data Collection***

The steps I used for data collection were as follows:

1. I scheduled interviews with participants.
2. I conducted and recorded one-on-one interviews with each participant using a videoconferencing program.
3. I transcribed interviews.
4. I sent a handwritten thank you note to each person who completed an interview.
5. I organized and analyzed data using a five-phase cycle.

6. I composed the findings and recommendations of this study.

Interviewing was the main method of data collection for this basic qualitative study. Qualitative interviewing requires intense listening, a respect for and curiosity about people's experiences and perspectives, and the ability to ask about what is not yet understood (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). After I obtained consent from participants, I scheduled individual, one-on-one interviews with each person. The interviews were conducted using a videoconferencing program and scheduled for a time that was convenient for each participant. I recorded each session and followed an interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions for each participant. At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the informed consent to remind participants of their voluntary participation as well as the study's purpose and confidentiality.

Next, I proceeded with conducting and recording each interview. I used the record feature on the videoconference program as well as a backup recording device. During each interview, I collected observational field notes. Interviews and field notes are two of the main methods by which qualitative researchers collect and generate data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As the sole researcher in this study, I took objective means to remove biases by engaging in an ongoing and systematic assessment of my thoughts, beliefs, and experiences during this research study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Wall et al., 2004). Although infrequent during the interview process, I wrote any biases I experienced in the margins of the interview protocol, as the participant spoke, to assist me in the analysis stage of this research. At the conclusion of each interview, I thanked participants for their time and input into the research I was gathering. Additionally, I let them know that when



I completed analyzing all interviews, I would send the findings of the study for member checking the discoveries. For each participant, I sent a handwritten thank you note for their time and participation in this study.

I reminded the participants that all data collected during this process would be kept confidential. I saved audio data and electronic data, such as digitally composed reflexive journaling and recorded video conferences, to a USB drive with password protection. I stored the data collected on paper, such as handwritten notes and memos, in a locked file cabinet at my home. All data will be protected for at least 5 years beyond the completion of the study as required by Walden University. After that time has elapsed, I will shred paper data and delete electronically saved data from the USB drive.

I collected data for this study from semistructured interviews. Each interview was recorded for the purpose of transcribing the data. During each interview, I took notes on the interview protocol and recorded nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, or voice inflections (see Yin, 2016). I transcribed the data in a timely manner while elements of the interview were fresh in my mind (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To ensure confidentiality, I used codes instead of names and saved all data in password-protected files. After transcribing each interview, I followed a five-phase cycle to analyze the data as described in the next section. Upon completion of data analysis, I reported the findings and composed the recommendations of this study.

### ***Data Analysis Plan***

I analyzed the data from the semistructured interviews with the participants of this study based on the three research questions as follows:

RQ1. How do K-12 school administrators describe leadership practices used to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

RQ2. What challenges do K-12 school administrators encounter in implementing practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

RQ3. What support or resources, not currently available, are perceived as needed by K-12 administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

As the sole researcher in this study, I recorded, transcribed, and analyzed data collected from interviews. During each interview, I listened, watched, and took field notes. Data analysis is a step-by-step process using the raw data from the interviews to provide clear and convincing answers to the research questions of the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For dependability, the data collected through semistructured interviewing must be true and free of bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) and properly analyzed to ensure the conclusions accurately reflect the real-world context that was studied (Yin, 2016).

Coding is a purposeful systematic method for analyzing qualitative data (Saldaña, 2016). Using the transcriptions collected during the interview process, I used content analysis (see Bengtsson, 2016; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992) to code and categorize the data to identify themes from the study based on the research questions. I did not use commercial software data-management programs to code transcription data; rather, I used a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to display and code the data. Content analysis is a process that allows researchers to make inferences and identify trends, patterns, and themes from collected data (Bengtsson, 2016; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). I used a five-phase cycle for the content analysis of data collected from the interviews: (a) compiling, (b)

disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding (see Yin, 2016). The phases of data analysis were recursive and iterative.

**Compiling.** The first phase of Yin's (2016) data analysis cycle is compiling data. I transcribed each interview and included notes and memos collected during the interview process. Becoming familiar with the interview transcripts was an important step of the analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transcribing and summarizing data facilitate data analysis (Yin, 2016). As I reviewed the interview transcripts, I made notes in the margins of the hardcopies and made connections to the CRSL framework, the conceptual framework for this study. I highlighted words on the transcripts to observe similarities in the data that helped me with the initial coding process. I read and reread interview transcripts as well as took notes to develop my transcribing language to formally arrange the data in a useful order (see Yin, 2016). Next, I used a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to compile the raw data from the collection of notes, memos, and transcripts of interviews conducted during this study. This process of compiling helped me to increase my familiarity with the data and is the beginning step of analyzing data (see Yin, 2016).

**Disassembling.** The second phase of Yin's (2016) data analysis cycle is disassembling data. Coding is a process of assigning meaning to data and can be a word or phrase that describes what is going on in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). During this phase, data are disassembled or broken down into smaller fragments or pieces to help provide insight on the meaning of the data (Bengtsson, 2016). I initially used a priori codes to identify key words based on the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016). I then proceeded with open coding to identify connections and relationships. Using a

spreadsheet to organize the data collection provided me with a visual representation of data and helped to reveal the emergence of patterns and categories. Coding is a process that takes several cycles to refine and identify pertinent patterns, categories, and themes.

**Reassembling.** The third phase of Yin's (2016) data analysis cycle is to reassemble the data from the open coding phase to observe patterns. Patterns in second-level coding help answer the research questions of a study and are linked to the conceptual framework (Saldaña, 2016). Reassembling involves a repetitive process of refinement that takes several cycles of observation. All coded data help identify relational patterns that can be used to form categories (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I reviewed the original raw data to recontextualize and ensure alignment between the pattern codes and raw data (see Bengtsson, 2016). Reassembling allowed me to observe, regroup, and sequence the data to create categories based on similarities that helped identify emerging themes (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The findings during this phase yielded additional cycles of coding. The reassembling stage of data analysis was important to ensure that I accurately interpreted the data.

**Interpreting.** The fourth phase of Yin's (2016) data analysis cycle is interpreting the data. During this phase, I used the data that I reassembled to develop a comprehensive interpretation of the emergent themes to help me form the basis for understanding of the entire study (see Yin, 2016). The process of identifying themes is based on the content analysis of codes, patterns, and categories that emerge from the data (Bengtsson, 2016). Interpreting the data led to cycling back through the phases of disassembling and reassembling to ensure an accurate interpretation of the data and address any possible

outliers or discrepant cases that did not support the emerging themes (Yin, 2016). As the main research instrument, I closely adhered to the data collection and analysis procedures of this study to ensure validity and account for any discrepancy in the data (see Yin, 2016). The summative interpretation of data addressed the research questions of this study that formed the basis for the concluding phase of analysis.

**Concluding.** The fifth phase of Yin's (2016) data analysis cycle is concluding the data. This final phase is connected to the interpreting phase that raises the interpretation of a study to a higher conceptual level or broader set of ideas (Yin, 2016). I used a compilation of words from the data to present the themes and conclusions of the study (see Bengtsson, 2016). After engaging in the iterative and recursive analysis of data, the conclusion offered lessons learned and implications for possible new research, concepts, and theories (see Yin, 2016). I asked the participants of this study to member check the findings to reduce bias and validate the findings (see Bengtsson, 2016). To conclude the data analysis phase, I shared the findings and implications from this study based on the CRSL framework and peer-reviewed literature.

### **Trustworthiness**

Establishing trustworthiness in a qualitative study is important. Qualitative research is centered on a relational approach to research, which contributes to critics' reluctance to accept the trustworthiness of studies using qualitative methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Trustworthiness strengthens research findings and demonstrates authenticity. The four criteria that should be considered by qualitative researchers in pursuit of a

trustworthy study are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). I address each criterion in the following sections.

### **Credibility**

A trustworthy study addresses credibility. Credibility assures that a qualitative researcher has properly collected and interpreted the data so that the findings and conclusions accurately reflect and represent the context that was studied (Yin, 2016). Credibility addresses internal validity to ensure that a study measures what it intends to measure (Shenton, 2004). To increase the trustworthiness of this study, I triangulated data sources, used peer reviewers, and asked the participants to member check the findings to establish credibility and ensure the analysis from this study accurately reflected the experiences and perceptions of the participants (see Burkholder et al., 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2016).

Triangulating data is a process used to ensure credibility and confirm the findings of a study (Yin, 2016). I triangulated the data sources (see Patton, 1999) for this study by selectively choosing participants who could answer the research questions. The criterion for participants identified those administrators who could provide the most relevant and plentiful data concerning leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. The participants in this study were K-12 school administrators (i.e., principals and assistant principals) from the district of study. I triangulated the data sources by selecting and interviewing principals and assistant principals from the middle school level to yield a broad range of information and perceptions about this study (Yin, 2016).

The second way I ensured the credibility of this study was to use the professional expertise of two experienced educators as peer debriefers. Both educational leaders have doctoral degrees and extensive knowledge and experience concerning school leadership practices. I asked these educational leaders to provide feedback on the instrumentation used for this study. I made modifications based on their recommendations to increase validity and credibility.

The third way I ensured credibility was member checking. I requested the participants in the study to member check the findings of the analysis. Credibility can be established by reviewing emergent themes to ensure the data analysis from this study accurately reflected the participant experiences and perceptions concerning CRSL practices (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

### **Transferability**

Addressing transferability is an essential criterion for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. Transferability addresses external validity and the extent to which the findings of one study are applicable and relevant to a different or broader context (Burkholder et al., 2016; Shenton, 2004). Transferability acknowledges the uniqueness of the local conditions in an initial qualitative study (Yin, 2016). Using thick descriptions and varying participant selection are strategies I used to establish transferability for the findings of this study.

For this study, I used detailed and specific descriptions of the setting, participants, and findings of the study that allowed for comparisons to other contexts (see Burkholder et al., 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The use of detailed and explicit descriptions of the

collected data and research findings allows other researchers who read this study to determine whether the findings are applicable, relevant, and transferable to their context (see Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013). Varying participant selection is another strategy for establishing transferability. I invited principals and assistant principals from the middle school level who offered a wide range of perspectives and experiences to contribute to the study's data and findings.

### **Dependability**

Dependability addresses the reliability of a qualitative study. To establish dependability, qualitative researchers must employ consistent procedures for collecting data, analyzing data, and reporting findings so that if the work were repeated in a comparable context, similar results would be obtained (Burkholder et al., 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Shenton, 2004). To establish dependability in this study, I employed triangulation and audit trails.

I purposively selected school administrators from the middle school level to triangulate the data sources and increase dependability. Two educational leaders who did not participate in this study were asked to provide feedback on the interview protocol I used for each interview (see Patton, 1999). I then used the same interview protocol to conduct and record one-on-one interviews with each participant in this study to ensure the data answered the research questions of this study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Additionally, I took fieldnotes, transcribed all collected data, and used audit trails. Audit trails helped me to keep an accurate account of the steps I followed during the collection and analysis of data for this study (see Burkholder et al., 2016). The detailed



procedures for collecting and analyzing data provided dependability to allow the study to be replicated and yield consistent findings.

### **Confirmability**

Another criterion for trustworthiness is confirmability. Confirmability is the qualitative counterpart to objectivity, where steps are taken to help ensure that a study's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the participants rather than the characteristics or preferences of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). Establishing confirmability reduces the subjectivity in qualitative research (Burkholder et al., 2016). Emphasizing triangulation promotes confirmability and reduces the effect of researcher bias (Shenton, 2004). To ensure confirmability in this study, I reduced the potential for researcher bias by engaging in reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and member checking.

The influence of researcher biases must be addressed to not risk the trustworthiness of a study (Yin, 2016). I practiced reflexive journaling and bracketing during the process of data collection and data analysis to address researcher bias. Reflexive bracketing is a reflective process that assisted me with being objective and unbiased in gathering and analyzing data (Ahern, 1999). While conducting interviews, I used my reflexive journal to record my personal beliefs, ideas, and thoughts on the participants' responses and behaviors to keep any biases from influencing the data collection process. While reading and analyzing data, I used my reflexive journal to record any personal biases that arose. Qualitative researchers must be mindful of personal biases and interpretations during when engaging with participations during the interview

process and when interpreting information during the data analysis process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). By engaging in reflexive journaling, I reflected on any biases that I had or developed that might have influenced the credibility of the study.

Peer debriefing and member checking are additional strategies I used to establish confirmability and reduce researcher biases. The educational leaders who reviewed the interview protocol prior to collecting data were also asked to review the findings that emerged during data analysis (see Yin, 2016). Additionally, participants were asked to member check the findings to reduce potential researcher bias and confirm that their experiences and perceptions were accurately represented in the data (see Bengtsson, 2016).

### **Ethical Procedures**

Qualitative research is centered on relationships. Therefore, framing relational considerations as ethical issues is important. Formalized guidelines for ethical procedures ensure beneficence for the welfare of participants and make certain no harm is caused to them in any research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Researchers must follow codes of ethics established by universities and other professional organizations to conduct research and reduce ethical dilemmas (Yin, 2016). I ensured the integrity of this study by adhering to ethical procedures. To ensure the integrity of this study, I followed specific ethical procedures concerning obtaining IRB institutional permissions, recruiting participants, handling materials and processes related to data collection and data analysis, and ensuring confidentiality.

As a student in the Advanced Educational Administrative Leadership program with Walden University, I worked with my committee chairperson and committee members to obtain approval to conduct research within the local district under study. I applied for formal IRB approval from Walden University. The IRB is responsible for ensuring the proposal aligns with ethical standards. I made required changes to the proposal per the feedback received through both processes to ensure ethical procedures were followed for this research study. The IRB approval number for this study is 06-27-22-1046392.

Upon receiving IRB approval, I began recruiting participants for this study. I used my Walden account to send individual emails to principals and assistant principals who met the criteria for this study. In each email, I provided an overview of the research study as well as the voluntary informed consent. Persons who accepted the invitation to participate in this study were asked to reply to the email with the response “I consent” to acknowledge their understanding of the nature of the study as well as their voluntary participation.

The consent form explicitly stated that participants’ identity and responses would be kept confidential and addressed Walden University’s requirements for storing data at least 5 years beyond completion of the study. The consent form explained that participation in the study was voluntary, and persons could choose to leave the study at any time for any reason without question (e.g., before the interview, during the interview, or after the interview had taken place). I explained to potential participants that interviews might last 45–60 min and would be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for

findings. Participants had the opportunity to member check the findings upon completion of the analysis. Confidentiality is vital in a qualitative study. I stored all data collected during this process as confidential. Audio data and electronic data, such as digitally composed reflexive journaling and recorded video conferences, were saved to a USB drive with password protection. Data collected on paper, such as handwritten reflexive journaling, notes, and memos, have been stored in a locked file cabinet at my home. All data will be protected for at least 5 years beyond the completion of the study as required by Walden University. After that time, I will shred paper data and delete any electronically saved data.

### **Summary**

Throughout this chapter, I explained the research methodology used to investigate school administrators' perceptions of challenges in using leadership practices and strategies to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse population of students. I detailed the criteria and procedures for purposively recruiting and selecting voluntary participants for this study. Additionally, I described the instrument that I used to collect data through semistructured interviews and detailed the specific steps I followed during the data collection and data analysis processes.

A trustworthy study addresses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, in this chapter, I described the steps I took to ensure the trustworthiness of this study and reduce researcher bias. I also detailed specific procedures I followed to ensure the ethical treatment of human participants. In Chapter 4, I discuss the setting of the study, address the data collection and data analysis processes,

and detail evidence of trustworthiness. I provide the results of this study to answer the research questions based on the CRSL framework.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K–12 school administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. Using an interview protocol, I conducted semistructured interviews to obtain data from participants in the study, seven middle school administrators. I analyzed the data collected during these interviews to create categories and developed themes based on the conceptual framework of this study. The CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016) was the foundation for this study and instrumental to the coding process, as well as the basis for addressing the research questions. Three research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do K–12 school administrators describe leadership practices used to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

RQ2: What challenges do K–12 school administrators encounter in implementing practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

RQ3: What support or resources not currently available are perceived as needed by K–12 school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

In this chapter, I include a description of the setting, the data collection and analysis process, the results, and evidence of trustworthiness. I conclude this chapter with an overall summary of the results and answers to the research questions.

### **Setting**

I conducted this study in a large urban school district in a southeastern state. The district includes over 100 schools and serves nearly 200,000 students from more than 180

countries who speak over 100 different languages, according to 2021 district public records. The student diversity within the district has increased over the last decade with non-White students totaling 82% of the enrollment in 2021. School administrators were purposively chosen to participate in this study to answer the research questions concerning the perceptions and use of leadership practice that promote culturally responsive learning environments. School administrators for this study included principals and assistant principals in the local district, who had at least 1 year of experience at the administrative level and worked at a school where more than 50% of the student population belongs to a non-White demographic group.

### **Demographics**

Seven participants met criteria, were invited, and agreed to participate in this study. I scheduled individual interviews with each of the participants using a videoconference program. Of the seven participants, one was a principal and six were assistant principals. All participants were at the middle school level with students in Grades 6–8 and had varying years of school leadership experience, ranging from 2.5 to 16.5 years, with an average of 6 years of administrator experience. Years of experience in education ranged from 14–21, with an average of 18 years. Participants included four Black women, one White woman, one White man, and one biracial man. Table 4 shows the demographic breakdown of the sample.

**Table 4***Participant Demographics*

Demographic	n
Race	
Black	4
White	2
Biracial	1
Gender	
Female	5
Male	2
Position	
Principal	1
Assistant principal	6
Years administrator experience	
< 4	2
4–10	4
Over 15	1

**Data Collection**

During the data collection process, I followed the procedures outlined in Chapter 3. The local district under study provides public access to the racial/ethnic distribution of enrolled students, and the demographics of each school are available via the district's and school's web pages. I reviewed the web pages to identify campuses where more than 50% of the student population belong to a non-White demographic group. I did not need to contact the district's human resource office to request the names of potential participants who met the criteria for participation in this study because the local district under study denied the initial IRB approval that would have allowed me to interview school administrators across the district. However, the local district did provide approval for data to be collected from a single school in the district with permission granted by the building principal.



Seven school administrators at this location met the criteria for this study. This school met the criteria for the study because 95% of the student population belongs to a non-White demographic group. After I obtained IRB approval from Walden University, I sent each potential candidate an email to request their participation in this study. For each email invitation, I used my Walden email address and clearly denoted a request to participate in a study in the subject line. In compliance with the Walden University IRB ethical standards, each email invitation included the consent form to provide potential candidates with information about the purpose of the study and the interviewing process for data collection. Additionally, the consent form detailed the voluntary nature of the study, confidentiality and participants' right to privacy, risks and benefits associated with participating in the study, and contact information for Walden University staff should potential candidates have additional questions.

To obtain informed consent, persons who accepted the invitation to participate in this study were asked to reply to the email with the response "I consent" to acknowledge their understanding of the nature of the study as well as their voluntary participation. Seven participants responded to my email invitations with their consent. Upon receiving informed consent from the participants, I scheduled interviews with each participant. Each interview was scheduled for one videoconference session for a duration of 45–60 minutes at a time convenient for each participant.

The semistructured interviews allowed participants the opportunity to provide in-depth responses to eight open-ended questions (see Yin, 2016). I developed an interview protocol to guide the interview process and followed the protocol with each participant.

The main interview questions were based on the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016), which was the conceptual framework for this study, and designed to answer the research questions concerning the perceptions and use of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. I used probes and follow-up questions when necessary to encourage participants to elaborate or clarify responses, and I rephrased or reordered the questions based on participants' responses during the interview process (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Yin, 2016).

At the beginning of each interview, I greeted each participant, reminded them that the interview was being recorded for the purpose of transcribing and analyzing data, and obtained their permission to proceed. Additionally, I reviewed the informed consent to remind participants of the study's purpose and their voluntary participation, as well as the confidentiality of their responses. I then explained that the eight interview questions were based on the CRSL framework.

I conducted interviews over 3 weeks and followed the interview protocol with each participant to allow each person to speak freely about their experiences and perceptions concerning leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. No interview exceeded 60 minutes, and no follow-up interviews were required or scheduled. The only unusual circumstance that arose during the data collection process was the change from sampling participants from throughout the district to a single middle school. I used the record feature on the videoconference program as well as a backup recording device to aid me in the transcription process.

## Data Analysis

The process of data analysis allowed me to identify themes from the raw data collected during seven semistructured interviews. I repeatedly watched and listened to each recording to accurately transcribe the data. After transcribing each recording, I repeatedly read each transcript to familiarize myself with the content for the purpose of coding and analyzing the data I collected during each interview. I followed Yin's (2016) five-phase data analysis cycle: (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding. I used content analysis to make inferences from the raw data and to find trends, patterns, and categories that emerged into themes based on the conceptual framework of this study (see Bengtsson, 2016; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). I began the analysis process by compiling the raw data from each participant's interview into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet helped me organize the data for analysis.

I read and reread the interview transcripts to familiarize myself with the content and make connections to the CRSL framework (see Khalifa et al., 2016), the conceptual framework for the study. Familiarizing myself with the interview transcripts was an important step of the analysis process to develop my transcribing language and formally arrange the data in a useful order (see Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2016). According to Yin (2016), qualitative research can be prone to bias. Therefore, as I read and reread the transcribed interviews, I recorded my thoughts in a reflective journal to acknowledge any bias.

After compiling the data into the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, I disassembled the data into smaller fragments (see Bengtsson, 2016; Yin, 2016) and then used a priori coding to identify key words and phrases that aligned with the four themes of the CRSL framework (see Khalifa et al., 2016). Next, I proceeded to use open coding and pattern coding to identify connections and relationships based on similarities to help provide insight on the meaning of the data (see Bengtsson, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Using a spreadsheet to organize the data collection gave me a visual representation of the data and helped to reveal the emergence of patterns and categories.

During the next phase of data analysis, I reassembled the data multiple times to ensure my codes were an accurate interpretation of the data (see Bengtsson, 2016; Yin, 2016). I reviewed the original raw data to recontextualize and ensure alignment between the pattern codes and raw data to help identify relational patterns to form categories (see Bengtsson, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Reassembling allowed me to observe, regroup, and sequence the data to create categories based on similarities that helped to accurately interpret the data and identify emerging themes (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2016). The process of identifying themes is based on the content analysis of codes, patterns, and categories that emerge from the data (Bengtsson, 2016). I cycled back through the phases of disassembling and reassembling to ensure an accurate interpretation of the data (see Yin, 2016) and was able to observe emerging themes from the categories. I reassembled data to develop a comprehensive interpretation of the emergent themes to help me form the basis for understanding of the entire study (see Yin, 2016).

## **Codes, Categories, and Themes**

### ***A Priori Coding***

I began the analysis process by compiling raw data from each participant's interview into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I then used a priori codes to help me identify patterns during the coding process. A priori codes are predetermined codes used to categorize data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The a priori codes were based on the four dimensions of the CRSL leadership in which school administrators (a) critically self-reflect on leadership behaviors; (b) develop culturally responsive teachers; (c) promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments; and (d) engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016). Using the spreadsheet, I categorized each excerpt of raw data obtained during the seven semistructured interviews by one of the four dimensions of CRSL. No discrepant cases were found. Table 5 displays a sample of the a priori coding I used to categorize the data.

**Table 5***Sample A Priori Coding*

Participant	Excerpt from interview	A priori code
P1	“Show interest and engagement with students from various cultures and racial and ethnic backgrounds.”	Promotes culturally responsive and inclusive school environments
P2	“Modeling the expectation to show [teachers and staff] how to bridge that gap.”	Develops culturally responsive teachers
P3	“I want to do a better job of getting our parents into the fold in a more positive way.”	Engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts
P4	“Having culturally diverse nights in our building just to celebrate our students and to celebrate their families within the community.”	Engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts
P5	“Provide real-life real-time examples and situations that take into consideration what cultural responsiveness should look like.”	Develops culturally responsive teachers
P6	“I read a lot of literature to build my background to be a more effective leader and to be able to answer questions to help our staff, students and stakeholders understand the why.”	Critically self-reflects
P7	“A key component of creating a culturally responsive environment is empathy; we need to lead with empathy when it comes to putting ourselves in other shoes and respecting where they come from.”	Promotes culturally responsive and inclusive school environments

*Open Coding*

After using a priori codes to categorize the excerpts from each semistructured interview, I moved on to the next phase of analysis using open coding. I disassembled the data into smaller fragments by assigning codes to identify connections and relationships in the data (see Saldaña, 2016; Yin, 2016). I used columns in the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to organize the codes during open coding. The first cycle yielded numerous

codes with similar meanings, so I inductively combined codes during a second cycle of open coding. By creating pivot tables, I observed a visual representation of the data that helped summarize the codes in a meaningful way based on each a priori code. Table 6 displays a sample of how I used a priori coding to determine open codes.

**Table 6**

*A Priori Coding to Open Coding*

A priori code	First open coding	Second open coding
Promotes culturally responsive and inclusive school environments	Build relationships with students	Establish meaningful relationships with all stakeholders
Develops culturally responsive teachers	Modeling the expectation	Modeling
Develops culturally responsive teachers	Strategies to help them	Professional development
Promotes culturally responsive and inclusive school environments	Give honor and recognition to different cultures	Celebrations and recognitions
Engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts	Build relationships with the parents	Establish meaningful relationships with all stakeholders
Engage students, parents, and indigenous and community contexts	Feedback	Communication
Critically self reflects	Think outside of my own experiences	Culturally sensitive and empathetic
Critically self reflects	Open and honest dialogue	Communication

*Pattern Coding*

After combining similar codes during the second cycle of open coding, I moved forward with pattern coding. I created additional pivot tables in the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to visually summarize the open codes that further helped me to identify patterns in the data; I used a feature of the spreadsheet to count the number of times I

used a specific code. This process helped me to observe the connections and relationships between codes to identify emerging patterns. For example, during my first round of open coding, I had 283 codes from the vast amount of raw data I collected during interviews. During pattern coding, I was able to closely examine connections between open codes and regroup the open codes based on those relationships and similarities. By reassembling the data in this manner (see Yin, 2016), I was able to inductively categorize the data into nine codes that captured the emerging patterns. Table 7 displays a sample of how I reassembled the data from open coding to pattern coding.

**Table 7**

*Sample of Open Coding to Pattern Coding*

Second open coding	Pattern coding
Modeling	Modeling
Celebrations and recognitions	Establish meaningful relationships with all stakeholders
Using data	Professional development
Professional development	Professional development
Culturally sensitive and empathetic	Culturally sensitive and empathetic
Communication	Communication
Challenges for cultural responsiveness	Deficit understanding of cultural responsiveness

***Categories and Themes***

During the next phase of data analysis, I used reassembled data from the previous phase to develop categories and themes. The process of identifying themes is based on the content analysis of codes, patterns, and categories that develop from the data (see Bengtsson, 2016; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). I created additional pivot tables in the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to visually summarize the pattern codes that further helped



me to identify categories. As I narrowed the nine pattern codes to categories, I could see the emergence of four themes. The comprehensive interpretation of the emergent themes helped me to form the basis for understanding the entire study (see Yin, 2016). Table 8 displays a sample of how I identified themes based on pattern coding and categories.

**Table 8**

*Pattern Coding to Categories to Themes*

Pattern coding	Category	Theme
Modeling	Leadership practices	Theme 1: School administrators use leadership practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments by modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors.
Establish meaningful relationships with all stakeholders	Building community	Theme 2: School administrators build community to promote culturally responsive learning environments by using open communication and by establishing meaningful relationships with all stakeholders.
Lack of culturally inclusive materials, strategies, and/or resources	Challenges	Theme 3: School administrators identified challenges to implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments as (a) an insufficient understanding of cultural responsiveness, (b) the lack of culturally inclusive materials and teaching strategies or resources, and (c) personal biases and resistance to change.
Professional development	Skills needed	Theme 4: School administrators must develop the skills needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments by providing ongoing professional development for all staff.

***Final Themes***

The fifth phase of Yin's (2016) data analysis cycle is concluding the data. After engaging in iterative and recursive cycles of data analysis, I identified four themes based on the codes, patterns, and categories found in the data (see Bengtsson, 2016; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). During this phase, I interpreted the data and drew conclusions based

on a broader set of ideas (see Bengtsson, 2016; Yin, 2016). Interpreting the data led to cycling back through the phases of disassembling and reassembling to ensure I presented an accurate interpretation of the data and to address any discrepant cases that did not support the emerging themes (see Yin, 2016). I closely adhered to the procedures for data collection and analysis. After I examined all the data, I found no discrepant data that conflicted with the emerging themes. Four themes emerged during this process:

1. School administrators use leadership practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments by modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors.
2. School administrators build community to promote culturally responsive learning environments by using open communication and by establishing meaningful relationships with all stakeholders.
3. School administrators identified challenges to implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments as (a) an insufficient understanding of cultural responsiveness, (b) the lack of culturally inclusive materials and teaching strategies or resources, and (c) personal biases and resistance to change.
4. School administrators must develop the skills needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments by providing ongoing professional development for all staff.

## Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K-12 school administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. I conducted semistructured interviews with seven participants in the local district: one principal and six assistant principals. Using the transcriptions created from the interview process, I used content analysis (see Bengtsson, 2016; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992) to code and categorize the data to identify themes based on the research questions. The process of content analysis allowed me to make inferences and identify trends, patterns, and themes from collected data (see Bengtsson, 2016; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). The four themes that emerged from this process aligned to the conceptual framework of CRSL practices (Khalifa et al., 2016) and the research questions that informed the study. The research questions were the following:

RQ1. How do K-12 school administrators describe leadership practices used to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

RQ2. What challenges do K-12 school administrators encounter in implementing practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

RQ3. What support or resources not currently available are perceived as needed by K-12 school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

By using semistructured interviewing, participants had the opportunity to give in-depth responses regarding their experiences, perceptions, practices, and challenges. The responses from participants were compiled, coded, and analyzed with four themes

emerging from the data. Themes 1 and 2 answered Research Question 1. Theme 3 answered Research Question 2. Theme 4 answered Research Question 3.

### **Theme 1: Leadership Practices to Promote Culturally Responsive Learning**

#### **Environments**

The first theme that emerged in this study is that school administrators use leadership practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments by modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors. Interview responses yielded the most data supporting this theme. All seven participants in this study expressed the importance of modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors. Modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors were the leadership practices mentioned most frequently by participants in this study. When school administrators demonstrate these specific leadership practices, they promote culturally responsive learning environments.

#### ***Modeling***

The first category of Theme 1 was that school administrators used modeling as a leadership practice to promote culturally responsive learning environments. All participants described using modeling as a leadership practice to promote culturally responsive learning environments. P7 expressed the noteworthiness of this theme:

I try and be a model for the way that we should empathize with others [and] model with my interactions and conversations. In dealing with parents, students, all stakeholders, we really have to be an example for what we want the world to

look like. Interactions are more positive when [school administrators] continually try to model words that are more culturally responsive.

P2 confirmed that school administrators promote culturally responsive learning environments by “modeling the expectation to show [teachers and staff] how to bridge” the cultural gap with students. P1 acknowledged that school administrators must “lead by example, treat everyone with respect, and show interest and engagement with students from various cultures and racial and ethnic backgrounds.”

All the participants shared how they prepare themselves and increase their knowledge of cultural responsiveness so they can model behaviors and practices for staff. Five of the seven participants received training in district-led professional development to increase their knowledge of cultural responsiveness. P1 shared, “I have participated, in the last 2 years, in at least three different professional learning opportunities, and I have asked my assistant principals to also participate.” P2 acknowledged, “I had to attend the workshops for cultural responsiveness and bring awareness into the school.” P1, P2, P3, and P7 all shared that they seek out and read articles and other literature on cultural responsiveness to increase their knowledge. P2 shared that reading “a lot of literature on cultural responsiveness [helped] to build my background to be able to answer questions for our staff, students, and stakeholders.”

P1, P2, P3, and P7 acknowledged the importance of self-reflection concerning leadership practices. P2 confirmed, “I had to do a lot of self-reflecting and practicing so that I [can be] a more effective leader with bringing awareness [and understanding of] culture responsiveness into the building and through the instruction.” P4 summed up the

importance of leaders modeling behaviors for students and staff to promote culturally responsive learning environments, stating,

Being an advocate for our students [and] making sure that everything that I have learned as a leader, as an educator, [I] take back to our teachers [to ensure] that they in turn, are inclusive to our students. Because if they're not inclusive to the students, the students are not going to be culturally inclusive to each other. Nor are other educators.

All participants confirmed that creating culturally responsive learning environments starts with school leadership. P3 commented on the need to “address leadership, because it’s where it starts.” P2 noted, “Leadership needs cultural responsiveness training in order to help build that bridge for teachers and staff.” P1, P2, P4, P6, and P7 acknowledged that school leaders must be cognizant of culturally responsive practices to authentically model those practices for teachers and staff.

### ***Demonstrating Culturally Sensitive and Empathetic Behaviors***

The second category of Theme 1 was that school administrators demonstrated culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors as leadership practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments. The participants in the study confirmed how their leadership practices and strategies demonstrated cultural sensitivity and empathy. The most noteworthy responses in this category pertained to increasing the diversity of school staff. P1, P3, and P6 each confirmed the importance of intentional hiring practices to reflect the evolving diversity of student populations so that those cultures are represented throughout the school. P3 shared that school administrators are “mindful about hiring and

working on diversifying staff each and every year.” P6 stated that “hiring practices [must be] inclusive of all races and [germane] to the specific needs of students.” P1 confirmed,

Research and [school] experience [have shown that] students of color and from different backgrounds need and benefit from having someone like them, who looks like them, can relate to them, maybe has their same cultural background as their teacher, their role model, and their support in the classroom.

School administrators in the study deemed inclusive hiring practices as a strategy for demonstrating cultural sensitivity to the representation of diverse personnel for diverse student populations.

All participants in the study confirmed the importance of leading with empathy. P6 stated, “A key component of creating a culturally responsive [learning] environment is empathy, and we need to lead with empathy when it comes to putting ourselves in others’ shoes and respecting where they come from.” P5 commented that school administrators demonstrate an “understanding that students come from different places, different backgrounds, different experiences” and help teachers and staff members “understand that they have to approach all students without bias.” P7 noted that every student, “regardless of their background, has different issues at home that [educators need to be understanding of] and responsive to, as well understand [their needs and] really dig in deep to where they are.” P1 confirmed the benefit of working in a school with students of color and shared,

Diverse student population and families have helped me be even more culturally sensitive and to have more empathy for our students and their own backgrounds,

differences of opinion, differences of thought, different experiences that they bring as students as our school than what I might have had when I was a student growing up.

P1, P2, P3, P4, and P7 each acknowledged the importance of expressing empathy and fostering high expectations rather than showing sympathy for students. P1 emphasized “the importance of having empathy for students, which is different than pity, [and] high expectations [for] students of all colors, backgrounds, nationalities, and languages”. P7 shared, “Understanding that we’re just looking at every child as someone in our room that needs to learn, needs to feel loved to learn and appreciated to learn. [Students] are going to rise to the standard that you set.” P2 expressed,

To promote inclusiveness and cultural responsiveness, [school administrators must look] at data deeper than academics, but more on who are we teaching, how do we relate to them, how do [our] strategies actually impact learning, and do these things represent the body of students.

P7 added that to “be culturally responsive [is to] meet students’ needs wherever they are.” For example, for non-English-speaking students, P7 recommended school administrators

find someone quickly to translate [to have] a three- or four-way conversation and not just let the translator speak for me, [but allow the student to see] the way I lean in [as if] I’m talking directly to them and not to whoever is translating for me. Let them see that I care about them, I’m honoring them, and making sure they understand.



P7 also stated, “I have a heart for our Hispanic population; feeling that a language barrier is different than other types of barriers that we face.” Seeking opportunities to meet and support students’ needs is a culturally responsive practice.

Cultural responsiveness is not limited to addressing racial or language barriers to learning. P3 stated,

People automatically view cultural responsiveness as something dealing with race, and that is not what it is. [Cultural responsiveness] is about seeing a person for who they are, accepting them for who they are and learning about who they are. . . . Our school is a smorgasbord of diversity, and there are students in our school who fly under the radar because they are not Black and Brown. Are those students not supposed to have the same culturally responsive people on their side as our Black and Brown students?

P7 added, “My goal is making [students] feel like they belong no matter what their background is [or] what their color skin is. I love and care about them and would do anything to help them that I could.”

All participants in the study stated that modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors were important elements of leadership practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments. These elements clearly emerged from the data as Theme 1.

## **Theme 2: Building Community to Promote Culturally Responsive Learning**

### **Environments**

The second theme that emerged in this study is that school administrators build community to promote culturally responsive learning environments by using open communication and by establishing meaningful relationships with all stakeholders. All seven participants in this study acknowledged the importance of open communication and shared examples of practices used to establish meaningful relationships with stakeholders such as students, staff, parents, and community members to promote culturally responsive learning environments. As I analyzed the data from the interview transcripts of this study, the supporting categories for building community were using open communication and establishing meaningful relationships with all stakeholders.

### ***Open Communication***

The first category of Theme 2 was that school administrators build community to promote culturally responsive learning environments by using open communication. The participants in the study described open communication that promotes culturally responsive learning environments as (a) expressing high expectations for teachers and students, (b) addressing difficult communication, (c) employing real-time communication, and (d) providing feedback and reflection on communication.

**Expressing High Expectations for Teachers and Students.** All participants expressed the importance of communicating high expectations for students as well as teachers and confirmed that conversations with teachers support promoting culturally responsive learning environments. P1 emphasized, “It’s the day-to-day having high

expectations for our teachers for how they treat our students in their classrooms, how they speak to our students during the course of a long 10-month school year.” P5 said, “Having conversations with teachers being open and honest with them about what is expected.” P7 elaborated that “conversations with encouragement [and] handling a situation with respect and calmness” had a positive influence with communication. P7 also added that this practice “opens up conversation and [makes] a difference for the next time” a similar situation occurs.

**Addressing Difficult Communication.** Open communication may include sensitive and intense exchanges. However, P3, P4, and P7 admitted that conversations are not always comfortable exchanges but are required to promote open communication. P3 acknowledged that “different conversations with teachers” are situational. P3 further elaborated that “one-on-one conversations with teachers [are necessary and critical, especially] when students say that a teacher said a certain thing to them, in a certain tone, or in a certain way.” P4 commented on the need for school administrators to make “sure that we have those hard conversations but leave out on a positive note.” P7 confirmed that conversations must be inclusive of “encouragement” and model how to handle “situations with respect and calmness.” School administrators demonstrated the importance of open communication, even though difficult conversations, by addressing concerns in a timely and tactful manner before they become greater issues. This practice also provides real-time feedback to teachers.

**Employing Real-Time Communication.** P1, P3, and P4 acknowledged the importance of addressing concerns in real time to provide immediate feedback and remind students and teachers of expectations. P1 shared,

We do our best to address inappropriate comments [or] behaviors by educators through one-on-one meetings [between the principal, assistant principal, and the teacher] so that we set high expectations and high standards for how we treat folks in the school.

P4 described that “the biggest thing for [school administrators is] when you see something making sure that it’s addressed, and not only addressed, but have conversations to bring about more understanding.” P3 explained,

I have had to address things that I’ve always not wanted to address because it may trigger something in me. I’ve learned how to put that to the side, because ultimately our students are the ones who will receive what they need, and they will not have their capacity built if [I], as one of their school leaders, [am] in my feelings about something a teacher said [or did].

Addressing concerns quickly was an aspect of effective and open communication.

**Providing Feedback and Reflection on Communication.** The participants in the study confirmed that school administrators must provide feedback and reflective on communication to promote culturally responsive learning environments. P4 acknowledged,

The only way you can learn and know that you’re not necessarily doing something correct is if someone brings that to your attention, because we all live

in our own little mind box. Unless it's brought to your attention, you may not even realize it, so it can be challenging, but [necessary to have] those open dialogues with teachers and students.

All participants articulated the necessity of open communication when working with teachers and the importance of modeling culturally appropriate language to promote culturally responsive learning environments. The words and language used are important for open, candid communication. P1 stated, “[Whether] we’re trying to work with teachers individually or work with teachers in a group setting, [we must] help them understand what we’re trying to help get them to do.” P3 shared that the school administrators have “made it a priority to ensure that teachers understand” or are provided the tools and strategies to help them “not only understand each other, but to help them understand our students.” P3 confirmed that helping staff members reflect on prompts such as “How am I communicating with our students? How are we speaking to our students?” are reflective practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments.

School administrators acknowledged that follow-up conversations with teachers are necessary for feedback and open communication. P3 stated,

I’m going to follow up on that [initial discussion], and that doesn’t necessarily need to be a whole-group discussion. That needs to be a discussion with that individual about what happened in that space. Not being judgmental or accusatory towards the teachers if they [have done or said] something maybe that they

[should not have] but help them to see and know that there's a better—different way to [address] those things that come up.

Feedback and reflection on communication were a necessity for school administrators. P2 shared,

I am an advocate of communicating with all stakeholders of all backgrounds to get insight on how we're doing as a school, and how we're meeting the needs of their students. Feedback helps me to see how my school is viewed in the public eye and [how] we could work to become a more culturally responsive community. I'm intentional about sending surveys [to all stakeholders] to get feedback on my [leadership] practices [as well as] teacher practices, and using the data collected to put things into place that will help us come together as a more diverse community.

All participants confirmed that open communication must include transparent, honest dialogue between all parties involved. By providing timely feedback, school administrators create opportunities for teachers and leaders to reflect on practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments.

### ***Establishing Meaningful Relationships With All Stakeholders***

The second category of Theme 2 was that school administrators build community to promote culturally responsive learning environments by establishing meaningful relationships with all stakeholders. The participants in the study confirmed the importance of building relationships with (a) students, (b) teachers, (c) parents, and (c) community partners to promote culturally responsive learning environments.

**Students.** All participants confirmed the importance of building relationships with students and described how building relationships with students promotes a sense of community and inclusion. P4 and P5 both articulated how school administrators can use the morning announcements to share messages that foster a sense of inclusion and community. P4, P5, P6, and P7 mentioned how leveraging the support of shared goals through the positive behavioral interventions and supports program also promotes a sense of community and inclusion. P1, P4, P6, and P7 confirmed that school administrators must be intentional about learning about students and the different cultures students represent. P1 stated, “It’s important that we honor different cultures. We do that by the way we treat individuals first and foremost in the classroom and just giving recognition and honor to those cultures and showing value for them.” P6 stated promoting culturally responsive learning environments required “school administrators to] make connections with students. It starts with getting to know students on [an] individual level and building relationships with them by getting to know them.” For example, P4 described the following practices:

I take notes, ask them about [themselves], speak, give compliments. Just [anything to] get them to talk to [me so that I] can build a relationship with them, [and let them] know that [I] care and understand and that I’m on their side.

P6 shared,

[I try to recognize] as many students as I can, affirming who they are as individuals, speak to them and let them know that I see them. I work to build

relationship through the conversation [and] being willing to listen and really getting to know [students].

The participants in the study acknowledged the importance of building relationships with students to promote a culturally responsive learning environments. The administrators shared specific leadership practices used to foster a sense of inclusion and community.

**Teachers.** Participants in the study expressed the importance of building relationships with teachers to promote culturally responsive learning environments. P2 stated, “I purposefully [avail] myself to have open communication, open office hours, and I am diligent about responding to all teachers and students within the school.” P3 stated,

We [must] get to know who our teachers are and know what their backgrounds are. We have teachers from diverse backgrounds that come from all over the world, and if there’s something happening in a certain part of the world, I make sure that they know that we’re thinking of them and we’re thinking of their families maybe in those areas.

Several participants described monthly celebrations with teachers to build community and establish meaningful relationships. These opportunities to hear and learn about each other on a personal level solidified relationships between administrators and teachers. P3 described the importance of building community with teachers and stated,

I try to build community with them so that they could see the value in each other, because I see the value in each of them, and I want for them to see the value in



each other and what everyone brings to the table. If they see each other as valuable, that's what builds our community.

The participants in the study described the importance of building relationships with teachers to promote culturally responsive learning environments and inclusion for all.

**Parents.** Building meaningful relationships both inside and beyond the school campus was important for the participants. All participants discussed the importance of establishing meaningful relationship with parents. P2, P3, P6, P7 expressed how school administrators constantly strived to connect with parents. P6 stated, "The biggest way to build relationships with the parents is to let them know you're in this with them." P2 stated, "Bridging community [is] one way to promote culturally learning environments and show that yes, there might be cultural differences, but the passion for students was the same."

P3 acknowledged that it is important to bridge "the gap instructionally with our parents and our community and [bring] them into the fold so they know what's going on inside of our building." P3 and P7 both described doing this by engaging parents in a more positive way within their communities. P3 stated, "Parents should not always have to come with us. We should go to parents [by going] into our apartment complexes and hosting meetings at an apartment complex, not just host the meetings here [at school]." P7 noted this practice would increase "parent involvement" by collaborating in "a safe place." The participants in the study noted the importance of building relationships with parents as a practice for promoting culturally responsive learning environments.

**Community.** P1, P2, and P3 acknowledged the importance of establishing meaningful relationships with community members. P3 stated that school administrators must build “community and those relationships with family and community.” P1 described opportunities to build long-lasting relationships with community members through initiatives such as “the community-based mentoring program, a local school council, and having a principal-for-a-day program here at our school.” P1 continued,

[These initiatives are] comprised of parents, community members, educators [from] very diverse [ethnic] groups. [This practice] gives us an opportunity to have different folks from the community—whether it be for profit, nonprofit, political leaders, faith-based leaders, business leaders, medical [professionals], people in the communications/broadcast industry—come into our school, spend the entire day learning about our school and [representing] different ethnicities and racial groups.

P2 and P3 shared the importance of maintaining connections with community partners. P2 and P3 described reaching out to community resources through letters, notes, phone calls, and surveys. P3 stated the importance of ensuring that community members and supporters “know that we appreciate [them] and want to make sure that our relationships are flowing and they’re continuing to flourish.” P2 noted,

I make it a practice to reach out to stores and business owners in the surrounding area to get feedback from them and try to figure out how to get them more involved with the school, so that kids are seeing diverse leaders and business owners.

All participants acknowledged the importance of establishing meaningful relationships with all school stakeholders. Showing honor for diverse groups promotes culturally responsive learning environments and is a way each school administrator described as being inclusive of all stakeholders. P6 noted,

Our textbooks are written for us, the content is given to us, and historically [has been] very Eurocentric and male dominated. It is very important that when recognitions such as Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, Native American appreciation or Pacific Islander appreciation and other different holidays come about, we really jump on it and celebrate the achievements of every ethnic group. That gives us unique opportunities to celebrate the achievements of those individual groups who historically may have gone overlooked or not been in the front of our history books and to recognize and show those students who don't necessarily see themselves in our textbooks or may see of themselves in our textbooks, but not necessarily in the most positive light that we see them and [their] culture is valued.

All participants expressed how diversity is celebrated through a variety of means. For example, all participants described having culturally focused events such Hispanic Heritage Night during Hispanic Heritage Month. P3 stated that "having culturally diverse nights in our building just to celebrate our students and to celebrate their families within the community" supports cultural responsiveness. P3, P6, and P7 expressed using other school events to establish meaningful relationships with stakeholders. P3 described having "fine arts [events] such as band, chorus, and orchestra concerts, Black History

Month, curriculum nights.” P7 said having “parent involvement activities to celebrate those cultures helps build our community by bringing people together.”

For all students, despite the dominant cultures present in the school, P6 described cultural responsiveness as,

“It’s not forgetting the 1% and 2% of our population, which might be the Native American or Asian [American]. We don’t want to overlook them, [or] our Caucasian students, just because our Hispanic population is large. It is our responsibility to make sure that all students feel like their culture is represented, recognized, and celebrated as well, and not put on the back burner just because they are the dominant culture.

Finding opportunities to connect with school stakeholders and honor cultural difference is a way school administrators establish meaningful relationships with stakeholders to promote culturally responsive learning environments.

### **Theme 3: Challenges**

Theme 3 is that school administrators identified challenges to implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments as (a) an insufficient understanding of cultural responsiveness, (b) the lack of culturally inclusive materials and teaching strategies or resources, and (c) personal biases and resistance to change. All participants in this study shared examples of perceived challenges to implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments.

### ***An Insufficient Understanding of Cultural Responsiveness***

In this category for Theme 3, five participants described the challenges promoting culturally responsive learning environments when educators lack or have an insufficient understanding of cultural responsiveness. P2 and P4 explicitly stated their teachers lacked an understanding of cultural responsiveness. P4 shared, “I have teachers that are not inclusive or culturally responsive.” P4 added, “I don’t think it’s purposeful, I think it’s ignorance in the sense of [not knowing] any better.” P2, P4, P5, and P7 each expressed the difficulties of changing mindsets when introducing cultural responsiveness. P1 commented, “Educators can have a hard time disassociating a training or learning experience about cultural responsiveness from their political beliefs.” P2 shared that administrators experienced challenges with teachers and parents who lacked an understanding of cultural responsiveness.

### ***Lack of Culturally Inclusive Materials and Teaching Strategies or Resources***

The lack of culturally inclusive materials and teaching strategies or resources was the second emerging category of Theme 3. P2, P3, and P6 addressed the lack of culturally inclusive teaching materials and the need for culturally responsive resources. P6 stated, “We have a prescribed curriculum that we have to follow [that] can be a challenge” for promoting culturally responsive learning environments. P2 noticed, “Instructional materials did not bridge about a cultural aspect of the students [being taught], so those kids were not engaged or interested, which then led to some behavioral problems.” Some leaders used local instructional monies to purchase culturally inclusive materials, but materials were not made available to every classroom.

### *Personal Biases and Resistance to Change*

The third category for Theme 3 addressed personal biases and resistance to change as challenges to promoting culturally responsive learning environments. All participants commented on personal bias. P6 stated, “Every last one of us comes with some sort of bias.” Each participant referenced their gender, ethnicity, upbringing, or professional experiences as the influence of personal biases. P1 and P2 both referenced their own gender and race. P2 admitted, “I felt that [as] an African American female, I pushed African American females harder. My expectations [of them were] higher. I was very biased.” All participants described the challenges of recognizing personal biases and the intentionality of not letting those biases influence how they lead others.

The participants in the study acknowledged that biases in other educators can be challenging with implementing culturally responsive practices for diverse groups of students. P4 expressed,

It’s challenging because it’s something that’s ingrained. If you [have] thought a certain way or have a habit of responding to situations, that’s your habit. You’ve done it over and over and over, and you’ve not been challenged with that, or you’ve not learned yet to control your tone of voice when you get upset or to bring it down a notch, because that’s your habit. [Despite your age], it’s going to take you some time to realize what you’re doing, when you’re doing it, and then to realize, now I have to change. And that’s a challenge because that’s a practice, a habit that you have. It makes people not teachable in that moment. If they

cannot see because it's so ingrained in them . . . I struggle. I don't think I'm prepared for [how to change that].

P1, P2, P3, P5, and P7 shared their perspectives on challenges related to resistance to culturally responsive training. P1 noted,

If you say to a group of educators, "Hey, we want you to reflect on your racial identity," that's offensive to some people. There are some people who don't want to do that. They don't want to participate. They want to know, "Why are we having to reflect?" They don't want that, and so that's a challenge. Educators are reluctant to want to improve or want to reflect or want to engage in the whole conversation. That can be challenging.

Participants in the study shared challenges about teachers refusing to be a part of culturally responsive training. P7 noted that educators have said, "That's not [my] curriculum, that's not what I'm here for" regarding culturally responsive training. P5 commented,

Stubbornness [impedes change because] we're set in our ways as educators, and my view is this view, and it's hard for me to open up to another option or opportunity to change. I think that's one of the biggest hurdles is changing mindsets. It's hard to convince somebody to [change] when they've been predisposed to say, to react, or to think a certain way, or to have a bias. That's the hardest thing to do is change a mindset.

P2 noted,

I've also had challenges from [certain ethnic groups] who feel that cultural responsiveness is just trying to look through the lens of an African American, when cultural responsiveness is looking through the lens of all Americans, or all people, not just Americans, all people.

Having a limited understanding of culturally responsive practices or lacking the desire to learn and implement changes are hurdles faced by school administrators in this study.

#### **Theme 4: Ongoing Professional Development for All Staff**

The fourth theme that emerged in the study is school administrators must develop the skills needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments by providing ongoing professional development for all staff. Active participation in professional development offers learning opportunities for all staff. Five of the seven participants engaged in district-led professional development as well as sought out their own self-directed professional development on cultural responsiveness. Self-directed learning opportunities included attending workshops, participating in book studies, reading professional literature, watching videos, and interacting with speakers on the topic of cultural responsiveness. The participants who engaged in cultural responsiveness training expressed how participating in the learning enhanced their knowledge and skills on the topic.

All participants in the study confirmed that ongoing professional development is required for all staff, including school administrators, to ensure that all acquire and implement the knowledge and skills needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments for all students. P1 expressed that a requirement for all staff to participate



in professional development increases accountability and “reduces the variance” in efforts to promote culturally responsive learning environments. P2, P5, and P7 acknowledged the convenience of staff participating in self-paced learning opportunities. P2 commented, “Self-paced learning is not bad because it [may] help people be more willing to participate, but there needs to be an accountability piece.” Such an accountability element could include deadlines to complete the learning and an expectation for implementing what was learned.

The participants in the study acknowledged that ongoing opportunities to learn with peers supported the development of skills needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments. The data collected during the study confirmed that school administrators must engage in ongoing professional learning with staff learning to promote culturally responsive learning environments. P6 noted, “To really to have [a] bigger impact in creating a culturally responsive environment for the whole school, it needs to go beyond me doing a module by myself.” P3 commented, “We want to build the capacity of our teachers to be able to have conversations with students from different backgrounds.” Staff should engage in learning together to promote culturally responsive learning environments.

All participants noted how staff could engage in professional development embedded throughout the school year such as workshops, book studies, professional literature, and speakers on the topic of cultural responsiveness. P1 noted the professional development should “provide opportunities for staff to reflect on who they are, what their particular cultural beliefs are, their own background and then ask them to think about

how they can be culturally sensitive and relevant with the students in their classroom.”

All participants in the study expressed that professional development must be intentional to build cultural awareness, should be mandatory for all staff, and should include a group-based or discussion format. P2 shared, “Sometimes we have biases that we don’t realize and cannot recognize.” P7 acknowledged,

I think if it’s mandatory and we do small groups, we have an opportunity for people to have a safe zone to talk. Then we can clear up misconceptions and possibly gain more buy-in for some people who have been struggling with this [topic].

P7 added, “It should be very discussion based [with] experts leading [the professional development] that we know that’s their heart.” P2 noted that group-based professional development can support educators with “coming up with strategies to help [staff] bring a bridge between how they were raised and how diverse the world is today.”

P1 shared that the professional learning should allow staff to “participate with their colleagues where there’s an opportunity to learn, discuss, reflect, and share experiences and thoughts. Not just a ‘sit and get’ where someone’s delivering all the information and we’re just sitting there listening.” P4 emphasized the importance of hands-on activities:

Have speakers come in and not just talk to us but engage us [in a workshop] where we practice. We pair up, get in groups, have discussions, [and] role play. Like okay, “Here is your scenario. I’ve talked to you about it; I’ve given you strategies and skills on how to respond in certain situations and how to help support teachers, students, and parents—now let’s practice. Let’s see if we can

practice doing better.” I’m going to remember what I did to practice. And in that way, that’s how I’m going to gain a better understanding, more so than what I read in a book.

Interaction is an important part of professional development.

Participants offered additional suggestions for professional development. P1 said, “It is important to expose staff to dynamic speakers who may be different than they are, have different experiences, have influence, and who can help provide motivation, inspiration, personal and practical experiences for working with young people.” P5 stated that ongoing professional development must allow “time for our teachers to analyze the situation that occurred and determine if my response was appropriate so that I can more appropriately respond in that situation.” P5 noted professional development should “provide real-life real-time examples and situations that take into consideration what cultural responsiveness should look like.”

P5 commented, “No matter what the structure is, it should happen multiple times throughout the school year. Monthly would be optimal.” P1 added that “three to five sessions” would be optimal. P5 emphasized,

Staff must be able to hear, listen, and analyze situations then talk through with people that don’t look like you, don’t think like you, about what the situation was and how [to] would react. You can’t be stuck with the people who are used to being around and have conversations about cultural responsiveness. You have to be with people you’re not used to talking to or collaborating with, so those experiences and conversations are actually genuine.

Using data supports professional learning. P2 stated, “I found that if I use numbers and data that it wasn’t my belief versus their belief, it was truthful and fact.” P1 emphasized,

I think that curriculum should be well vetted and sensitive. I don’t think it should be targeted to help White people understand Black people or White people understand Hispanic people. If it’s presented like that, it’s not going to be received well. It’s got to be a very strategic type of learning that helps folks reflect without feeling like they’re being targeted because the color of their skin is White. Or that they’re not appreciated as an educator in this school system, because they’re White or because they’re White, they need to improve, just because they’re White.

The curriculum should emphasize that cultural responsiveness is not specific to any race or ethnicity but rather about understanding all cultures and needs of students.

### **Summary**

In summary, the data collected in the study revealed school administrators’ perceptions of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. Those leadership practices included modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors, building community by using open communication and establishing meaningful relationships with all stakeholders, and developing the skills needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments by providing ongoing professional development for all staff. Each of the leadership practices aligned to the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016). The data collected in the study

also revealed that school administrators identified challenges to implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments as (a) an insufficient understanding of cultural responsiveness, (b) the lack of culturally inclusive materials and teaching strategies or resources, and (c) personal biases and resistance to change. Each participant in the study answered every interview question based on their perceptions and experiences. No data were missing, incomplete, or inconsistent through the process of data collection and analysis. No elements of nonconforming data were identified in the study.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K-12 school administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. Trustworthiness strengthens research findings and demonstrates authenticity. I ensured the trustworthiness of the study by using strategies to achieve credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Shenton, 2004; Yin, 2016). I address each criterion in the following sections.

#### **Credibility**

To establish the trustworthiness of the study, I used strategies to ensure credibility. Credibility provides internal validity and ensures that a study measures what it intends to measure (Shenton, 2004). Credibility also ensures that data are properly collected and interpreted so that the findings and conclusions accurately reflect the context that was studied (Bengtsson, 2016; Yin, 2016). To establish credibility and

increase the trustworthiness, I worked with peer reviewers and used member checking of the findings to ensure the analysis from the study accurately reflected the experiences and perceptions of the participants (see Burkholder et al., 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2016).

The first way I ensured the credibility of this study was to work with peer reviewers. I collaborated with two experienced educational leaders as peer debriefers. The educational leaders were not part of the study but had extensive leadership experience in the local district and with working with culturally diverse groups. The educational leaders provided feedback on the interview protocol prior to my interviewing participants and reviewed the findings of the study to ensure that I accurately depicted participants' experiences without bias.

The second way I ensured credibility was member checking of the findings of the data analysis. Credibility can be established by reviewing emergent themes to ensure the data analysis from this study accurately reflected the participant experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To increase the validity and credibility of the study, I gave participants the opportunity to review the findings and offer feedback on the themes that emerged from the study. No participants offered feedback on the findings.

### **Transferability**

Establishing the transferability in the qualitative research of the study was an essential criterion for ensuring trustworthiness. Transferability acknowledges the uniqueness of the local conditions in an initial qualitative study yet provides external validity and the extent to which the findings of one study are applicable and relevant to a

different study or broader context (Burkholder et al., 2016; Shenton, 2004; Yin, 2016). I used thick descriptions and varied the selection of participants to establish transferability for the findings of the study.

Using thick descriptions and varying participant selection were strategies I employed to ensure transferability. I used detailed and specific descriptions of the setting, participants, and findings of the study to allow for comparisons to other contexts by other researchers (see Burkholder et al., 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The use of detailed and specific descriptions of the collected data and research findings allows other researchers who read this study to determine whether the findings are applicable, relevant, and transferable to their context (see Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013). As another strategy for establishing transferability, I invited principals and assistant principals from the middle school level who offered a wide range of perspectives and experiences to contribute to the study's data and findings.

### **Dependability**

Dependability ensures the reliability of a qualitative study. To ensure the dependability of the study, I used consistent procedures to collect and analyze data, as well as to report and share findings so that if the work were repeated in a comparable context, similar results would be obtained (see Burkholder et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Shenton, 2004). To establish dependability in this study, I collected data that aligned to the research questions and used an audit trail.

I purposively selected principals and assistant principals from the middle school level with varying years of experience in education and a broad range of information and

perceptions about the topic, to answer the research questions of this study (see Yin, 2016). I collaborated with two educational leaders as peer debriefers, who did not participate in this study. Each reviewed and provided feedback on the interview protocol I used for each interview prior to conducting interviews (see Patton, 1999). I then used the same interview protocol to conduct and recorded one-on-one interviews with each participant in this study to ensure the data answered the research questions of this study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

During the interviews, I took fieldnotes as the participants shared their experiences. I transcribed all collected data and used audit trails. Audit trails helped me to accurately depict how decisions were made through each cycle of the coding process that led me to the findings of the study (see Burkholder et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The detailed procedures for collecting and analyzing data provided dependability to allow the study to be replicated and yield consistent findings.

### **Confirmability**

Establishing confirmability is another criterion for trustworthiness in a qualitative study. Confirmability is the qualitative counterpart to objectivity in quantitative studies, where steps are taken to help ensure that a study's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the participants rather than the characteristics, preferences, or opinions of the researcher (Burkholder et al., 2016; Shenton, 2004). Emphasizing triangulation promotes confirmability and reduces researcher bias (Shenton, 2004). To ensure confirmability in the study, I reduced the potential for researcher bias by engaging in reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and member checking of the findings.



As the sole researcher of the study, it was important to be aware of my biases to establish confirmability. Throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data from recorded and transcribed interviews, I practiced reflexive journaling to address any biased thoughts or feelings I had that could influence the credibility of the study and risk the trustworthiness of the study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2016). By practicing reflexive journaling, I recorded my personal beliefs, ideas, and thoughts on the participants' responses and behaviors during interviews, as well as those that developed while reading and analyzing data to prevent biases from influencing the credibility of the study.

To increase the validity and credibility of the study, I collaborated with two experienced educational leaders as peer debriefers. The two educational leaders were not part of the study but had extensive leadership experience in the local district and provided their feedback to reduce bias (see Yin, 2016). I also asked the participants in the study to review the findings and offer feedback on the themes that emerged from the study and to confirm that their experiences and perceptions were accurately represented in the data (see Bengtsson, 2016; Yin, 2016). Peer debriefing and member checking were strategies I used to establish confirmability and reduce researcher biases.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the findings that resulted from an extensive analysis of the data collected from seven semistructured interviews. The data were collected to explore K-12 school administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using

leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. Four themes emerged from the analysis of data:

1. School administrators use leadership practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments by modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors.
2. School administrators build community to promote culturally responsive learning environments by using open communication and by establishing meaningful relationships with all stakeholders.
3. School administrators identified challenges to implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments as (a) an insufficient understanding of cultural responsiveness, (b) the lack of culturally inclusive materials and teaching strategies or resources, and (c) personal biases and resistance to change.
4. School administrators must develop the skills needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments by providing ongoing professional development for all staff.

In addition to presenting the findings in this chapter, I provided evidence of the strategies used to establish the trustworthiness the study. In Chapter 5, I provide an interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K–12 school administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. The basic qualitative research approach is designed to investigate problem-based issues and present findings based on participant interviews that answer the research questions (Yin, 2016). I used a basic qualitative approach to address the gap in the research about practice and answer the research questions for the study. A basic or generic qualitative approach was appropriate for the study because I wanted to explore the perceptions of leadership practices of K–12 school administrators in an urban school district who promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The research questions framed the scope and boundaries for the basic qualitative study (see Burkholder et al., 2016). The following research questions were grounded in the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016) and used to guide the study:

RQ1: How do K–12 school administrators describe leadership practices used to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

RQ2: What challenges do K–12 school administrators encounter in implementing practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

RQ3: What support or resources not currently available are perceived as needed by K–12 school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

After I collected and analyzed all the data from the study, four themes emerged:

1. School administrators use leadership practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments by modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors.
2. School administrators build community to promote culturally responsive learning environments by using open communication and by establishing meaningful relationships with all stakeholders.
3. School administrators identified challenges to implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments as (a) an insufficient understanding of cultural responsiveness, (b) the lack of culturally inclusive materials and teaching strategies or resources, and (c) personal biases and resistance to change.
4. School administrators must develop the skills needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments by providing ongoing professional development for all staff.

In this chapter I share the interpretation of the findings, limitations, recommendations, implications, and conclusion for the study.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

I designed this qualitative study using a basic approach to explore K–12 school administrators’ perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. I conducted semistructured interviews with seven school administrators to collect data. After transcribing each recorded interview, I followed Yin’s (2016) five-phase data

analysis cycle: (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding the data. I used content analysis to make inferences from the raw data and to find trends, patterns, and categories that emerged into themes based on the conceptual framework of this study (see Bengtsson, 2016; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992).

Upon completion of the study, four themes emerged that closely align with the peer-reviewed literature on cultural responsiveness and leadership practices described in Chapter 2. The process of identifying themes helped me form the basis for understanding the entire study based on content analysis of codes, patterns, and categories that emerged from the data (see Bengtsson, 2016; Yin, 2016). In this section, I review the findings from the study and provide an interpretation of the findings in the context of CRSL, the conceptual framework for the study, and other peer-reviewed literature.

### **School Administrators Model and Demonstrate Culturally Sensitive and Empathetic Behaviors**

The first theme that emerged in this study is that school administrators use leadership practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments by modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors. The leadership practices that participants deemed necessary for promoting culturally responsive learning environments are supported by the CRSL framework, the conceptual framework for this study. Two of the four themes of the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016) addressed school administrators who (a) develop culturally responsive teachers and (b) promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments. Modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors were prevalent in the literature and in the

findings of the study as leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments.

The findings in the study suggest that by modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors, school administrators can promote culturally responsive learning environments for all students. The findings in the study align with the findings of the comprehensive review of literature in Chapter 2. School administrators can lead the development of schoolwide practices and procedures that foster a sense of equity, inclusion, and belonging (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Nadelson et al., 2020). Nadelson et al. (2020) found that school administrators foster a climate and culture of inclusion for all students by demonstrating behaviors that promote cultural responsiveness. School administrators support inclusion and promote culturally responsive learning environments for all students in their schools by developing culturally responsive teachers.

School administrators provide leadership and support the development of teachers' skills and practices. Leadership is second to classroom instruction among factors that influence student learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). Similar to the findings of Nadelson et al. (2020) and Newcomer and Cowin (2018), the school administrators in this study developed culturally responsive teachers by modeling culturally responsive practices. Researchers have found a relationship between the leadership practices of school administrators and student learning outcomes (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Uysal & Sarier, 2018; Wilson et al., 2020). By modeling CRSL practices for staff, school administrators can influence the

climate and culture of schools and promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse groups of students. All participants in the study cited modeling and demonstrating empathetic behaviors as leadership strategies to promote culturally responsive learning environments.

The behaviors and practices of school administrators promote culturally responsive learning environments that demonstrate value and equity for all by fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion. In a seminal study, Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) found that modeling CRSL practices, demonstrating empathetic behaviors such as commitment to caring for others, and developing positive relationships promoted culturally responsive learning environments for racially and linguistically diverse students. Newcomer and Cowin (2018) determined that school administrators foster the development of culturally responsive teachers and increase student learning experiences through modeling culturally responsive practices. Nadelson et al. (2020) confirmed that when culturally responsive practices are modeled for school staff, school administrators increase influence over transforming attitudes, mindsets, practices, and strategies necessary to promote culturally responsive learning environments. By building the capacity of teachers, school administrators can improve students' learning experiences. When school administrators model and demonstrate culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors, they promote culturally responsive learning environments for all students.

### **School Administrators Use Open Communication and Establish Meaningful Relationships With All Stakeholders**

The behaviors and practices of school administrators shape the climate and culture of schools and promote cultural responsiveness. The leadership practices of school administrators have a strong influence on students' learning environments (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Nadelson et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018; Uysal & Sarier, 2018; Young et al., 2017). All the participants in the study shared the importance of using open communication and establishing meaningful relationships with all stakeholders to promote culturally responsive learning environments.

Prevalent in the literature and from the participants' responses, a welcoming and culturally responsive learning environment communicates inclusion. A positive school climate fosters a sense of belonging for students and increases student engagement (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Manns, 2021). School administrators demonstrate a commitment to inclusion and cultural responsiveness by creating welcoming school environments for students and families (Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020; Shields & Hesbol, 2020). Researchers have found that culturally responsive learning environments promote inclusive learning environments and value the cultural identities of all students (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2018; McCarther & Davis, 2017; Nadelson et al., 2020). The participants in this study confirmed that using open communication and establishing meaningful relationships with all stakeholders are leadership practices used to promote culturally responsive learning environments.



The findings in the study suggest that through open communication and establishing meaningful relationships with all stakeholders, school administrators promote culturally responsive learning environments. School administrators must be cognizant of the needs of their students, staff, and community to promote culturally responsive learning environments (Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Similar to the findings of Gordon and Ronder (2016), the participants in this study cited leadership practices used to promote inclusion and cultural responsiveness as using open communication to foster a welcoming school environment, building relationships with students, engaging families and the community, and changing hiring practices to reflect the needs of the diverse learning community (Gordon & Ronder, 2016). For school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments, meaningful relationships must be established with all stakeholders, such as students, teachers and staff, parents, and communities.

The participants in this study confirmed that building meaningful relationships with all stakeholders is essential for promoting culturally responsive learning environments (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). By building meaningful relationships, connections between schools and communities offer opportunities to increase cultural knowledge and focus on students' learning needs to create opportunities for authentic communication between school personnel and families (Bertrand & Rodela, 2017; Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016). The relationship between school and family fosters opportunities for educators to deepen their understanding of diverse groups by increasing

awareness of cultural values, perspectives, and practices that affect students' learning and sense of inclusion within the school community (Bertrand & Rodela, 2017; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). School administrators with a mindset for promoting culturally responsive learning environments use open communication; establish meaningful relationships with students, staff, families, and community stakeholders; and work with the teaching staff on implementing culturally responsive strategies (Gordon & Ronder, 2016).

School administrators create welcoming spaces through meaningful engagement to promote culturally responsive learning environments. Similar to the findings of Gordon and Ronder (2016) and Waly (2020), the participants in this study sought and implemented feedback from stakeholders to promote school and community relationships and to provide more equitable, inclusive, and responsive school environments. Culturally responsive school administrators build bridges between the school and community to foster meaningful relationships. When school administrators engage students, parents, and Indigenous contexts, knowledge and perspectives on cultural diversity increase.

Using open communication and establishing meaningful relationships with stakeholders are leadership practices of participants in this study to promote culturally responsive learning environments. School administrators may seek ways to honor the backgrounds of students and to create school structures and processes that accommodate the lives of parents (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). The leadership practices are supported by the CRSL framework and align with three of the four themes addressing school administrators who (a) engage in critical self-reflections; (b) promote culturally

responsive and inclusive learning environments; and (c) build community advocacy by engaging students, parents, and Indigenous contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016).

### **School Administrators Identify Challenges to Implementing Culturally Responsive Learning Environments**

The United States has increasingly become a diverse multicultural society. As U.S. public schools grow in diversity, implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments has become a necessity to meet the educational needs of diverse populations of students. The school administrators in this study identified challenges to implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments as (a) an insufficient understanding of cultural responsiveness, (b) the lack of culturally inclusive materials and teaching strategies or resources, and (c) personal biases and resistance to change.

Prevalent in the literature and the responses from participants in the study, many educators are not innately culturally responsive and do not enter the field of education with a sufficient understanding of cultural responsiveness (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Gordon & Espinoza, 2020). Similar to the findings of Bottiani et al. (2018), the participants in this study noted that few educators are proficient at bridging cultural differences to promote inclusive learning environments due to having an insufficient understanding of cultural responsiveness.

Culturally responsive school administrators support an inclusive curriculum that incorporates students' cultures and languages (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). However, participants in this study acknowledged the lack of culturally

inclusive materials, resources, and teaching strategies needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments. The curriculum and instructional materials are prescribed by the state district and may not be multicultural. Some participants in the study used school-based funds to purchase culturally inclusive materials, but this practice was not widespread and only used in certain classrooms.

The behaviors and leadership practices of school administrators can foster authentic experiences that promote the implementation of culturally responsive practices. School administrators who use CRSL practices demonstrate a commitment to mitigating barriers that have contributed to systemic inequities and deficit thinking concerning diverse populations of students in public schools (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). The participants in the study acknowledged that personal biases and resistance can be challenging with implementing culturally responsive practices for diverse groups of students. Similar to the findings of Reed and Swaminathan (2016), the participants in this study acknowledged the challenges of educator biases in diverse urban settings and identified a need for job-embedded professional development to mitigate biases.

### **School Administrators Must Develop Skills By Providing Professional Development**

The behaviors, practices, and skills of educators influence the learning atmosphere for all students. Professional development opportunities are designed to enhance educators' practices and skillsets. Prevalent in the literature and responses from participants, school administrators must develop the skills needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments by providing ongoing professional development for all

staff. Similar to the findings of Reed and Swaminathan (2016) as well as Gordon and Ronder (2016), participants in this study confirmed the necessity of school administrators to develop the capacity of teachers who work with diverse populations of students by providing professional learning opportunities on cultural responsiveness.

Providing professional development opportunities is a leadership practice needed to develop culturally responsive teachers (Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Similar to the findings of Nadelson et al. (2020) as well as Newcomer and Cowin (2018), all participants in this study identified providing professional development, mentoring, and modeling culturally responsive practices as leadership practices school administrators use to develop culturally responsive teachers within their schools. The findings in the study suggest that by providing ongoing professional development for all staff, school administrators can promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments. Similar to the findings of Farinde-Wu et al. (2017) and Gordon and Espinoza (2020), all participants in this study acknowledged that many educators have not had training in cultural responsiveness through educator preparation programs or job-embedded professional development to gain a strong understanding of culturally responsive practices. Engaging in continuous professional development opportunities allows educators to reduce cultural misunderstandings and identify opportunities to embed elements of cultural responsiveness throughout the process of teaching and learning (Khalifa, 2018).

The findings in this study revealed that educators, including school administrators, need to engage in ongoing professional development to develop their

skillset in cultural responsiveness. Many school leaders do not begin their roles as school administrators with prior knowledge or formal training on culturally responsive practices designed to address the needs of diverse populations of students. Prevalent in the literature and responses from participants, school administrators can have a limited understanding of how to promote culturally responsive learning environments if they have not received professional training on the subject. Cultural responsiveness is not widely studied in leadership preparation programs (Barakat et al., 2019; Brion, 2019; Brown et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018; Stone-Johnson et al., 2021). Brion (2019) suggested a need for ongoing training and support from the local school district to increase the cultural competency of in-service school administrators. The findings of this study aligned with the findings of and Sutchter et al. (2018) and Brion that revealed school administrators' lack of preparedness in promoting culturally responsive learning environments was due to lack of professional training on cultural responsiveness. The comprehensive literature review in Chapter 2 revealed minimal preservice and in-service professional development opportunities for school administrators. In summary, professional development is necessary for all educators, including school administrators, to promote culturally responsive learning environments for all students.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As the sole researcher, acknowledging the limitations or weaknesses in the design of a basic qualitative study is important (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2016). Limitations are found in all research studies and may affect the transferability and dependability of a study, as well as inform potential problems related to future research of a similar nature

(Burkholder et al., 2016). The three limitations of this study were (a) limiting the sample size to a small number of participants at a single site, (b) choosing semistructured interviewing as the data collection method, and (c) potentially yielding to researcher bias.

The sample size for this study was a limitation. I collected data from seven school administrators in an urban school district who led at a school with a majority non-White student population. Limiting the sample size of this study to seven participants was a potential weakness in obtaining data representative of the leadership practices of school administrators in a large urban school district. However, in qualitative research studies, a sample size of 1–10 participants is expected and can result in a vast amount of data (Boddy, 2016; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The perceptions and experiences of the participants may not reflect the leadership practices of a larger population of school administrators.

The criteria for participation in this study were (a) principals and assistant principals in the local district, (b) who had at least 1 year of experience at the administrative level, and (c) and worked at a school where more than 50% of the student population belongs to a non-White demographic group. The participants in this study met the criteria for selection and were purposively selected to answer the research questions concerning the perceptions and use of leadership practice that promote culturally responsive learning environments (see Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The study was limited to the field of education and narrowed the scope of participants to middle school administrators identified as principals or assistant principals in the district of study. I had hoped to gather data representing multiple schools

but could not gain permission from the district to conduct research in more than one school.

I did not consider teachers, district-level administrators, or school administrators who did not lead schools with a diverse demographic student body because the nature of this study was to explore school administrators' perceptions of leadership practices and strategies used to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse groups of students, as well as to explore the perception of challenges encountered by school administrators with implementing such practices. The scope of the study may affect the degree to which the findings may be transferred to other settings (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013). The boundaries of the scope may limit the transferability of the findings of this study to other administrators, contexts, or school districts.

The second limitation of this study was narrowing the data collection method to semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviewing allows participants to provide in-depth responses but also limits the data to participants who choose to self-report their behaviors, experiences, and perceptions through interactions with the researcher (Yin, 2016). I conducted semistructured interviews using the same interview protocol and the same interview questions to be consistent as I collected data from each participant regarding the perceptions, practices, and challenges of using leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. All participants were interviewed using a videoconference call program in which the setting of the interview was at the participants' discretion. The interview setting might or might not have been completely



free of distractions or had other factors undetected through my limited view through the camera that could have influenced the participants' responses to interview questions.

The third limitation of this study was the potential for researcher bias. As the sole researcher, I was the primary instrument for this study. My personal bias could have potentially affected data collection and analysis and limited the outcomes of this study, because I am an employee of the school and district under study. My presence during data collection could have affected the participants' responses. To objectively address all potential weaknesses of this study and remove biases in a scholarly manner, I provided a detailed research plan and practiced reflexivity and bracketing before, during, and after data collection and data analysis (see Ahern, 1999). Reflective journaling and bracketing allowed me to engage in an ongoing and systematic assessment of my beliefs, expectations, feelings, and thoughts related to this study and the overall research process (see Ahern, 1999; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Wall et al., 2004). I also used peer debriefers and the strategy of member checking to triangulate the data and reduce the influence of researcher bias in the study's findings. Limitations may affect the dependability and transferability of the results and findings of this study. The findings of this study may be pertinent to the local school district but may not be applicable or transferable to a broader context (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), such as other school districts in the United States. Therefore, I provided detailed measures throughout the research process to ensure trustworthiness of the research findings of this study.

## **Recommendations**

This study presents school administrators' perceptions of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. The findings of the study revealed specific practices and strategies that school administrators use to promote culturally responsive learning environments, as well as identified challenges to implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. The study confirmed that school administrators must develop the skills needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments by providing ongoing professional development for all staff—including administrators. Based on the findings of the study and the comprehensive literature review in Chapter 2, further research is needed on leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments, as well as opportunities for professional development in the district under study.

Further research is needed on leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. The literature supported the problem of practice that some K-12 school administrators need additional training to increase knowledge of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive environments (Khalifa et al., 2016; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Further research is needed to determine the knowledge school administrators have on culturally responsive leadership practices and how to effectively implement those practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments for students. Further research is also needed to determine how to address the needs of school administrators through professional

development to not only promote culturally responsive learning environments but also develop culturally responsive teachers.

The school administrators interviewed for the current study shared that professional development for all educators was necessary to promote culturally responsive learning environments. The comprehensive literature review provided a synthesis of literature on leadership practices but was limited on which specific practices were most beneficial to promoting culturally responsive learning environments. The findings of this study aligned with the literature review, which revealed that professional development is needed for school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments and develop culturally responsive teachers.

Although the findings of this study provided relevant, meaningful, and timely information for middle school administrators, the sample size of the study was a limitation. I did not collect data from elementary or high school administrators, thereby limiting the transferability of the study to other middle schools. A recommendation for future studies is to compare the perceptions of challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments with a broader sample of school administrators from elementary, middle, and high schools who (a) have at least 1 year of experience at the administrative level and (b) work at a school where more than 50% of the student population belong to a non-White demographic group. To build on the current study, a future study could identify how ongoing professional development can cultivate the specific leadership practices needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments. Research could determine how

district leaders can leverage ongoing professional development to allow school administrators to gain relevant, meaningful, and timely support in implementing specific practices to develop culturally responsive teachers and promote culturally responsive learning environments. As one participant noted, professional development on cultural responsiveness should be well vetted.

Future research could have a qualitative or quantitative study design. A qualitative study could be designed to explore how in-service school administrators are prepared through educator programs, leadership programs, and job-embedded professional development opportunities to promote culturally responsive learning environments opportunities while in practice. Further research using a quantitative design could investigate the significance of specific leader practices and professional development or training on the implementation of practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments. Increasing the sample size of school administrators from elementary, middle, and high schools would increase transferability of either study design. District leaders could use the findings of either study design to develop relevant professional development opportunities for in-service school administrators that provide guidance and support in developing culturally responsive teachers and promoting culturally responsive teachers.

### **Implications**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore K-12 school administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school

district. The findings of this study add to the knowledge base of literature by revealing that school administrators (a) model and promote culturally responsive learning environments using sensitive and empathetic behaviors, (b) use open communication to establish meaningful relationships with all stakeholders, (c) experience challenges to implementing practices that promote CRL environments, and (d) need to provide ongoing professional development for all staff. These findings impart meaningful connotations for school administrators in the district of study that include implications for practice and positive social change.

Based on the findings of the study, the implications may influence professional development for educators in the district under study, as well educator preparation programs. The study confirmed that school administrators not only must model and demonstrate specific behaviors and practices, but also must develop the skills needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments by providing ongoing professional development for all staff. School administrators must be cognizant of culturally responsive practices to lead this work. However, similar to the findings of Marshall and Khalifa (2018), this study found that many school administrators have limited knowledge of the leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive environments. Increasing the knowledge and skills of school administrators through professional development and educator preparation programs increases their capacity for promoting culturally responsive learning environments and developing culturally responsive teachers.

The findings of this study revealed the necessity for educators, including school administrators, to develop their knowledge and skills in culturally responsiveness practices by engaging in professional learning. The findings aligned with the comprehensive literature review that revealed many educators have not received formal training through educator preparation programs or in-service professional development on culturally responsive practices. The participants in the study who had culturally responsive training cited leadership practices that aligned with the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016), the conceptual framework for the study. The following implications are provided to help close the gap in practice concerning school administrators' use of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students, as well as the challenges some administrators experienced with implementing such practices.

### **Implications for Practice**

The first implication is for school administrators. Based on the findings of this study, principals and assistant principals need to engage in required professional development to increase their understanding of cultural responsiveness and the specific leadership practices necessary to promote culturally responsive learning environments. Culturally responsive school administrators are necessary to promote culturally responsive learning environments for the diverse populations of students in public schools (Ezzani, 2021; Spikes, 2018). However, culturally response practices are not widely taught in leadership preparation programs (Barakat et al., 2019; Brion, 2019; Brown et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018; Stone-Johnson et al., 2021). Many school

administrators have not received formal training on cultural responsiveness and, therefore, demonstrate a lack of knowledge and skills concerning the implementation of practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments (Brooks et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018; Sutcher et al., 2018). Because many school administrators have not received preservice training on cultural responsiveness, in-service professional development is vital for promoting culturally responsive learning environments.

Based on the findings of this study, for school administrators to effectively guide their staff in promoting culturally responsive learning environments for the diverse population of students in public schools, administrators must be trained in culturally responsive practices. Some of the participants in this study engaged in voluntary district professional development on cultural responsiveness. All participants in this study acknowledged that participation in district-facilitated professional development should be required for all school administrators to reduce the variance between who receives training and who does not to establish consistency throughout the district. The district under study must provide professional development training to ensure that school administrators receive the knowledge and skills necessary to promote culturally responsive learning environments. A recommendation based on the findings is for the district under study to provide required professional development training for all school administrators designed to increase their knowledge of cultural responsiveness and offer specific leadership practices that can be used to promote culturally responsive learning environments in schools.

Based on the findings of this study, a second implication for practice is for all educators. Educators must be knowledgeable of culturally responsive practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments. Each participant in this study confirmed the necessity for all educators to engage in professional learning on culturally responsive practices. Similar to school administrators, many educators have not had training in cultural responsiveness through educator preparation programs or in-service professional development training to gain an understanding of culturally responsive practices (Bottiani et al., 2018; Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Gordon & Espinoza, 2020).

By engaging in ongoing professional development, educators may reduce cultural misunderstandings and embed elements of cultural responsiveness throughout the learning environment (Khalifa, 2018). All educators need to engage in required professional learning to increase their understanding of cultural responsiveness and the specific practices necessary to promote culturally responsive learning environments for the diverse population of students in public schools. Another recommendation is for the district under study, as well as educator preparation and graduate level programs, to embed training on cultural responsiveness in professional learning opportunities for all educators.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Implications from this study have the potential for positive social change in local schools, districts, and educator preparation programs. In the local district, this study offers an original contribution for positive social change by increasing the cultural competence of school administrators and identifying leadership practices used to promote



culturally responsive learning environments for the district's diverse population of students. Implications from this study may be used to inform the need for required professional development training in the local district, as well as through educator preparation programs, to increase educators' understanding of cultural responsiveness and use of specific practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments.

The implications of this study have the potential for positive social change by informing future research to increase knowledge of leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments to meet the needs of diverse populations of students in public schools. The increasing diversity of students requires new approaches to educational leadership in which leaders demonstrate behaviors and practices that promote academic success and improve educational opportunities for all students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Nadelson et al., 2020). This study addressed an underresearched area of public education and fills a gap in the research about practice because current peer-reviewed literature concerning cultural responsiveness predominantly address teacher practices, rather than administrator practices (Khalifa et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2020).

The leadership practices of school administrators influence students' learning outcomes. The leadership practices of school administrators influence learning environments (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018; Uysal & Sarier, 2018; Young et al., 2017). School administrators guide the instructional decisions that promote culturally responsive learning environments and support conditions for educational equity for all students in

their schools (Nadelson et al., 2020; Newcomer & Cowin, 2018). Increasing the knowledge and skills of school administrators through professional development training and educator preparation programs increases their capacity for promoting culturally responsive learning environments and developing culturally responsive teachers. By increasing the knowledge of specific leadership practices used to promote cultural responsiveness, this study may lead to changes in school administrators' behaviors and address the gap in practice that some administrators experience challenges in using leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments.

### **Conclusion**

Public schools in the United States have become increasingly diverse, necessitating educators know and embed culturally responsive practices into the learning environment. School administrators use leadership practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments by (a) modeling and demonstrating culturally sensitive and empathetic behaviors and (b) building community using open communication to establish meaningful relationships with all stakeholders. This can be challenging because many educators have not learned culturally responsive practices through preservice training or in-service professional development.

The lack of training leads to challenges to implementing practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments such as (a) an insufficient understanding of cultural responsiveness, (b) the lack of culturally inclusive materials and teaching strategies or resources, and (c) personal biases and resistance to change. School administrators need to provide and engage in ongoing professional development to

cultivate the skills needed to promote culturally responsive learning environments.

Administrators must be knowledgeable of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments and develop culturally responsive teachers.

District officials and campus administrators should review the finding of this study to increase the knowledge of the leadership practices used by school administrators and promote ongoing positive social change for the increasingly diverse population of learners in public schools. School administrators are vital in shaping students' education experiences and environments through their leadership practices, which influence not only teaching and learning but also the climate and culture of the classroom and campus. School administrators must know and implement leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments to ensure educational equity and academic success for the diverse population of students in public schools.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol

- I. Greeting and Purpose of Study
- II. Review Consent Form
- III. Definition of Culturally Responsive School Leadership
- IV. Obtain Background Information
- V. Participant Questions
- VI. Interview Questions
- VII. Close of Interview

### I. Greeting and Purpose of Study

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my study. I sincerely appreciate your time, support, and contribution. The purpose of this study is to explore K-12 administrators' perceptions of the challenges faced in using leadership practices and strategies that promote culturally responsive learning environments in an urban school district. The questions I'll ask you in this interview will guide our discussion.

### II. Review Consent Form

Before we proceed, I want to review the consent form with you.

### III. Definition of Culturally Responsive School Leadership

This study is based on the culturally responsive school leadership framework. This framework evolved from a synthesis of scholarly literature on leadership practices used by administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments for diverse populations of students. The literature focused on empirical evidence of culturally responsive leadership practices that had a direct effect on school climate, curriculum,

policy, pedagogy, and student achievement. The four themes of the culturally responsive school leadership framework are based on school administrators who (a) critically self-reflect their leadership behaviors and practices; (b) develop culturally responsive teachers; (c) promote culturally responsive and inclusive school environments; and (d) engage students, parents, and Indigenous and community contexts.

I appreciate that you work with a diverse population of students. The interview questions are designed for you to share your views on leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments as well as your views on challenges that may affect implementing such practices in an urban school district. Each question will be aligned to one of the four CRSL themes.

#### IV. Obtain Background Information

As we begin, I'd like to confirm some background information that will help me with the study.

Name:

Gender:

Current role and level (ES, MS, or HS):

Total number of years at current school:

Total number of years as a school administrator:

Total number of years in education (as an administrator and in other roles):

#### V. Participant Questions

I have eight questions for you, and I've included probes for the purpose of clarification or elaboration to your responses. As you are aware, I'm recording this

interview, but I may also take written notes as we work through the questions. I want you to share your perceptions of leadership practices that promote culturally responsive learning environments where you are currently employed. Are there any questions I can answer for you before we continue?

#### VI. Interview Questions for School Administrators

How do you promote inclusive and culturally responsive schools for diverse groups of learners?

Tell me more...

Give me examples...

As a school administrator, how do you develop culturally responsive practices in faculty and staff members?

Tell me how...

Give me specific examples...

How do you develop meaningful relationships with stakeholders from diverse backgrounds?

Give me examples...

In your school, are there any specific practices used to foster a sense of community, that you have not already mentioned?

Tell me more...

As a current school leader, describe your level of preparedness in handling situations related to cultural differences in your school.

Tell me more...

As a school administrator, what challenges do you or have you encountered in implementing practices to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

Give me specific examples...

What support or resources, not currently available, do you think are needed for you and other school administrators to promote culturally responsive learning environments?

Tell me more...

Is there anything else you would like to add?

#### VII. Close of Interview

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. Your knowledge, experience, and perspective will help me further the understanding of culturally responsive school leadership practices. Once I have completed all interviews, I'll reach out to you after I analyze the data and see if what I find agrees with what we've discussed today. What is the best way I can reach you?

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Interviewee code number: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview start time: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview completion time: \_\_\_\_\_