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RECEIVED 13 February 2024

ACCEPTED 21 March 2024

PUBLISHED 05 April 2024

CITATION

Mansfield KC and Lambrinou M (2024)
Culturally responsive leadership: a critical
analysis of one school district's five-year plan.
Front. Educ. 9:1385788.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2024.1385788

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Culturally responsive leadership: a critical analysis of one school district's five-year plan

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Centering the need for culturally responsive leadership (CRL), this study engages in a critical analysis of one large urban school district's 5-year plan that aims to be culturally responsive and equity focused. We first define the various facets of CRL, connect its major components to culturally responsive teaching/pedagogy (CRTPE) and student voice (SV), and offer an original, integrative framework as a tool for analysis. We argue that CRL is not enough on its own and needs more than the commitment of principals to reach its maximum potential. We also provide recommendations on what needs to happen to make culturally responsive schooling a reality for students and their communities.

KEYWORDS

culturally responsive leadership, culturally responsive teaching, student voice, equity, capacity building

Introduction

Entering the city of Alexandria, located only 7 miles from Washington, DC, one immediately experiences a respite from the hustle and bustle of the city, and is met with a quiet charm as one encounters its attractive waterfront and the quaint shops lining neatly constructed cobblestone pavements. At first glance, the city is wealthy, but not obscenely so. Instead, one is more captivated by *Old Town's* well-preserved colonial architecture, quaint boutiques, and plethora of bougie restaurants. Yet, Alexandria also boasts a vibrant community, one marked by diversity: a large African American population and a growing migrant and refugee population bringing together communities from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Contrary to most of the state, Northern Virginia is considered strongly liberal, with the Alexandria City Council a Democratic majority ([City of Alexandria, 2024](https://www.alexandriava.gov/city-council/)).

However, these current developments and the city's aesthetics are the pretty veil cast over a troubled history marred by its legacy of racism, beginning with the prominent role it played as the headquarters for slave market operations in Virginia in the decades preceding the American Civil War ([Mello-Klein, 2020](https://www.alexandriava.gov/history/)). More recently, in the 1950s, '60s, '70s and even into the 1980s and 1990s, systemic racism continued to hold the city's inhabitants in its grip, with city and school leaders resisting federal mandates to desegregate schools. These troubled years also saw an increase in law enforcement inflicting violence upon communities of color, while local governments restricted access to clean water and healthcare for minoritized populations. These conditions prompted backlash by Black community leaders, including student mobilization, whose resistance efforts included a call to rename public schools bearing the names of former educators who worked to keep Black Americans from learning alongside their White peers. While many African American citizens worked tirelessly for several decades,

it seemed change would never come. That is, until its first Black Superintendent of Schools arrived: Gregory C. Hutchings, Jr.

Dr. Hutchings made clear, before and after being hired as Superintendent, that he was going to address racism and embrace the inclusion of families, students, and local leaders to truly understand community needs. One of the first things he did was lead a team of people to develop the school district's five-year plan.

The call for culturally responsive leadership

There is a growing call among higher education and K-12 professionals, as well as parents and community members, for leaders of educational organizations to be culturally responsive (Johnson, 2007, 2014; Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018). The theory of action behind culturally responsive leadership is multifaceted but holds promise to address many societal issues that intersect with students' experiences in school. For example, systemic racism continues to manifest in schools in the form of over-disproportionality of Black students in school discipline (Mansfield et al., 2018) and under-proportionality of Black students in gifted and other advanced programming (Mansfield, 2015b). Khalifa (2018) argued that cultural responsiveness is necessary to address these and other inequities and for overall effective school leadership. Khalifa also contended that to be sustained (as well as adopted in the first place), cultural responsiveness must be supported at the top. But what is culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL)? And how can superintendents and school board members support its development and sustainability? Furthermore, what are the relationships between CRSL and teachers' responsibilities? How does culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy (CRTTP) fit with the roles of a CRSL? And what do students have to do with any of this?

Similar to Johnson (2007, 2014) we explore connections across the leadership, teaching, and pedagogy literature to trouble over these questions. However, our work is unique in that we push further into underexplored territory by including the student voice literature in our theoretical development. We achieve this via a critical analysis of one American urban school district's 5-year plan that aims to be equity-focused and culturally responsive. We then use our original framework to determine whether, and if so, how this district's vision aligns with the principles of culturally responsive leadership. Findings lead to a discussion of implications for school districts generally, but individual schools in particular, on what needs to happen to make culturally responsive leadership a reality for students and their communities. But first, we share a review of the literature that draws from research in school leadership, teaching, pedagogy, and student voice to show the power and potential of coupling the knowledge across these interdisciplinary fields to truly understand the multiple dimensions of culturally responsive schooling that inform a way forward.

The multiple dimensions of culturally responsive leadership

In this section of the article, we share major themes in the extant literature that undergird the research on culturally responsive

schooling: culturally responsive school leadership, culturally responsive teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, and student voice. In addition, we provide a data display that provides a thematic analysis of the literature with citations for each theme (see [Supplementary Table S1](#)). Our purpose for creating this tool is four-fold: First, it provides a graphic organizer to show how some of the themes cut across all four literature areas (or not), while also providing a helpful visual that spurs future discussion about what the implications of these differences might be. Second, it offers a quick reference for readers who may desire exploring one of the themes more deeply for their own research endeavors. Third, this tool helps us keep our narrative easier to read by sharing our sources and meaning making in table form rather than inserting copious in-text citations for each point we make. And finally, per Miles and Huberman (1994), the research team used the data display as a starting point for our data analysis and eventual conclusion drawing (see [Supplementary Table S1](#)).

Culturally responsive school leadership

Much of the research on culturally responsive leadership dovetails with the literature on leadership for social justice (Johnson, 2014; Lac and Mansfield, 2018) with both focusing on key characteristics that socially just and culturally responsive leaders demonstrate and integrate in their everyday practice as school leaders. Some of these characteristics can be considered internal work; for example, leaders developing a deep understanding of their own cultural identities as well as taking the time to actively increase their understanding of others (Khalifa et al., 2016). This is the internal work necessary for moving toward a deeper knowledge of the histories, traditions, and values of the families and students in their schools, as well as the community within which their school is embedded (Radd et al., 2021; Ishimaru, 2022). These leaders work hard to develop what some call cultural competence (Gay, 2000) which opens leaders' eyes to the systemic barriers and inequities that affect different cultural groups as well as a commitment to address these hurdles and injustices in their schools (Khalifa, 2018). Undergirding all of this internal work is a robust respect and appreciation for diversity and inclusion that centers minoritized voices and values stakeholders' unique contributions (Fernández and Paredes-Scribner, 2018). Taken together, these key characteristics and commitments bolster the change that families have been advocating for generations: Having leaders who advocate for equitable policies and practices that promote fairness and social justice so that students thrive and grow and learn, while also honoring their backgrounds and/or identities (Newcomb and Mansfield, 2014). For example, if dismantling disproportionality in school discipline and/or advanced programming is a goal, then it is essential that school folk couple that work with a commitment to combating personal biases and assumptions (Khalifa et al., 2016; Radd et al., 2021).

But leaders, culturally responsive or not, cannot do their work successfully on their own. In fact, the general leadership literature has touted for decades the importance of developing and deploying effective communication strategies and styles to meet the needs of the school communities so that everyone feels seen and heard (Mansfield and Jean-Marie, 2015). Moreover, there has been a call since the 1980s for school leaders to actively seek input from diverse stakeholders. Further, to successfully enact their agenda, effective leaders build

collaborations and partnerships across a variety of communities, involve a diverse array of people in decision-making, and work to ensure parents and other community members feel valued for their perspectives and expertise (DeMatthews, 2018; Fernández and Paredes-Scribner, 2018; Ishimaru, 2022).

Culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy

First, the literatures of both culturally-responsive teaching and culturally-responsive pedagogy align with what the culturally-responsive leadership literature has to say about the imperative for educators to build authentic relationships and develop an understanding of their students' cultural backgrounds and histories (Howard, 2007). However, both go further than much of the leadership literature in stressing ways teachers' beliefs and their pedagogy emanate from the knowledge of the cultural strengths and assets that students bring to the classroom (Yosso, 2005). That is, culturally responsive teachers hold high expectations for all students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds (Will and Najarro, 2022). They believe in the capabilities of every student and provide the necessary support and resources to help them succeed. Moreover, teachers must create a safe and inclusive classroom environment where students feel respected, valued, and connected (Jackson, 2020; Brown et al., 2022). Similarly, culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy both emphasize the importance of teachers encouraging students to develop their own critical consciousness by critically analyzing and challenging social inequities (Lac and Mansfield, 2018).

Like culturally-responsive leadership, both culturally-responsive teaching and culturally-responsive pedagogy stress the importance of developing good communication with families. However, culturally responsive pedagogy goes further by demanding that educators value and validate students' home language and communication styles (Fernández and Paredes-Scribner, 2018; Ishimaru, 2022) and create a language-rich environment that supports language diversity (Howard, 2021). Moreover, culturally responsive pedagogy places students at the center of the learning process. Teachers engage students in meaningful dialog and collaborative activities that draw on their cultural backgrounds (Cook-Sather, 2007). Additionally, culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy employ a variety of instructional strategies and incorporate culturally relevant content that connect with students' lives and experiences (Jackson, 2022).

Student voice

The student voice literature magnifies all of the qualities and characteristics that we have discussed thus far, especially the ideals of culturally responsive pedagogy, as amplified in the writings of Paulo Freire (Lac and Mansfield, 2018). However, there are some central tenets of student voice theory that we believe (and research has shown) that exponentially enhance the power and potential of culturally responsive leadership, especially if coupled with culturally responsive teaching, and pedagogy. These tenets center on issues of sharing power, honoring agency, and developing capacity, as well as the importance of democratic schooling and engaging citizenship as ways to resist harmful neoliberal reforms.

For example, student voice scholars stringently challenge what they view as undemocratic practices in schools, especially how daily life centers on restricting students' interactions with each other and with the learning process. This literal silencing is not only damaging to individual students but stifles the overarching culture of what should be a constructiv(e)ist learning community (Lac and Mansfield, 2018; Smith, 2020). Instead, focusing on ways to include student voice in schools helps steer us away from a compliance model that entails students' active involvement in their own learning, even within the context of standardization and accountability (Waters, 2011; Bourke and Loveridge, 2018; Nelson, 2018). A recognition of student agency, along with a commitment to student voice and active involvement, spurs growth and strengthens feelings of self-efficacy—essential components for young people to feel empowered and turn their focus outward to make a difference in their schools and communities (Mitra, 2008; Welton and Freelon, 2018; Smith, 2020). Ginwright and Cammarota (2006) link this growth to the imperatives of democracy:

The only chance for democracy to expand in the next generation is for young people to be perceived of and treated as vital agents of social transformation. Limiting their agency by undermining their efforts to improve community conditions will render them objects of knowledge—vessels to be filled. The advancement of an active and engaged citizenry requires the edifying practice of acknowledging and supporting youth agency, and young people's capacity to become subjects of knowledge and social transformation. (p. xix)

But creating a democratic organization requires sharing power and giving members of a community chances to govern themselves and practice citizenship (Giroux, 1986, 2003; Fielding, 2001, 2004, 2011; Lundy, 2007; Taylor and Robinson, 2009; Gartrell, 2012; Sargeant and Gillett-Swan, 2015; Wood et al., 2018; Connor, 2020). This aligns with the US leadership standards that assert that principals and superintendents share leadership and power with *stakeholders* (Brasof, 2015; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). And as the student voice advocates say, school leaders should invite the people who literally have a *stake* in what happens in schools to the proverbial decision-making table (Lac and Mansfield, 2018). There are a number of ways students can practice citizenship behaviors; for example, students at all ages can determine class commitments (formerly known as "rules") at the beginning of the year as well as lead meetings throughout the year, which works especially well for implementing programs such as restorative discipline practices (Mansfield et al., 2018). These activities harken back to the work of John Dewey who posited that including students in school governance carries over into citizenship behaviors as adults (Mitra and Serriere, 2015), an important reason student voice scholars critique many neoliberal reforms such as scripted curricula, standardized testing, and zero-tolerance discipline policies (Bourke and Loveridge, 2018) (see Supplementary Table S2).

Materials and methods

This article is based on a long-term ethnographic study that examined the processes and outcomes of organizational change spurred by students and supported by administrators across the

spectrum (school principal, district superintendent, local governing board). We chose to study the experiences of Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) as they transitioned to an equity-centered, culturally responsive leadership approach to schooling across the district. The local news was replete with reports about the new African American superintendent who was hired especially for his commitment to affect change via his commitment to social justice. Post-hire, follow-up news reports shared snippets of the district's 5-year strategic plan that reflected the talking points of earlier news reports, including changes on the school board toward a more diverse body who spoke publicly about their commitments to anti-racism.

Background of the case

As a Virginia school district located in the Old South, ACPS was complicit in preserving Alexandria's racial status quo and enforcing systemic racial oppression. For example, in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, ACPS played an important role in the Massive Resistance Movement (MRM). This was led by Alexandria's long-time racist superintendent, Thomas Chambliss (TC) Williams, who openly embraced eugenics beliefs of the intellectual inferiority of Black people. The MRM in Virginia went so far as to shutter schools altogether rather than comply with the US Supreme Court's decisions.¹ Then, in the 1960s and '70s, Superintendent Williams feigned to comply with integrating schools while also funneling Black students in special education classes and other racialized academic tracking. Eventually, the Alexandria City community honored Thomas Chambliss (TC) Williams' life of service in the region by naming their high school after him.

Resistance to the TC Williams' heritage in Alexandria continued for decades in various ways. The most recent resistance efforts by the Black community intensified in 2017 after a sizable white supremacist group marched with fiery torches at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.² In addition, the video-recording of the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police reinvigorated demands for racial justice, including the removal of Confederate monuments in numerous Virginia cities (Miles, 2020). These and other events ignited Black students in Alexandria City Public Schools to topple the damaging legacy of TC Williams by changing the name of their school and dismantling the vestiges of within school segregation and unfair treatment of students of color (Mansfield and Lambrinou, 2022).

These events, along with the hiring of equity-oriented superintendent, Dr. Gregory Hutchings in 2019 proved to be a catalyst for change (Alexandria Living Magazine, 2022). Superintendent Hutchings, Alexandria's first Black Superintendent, voiced his support for anti-racist initiatives and systemic change early in his tenure and was instrumental in inviting student ambassadors, including student school board representatives, as well as others in the TC Williams

student community, to take charge of the school renaming process and push for more wholesale policy changes.

Data collection and analysis

Our first stage of research focused on the contextual (historical, socio-cultural, political) factors that led to and guided policy change, the roles students played in the change process, and ways the superintendent, principal, and school board members responded to students' policy leadership (Mansfield and Lambrinou, 2022). Data collection included attending 16 ACPS sanctioned community events. Due to COVID-19, these public events could not be attended in person. Rather, ACPS audio and video recorded each session and made them available to the public on their website. Primary sources also included hundreds of documents that included results of community surveys, meeting agendas, videos of school board meetings, and copies of reports which included Superintendent Hutchings' 5-year plan: The focus of this article.

Our analytical process included several readings of the strategic plan individually, using the *A priori* thematic material derived from our literature review (Supplementary Table S1). Following Miles and Huberman (1994), we engaged in episodes of data reduction such as discarding themes that lacked support or clustering themes in order to create greater focus. We then created a second data display (Supplementary Table S2) which Miles and Huberman describe as "an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action" (p. 11). Each researcher compiled a data display individually before sharing our interpretations with each other. Together, we discussed and agreed upon the final chart that indicates the major themes and accompanying concepts.³

Findings

Our analysis of ASP's strategic plan yielded five distinct themes: a) cultural self-awareness (including awareness of biases), competence, and respect for diversity; b) focus on equity and the district's steps for action-oriented change; c) improving communication and developing relationships with stakeholders, including community partnerships and family engagement; d) a student centered focus encompassing high expectations for students, differentiation strategies, as well as culturally relevant and responsive content and instructional practices, and e) the development of capacity building and potential for shared leadership with both students and school based personnel.

Cultural self-awareness, competence and respect for diversity

The district's plan embraces the diversity present in the student body, highlighting that they comprise students from "119 countries... and 120 languages spoken" (ACPS, 2020, p. 4). However, school leaders also acknowledge that the "fight for equity is far from over"

1 For additional details, please, consult the following online archives stored at the Library of Virginia: <https://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/brown/browndocs.htm>.

2 Counter protesters eventually arrived, followed by threats of violence from white supremacists on the scene. Heather Heyer was purposely attacked and killed (and 5 others were hospitalized) after a "deadly vehicular incident" (Bey, 2017).

3 Please refer to Supplementary Table S2 for the data display capturing the agreed upon final chart that reports the major themes and accompanying concepts.

(p. 4), calling attention to entrenched biases while underscoring that the recognition and understanding of their troubled racial past and the enduring legacy of systemic racism is imperative to moving forward. For instance, they note that “ours is a history of a community that faced adversity, racism, bigotry, and neglect” (ACPS, 2020, p. 4), while also calling attention to the history of community resistance, including “many who went on to become champions for equality and human rights” (p. 4). They add that living up to the legacy of this resistance is contingent on “continu[ing] to fight for an equitable education...regardless of race, socioeconomic status, zip code, family circumstances and/or educational ability” (p. 4).

The plan also makes a connection between communal history and its direct contribution “to the barriers that our young people face today,” including in-school segregation, which signals that “our work is not yet done” (ACPS, 2020, p. 4). It also places an emphasis on accountability, on reckoning with a difficult past that may necessitate navigating discomfort, and on standing up for the entire student population and community, especially those who have been historically marginalized. Specifically, their strategy maintains:

We must have courage and be unapologetic about speaking on behalf of those who are different from us. We must advocate for our young people and those who don't have a voice in our communities. (p. 4)

According to the document, implementing this equity agenda hinges on a commitment to acknowledge systemic inequities and the recognition that “the creation and perpetuation of racial inequities has been deeply rooted into school systems” (p. 6). Subsequently, the school system must take on the responsibility of not just addressing what is referred to as the achievement gap, but also “eliminat[ing] opportunity gaps” (p. 15). The plan also communicates an understanding of the convergence of intersectional identities and the ways in which they shape students' schooling experiences. Consequently, there is a call for an approach that “recognizes the interconnected ways in which marginalization takes place” (p. 6).

Equity and social justice focus

The district's blueprint foregrounds equity as the centerpiece of its agenda, placing it “at the center of everything we do as a school division” (ACPS, 2020, p. 3). The five-year plan defines equity as “fairness” (p. 6), distinguishing it from “equalizing student results” (p. 6). It also interprets equity to signify “meeting every student where they are and not where we want them to be,” pointing out that this may necessitate “changing the way we teach and how we respond to and support students of every ability level” (p. 6).

The discourse advances a “theory of action” (p. 6) premised on eliminating learning gaps for low-income students, students of color, emergent bilingual learners, and students with disabilities. The text also emphasizes that the nature of this work needs to be “systemic” and not reduced to “isolated perceptions by individuals” (p. 6), bolstered by a unified response and “systemic alignment” (p. 9) among the district's various stakeholders regarding the district's equity-based priorities. Finally, the plan outlines an action-oriented approach pushing for “equitable outcomes” (p. 16) for students and “facilitating equity-focused...improvements in policy and practice” (p. 17). It

further establishes parameters around an “equity audit” (p. 15) addressing a number of systemic barriers, including “disproportionality rates of students in advanced coursework...[in] special education... disproportionality rate of suspensions” (p. 16). The district's strategy also includes utilizing a survey to identify the “percentage of students who feel safe, valued, and engaged” (p. 16).

Community partnerships and family engagement

From the outset, the school district's strategic plan prioritizes the need to engage critical stakeholders in their effort to push their equity agenda. For instance, they reference “engaging and empowering the entire city” (ACPS, 2020, p. 3), and highlight their intention to partner with local community organization to “form a Unified Planning team to... maximize collective community engagement...and focus on shared outcomes” (p. 5). Community collaboration is also emphasized when considering ways of meeting students' socio-emotional needs by collaborating with the city's Health Department, to “expand student access to mental and physical health supports,” for example (p. 17). Community organizations, including “city and non-profit partners” (p. 19), are once again centered as essential in facilitating school and home collaborations.

In addition to local agencies and organizations, families are referenced as critically important stakeholders. The strategic plan makes numerous proposals around increased collaboration with families and the district's intention to unite in-school with out-of-school learning contexts. First, the written discourse acknowledges the significance of building relationships with family stakeholders from minoritized communities and “engaging families – with a particular focus on immigrants and families of color” (ACPS, 2020, p. 19).

The plan also identifies family involvement as a crucial component to addressing opportunity and achievement gaps. Further, bridging school and home is key to understanding what students need in order to establish requisite mechanisms of support. Specifically, the goal is to “develop authentic, sustained relationships with families that support students' social, emotional, and academic well-being” (p. 19) by engaging in “regular community conversations in schools” (p. 19) and working closely with their “Family and Community Engagement Team and parental liaisons” (p. 19).

Furthermore, the guiding document references increasing and facilitating communication between schools and family stakeholders by “developing informational tools and grade level dialogs for students and families” (p. 17) and “streamlining and aligning technology tools for improved communications with families and other stakeholders” (p. 15). Finally, the plan centers on restructuring the development of strong relationships between school-based stakeholders and district leadership as a way to shore up better outcomes for students.

Student-centered instruction

Along with equity, the district's strategic plan foregrounds student-centered instruction as a cornerstone of its approach. In the mission statement that prefaces the five-year plan, school leaders proclaim students to be “the center of our work, decision-making and mission” (ACPS, 2020, p. 1). To this end, the written discourse pledges

the delivery of a high quality, accessible curriculum for all students, while also urging stakeholders to address students' socio-emotional needs in addition to ensuring their academic success.

Academically, differentiation is hailed as a major point of emphasis and characterized as "changing the way we teach and how we respond to...students of every ability level" (ACPS, 2020, p. 6). Moreover, providing additional layers of support will be primarily enacted through the use of the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework to meet the needs of minoritized students while also spurning a one-size-fits-all approach because they are rarely successful (p. 6). Additionally, school leaders will retain a "focus on meeting students where they are to support equitable outcomes" with the use of "best practices" (p. 13). Furthermore, additional support will be given to minoritized student populations, including students with disabilities and emergent bilingual learners with differentiated instruction based on students' strengths (p. 16).

In addition to instructional and curricular differentiation, district leaders also proclaim their intentions to honor student's cultural backgrounds, recognizing the need to "build cultural competency" (p. 19), and implement instruction that is "culturally relevant" (p. 14). At the same time, they clarify that responding to student needs means addressing not only academic, but also socio-emotional concerns. To this end, the plan pushes for the implementation of "high-impact instructional strategies" (p. 13) to help advance academic success and encourage the "social and emotional development for a diverse student population" (p. 13). Moreover, the document promotes a "realignment [of] professional learning" (p. 13) and the identification and subsequent implementation of "high-leverage instructional strategies through a lens of trauma-informed care" (p. 13).

Capacity building and a shared leadership vision

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the scheme foregrounds both school personnel and students as critical stakeholders in bringing this strategic plan to life. When it comes to students, for instance, an early stated goal is "empowering all students" (ACPS, 2020, p. 3) with the understanding that this entails "engaging students in decision-making processes" (p. 8) and having students actively involved in identifying "needed supports and services" (p. 17). Additionally, the plan embraces the notion of students taking "ownership of their learning" (p. 16).

In addition to building and honoring students' agency and roles in executing the district's leadership vision, school leaders also acknowledge the pivotal part school-based personnel play in designing and executing this vision. For example, the document notes that "every school was represented by at least one staff member in the design of the strategic plan" (p.3), an intentional effort to "draw on the skills and expertise of those who...impact our students on a daily basis" (p. 3). The publication also states that, in the effort to engage in the capacity building of school-based personnel, school leaders will define and clearly communicate "areas in which schools have autonomy... and corresponding roles and responsibilities for administrators and educators" (p. 10). Furthermore, the plan reiterates the need to remain engaged with stakeholders within schools and have the central office provide proper support to schools to enable stakeholders to implement the district's vision.

Discussion

The district-wide strategic plan foregrounded in this study provides hope for those championing culturally responsive leadership in K-12 educational settings. The language employed is justice-oriented and brings into focus the distinction between equity and equality, for instance, as well as the importance of redressing historical injustices and removing barriers to access and resources. At the same time, the scheme highlights racial equity as a distinct pillar of its humanizing vision and thus demonstrates an understanding of the school district's own complicity in perpetuating race-based inequities. This acknowledgment is significant as it points to ways school leaders are responsible for the role schools play with regard to racial injustice. Correspondingly, it establishes the current district's mission as one intentionally grounded in histories of resistance and exemplars for how school leaders, educators, and students can and should make different choices when they encounter systemic injustice within their educational and communal settings. Further, the district's narrative illuminates the irrefutable thread that connects past and present, usually rendered invisible by dominant color-evasive and supposed power-neutral discourses, which is integral to understanding structural injustice and combating it.

In alignment with the research around culturally responsive schooling, the district plan also recognizes that while developing cultural competence is key to enacting this agenda, they cannot accomplish a mission of this magnitude as individuals. Rather, they must commit to a systemic, unified approach. This entails district and school leadership working in close proximity with key stakeholders, investing in community partnerships, family engagement, developing the capacity of school-based personnel and, importantly, including students in executing a leadership vision.

On the other hand, while the school district's 5-year goals appear to be grounded in equity and justice-oriented approaches, it also employs terminology that runs counter to this premise. For instance, the plan adopts elements of neoliberal discourses that emphasize standardized testing and accountability metrics, including usage of the terms "results driven" (p. 3), "rigorous metrics" (p. 3), and "standards of excellence" (p. 3). The document also mentions utilizing "best practices" and "evidence based" (p. 15) approaches, typically relying on performance measurement data on the basis of student scores on culturally biased standardized tests [as critiqued by Leonardo (2007)].

While these references are sparse compared to the abundance of equity language employed, they are worth noting as they appear to, at least philosophically, undercut the main premise of the document. It is also worth noting that these phrases are not accompanied by explanations of what the data is, nor how this data would be collected and/or used. One is left wondering whether the standards discourse is nothing more than empty signifiers. However, its presence gives rise to questions that pertain not only to whether it is possible for leadership to enact these equity-based reforms. That is, in addition to hoping for justice-centered change, there are structural constraints that school leaders may face in advancing these reforms, particularly in a hostile political and legislative state context. For instance, Virginia's Republican representatives in both state legislative chambers and the Republican governor are focusing their attention on how to eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in educational settings (Oliver, 2023). Thus, exploring these tensions and how school leaders respond is important when evaluating their efforts to enact culturally responsive

practices while navigating external pressures. The blueprint also leaves out important details regarding the implementation of various initiatives; for instance, while it emphasizes that educators will be culturally competent and employ culturally relevant instructional strategies, there is no reference as to how the district will ensure that educators develop the necessary skills in order to do so. Importantly, while the strategic plan purports that sharing leadership with students will be a cornerstone of its approach, there are no specifics as to how students will take part in decision-making processes.

Conclusions and recommendations

Culturally responsive schooling is enriched when enacted through a unified, collective, and community grounded systemic effort, rather than sprinkled in a few chance classrooms. Moreover, we argue that it is vital to conjoin culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) and culturally responsive teaching/pedagogy (CRTP), partly because both practices intersect and cannot be easily disentangled. Conversely, school leaders who are committed to enacting CRSL will find it difficult to create equity-oriented mechanisms and supports for students without ensuring that educators and school staff are culturally responsive both through their pedagogy and in their social interactions with students. Thus, for substantive change to occur, community members – not just building administrators and school district officials – need to be working in concert with one another and this has to be both a top-down and ground-up approach that brings together diverse teams comprised of school board members, superintendents, principals, educators, students, families, and community members. The community must work in concert to ensure that all members of the school community are actively developing the cultural competence and critical self-reflexivity skills necessary for enacting culturally responsive teaching practices, creating culturally responsive classroom environments, and cultivating culturally valorizing relationships with students.

While it is too early for firm conclusions, we are heartened that the district is publicly stating a commitment to support and implement an equity-grounded, culturally-responsive vision that is undergirded by an acknowledgment of systemic inequities, which, in our experiences, is quite rare. Even more exceptional, the strategic plan demonstrates a nuanced knowledge of intersectionality and its role within schools; how intersectional frameworks of oppression overlap and intersect in the backdrop of interlocking systems of oppression. Importantly, the scheme's push for a systematic, unified approach to executing its humanizing vision is premised on collaborating with key stakeholders to bring this vision to life, including not only school-based personnel, but also families, community members, and, importantly, students. Moreover, the blueprint envisions not only capacity-building for all stakeholders, but also looks forward to shaping a shared vision that includes amplifying student voice and leadership. In that sense, the strategic plan is very much aligned with CRSL and CRTP principles and also embraces student voice which, as we have argued, should be a key tenet of a culturally responsive schooling approach.

On the other hand, the 5-year plan also leaves out important details that generate questions about the district's level of commitment to making these goals a reality. For example, the written discourse lacks specifics on how school leaders and teachers will develop the

necessary cultural competence; nor, how they will be evaluated on this goal (indeed, whether they are to be evaluated on it at all). We are also left with questions around whether and how educational leaders and other personnel would carve out a specific role for students within the context of the vision. Specifically, how are students expected to contribute to decision-making and exhibit leadership? The lack of specificity when it comes to these core tenets of CRSL and CRTP, coupled with neoliberal terminology that the plan uses, raises questions about the district leaders' clarity of what is required to make this vision a reality. At the same time, we would be remiss to ignore the serious tensions school districts face from anti-DEI activists in their local communities. Districts committed to equity, justice, and culturally responsive practices will most likely face criticism, and in some cases, lose their jobs. We recommend school districts also include professional development opportunities that strengthen concerned educators' and citizens' abilities to speak truth to power as the need arises in their particular circumstances.

In addition to local politics, many school districts face a difficult legislative environment in their states that make it particularly challenging to enact equity-based reforms, including CRSL, CRTP, and student voice. But perhaps because of (rather than despite of) the external policy context, school leaders need to fight back against these unjust policies that perpetuate the systemic inequities minoritized students have had to experience for decades. When it comes to minoritized students, in urban settings in particular, students' voices and perspectives have been omitted or pathologized for so long. Thus, creating platforms and opportunities for student voice and student leadership is paramount to effective change. The objective of culturally responsive schooling is, after all, finding ways to respond to the needs of students. And what better way to do that than by including students within the decision-making processes that influence their lived realities and schooling experiences?

Truly valuing students' cultural assets while creating genuinely inclusive schooling environments hinges on more than just obliging students' interests: Amplifying students' voices and sharing decision-making power with them is essential to their growth as members of the school community and of their civic participation in adulthood. Furthermore, all students should have the opportunity to be involved in leadership and voice, especially students considered to be academically under-achieving or those who "have behavior problems." Student representation should be proportional to student body demographics with an intentional effort to include and center the voices of students from historically underrepresented and marginalized students who had been underserved and harmed by systemic urban schooling, policies, and practices.

Finally, we argue that centering student voice and sharing power with them has potential to convert culturally responsive schooling in all its facets (leadership, teaching, pedagogy, and voice) from just an aspirational slogan to a truly transformative practice, shaping students' realities and shaping needed structural change in education and beyond.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving humans in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was not required from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

KM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. ML: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. Funding for disseminating this project was made possible by the Mike Moses

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2024.1385788/full#supplementary-material>

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