

## **Culturally Responsive Curriculum Implementation of Middle School Principals in Southern Texas**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although culturally responsive curricula are designed to educate students to be both socially and culturally successful, the curriculum implementation leadership practices middle school principals have used to support such curricula have been unclear. This study explored how middle school principals in southern Texas were supporting their teachers by implementing a culturally responsive curriculum in their schools. This exploratory qualitative study employed the applied critical leadership conceptual framework to examine the culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices of middle school principals in southern Texas. The criteria for the selection of participants were 2 to 5 years' experience as a principal in a middle school managing a school in grades 6, 7 and/or 8 with a population between 300 and 1,200 students and a self-reported minority presence. Data were collected through interviews with 10 purposively selected middle school principals recruited from LinkedIn. Data analysis included the identification of emergent codes, categories, and themes. Findings revealed that these principals build collaboration within their schools to promote cultural appreciation and belongingness to meet the diverse needs of their students who were experiencing challenges. Results indicated that Principals reported being proactive and adopting restorative approaches in addressing race and social injustice issues. They reported implementing culturally responsive curriculum leadership practices in nonstandard ways based on situational responses. These results are valuable for educational policymakers to plan how to standardize culturally responsive practices for diverse environments in the more positive social integration of immigrants into the wider society.

Keywords: Cultural responsiveness, Culturally responsive school leadership, Culturally responsive pedagogy, Transformative leadership.

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## INTRODUCTION

Middle school principals in the United States may not be effectively supporting their teachers with implementing a culturally responsive curriculum. The issue is not unique to the United States but is mirrored internationally in countries that reflect a diverse demographic outlook. Khalifa et al. (2016) posited that it is necessary to promote the culturally responsive school leadership behaviors of principals and assistant principals to positively influence instruction and student learning. Faas et al. (2018), in their interviews with principals in Ireland, revealed that culturally responsive pedagogical practices symbolize school ethos in student-teacher interactions, students' preconceptions, values, and goals as a vital part of positive school multicultural environments. Furthermore, DeMatthews (2016) and Dumas and Nelson (2016) concluded that Black and Hispanic middle school children tended to give disciplinary problems and experienced low achievement because of the limited inclusion of culturally relevant experiences in the classroom. According to the Texas Education Code (2020), principals are legally responsible for instructional guidance in their schools. Despite various initiatives, scholars such as Khalifa et al. (2016), Murakami et al. (2017), Santamaría and Santamaría (2015, 2016), and Scanlan et al. (2016) concurred that further research was necessary to examine whether principals are implementing a culturally responsive curriculum. Although Texas exemplifies a diverse state with increasing Black and Hispanic populations, few studies examining their culturally responsive practices have occurred there. However, in the few available studies, researchers such as Keehne et al. (2018) and Milner (2016) indicated that there was a problem with culturally responsive leadership practices in middle schools in southern Texas.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices of middle school principals in southern Texas. The findings of this study could help inform the leadership practices principals adopt to support their teachers in diverse settings and could be used to curb high attrition among minority students to alleviate discipline problems that often lead to suspensions and referrals. The research focus was to identify possible ways for principals to support their teachers to implement a culturally responsive curriculum to promote achievement and social acceptance and integration of a diverse population.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions for this study were as follows:

### Research Question (RQ)1:

What are the beliefs and experiences of middle school principals about culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices in southern Texas?

**Research Question RQ2:**

What do middle school principals consider as they develop and implement a culturally responsive curriculum as part of their leadership practices in southern Texas?

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

As a result of the increasing diverse learners in schools, researchers such as Keehne et al. (2018), Roberts and Guerra (2016), and Santamaría and Santamaría (2015) have posited that a culturally responsive curriculum is necessary for these learners who have unique cultural experiences. In addition, Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan (2018) and Khalifa et al. (2016) highlighted that the migration of individuals across borders has resulted in diverse populations in countries such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Against this background, Linan-Thompson et al. (2018) and Minkos et al. (2017) revealed that globally Black and Hispanic immigrant English Language Learners (ELL) face cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical alienation in the classroom. Santamaría and Santamaría (2016) also documented the need for more information on how leaders were modifying curriculum implementation in schools to promote culturally responsive practices, which might alleviate the challenges of indiscipline and low academic achievement.

The findings from several studies have revealed that diverse learners are not socially integrated into the wider society (Carey et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016; Linan-Thompson et al., 2018). They highlighted that there is the possibility that educational leaders are not planning for the needs of ELL, who are often misunderstood by their teachers and do not understand the curriculum, which teachers delivered in English. Carey et al. (2017) proffered that because schools represent the mainstream to the wider society, it is necessary for curriculum implementation to reflect social integration in the classroom. Moreover, Linan-Thompson et al. (2018) concluded that the practice of intersectionality and exclusionary practices creates ethnic and cultural divisiveness, which extends from the school into the society where inevitably minority individuals face difficulties with social integration. To realize social integration in the classroom, Khalifa et al. (2016) found that teachers depend on their principals to direct the pathway to relevant professional development to promote the culturally relevant pedagogical strategies needed to guide diverse learners. These authors concurred that culturally responsive instructional leadership practices in schools promote social integration and are critical for the elimination of intersectionality and exclusionary procedures.

Although there is a diverse demographic outlook in schools, some principals in the United States may not be implementing culturally responsive curriculum leadership practices that are crucial for the social inclusion and integration of the culturally different learners (Seto & Sarros, 2016). Easton-Brooks et al. (2018) revealed that the population specific to schools in southern Texas mirrors the diverse society, typical of other states. Therefore, the conclusions of Abacioglu et al. (2019) and Castillo and Maniss (2018) are relevant in proffering that principals should tailor their school-based curriculum to include plans for inclusion, multiculturalism, and social integration of students. The emphasis of these researchers was that the diverse educational environment in the United States demands culturally responsive instructional guidance to socially integrate and include all learners.

The limited inclusion of culturally relevant practices in the implementation of the curriculum for Black and Hispanic middle school children has caused them to exhibit

disciplinary type problems and experience low academic achievement (DeMatthews, 2016; Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Furthermore, Johnson et al. (2016), in their report on Texas, specified that from as early as 6 years old, non-White kindergarten students are more likely to be sent to a disciplinary alternative education program to address disciplinary problems. DeMatthews (2016), Dumas and Nelson (2016), and Johnson et al. conceded that non-White students are more likely to experience behavioral problems and are removed from their school setting because of the lack of culturally responsive instructional strategies in the classroom.

Non-White students' behaviour has caused discipline problems that has led to the experience of attrition because they struggle to keep up with an alien curriculum that is written and delivered in English by teachers who do not understand and are not qualified to teach them (Brown & Crippen, 2017; Johnson et al., 2016; Michals, 2018). Evidence from the Intercultural Development Research Association report supported that in Texas, 102,610 students were missing from the public high school enrollment in 2015-2016 (Johnson et al., 2016). Of these, one in three were Hispanic students, and one in four were Black students. Johnson et al. conceded that the attrition or drop out rates reflect an inability to keep students enrolled until they graduate. The high rates of out of school suspensions and referrals to alternative programs have accounted for the attrition rate for Black and Hispanic students, which signals a problem in curriculum implementation. Johnson et al. (2016) emphasized the zero tolerance for minor school infractions, which has resulted in double the amount of suspensions annually with Blacks receiving nearly twice the suspensions of the local school population and 9% more than Hispanic students. These occurrences are symptomatic of a deeper problem with a limited, culturally responsive curriculum implementation.

Consequently, there is a crucial need for curricula reforms and actions in Texas to prevent disciplinary problems to provide equal educational opportunities and a quality education for every child (Johnson et al., 2016). Darling-Hammond (2017) and Ladd (2017) accentuated that by not adequately addressing culturally responsive curriculum implementation, most immigrant students with unique cultural differences experience low achievement because of cultural alienation. As in the Ladd study, Mathis and Trujillo (2016) concluded that there are school reform flaws in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act and the Every Student Succeeds (ESSA) act as mandatory educational policies, which do not cater to the needs of minorities.

In the United States, the increasing immigrant numbers have created a "melting pot" of diverse cultures in the schools with the impending reality that the "minority" may soon become the "majority" (Craig et al., 2018; James, 2017). Consequently, Carey et al. (2017) and Keehne et al. (2018) proffered that school leaders need to maintain close connections with the community and to encourage culturally responsive instruction in their schools. Moreover, Knight-Manuel et al. (2019) posited that it is essential that principals implement curriculum responsive practices to support teachers in delivering a curriculum with a culturally relevant shared vision and be encouraged in conversations on cultural identity, academic proficiency, and community advocacy. To realize this, these scholars recommended that leaders need to plan for a diverse community, which would become the new norm in a traditional all-White society (Carey et al., 2017; Keehne et al., 2018; Knight-Manuel et al., 2019).

In the United States, school principals in 27 districts from nine states have received grants to implement school programs such as school climate to support their diverse students (Kendziora et al., 2018). Despite these efforts, Watson (2018) substantiated a point that was supported by Kraft et al. (2018) that principals need to include school programs to address the needs of culturally different learners. Overall, more than 24 states have adopted school climate as

a whole school initiative to equip each child with culturally inclusive attitudes (Wang & Degol, 2016). According to Piscatelli and Lee (2011), school climate is a whole school program guided by principals to improve the quality and character of school life to include all stakeholders' culturally relevant experiences of norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. The National School Climate Center (2007) emphasized the need to develop a positive school climate to promote character education, children's healthy social and emotional development, an increase in academic achievement, and a decrease in dropouts with an increase in teacher retention. Principals' use of science improvement and in-school coaching programs introduced innovative ways for teachers to deliver a curriculum that engages culturally different learners in the classroom (Kraft et al., 2018; Watson, 2018). According to Owens (2018), the Tucson Unified School District in Arizona implemented the MAS, that leaders eventually revoked and replaced with HB2282, which made the teaching of MAS illegal in 2010.

Researchers have emphasized the need for future examination on how school leadership in Texas integrates cultural responsiveness in the delivery of the curriculum (Martinez & Everman, 2017; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). In separate studies, Keehne et al. (2018) and Milner (2016) identified the problem that middle school principals in southern Texas might not be implementing a culturally responsive curriculum. Researchers have focused on culturally relevant strategies in schools, but there is an existing gap that could be filled by examining the culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices of middle school principals in southern Texas (Murakami et al., 2017; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015; Scanlan et al., 2016).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH**

### **Research Design**

We selected an exploratory qualitative design because we needed to obtain the culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices of middle school principals in one location in southern Texas. Their experiences regarding culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices were essential to this study. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

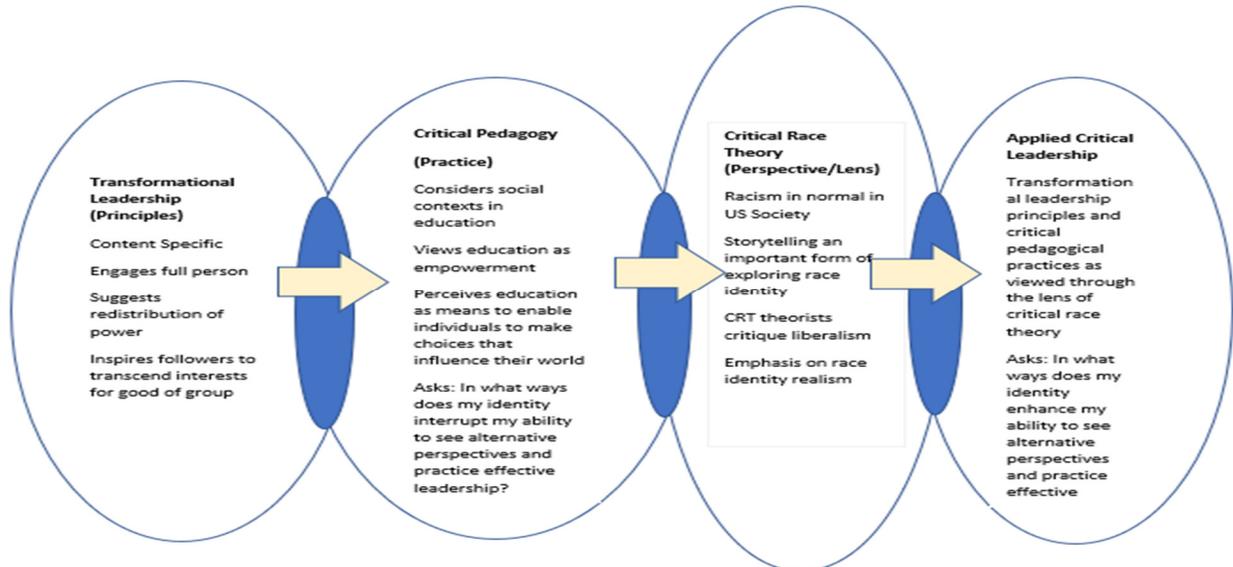
### **Conceptual Framework**

The applied critical leadership (ACL) conceptual framework, pioneered by Santamaría and Santamaría (2015), formed the basis of this study. The ACL comprises nine indicators of culturally responsive leadership practices. For Santamaría and Santamaría, the nine determinants that could be reflected in school leaders include the use of the critical race theory (CRT) to guide the analysis of issues, the use of empirical data by leaders to make informed academic decisions, encouraging a group consensus, having conversations on race and social injustice, acknowledging a stereotype threat, having a leader who is a role model, building trust, demonstrating servant leadership, and encouraging the voice of all stakeholders.

The indicators of ACL represented the guide in this study to explore the culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices of middle school principals in southern Texas. ACL symbolized the foundation of this study and predetermined the literary analysis to support the qualitative research design approach with the individual interview process. The indicators of the ACL conceptual framework informed the structuring of the

research questions we addressed in this study. Santamaría and Santamaría (2013) showed the intersection of the principles of transformational leadership, critical pedagogy and CRT to produce the ACL framework as seen in Figure 1

### *Depiction of ACL Framework*



### **Setting, Population/Participants**

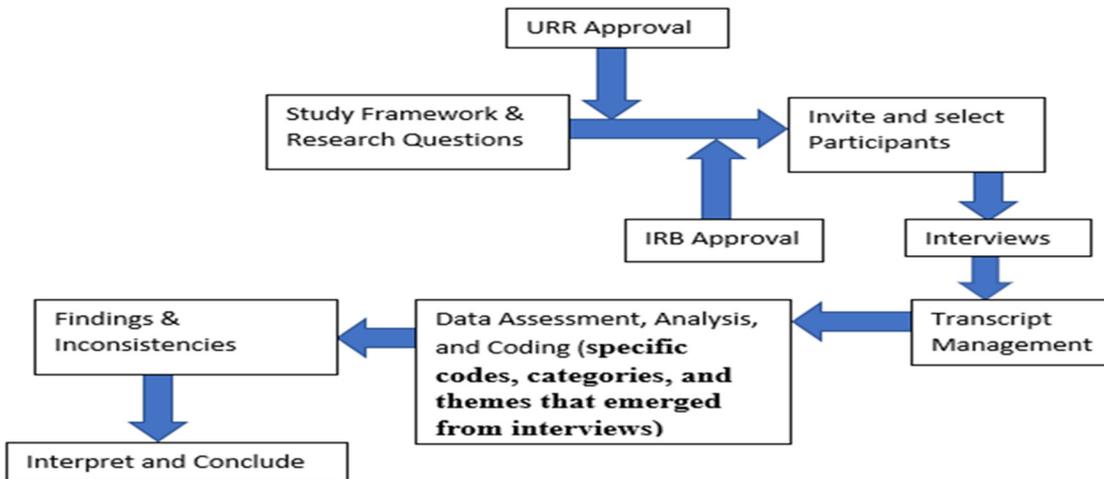
After obtaining IRB approval (Walden IRB #12-16-20-0975138), we purposefully selected 10 middle school principals as participants. The logic for participant selection included public middle school principals in southern Texas with 2 to 5 years' experience as a middle school principal and a diverse school population with a self-reported presence of minority ethnic groups in middle Grades 6, 7, and/or 8 with 300 to 1,200 enrolled students. We reached out to recruit participants by using the search link on LinkedIn to find middle school principals from southern Texas and sent requests to connect with them and their emails. The purposeful selection of middle school principals as participants for this study were set within a multicultural demographic outlook in southern Texas. These principals fulfilled the criteria for this study. Four of the participants were females. There were two Whites, four Blacks, and four Hispanics. Each of the 10 participants provided data for our study. The participants were from middle school in educational districts that span a large geographical area in southern Texas.

### **Data Collection, Coding, and Analysis**

Participants were anonymous to one another and were unaware that other interviews were conducted. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the resultant international travel restrictions, and the enforcement of social distancing requirements, we conducted the individual face-to-face video interviews on a licensed Zoom platform as approved by the IRB. Interviews were conducted over a period from December 2020 to January 2021. After reaching out to middle school principals in a semiurban area in southern Texas, we connected with the individuals who showed interest, fulfilled the criteria of the study, and consented voluntarily. Each of the 10 participants indicated a convenient time for the interviews, which were facilitated on Zoom Video Conferencing Platform. Figure 2 shows the logical flow of activities we followed in the data acquisition,

analysis, and management trail for this study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldaña, 2016). Data assessment and coding were done after the interview transcripts were de-identified and participants agreed that the information was correct. The face-to-face Zoom interviews were recorded on our computers and manually transcribed. We followed an interview guide, which included scaffolded open-ended questions aligned to the research questions and the ACL conceptual framework. After we transcribed the interviews in Microsoft Word, we sent them to the participants for their review.

**Figure 2 - Stepwise Logical Flow for This Study**



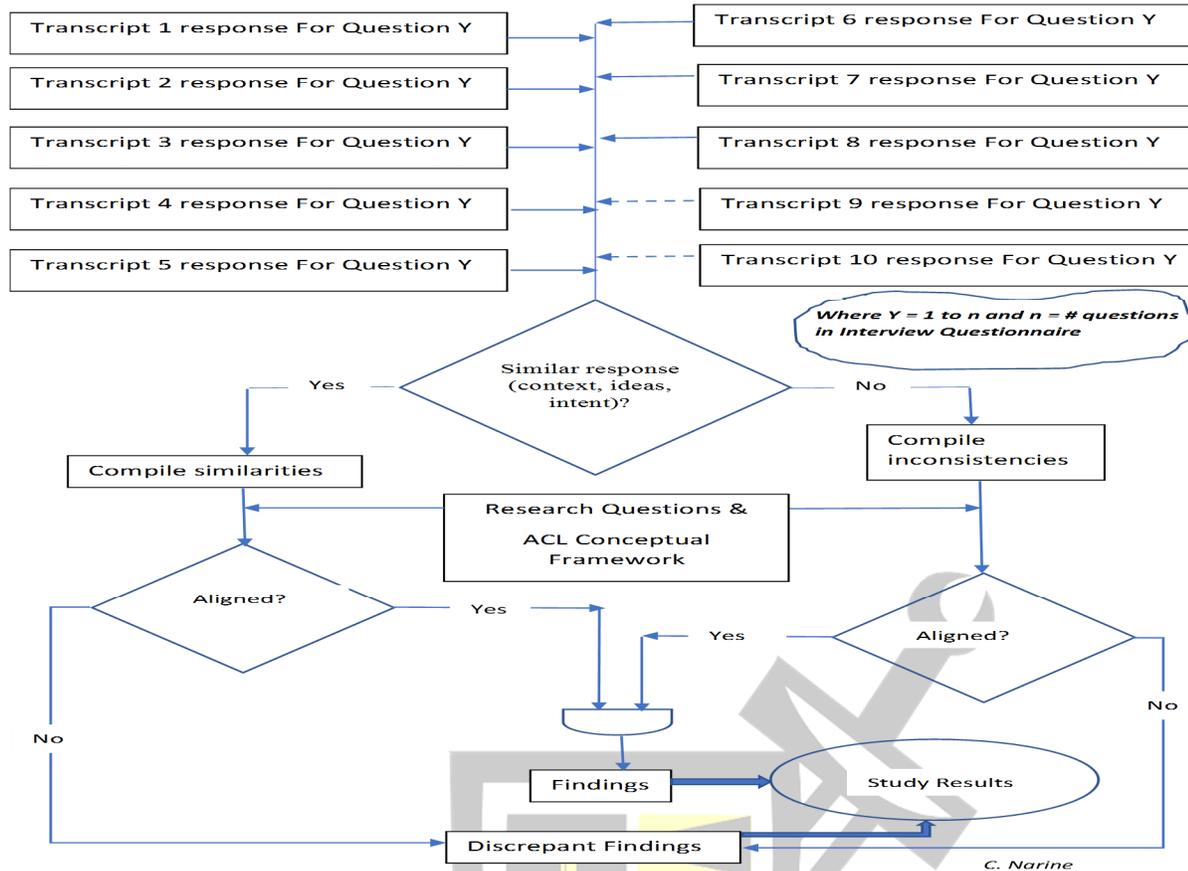
We used the information from the interview questions, in Table 1, and the relevant data in each participant response to these questions to identify emerging codes (Saldaña, 2016). The indicators from the ACL conceptual framework were also significant aligning factors that we considered and then did open coding. Similar emergent codes were then placed into emerging categories to answer the research questions which were aligned to the interview questions as shown in Table 1 (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldaña, 2016). Finally, the data were analyzed to identify similar categories for evolving and emerging themes.

**Table 1 - Categories and Themes**

Research questions	Interview questions	Categories	Themes
What are the beliefs and experiences of middle school principals about culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices in southern Texas?	What do you believe is the meaning of culturally responsiveness? Can you give examples?	Student needs Cultural appreciation and belongingness	The meaning of cultural responsiveness
	In what ways do you implement a culturally responsive curriculum in your school? Describe these ways and say how important they were to you.	Creating a culturally responsive curriculum (CRC) Curriculum implementation challenges	Culturally responsive curriculum (CRC) implementation
	Describe how you lead your staff and students. What are your strategies?	Building collaborative cultures Leadership strategies	Strategic leadership
	Describe your best leadership practices for a diverse school population. In what ways would you say you are a transformative leader?	Leadership behaviors for diversity Transformative leadership practices	Transformative culturally responsive leadership practices
What do middle school principals consider as they develop and implement a culturally responsive curriculum as part of their leadership practices in southern Texas?	Describe your experiences in developing and implementing a culturally responsive curriculum. Give examples of how you support your teachers in the delivery of the curriculum.	Exemplars of culturally responsive curriculum implementation	Experiencing culturally responsive curriculum (CRC) implementation
	How do you approach issues of race and social injustice? Can you give examples.	Approach to issues	Leadership approaches to racial and social injustice
What are your beliefs on leadership? How do you think your beliefs help or hinder your leadership role?	In what ways do all stakeholders have a voice in your school? Can you give examples?	“Collectiveness of everyone” Students’ voice Teachers’ voice Parents’ voice Community voice	Stakeholders’ voice
	What are your beliefs on leadership? How do you think your beliefs help or hinder your leadership role?	Beliefs Hindrances	The effect of beliefs on principals’ leadership role
What do middle school principals consider as they develop and implement a culturally responsive curriculum as part of their leadership practices in southern Texas?	Describe the issues you believe affect your students and teachers in and out of school. Can you give examples and say how you support them when they experience issues?	Students’ struggles Teachers’ issues School support	Supporting student and teacher issues

The strategy, as shown in Figure 3 guided the compilation of findings built from the similar codes, categories, and themes that evolved from our analysis of the participant provided responses. The context, intent and ideas they provided were assessed against the research questions and the ACL conceptual framework that overarched this study and found to be aligned. Findings from this focus were kept in line with the intent of the study.

**Figure 3 - Process for Determining Findings and Inconsistencies**



## RESULTS

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices of middle school principals in southern Texas.

**RQ1: What are the beliefs and experiences of middle school principals about culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices in southern Texas?**

#### *Theme # 1: Meaning of cultural responsiveness*

Meaning of cultural responsiveness was the beliefs and experiences of participants about culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices and how that evolved from their understanding and appreciation of the students’ needs. Participants voiced that cultural responsiveness is being “sensitive to everybody” and who should feel “a sense of belonging.” They revealed the significance of culturally responsive “classroom pedagogy” where students learn about “specific cultures” while enabling the creation of “cultural appreciation and belongingness.”

***Theme # 2: Culturally responsive curriculum implementation***

Culturally Responsive Curriculum Implementation was the principal's ideas and strategies for inclusive teaching so that all students identify with the curriculum. The implementation of a CRC emanated from participants creating strategic ways to meet the diverse needs of their students despite inherent challenges. Notwithstanding a mandated curriculum administered by the school districts and an identified deficiency "without any theme on cultural responsiveness", middle school principals who participated in this study promoted "creating a culturally responsive curriculum."

***Theme # 3: Strategic leadership***

Strategic leadership was the planned management focus of the principal for the implementation of CRC at their school. For participants, building collaborative cultures and practicing effective management behaviors resulted from and represented strategic leadership. Participants agreed that collaboration among school administration, teachers and students were significant positives for effective leadership. Participants proffered certain behaviors which were beneficial for strategic leadership. This was apparent in their response that it was "good to be present" adding that there should be "clear expectations" because "you are an example of what you want."

***Theme # 4: Transformative culturally responsive leadership practices***

Transformative culturally responsive leadership practices were the adopted proactive, collaborative, and solution-oriented leadership strategies that principals employ to achieve CRC initiatives. They honed ideas and input from all stakeholders including, parents, teachers, members of the community, and the school district. They reported that with this involvement, student behavior and attitudes were shaped by parents and the community. That way, there was a synchronism that auger well for students' success and improved school performance and outcomes. Participants were out front communicating with staff and students by assuming duties as hall monitors regularly, "breaking up fights," and maintaining order and discipline. Participants practiced leadership behaviors for diverse students and inculcated transformative leadership practices. Fundamental requirements of good leadership, according to participants, were for individuals to be aware of their personal biases, strengths, level of understanding, and to use these to build trust and to encourage followers to superior performance and success.

**RQ2: What do middle school principals consider as they develop and implement a culturally responsive curriculum as part of their leadership practices in southern Texas?**

***Theme # 5: Experiencing culturally responsive curriculum (CRC) implementation***

Experiencing CRC implementation was the realization of expected responses and reactions by the students, teachers, and the school district to CRC initiatives. One participant reiterated that "there is no School District or standard way of addressing social and cultural uniqueness and differences; we don't have necessarily a curriculum that surround you know culture responsiveness" Despite this, all participants considered the talents and abilities of their

staff and students as they developed and implemented a culturally responsive curriculum as part of their leadership practices in southern Texas. Participants had no standard ways of addressing CRC. They adapted to their specific school environment and culture from situational responses which became the procedure within the distinct school environment. Middle school principals considered their experiences, proven CRC exemplars, their approaches to racial and social injustice, their beliefs which could affect their role, stakeholders' voice and how they could support students and teachers as they developed and implemented a culturally responsive curriculum as part of their leadership practices in southern Texas.

### ***Theme # 6: Leadership approaches to racial and social injustice***

Leadership approaches to racial and social injustice represented the ways that principals addressed issues of ethnicity and inequity. Participants stressed equal treatment for all despite how challenging the situation might be and even if the consequences were severe. Being proactive, dealing with the issues immediately, using a restorative approach and not leaving issues open-ended were relevant in the approaches to racial and social injustice.

### ***Theme # 7: Stakeholders' voice***

Stakeholders' voice was the principal ideas about how to include and involve students, teachers, parents, and the wider community for positive CRC implementation and outcomes at school. A collaborative culture extended to having open positive communication supported by an open-door policy when working directly with a staff, for a clear way forward. There were opportunities to voice concerns formally or informally. Participants termed inclusion as a collectiveness of everyone when all the stakeholders have voice and building relationships.

### ***Theme # 8: The effect of beliefs on principals' leadership role***

The effect of beliefs on principals' leadership role represented the individual perspectives on best leadership skills and competencies necessary for CRC implementation. Participants considered their leadership beliefs, stakeholders' voice and support when developing and implementing a CRC. It was relevant that the beliefs of principals might affect their leadership role. Principals believed in a leadership based on "inclusion," "representation" and "transparency" with a positive intent that supported inclusion for overall student success. A belief of "talking the talk and walking the talk" was common among several participants who reflected on this to symbolize transparency in the leader's expectations.

### ***Theme # 9: Supporting student and teacher issues***

Supporting student and teacher issues was the individual's understanding of the best ways to address challenges experienced by students and teachers. Participants spoke to social issues such as poverty, crime, absent parents, single parents, and challenges of the LGBTQ community as typically requiring school leadership understanding, appreciation, and support, especially the strategy for negotiating and addressing the best way forward.

## Combined Results on Cultural Responsiveness Factors

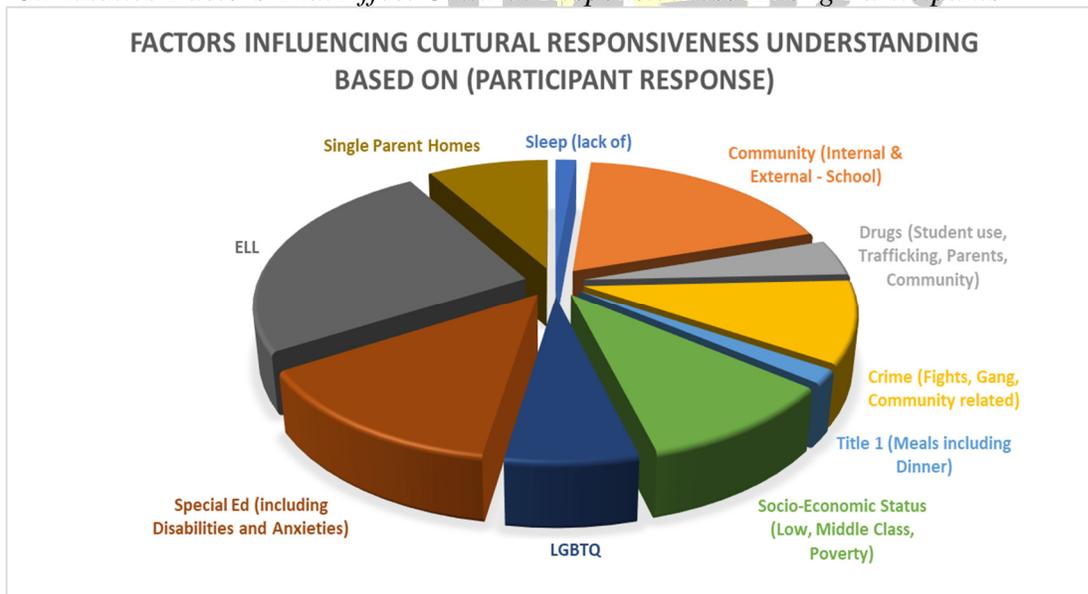
Participants highlighted the certain factors which they thought influenced and, in some ways may hinder the implementation of cultural responsiveness in their school. They highlighted student issues such as socio-economic, which led to poverty, and other challenges such as drugs, crime, gangs, lack of structure at home, not having sufficient food and absenteeism from school. Their concern was that although they were implementing a culturally responsive curriculum, they were not always supported by parents, the majority of whom were notably absent. Notwithstanding, the participants acknowledged that the school district needed to be more supportive and actively involved in promoting a more culturally responsive curriculum.

Factors influencing Cultural Responsiveness understanding and appreciation are highlighted in Figure 4. The common factors and social realities, that prompted principals, as participants in this study were the

- socioeconomic status of the families of students who attended these schools
- communities where the schools were located
- level of crime and drug use or abuse in these communities
- prevalence of gang activities
- single-parent homes, the level of education of parents, lonely and depressed students
- presence of these and whether were able to help students and create a stable environment for their children to focus on schoolwork, online gaming
- presence of self-identified language learners, special ed recipients and LGBTQs and the different levels of attention and support these individuals needed

**Figure 4**

*Cumulative Factors That Affect Cultural Responsiveness Among Participants*



## Interpretation of Findings

This study extended on previous works by scholars who employed the ACL conceptual framework. Santamaría and Jean-Marie (2014) and Santamaría and Santamaría (2014) focused on female and non-White principals. Aho and Quaye (2018) applied the ACL framework to higher education. Jayavant (2016) concentrated on primary schools. In this study, results were informed by the ACL indicators, the critical race theory (CRT), the use of empirical data by servant leaders to make informed decisions, supported group consensus, conversations on race and social injustice, and the participants saw themselves as role models and builders of trust and encouraged the voice of all stakeholders.

Our study, with the focus on middle school, expanded on current knowledge by exploring the cultural responsiveness curriculum implementation leadership practices of 10 White, non-Whites, male, and female principals in southern Texas. The findings supported Santamaría and Santamaría's (2013) strategies that reflecting critical pedagogy in the school curriculum could be adopted in the classroom. These results build on previous knowledge to include whole school restorative approaches as resolutions to racial and social injustice, and these solutions can be translated into learning opportunities in the classroom. Furthermore, our study indicated that leaders had an ability to promote collaboration and collective efficacy, which were critical for effective culturally responsive curriculum implementation practices. These findings endorsed the promotion of racial and social justice and educational equity, which is significant for minority learners in schools (see Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012, 2013). Apart from emphasizing the importance of stakeholders' voice, the participating principals accepted that there was a disconnection between school policy and the curriculum.

The conclusion of this study that servant leadership as an ACL indicator was manifested in the strategic leadership of participants was related to articles by Aho and Quaye (2018), Santamaría and Santamaría (2014, 2015, 2016), and Seto and Sarros (2016). These authors underlined that school principals as leaders should be role models demonstrating consistent behaviors that reflected and referenced the expectations of their teachers. Our study extended on the findings of these scholars by identifying, that participants in this study displayed servant leadership behavior that was synonymous with principals foregoing their self-interest and beliefs to achieve the objectives of the school.

Participants in this study confirmed that they initiated professional development for teachers, which resonated as the extra effort teachers make to understand their students. There was a synchronism that augers well for students' success and improved school performance and outcomes. Fundamental requirements of good leadership for participants were to be aware of their personal biases, strengths, and level of understanding and to use this to build trust and to encourage followers to superior performance and success. Participants in this study recognized that each student was unique, and each situation, where attention became necessary, was similarly distinctive. Participants were committed to doing right with self-respect and integrity. The responses from interviewees in our study extended the work of Civitillo et al. (2018) and Santamaría (2009) conclusion from teachers to middle school principals as being individuals who were interested in the learning needs of their students and were very reflective and introspected on their practice.

While all principals in this study collected data, some of them stressed the importance of empirical data more than others, and thus there was no unanimity or consensus on the importance of data use. They emphasized, however, that data drove their response action to school issues.

Their data were relevant for planning because it indicated whether their students were at risk, struggling, or displaying behavioral challenges. Articles by Bode et al. (2012) and Santamaría and Santamaría (2015) endorsed the value of a principal making planning-type decisions based on empirical data as one of the ACL indicators.

### **Limitations**

A possible limitation was the use of LinkedIn to recruit middle school principals. We accessed the intended 10 participants for this study via LinkedIn which could be replicated as a platform to access participants for future studies. Before the data collection phase, there was a possibility that the decision to only seek participants using LinkedIn, could have led to the exclusion of other middle school principals whose curriculum implementation leadership practices may have been valuable to this study. The individual principals who agreed to be participants, proved that a high-quality field of participants contributed to the study. The risk of sufficient and suitable participants being unavailable or not willing to contribute did not materialize. The study's strategy and approach were effective when the existing Covid-19 Pandemic situation and impact are considered.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this study indicated that the ACL conceptual framework can be used for research to affirm whether the culturally responsive curriculum implementation and practices of middle school principals are relevant at the elementary and secondary schools in southern Texas. The ACL conceptual framework was relevant for this study and is versatile and transferable as was proffered by Jayavant (2016) who used ACL to explore primary school principals in New Zealand. It is recommended that further research in the United States and other countries can address the culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices of middle school principals and other critical leaders such as supervisors and district superintendents who may influence curriculum implementation. Employing the ACL framework in these other locations can add valuable findings for principals to support teachers in the delivery of a culturally responsive curriculum for improved students' success, and to foster a sense of belongingness in diverse settings.

The scope of this study can be extended to determine how effective principals' curriculum culturally responsive approaches have been in the schools where these have been adapted with the official sanction of the district. Furthermore, how culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practice influence and impact on student performance or school success is recommended for further research. Further research is essential to examine abnormal curriculum issues which depict exceptions to the norm. Participants adapted to the curriculum by utilizing different strategies. Although the NCLB and ESSA have been addressed by scholars in previous works, this study's findings revealed that there is non-standardized procedure in navigating a culturally responsive curriculum. Ladd (2017), Mathis and Trujillo (2016) and Saultz et al. (2019) corroborated that the history of school reform was "flawed" and in need of "repair." Carey et al. (2017), Khalifa (2018) and Khalifa et al. (2016) concurred that

there was no culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership model for principals and teachers.

As a result of low socio-economic status of students being identified by nine participants as affecting a culturally responsive curriculum implementation there is prospect for future studies focusing on this issue. This study supported the findings of DeMathews (2016) and Wun (2018) that societal issues can negatively affect school discipline and delivery of a culturally responsive curriculum. The link between the school and home was reinforced by Carey et al. (2017) and Knight-Manuel et al. (2019). Participants linked the lack of parental involvement to students coming from socio-economic disadvantaged households.

It will be useful for researchers to consider whether culturally responsiveness strategies can be a vehicle for parental support which can positively impact students.

It is recommended and relevant to further examine if low socio-economic status shaped the cultural responsiveness in schools and if so, would communities that are susceptible to crime, drugs and poverty have a similar impact. Of particular importance is whether the Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated and adversely affected the culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices regarding socio-economically disadvantaged students.

### **Significance**

The study adds knowledge to the culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices of middle school principals within a diverse environment. This new awareness informs educators on relevant practices that they may appropriately apply to the curriculum delivery in their schools. In their research, Murakami et al. (2017) and Santamaría and Santamaría (2015) focused on the culturally responsive practices of principals in elementary schools and states other than Texas. Addressing this problem in middle schools provided educational policymakers with valuable information to standardize culturally integrative curriculum practices for school leaders in diverse environments. The information may lead to curriculum modifications to enhance cultural relevance. This study's social change implications could be evident in the schools and transcend into positive social integration in the wider society. Principals may improve practice and positively impact teachers' pedagogy to influence the inclusion of immigrant children in schools and the wider community. Roberts and Guerra (2016) have underscored that the sharing of participants' experiences and practices might inform leaders on how to prepare and manage new school-based programs. Equity, mindfulness, and tolerance of diverse groups by educators may translate into the wider society. The findings of this study could lead to the establishment of learning communities and promote the interaction of schools with stakeholders.

### **Social Change Implications**

Non-standard or inconsistent application of cultural responsiveness knowledge and skills by principals may negatively influence, and contribute to the exclusion of students from enjoying acceptance and belongingness at school. Cultural responsiveness as it relates to curriculum implementation, today, means the principal's understanding of the evolving needs of an individual or group of different race, religion, class, gender, personal preferences, experiences, performance, and community which is indicative of positive social change. The ability of the principal, with that understanding, to address these needs, consistently catalyze positive and

meaningful social change will likely be different in the advent of a leadership change at the school. If that happens, the impact can be unexpected and unwanted by the school population.

Participants' proactive, collaborative, solution oriented, and transformative leadership strategy generated ideas and input from all stakeholders including, parents, students, teachers, members of the community, and the school district to reflect positive social change. That leadership approach allowed for sharing of ideas, buy-in and support for new initiatives and enhanced efforts for addressing relevant issues and to maintain a presence and measure of social control. Principals elsewhere in the United States, especially in areas where there is an acute cultural influence, can benefit from a deliberate focus on a culturally responsive curriculum implementation approach to address the situational needs of students at school.

The implications for policymaking, social integration, inclusionary culturally responsive practices and limiting intersectionality were evident in this study and augur for positive social change for the individual, the school and the wider society. The awareness for school policy and curricula changes imply action for educational policymakers to connect with the individual and the organizational needs to consider the implementation of a culturally responsive curriculum. Social integration emanates from educational leaders who may not encourage exclusionary practices and intersectionality. These leadership behaviors positively affect students, teachers and parents translating from the mainstream of the school into the wider society, resulting in positive social change.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to explore the culturally responsive curriculum implementation leadership practices of ten (10) middle school principals in southern Texas. All the participants acknowledged cultural responsiveness as important for curriculum implementation and they tailored it to allow the school population to associate it with the lessons being taught in the classroom. It was important that participants identified situational cultural responses whereby they addressed issues in and out of the classroom and shaped curriculum cultural responsiveness accordingly. Principals were strategically proactive and transformative, but this was initiated by previous events.

The downside of non-standard application of these principles were not fully explored and should be the subject of further and more focused research. There were unanswered questions on how to make curriculum culturally relevant to a continuously changing society based upon the knowledge educators envisaged should be imparted to children by the end of a particular school level. If that knowledge was not being aligned to the existing social reality, then the principal's effort might be futile in influencing and enabling students to attain and maintain sufficient understanding and feel that they belong at the school. Crime, drugs, gang violence and the unique familial circumstances were the major concerns of principals whose responsibilities were to try to support teachers in developing and implementing a curriculum to be delivered to students in that environment. The racial composition of certain communities and schools was continuously changing resulting in different cultural influences. Apart from race, there was the LGBTQ presence, which was not new, but the emphasis and elevated awareness were evident and likely to influence further changes to the cultural landscape in schools. Their inalienable right to equity, to be seen, heard, and desire to be accepted were inescapable. The curriculum cannot be culturally responsive to or limited to Blacks, Hispanics, Whites, Others, or LGBTQ but should be inclusive; with learners having choices among a myriad of cultural knowledge.

Collaboration emerged as strategic leadership in this study, but the non-standard ways these principals employed to implement a culturally responsive curriculum might be unique to their school culture and not transferable to other school environments. The need for a standardized policy to address a culturally responsive curriculum is inevitable.

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