
Original Paper

Developing Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teacher Leaders: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

As U.S. schools are becoming increasingly diverse, inequities persist for multilingual learners (MLs) and other culturally and linguistically diverse students. Just as scholars have called for culturally and linguistically responsive (CLR) practices to guide teachers' pedagogies, they have also pointed to the urgent need for CLR leadership to create more equitable schools. This study explored the experiences and reflections of 15 in-service teachers who participated in a three-year graduate studies program in CLR school leadership. A qualitative case study design was used with reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) methods to analyze the participants' written coursework artifacts. Three themes about the participants' CLR leadership were developed across the dataset: 1) They were focused on using equity data to lead changes in instruction and school improvement; 2) They adopted a servant leadership approach toward students, families, and colleagues; and 3) They were committed to their own continual growth and critical consciousness as teacher leaders. This research adds to our understanding of educators' experiences with professional development designed to promote CLR leadership. It also raises questions about traditional school administrator roles, and how they could be reimagined to align with the aspirations of CLR leaders.

Keywords: culturally and linguistically responsive leadership, equity, teacher professional development, praxis, critical consciousness, English/multilingual learners

Introduction

Serving the Needs of Diverse Students

Since the turn of the millennium, U.S. public schools have experienced dynamic growth in students' cultural and linguistic diversity (NCES, 2020b, 2022a, 2022b; OELA, 2021a). By 2020, "students of color" (a term that includes Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and students of two or more races) were the majority of public school enrollment (NCES, 2020b, 2022a, 2022b). Hispanics are the fastest-growing student demographic, increasing from 6% of public school enrollment in 2000 to 28% in 2020 (NCES, 2020b; NCES, 2022c). One third of children under age 9 now have at least one parent who speaks a language other than English at home (Park et al., 2018). Spanish is the predominant language spoken in 60% of these households, but many other languages including Chinese, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and Arabic are also spoken (Park et al., 2018). While student demographics have shifted significantly, the teacher workforce has not; it remains predominantly (79%) White and largely monolingual (NCES, 2020b, 2022a, 2022c).

Amidst these demographic changes for U.S. students, scholars have identified a gap in teachers' preparation to serve the needs of diverse students (García et al., 2010; Lucas et al., 2008; Lucas, 2011; Mitchell, 2019; Nutta et al., 2012; Rafa et al., 2020; Santibañez & Gándara, 2018; Scott et al., 2014; Tigert & Montecillo Leider, 2022). In particular, students who are learning English, known by the asset-based term multilingual learners (MLs), are a rapidly growing student group whose needs have outpaced the numbers of teachers skilled at teaching them. Russell and Von Esch (2018) observed that the population of MLs is "growing much faster than the numbers of well-trained specialists" in ML instruction (p. 52). The majority of U.S. teachers feel unprepared to successfully teach MLs (Baecher, 2012; Calderón & Slakk, 2019; Mitchell, 2019; NEA, 2015; Nutta et al., 2012; Rotermund et al., 2017; Santibañez & Gándara, 2018; Scott et al., 2014).

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) developed the National Professional Development (NPD) program to provide grants that support PD activities "designed to improve classroom instruction" for MLs (USDE, 2018). The subject of this study was one NPD program, designed through a partnership between a mid-Atlantic U.S. university and a local school district. This NPD-funded PD program offered a cohort of 17 in-service teachers the opportunity to participate in three years of graduate-level studies, culminating in a Master of Education degree, administrative licensure, and additional teacher certification in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The program's stated goal was to develop teachers' skills as culturally and linguistically responsive (CLR) practitioners and school leaders who could successfully serve MLs. Throughout the manuscript, this NPD-funded university/district partnership will serve as the case under study, referred to as a culturally and linguistically responsive professional development (CLR-PD) program.

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy

Schools are charged with ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities for all students and student groups, yet research indicates that culturally and linguistically diverse students, and MLs in particular, often lack appropriate educational services and supports to meet their academic needs (Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Scanlan & López, 2012; Sullivan, 2011; Wise & Slater, 2020). Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, public schools must ensure that MLs can participate meaningfully and equally in all curricular and extracurricular programs and have access to their grade-level curricula to meet promotion and graduation requirements (USDE, 2015). In 1974, the Supreme Court unanimously decided the landmark *Lau v. Nichols* case, ruling that schools must recognize the unique barriers faced by MLs and provide them with differentiated support for equitable opportunities and access to learning. The decision stated that MLs were deprived of a "meaningful" education when they were merely given the same texts and instruction as other students (*Lau v. Nichols*, 1974).

Yet nearly 50 years later, schools still struggle to fulfill their obligation to provide MLs with differentiated materials and support to fully access the curriculum. Despite attempts to improve accountability for MLs' achievement through Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), most states continue to fall short of their annual ML performance targets (OELA, 2021a). Moreover, policy decisions in the past two decades have increasingly placed MLs in mainstream classrooms, often without an ESOL-trained teacher (Coady et al., 2015; de Jong et al., 2013; Lucas, 2011; Martin, 2018; Tigert & Montecillo Leider, 2022; Villegas & Lucas, 2011). The majority of teachers nationwide report feeling unprepared to meet the needs of MLs and say that they receive little to no annual PD related to MLs (Lucas et al., 2008; Lucas, 2011; Mitchell, 2019; Santibañez & Gándara, 2018).

MLs benefit most when *all* of their teachers have received ML-specific training (Rafa et al., 2020). While research suggests that many teachers continue to hold deficit attitudes towards MLs and possess limited knowledge about ML instruction, scholars believe that PD can offer progress in this area (e.g., Calderón & Slakk, 2019; Coady et al., 2015; Faltis & Valdes, 2016; Mitchell, 2019; NEA, 2015; Nutta et al., 2012; Rotermund et al., 2017; Santibañez & Gándara, 2018; Scott et al., 2014). Teachers with adequate training are more effective in increasing MLs' achievement because they have acquired the dispositions and skills necessary to plan instruction that is responsive to MLs' complex language and learning needs (de Jong & Harper, 2005; Echevarria et al., 2017; Gersten & Baker, 2000; Linan-Thompson et al., 2018; Nutta et al., 2012; Quintero & Hansen, 2017; Santibañez et al., 2021; Villegas, 2018).

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Leadership

As a student-centered pedagogy aimed at addressing inequities for diverse learners, CLR pedagogy overlaps with similarly oriented pedagogies, such as equity pedagogy (Maina & Zaier, 2020; McGee Banks & Banks, 1995), critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1974/1989), social justice pedagogy (Butler et al., 2021; Duncan-Andrade, 2007), and transformative pedagogy (e.g., Farren, 2016; Freire, 1970/2000; Ukpokodu, 2009). All of these pedagogies aim at inducing systemic change through instructional and organizational decision-making that demarginalizes the identities and needs of underserved students.

Culturally and linguistically responsive leadership refers to educational leadership guided by a decision-making lens of cultural and linguistic responsiveness. Like the evolution of terminology for CLR pedagogy, there are various names for school leadership approaches that are similar to CLR leadership. Khalifa et al. (2016) explored “culturally responsive school leadership,” noting that the term “cultural” was meant to include students’ “racial, linguistic, ethnic, national identity, or class” backgrounds (p. 14). Similarly, social justice leadership (Bogotch, 2002; Marshall & Oliva, 2009; Theoharis, 2007, 2010), equity leadership (Childress et al., 2009), transformative school leadership (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Shields, 2010; Theoharis & Brooks, 2012), and critical moral leadership (Wise & Slater, 2020) all have similar goals of promoting systemic change to improve educational opportunities for diverse students.

In their comprehensive synthesis of literature, Khalifa et al. (2016) explained culturally responsive school leadership as an approach to school leadership that “creates school contexts and curriculum that respond effectively to the educational, social, political, and cultural needs of students” (p. 7). They identified the four key behaviors of culturally responsive school leaders as: 1) critical self-awareness and self-reflection, 2) developing culturally responsive teachers and curricula, 3) promoting culturally responsive/inclusive school environments, and 4) engaging students and parents in community contexts. Khalifa (2018) further defines these four leadership behaviors and argues that culturally responsive school leadership is a “necessary component of effective school leadership,” without which, equitable schooling cannot be achieved (p. 16).

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teacher Leaders

Though school administrators were the focus of much of the literature on CLR-related school leadership, teacher leaders were also acknowledged to play a crucial role. Khalifa et al. (2016) emphasize the important role that teacher leaders, as well as community leaders, play in CLR school reform. Scanlan and López (2015) make a point of explaining their word choice of *leadership*, as opposed to *leaders*, to highlight the importance that teachers and an array of other stakeholders play in leading school change (p. 19). Indeed, “highly regarded teachers can exert more influence over peer’s instructional practices than administrators” (Scanlan & López, 2015, p. 20). This is because true teacher leaders are not defined by positional or top-down authority but are instead, chosen as leaders by their peers (Crippen & Willows, 2019). Teacher leadership indicates a process in which teachers not only demonstrate ongoing success with students, but also work on continually building collegial relationships, spreading productive practices, and enhancing school culture (Crippen & Willows, 2019; Muijs & Harris, 2003, 2006; Pounder, 2006; Silva et al., 2000).

In many schools, teachers are better equipped than their administrators to develop the conditions, opportunities, and structures needed to meet the needs of MLs (McGee et al., 2014; Russell & Von Esch, 2018). Thus, schools should “make it a priority” to give ESOL-trained teachers leadership roles where they can influence their peers’ dispositions, help teachers across the curriculum provide high-quality ML instruction, and advocate for MLs and their families (Russell & Von Esch, 2018, p. 56). This is precisely what we will see in this study, as a group of teachers nearing the end of a three-year CLR-PD program became increasingly influential as instructional leaders and advocates for MLs in their schools.

Significance of the Study

CLR leadership is an emerging field that seeks to replicate the ideas of CLR pedagogy on a more comprehensive, school-wide scale. When CLR pedagogy moves beyond individual classrooms to shape a school’s overall culture, its impact on student achievement grows. This premise has been demonstrated in the work of Bandura (1997), Goddard et al. (2000), and Hattie (2018), who found that teachers’ *collective* efficacy dramatically increases student achievement, far beyond the impact of teachers working in isolation. Scholars have come to understand collective efficacy as the key component in school reform efforts to promote equity and improve academic achievement for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Chong et al., 2010; Donahoo, 2018; Ross et al., 2004; Zambo & Zambo, 2008). Furthermore, Chu and García (2018) demonstrated that teachers’ CLR competencies are predictors of teachers’ individual self-efficacy and collective efficacy.

This research is situated within a framework of ethics of care, social justice, and constructivist theories, which also provide the foundation for equitable and responsive pedagogies, like CLRP (Hollie, 2018;

Scanlan & López, 2015). Prominent care theorist, Noddings (2002, 2005, 2013) believed that our ability to care is what enables us to “take a global view and to develop a sense of social justice” (Johnson, 2003, p. 184). Social justice theory argues that knowledge should be created and used to build a more socially just world based on fairness and equal opportunities (Rawls, 1971/1999, 2005). CLR-PD aligns with this goal by giving teachers opportunities to construct knowledge to transform their practices and increase care and equity for underserved students (Álvarez, 2019; Hollie, 2018). A constructivist lens encourages us to view teachers’ learning as a phenomenon that largely takes place outside of the confines of PD, through their concrete experiences as they apply theory and ideas to practice (Crotty, 1998; Kolb, 1984). Thus, examining teachers’ own accounts of their experiences and reflections gives us insight into their learning from CLR-PD (Bartle, 2015).

Study Design and Methodology

Case Study

This interpretive, qualitative case study to explore the participants’ experiences with CLR leadership and reflections on their leadership growth throughout the CLR-PD program. I used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) methods to analyze the participants’ written course documents gathered in the final semester of their CLR-PD (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The CLR-PD program aimed to improve educational outcomes for MLs by developing the participants’ skills as CLR teachers and leaders. The cohort spent three years together, taking a total of 12 university courses that focused on various aspects of CLR pedagogy and leadership.

Case study design is well-suited to investigating contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts and answering *how* and *why* questions (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). Merriam (1998) defines the qualitative case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). In this study, the cohort represented a unique bounded system, or case, that was conducive to studying teachers’ experiences with CLR-PD. The participants shared a context of studying together from 2018-2021 and teaching in the same mid-Atlantic school district (Yin, 2009).

Research Questions

A qualitative study was conducted to explore the following research questions:

1. How did the CLR-PD participants experience CLR leadership?
2. How did they reflect on their leadership growth and practices?

Methods

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used as the method for qualitative data analysis and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA offers the researcher flexibility in developing a research design that is suitable to the research context and questions. Given the range of variations offered within RTA, it is essential for researchers to demonstrate reflexivity by actively contemplating and explaining their stances throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 9; Trainor & Bundon, 2021). In this study, my orientation to the data was primarily experiential and inductive. I focused on the participants’ experiences as they described them to construct meanings directly from the data in a “bottom up” approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 10).

In this way, the approach was experiential as opposed to critical, since I sought to capture the participants’ perspectives as they described them, rather than interrogating them (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In addition, since my subjective experiences and knowledge of literature inevitably influenced my coding and interpretations, a level of deductive analysis was involved. As Braun and Clarke (2022) note, “these different approaches are *not* mutually exclusive” and they often reflect “points on a spectrum... rather than binary choices” (p. 9). I used an interpretive approach to data analysis consistent with a social constructivist epistemology, based on the belief that knowledge is subjective and co-constructed. Meanings were produced by the interplay of the participants’ interpretations of their own experiences and my role as the researcher interpreting their words (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Cruickshank et al., 2022; Smith, 2017).

Participants

Table 1 uses pseudonyms for the 15 participants who consented to this research.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Name	Position	School	LOTE	Years Teaching	Highest Degree
Amanda	Reading/Literacy Resource Teacher*	Central Office	No	17	M.Ed.+
Denise	Science, Grade 7	Charter K-8	No	9	M.Ed.
Edward	ESOL, Grades 5-8	Charter K-8	Yes	13	M.Ed.
Haley	ESOL, Grades K-4	Charter K-8	No	10	Bachelor
Janine	Title 1 Math, Grades K-5*	Elementary V	Yes	9	M.Ed.
Josselyn	Grade 4	Elementary W	No	12	Bachelor
Julia	Reading specialist, Grades K-5*	Charter K-8	No	12	M.Ed.
Karen	Kindergarten	Charter K-8	No	23	M.Ed.
Lila	English Language Arts Chair*	Middle X	No	7	Bachelor
Matt	Math, Grade 8	Charter K-8	No	13	M.Ed.
Miles	Math, Grade 7	Charter K-8	No	8	M.Ed.
Miranda	Spanish, Grade 7-8	Middle Y	Yes	6	Bachelor
Rachel	ESOL, Grades 9-12	High School Z	Yes	5	Bachelor
Steven	English/History, Grade 7	Charter K-8	No	6	M.Ed.
Thomas	Instrumental Music, Grades 3-5	2 elementary schools	No	9	Bachelor

Note. Names of participants and schools are pseudonyms. LOTE = Proficiency in a language other than English. Years teaching was prior to the 2020-2021 school year. *Out-of-classroom positions. +Near completion during this study.

The 15 participants were in their third and final year of a CLR-PD program that began in August 2018 and ended in June 2021. The program was funded by a five-year NPD grant through the Office of English Language Acquisition (USDE, 2018). These grants aim to foster collaboration between higher education

institutions and school districts to implement professional learning to improve instruction and outcomes for MLs (USDE, 2018). The program gave participants the opportunity to simultaneously earn their M.Ed. in Leadership and Culturally Responsive Decision Making, Administrative 1 licensure, and ESOL teacher endorsement, while also taking additional special education coursework. The program's stated goal was to build educators' capacity as CLR teachers, equity-informed decision-makers, and influential school leaders to serve the needs of MLs and other diverse students. The cohort took 12 courses, which included a 300-hour administrative internship. The cohort was made up of 17 teachers in all, but two did not choose to participate in the research.

Data Collection

This study analyzed written documents produced by the participants for coursework in the last semester of their PD program. The primary focus of this inquiry was on the participants' reflections on their leadership experiences and growth. The documents for analysis included a paper in which participants summarized their leadership growth throughout the program, a reflection on their stance as instructional leaders, leadership standards logs with reflections, and a "challenge" project designed to stretch their leadership skills. All assignment instructions can be found in Appendix J.

The participants consented to the use of their written documents, with approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, both at the beginning and conclusion of the program. These artifacts were stored in the university's Tk20 assessment management system. Before using the documents for research purposes, care was taken to preserve the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to replace the participants' names and schools.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis encompasses a family of related, but different, data analysis approaches. *Reflexive* thematic analysis (RTA), coined and described by Braun and Clarke (2022) as an approach to thematic analysis that values the researcher's subjectivity, experience, and "artistic interpretation" as the tools for deriving knowledge from qualitative data. The goal of engaging in reflexivity was important to me as an experienced teacher and teacher leader who came to this inquiry with existing notions based on those experiences. Reflexivity was also valuable to me as a novice researcher and doctoral student because it served as a tool for my research transparency and my metacognition as a learner throughout the research process.

The analysis focused on patterns that presented strongly across the entire dataset and extracted statements that were backed up with reasoning and evidence. On the whole, as I read through the course documents, I was struck by the sense of authenticity and honesty portrayed by the participants. They shared personal reflections and opinions that often included self-critiques and critiques of the PD program itself. Based on the participants' candor throughout their writing, I believe their course documents were honest and accurate portrayals of their experiences and beliefs. They seemed to write freely and without inhibition, leading me to believe that a culture of authenticity, trust, and critical consciousness had been established over their three years in CLR-PD.

Analysis and Discussion of Themes

Overview of Themes

Fitting with a Big Q qualitative reporting paradigm, an integrated analysis and discussion of the three themes developed from the data using RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In the participants' written course documents, they reflected on their ideas about CLR leadership and their personal growth as CLR leaders. Using an RTA approach to analyze their texts, three themes were generated across the dataset about the participants' experiences with CLR leadership. The three themes I developed about the participants' experiences with CLR leadership, as shown in Figure 1, were:

1. Using equity data to drive high-quality instruction and school improvement.
2. Servant leadership approach on behalf of students, families, and colleagues.
3. Commitment to continual growth and critical consciousness as *teacher* leaders.

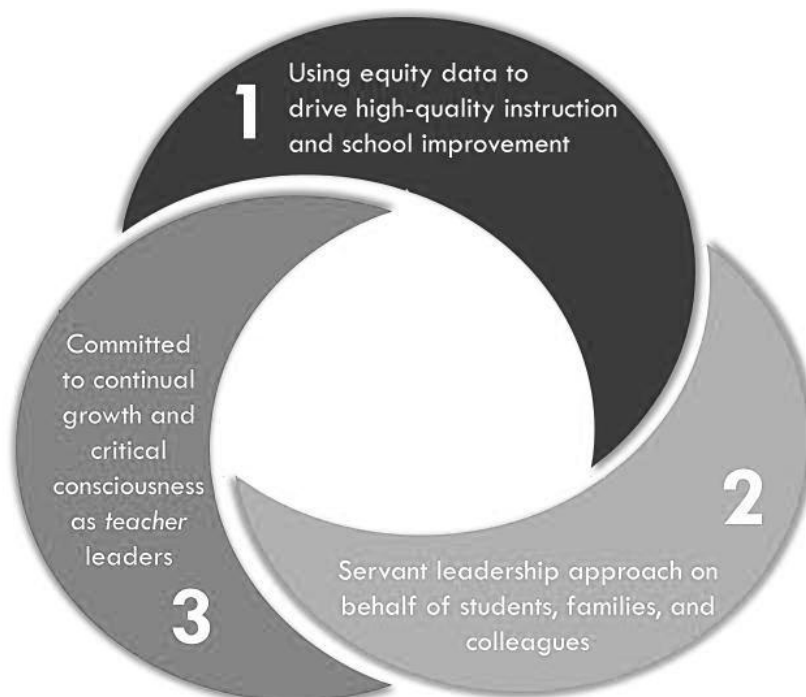


Figure 1. Three Themes to Describe Participants' Experiences with CLR Leadership

Theme 1: Using Equity Data to Promote High-Quality Instruction and Improvement

The idea of using data as a tool for equity is common throughout the literature on CLR pedagogy and leadership and this was such a prevalent theme throughout the dataset. The participants in this study repeatedly described their leadership in ways that involved using data to systematically analyze instruction and improve equity.

Amanda was a reading and literacy resource teacher who worked out of the district's central office to write elementary curriculum and support 14 elementary schools. She saw "data-based decision making" as a "big area of growth" for her "over the past three years." Amanda commented:

There is a saying that "numbers don't lie." I often add the phrase "...but they do tell stories." Throughout this program, I have learned to use data to help schools make decisions about improvement plans, student groupings, and PD needs. I have also learned to ask questions and look beyond just the basic numbers, to dig deeper and understand the story that has created the data. If 60% of students are below grade level in reading, why? What is that 60 percent's story? What does the data tell me about the teachers in the school? Have they had proper PD to provide students with the instruction they need to succeed? What is the community like? Is there poverty, crime, hunger? What needs should be addressed?

Amanda's analysis of student data led to her ask questions about how to improve instruction. She explained, "Just reteaching lessons to students is not going to make them suddenly achieve success. This [PD] program has taught me to look closely at the data, identify root causes, and set up a multi-faceted approach to addressing areas of need." As a literacy coach, Amanda's approach to leadership leaned heavily on the use of data to guide her support for teachers and assist schools in their decision-making.

Though Steven, a middle school English and history teacher, played an entirely different role than Amanda, he maintained the same focus on using data to lead changes for equity. Steven saw his role as leader of the school's Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) team as a way to use data to systematically foster a more positive and equitable school culture. He described PBIS as "a growing focus" of his both "as an educator and a teacher leader" and an "avenue to affect real change and promote equity within our community." Steven wrote:

As our PBIS Lead again next year, I will be able to further develop my skills as a data analyst and look at large scale aggregates. I will be able to help drive and influence our School Improvement Plan with further implementation of our PBIS system. [...] There is no greater test of equity than understanding how we treat our students. It is the most vulnerable aspect of their lives to our implicit biases. It is the hardest element to track and assess, and it has the greatest impact on students' relationship with school.

Steven was hoping to convince his leadership team to "invest in a new data system" for PBIS. He explained that "with a more robust and efficient data collection system," he would be able to "truly tell a story with data about the students we are praising, and conversely, the ones we are leaving behind." As Steven put it, "we can wave away implicit bias and inequity, but the data does not lie." He described how "the ability to see that Hispanic students in fourth grade, for example, are earning disproportionately less praise than the rest of their peers is an important story" that may be "hard to hear," but those stories about inequity "need to be discovered, analyzed, and corrected." Steven saw his PBIS work as a way to "continue to grow as a teacher leader" and to "encourage staff to face and overcome these difficult realities."

The theme of using data to promote equity and high-quality instruction was prevalent throughout the dataset. Though this practice is clearly supported and elevated throughout the literature on CLR leadership, it was nonetheless striking to me as a practitioner who rarely hears equity data being discussed at the "teacher level" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 104) or used as a tool for systematically improving instruction for underserved students. As a teacher leader in a different school district than the participants in this study, I wondered if the participants' strong emphasis on data was related to practices being driven at the district level. As Khalifa et al. (2016) observed, there are wide variances in how local districts monitor and encourage the use of data to lead school reforms aimed at improving equity. CLR leaders must look for ways to systematize equity audit processes and develop a level of trust and comfort amongst colleagues to promote regular discussions of equity data (Skrla et al., 2004). Khalifa et al. (2016) found that "policy requirements" at the state and local levels can have profound implications for "for collecting school data" that can affect "school equity, inclusivity, curriculum standards, and climate" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 26).

Theme 2: Servant Leadership on Behalf of Students, Families, and Colleagues

A second prevalent theme across the dataset was the participants' view of themselves as "servant leaders" in their schools (Greenleaf, 1970/2008, 2003). Greenleaf first defined the idea of a leader who acts as a servant, ensuring that the needs of others are met (1970/2008). Greenleaf's notion of servant leadership flipped the traditional, hierarchical model of leadership, as the servant leader works to involve communities and teams in decision-making rather than taking a top-down approach (Greenleaf, 2003). Using Greenleaf's writings, Spears (2010) asserted that servant leaders embody 10 characteristics: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth, and community building. Crippen and Willows (2019) used these 10 characteristics to explore the intersections between servant leadership and teacher leadership. Teachers who are servant leaders prioritize the needs of the people they serve over their own leadership aspirations or organizational directives (Crippen & Willows, 2019).

The desire to serve the needs of their students, students' families, and colleagues was a strong theme that characterized the participants' notions about CLR leadership and descriptions of their own leadership practices and growth. In Wise and Slater's (2020) case study, they also found that a commitment to servant leadership was a predominant characteristic of educational leaders working with MLs. Wise and Slater (2020) remarked that although their case study participants did not use the term "servant leadership" specifically, they often discussed their leadership "in terms of empowering others and building capacity, ensuring that others were not only involved in the decision-making process, but were a fundamental part of that process" (p. 63). Similarly, though none of the participants in this study used the words "servant leadership," their notions about CLR leadership and descriptions of their practices were indicative of this leadership style.

Serving the Needs of Students

A large portion of the participants' reflections described their servant leadership on behalf of students.

This theme was evident in all 15 of the participants' writings, often as they discussed their work to promote equity in their schools. Wise and Slater (2020) found that school leaders' servant leadership first and foremost lifted up the needs of "students and families" (p. 62). Lila underscored this idea:

I continue this journey the way I started, as an advocate for my students. I make a conscious decision to work in schools affected by systemic racism, poverty, and lack of resources for one reason: because I believe all kids deserve highly qualified, caring educators. I realized shortly after my career began that there is much I do not have control over. However, I do control myself. I control my knowledge, my voice, and my practice. This has become the resource I can provide to students to help remove barriers. As a leader, I wish to continue to advocate for my students and the things they need and deserve as human beings. I do this by recognizing my sphere of influence and making changes where I can. [...] I am excited to see where this journey takes me and to always remember that kids are the reason we show up.

Similarly, Amanda described her CLR leadership as "looking at education through the lens of equity" and "diving headfirst into the important work of examining both what we are teaching our children, and how we are engaging them as learners." Amanda viewed her role as a curriculum designer and instructional coach serving the needs of diverse students. She explained, "I need to create a diverse and inclusive curriculum that provides mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors for our students to see themselves, learn about others, and step into worlds beyond their imaginations." The ultimate goal of CLR leadership is to promote success for underserved students by ensuring high-quality CLR teaching and learning (Hollie, 2018; Scanlan & López, 2015).

Miranda, a middle school Spanish teacher, echoed Denise's remarks about serving the needs of students by stepping up as a leader who challenged racism and systemic inequities. Miranda described the majority of her students as children who had "experienced at least one ACE [adverse childhood experience]" and she recounted how trauma can make it "harder for them to learn without significant investments, including smaller class sizes, more trained staff, and more supports." She wrote, "The only way that I see to effectively advocate for more resources is to stop accepting the adage that teachers should only worry about things they can control." She believed that service to students should go beyond the classroom and school walls, stating the "need to advocate outside the school system, to legislators and the public" to combat "systemic racism" and get students the resources they need and deserve.

While all of the participants talked about their CLR leadership in ways that described servant leadership on behalf of students, Denise and Miranda's advocacy also aimed at larger societal changes. Schools and school leadership have never been apolitical (Anderson, 2009; Freire, 1970/2000; Gay, 2010) and "transformation in schools is only likely to occur when leaders take on roles as social change agents and engage in advocacy leadership and social and educational movements (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014, p. 119). The literature on CLR leadership identifies "being socially and politically active" and "advocating for policies that counter oppression" as important CLR leadership behaviors that are needed to address the roots of systemic inequities (Anderson, 2009; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). The "sociopolitical engagement" of CLR leaders is crucial to mitigating disparities between dominant and non-dominant students" (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014, p. 119). CLR leadership seeks to transform a system that is responsible for causing those disparities. As Miranda put it, "most schools in lower socio-economic areas," like hers, were experiencing "equity problems." She explained:

The superintendent talks about equity, but then the White, middle-class areas get new schools while the lower income areas get minor renovations. [...] I am glad for the new windows, but where are the new science labs, new media center with sufficient computers, new classrooms with more than one working outlet, new hallways and stairwells that are inviting, instead of institutional? There used to be a stipend paid to teachers who worked at Title 1 schools, as a way of acknowledging the extra effort needed to effectively teach in a high poverty area. That stipend has been gone for years, with the result that Title 1 schools are more often staffed with new or conditional teachers who, while dedicated and caring, still have a lot to learn about the art of teaching.

In this study, the participants' CLR leadership was strongly grounded in their desire to serve students through promoting high-quality CLR instruction and advocating for equitable policies, both within their own schools and in society at large. Teachers' leadership and advocacy play an important role in holding schools and district leaders accountable for meeting the needs of MLs (Lucas, 2011; Russell & Von Esch,

2018; Snyder & Staehr Fenner, 2021). While the participants' servant leadership on behalf of families and colleagues shared the same ultimate goal of serving students, the two subthemes of service to families and colleagues will be explored separately to illustrate how important the participants viewed their CLR leadership work in these two areas.

Serving the Needs of Families

The value of connecting schools and families is well-established. Over several decades, research has demonstrated a strong relationship between educators' effective engagement of families and positive outcomes for students (Leo et al., 2019). Family engagement has been linked to "improved academic achievement, attendance, homework completion, and student motivation," "lower rates of dropout and truancy," and "positive social/emotional effects" (Leo et al., 2019, p. 256-257). When schools effectively engage families, students tend to achieve more, regardless of income, ethnicity, or parents' educational levels (e.g., Driessen et al., 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2007). To that end, ESSA (2015) explicitly calls for educators and families to engage together in a reciprocal partnership to promote students' success.

Family engagement is a core tenet of culturally responsive pedagogies (Hollie, 2018; Leo et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Khalifa et al., 2016). Snyder and Staehr Fenner (2021) propose "uniting students' schools, families, and communities" as a guiding principle of culturally responsive teaching for MLs (p. 230). Family support and engagement have been identified as critical factors in MLs' academic success and emotional well-being (Martinez-Alba & Pentón Herrera, 2021; Reese & Gallimore, 2000). Educators should foster "warm and respectful relationships" with MLs' families (Snyder & Staehr Fenner, 2021, p. 231) and use an asset-based approach that recognizes the many ways that MLs' families support their child's education (Cooper, 2009; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Khalifa et al., 2016; Poza et al., 2014; Quijochó & Daoud, 2006; Staehr Fenner, 2014). Hollie's definition of CLR pedagogy underscores the need for educators to intentionally create inclusive environments that validate students' home cultures and languages (2018). Effective family engagement enables teachers to better connect learning to students' lives, identify appropriate accommodations or supports, and hold higher expectations for all students (Hollie, 2018; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016).

In this study, Miranda, a Spanish teacher and native Spanish speaker, was the only participant who discussed family engagement for MLs as an aspect of CLR leadership that "came easily" to her. Miranda identified culturally and linguistically with the majority of her MLs, who were Hispanic. She discussed her ability to serve MLs' families as a liaison and interpreter, which was especially needed throughout the pandemic and virtual learning. Reflecting on her CLR leadership and future pathway, Miranda was planning to leverage her bilingualism to "help more students and their families" by taking classes to become a "Pupil Personnel Worker (PPW)."

Matt was exploring ways to spread his influence to improve connections between the school and MLs' families. He saw a "family mentor program" as a potential way to build "relationships and community knowledge" to "identify more solutions" for culturally and linguistically responsive communication practices. In this way, Matt's desire to be a servant leader on behalf of families reflected a strong pattern across the dataset.

All of the 15 participants described their work with families in ways that portrayed servant leadership. This same theme was identified by Wise and Slater (2020) in their case study on leaders who were working to improve equity for MLs. The participants' servant leadership with families toppled the traditional notion of "one-way, disciplinary-focused communication" and modeled a "reciprocal approach" (Leo et al., 2019). Instead, they sought to empower families to make informed decisions about their child's education, provide feedback, and have a "bigger say in what goes on," as Denise put it.

A solid research base establishing the positive link between family engagement and improved student outcomes suggests that the participants' focus on families had direct benefits for their students (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Leo et al., 2019). Ishimaru and Galloway (2014) identified "collaborating with families and communities" as a high-leverage leadership strategy to improve equity in schools (p. 117). They described "exemplary" leadership practice in this area as seeking to "collaborate with parents and caregivers, particularly from non-dominant communities, as experts on their own children" and

recognizing the role they can play as “change agents” who influence school policies, contribute to school improvement, and help create a more inclusive school climate (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014, p. 117).

The idea of CLR leaders serving the needs of colleagues *in order* to serve the needs of students was echoed consistently across the dataset. Throughout her three years in the program, Lila said she had “moved from being a classroom teacher to a teacher leader, and now the chair for our English Language Arts department.” Prior to becoming department chair, Lila served as her school’s Inter-Disciplinary Team leader for sixth grade. In that role, she described leading her colleagues “in a collaborative decision-making process to put in place positive behavior incentives” in an effort to “manage the behaviors of incoming sixth graders.” She explained that “there was a lack of support from the new administration team, and I had to use my [CLR-PD] teachings to help put in place different management and instructional strategies to support my team.” When she moved into the out-of-classroom department chair role, she “established a passion for being an instructional coach.” Lila explained:

I want to make an impact for students not just by being in the classroom, but by helping to develop teachers who are passionate and keeping those teachers in a school that others may deem to be “too hard.” Throughout this program, I have grown from wanting my sphere of influence to be the kids in my class to asking myself, “Can I help other teachers recognize how they are a resource and how to put that resource to best use?”

Lila’s school leadership roles focused on supporting her teams of teachers in ways that would help them to better serve the needs of students.

In sum, the participants described their notions of CLR leadership and their personal leadership growth in terms that reflected servant leadership. The ten characteristics of servant leadership, defined by Spears (2010), were evident throughout the participants’ responses. The previous sections have highlighted how the participants’ servant leadership was demonstrated through aspects including their community building with students, families, and staff; commitment to supporting the growth of their colleagues; and stewardship of school improvement and “the greater good” (Crippen & Willows, 2019, p. 175; Greenleaf, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2006; Supovitz, 2018). Their ability to serve as influential teacher leaders was based on their characteristic of persuasion, rather than coercion or positional authority (Greenleaf, 2003; Crippen & Willows, 2019). Thus, the servant leadership characteristics of community building, commitment to growth, stewardship, and persuasion have been made clear.

The servant leader characteristics of foresight and conceptualization were evident, though to a lesser extent, in the participants’ responses. Foresight refers to the servant leader’s ability to use the past and present to anticipate and plan for the future (Crippen & Willows, 2019; Greenleaf, 2003; Sipe and Frick; 2009). Crippen and Willows (2019) connected the servant leader’s characteristic of foresight to school improvement efforts, which all of the participants discussed in terms of their CLR leadership. This overlaps with the servant leader’s characteristic of conceptualization, in which they exhibit the ability to problem solve and see the “bigger picture” (Crippen & Willows, 2019; Greenleaf, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Many of the participants described their experiences enacting school-wide initiatives, implementing systemic changes, and developing a vision of CLR schooling, all of which relate to the servant leadership characteristics of foresight and conceptualization. Finally, the servant leader characteristic of self-awareness will be discussed in-depth in the third theme, as it relates to the participants’ continual growth and critical consciousness as teacher leaders.

Theme 3: Continual Growth and Critical Consciousness as *Teacher Leaders*

The third theme to describe the participants’ experiences with CLR leadership was their commitment to continual growth and critical consciousness as teacher leaders. Critical consciousness is considered a core attribute of CLR leadership (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). Leaders’ critical consciousness is defined as “awareness of self and their values, beliefs, and/or dispositions” in relation to the students and community being served (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 9). Effectively serving MLs requires educators and school leaders to “build cultural competency” and “operate from an asset-based approach” (Snyder & Staehr Fenner, 2021). Moreover, Hollie (2018) emphasizes the need for CLR practitioners to maintain a stance that “refutes deficit thinking” and views what every student “brings culturally and linguistically as an asset, a capability, and an element that can

be built upon” (p. 32). For some educators, this requires a “change in heart and in mind,” or a “mindset shift,” to understand that students are “not the problem but rather the source of the solution” (p. 32). PD and preparation programs are considered important spaces for intentionally developing educators’ CLR mindsets and practices (Gort et al., 2011; Jackson & Boutte, 2018; Lucas, 2011).

As noted previously, the theme of constant reflection and critical consciousness is also inherent in the characteristics of servant leadership. Servant leaders demonstrate foresight, conceptualization, and awareness that is both internal and external (Crippen & Willows, 2019; Greenleaf, 1970/2008; Spears, 2010). Akin to reflexivity, the servant leader’s internal awareness involves looking inward at oneself to constantly reflect on one’s own practices and positionality as a leader (Crippen & Willows, 2019). This occurs when teachers analyze their role as a leader, how it might affect their relationships with others, and how they can best use their sphere of influence to affect change (Crippen & Willows, 2019). External awareness denotes the servant leader’s understanding of the environment and its context, and an ability to “fully see all of the intricacies at play” in order to effectively lead and solve problems (Crippen & Willows, 2019, p. 174). In this way, the servant leader characteristic of awareness involves an operational tension between internal and external perceptions, leading to a determination of what can be accomplished and how best to achieve it (Greenleaf, 1970/2008; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

As praxis and critical consciousness are interpretive and ongoing processes, they encapsulate the idea of continual learning and growth (Arnold & Mundy, 2020; Gay, 2010; Li & Sah, 2020). The CLR leader’s praxis is described as a continual quest to “create the learning architecture” that will increase equity (Scanlan and López, 2015, p. 24). The participants demonstrated a commitment to continuously developing their critical consciousness in order to better serve the needs of their students. Likewise, their commitment to continual growth reflects the idea that equity is a goal to constantly strive for – when equity gains are made, CLR leaders are propelled to seek further and push for even greater equity. Along the same lines, Khalifa (2018) reminds education leaders to “resist notions that they will ever create *completely* culturally responsive schools” (p. 103). Instead, CLR leaders should be engaged in an iterative cycle of “constantly engaging in critical self-reflection” and “implementing and/or reforming policies and practices that will make schools *more* culturally responsive” (Khalifa, 2018, p. 103).

Conclusion and Implications

These themes developed in this study were supported by current scholarship, which has identified data-driven approaches to school improvement (such as equity audits), a servant approach to leadership, and developing educators’ critical consciousness as important aspects of CLR leadership (e.g., Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Scanlan & López, 2015; Wise & Slater, 2020). From the standpoint of a teacher practitioner, the participants’ strong emphasis on using data to guide their CLR leadership efforts was the theme that was most surprising to me. While it is clearly an important aspect of CLR leadership, equity data discussions may not be a practice that is embraced by teachers or used in schools where there is not an established culture of trust and a shared goal of equity (Khalifa, 2018). The authentic use of equity data for improvement and accountability may vary widely in its implementation across districts or schools (Khalifa, 2018). As a teacher with 22 years of experience, having taught in two different counties/states and eight different schools, I have rarely heard equity data discussed at the teacher level or used to systematically improve instruction.

Yet, developing a school culture where data-based equity discussions occur frequently and authentically is crucial to CLR leadership (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). The participants described their intentional collection and use of data, both quantitative and qualitative, to reveal and address inequities for MLs and other diverse students. This practice was tied to the other themes, as the participants were committed to continually cultivating their critical consciousness and shared a vision of servant leadership on behalf of underserved students. Having honest and open discussions about equity data was part of their process of continual growth and critical consciousness aimed at serving students’ needs.

Woven throughout all themes was the importance of building a foundation of trusting relationships with staff, students, and families. Trusting relationships formed the bedrock upon which the participants’ servant leadership could occur, their critical consciousness could be jointly pursued, and their use of data discussions could promote a shared vision of equity, rather than sowing distrust amongst colleagues. The

same ideas are present throughout the literature on CLR leadership. Khalifa (2018) lays out a three-year plan for CLR leaders to organize schools in ways that build trust and “establish a culture of equity accountability” (p. 105). In their review of Veemis et al.’s (2020) volume of scholarship on leadership for diverse schools, Berry et al. (2020) identified several salient CLR leadership themes: relationship-building and authentic caring, moral purpose, a shared goal of transformational change, respecting and affirming identities, contextually driven leadership practices, reflection/reflexivity, and ensuring high-quality teaching and learning (p. 221). These ideas were displayed consistently by participants across the dataset and in the three themes that were presented.

There are several implications that arise from this study. First, it provides evidence that CLR-PD programs can develop educators’ mindsets and skillsets in ways that hold promise for promoting equity for MLs and other underserved students. Throughout the literature, scholars have issued a clear and urgent call for more CLR teaching and leadership practices to address inequities that have persisted in U.S. schools – inequities that could become more pronounced with ongoing shifts in U.S. demographics creating “superdiverse” classrooms (Hollie, 2018; Hurwitz & Olsen, 2018; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Park, et al., 2018; Scanlan & López, 2015; Snyder & Staehr Fenner, 2021; Vertovec, 2007, 2022). As classrooms and communities are becoming increasingly diverse, schools play an important role in conceptualizing and modeling how members of superdiverse societies can work together in ways that collectively benefit all (Vertovec, 2022).

CLR pedagogy and leadership strive to address inequities and reduce the exacerbation of stratification that can lead superdiverse societies to become “diversity dystopias,” marked by increasing tension and conflict (Vertovec, 2022, p. 224). As scholars have noted, more CLR-PD opportunities are needed for widespread educator preparation and development towards becoming CLR teachers and school leaders (Maina & Zaier, 2020; Merchant et al., 2020; Villegas, 2018; Berry et al., 2020). Partnerships between universities and school districts, such as those formed through NPD grants, can provide CLR-PD programs that effectively bring educators together to lead the way in school reforms. In this study, eight of the 15 participants worked at one K-8 charter school and all 15 participants worked in the same school district, where student diversity was steadily increasing. The participants’ shared local contexts were useful for building strong relationships, shared understandings, and collective efficacy amongst the cohort. Thus, one implication of this study is the recommendation for more PD programs, such as those leading to additional teaching certifications, Master’s degrees, and/or administrative credentials, to use the local cohort model and set a clear focus for developing teachers’ CLR pedagogy and leadership.

A second implication is for schools to intentionally develop spaces for educators to work collectively to build critical consciousness and shared understandings around CLR practices. Scholars have found that this work can be fostered through school-based professional learning communities (PLCs), or communities of practice, focused on equity. In this study, Denise and Lila recounted how their participation in book study groups on topics of race and culture was an important element in their ongoing development of critical consciousness. Lomelí (2021) provided another example as a principal leading a group of educators in “critical praxis circles,” a process guided by “Freirean principles of dialogue and praxis” (p. 122). He described this PCL as a group of educators meeting regularly to reflect upon and discuss their instruction and student work (Lomelí, 2021). They developed “collective critical consciousness” by coming together through “authentic dialogue” to “critique the status quo or institutional forces of oppression and apply the critiques to their own context” and “access community cultural wealth to find ways to counter the status quo or institutional forces of oppression” (Lomelí, 2021, p. 121).

More scholarship and research are needed to help district leadership, policy makers, and university leadership development programs understand how the values of CLR leadership can be put into practice and managed amidst the competing responsibilities of actual school administrators. Khalifa (2018) raises critical questions and pushes back against traditional school leadership models. He provides a blueprint for CLR principals, who must “institutionalize multiple practices, simultaneously” – engaging their staff in critical self-reflection, seeking to better understand their school community’s “knowledge, experiences, and perceptions,” and using this knowledge to “craft schools as a space inclusive of all students” (Khalifa, 2018, p. 110). While Khalifa acknowledges that these are practices many principals “have likely *not* learned in their leadership preparation programs,” the question raised by this study is how educators who

have been trained in CLR leadership programs can merge their CLR visions and skillsets with the constraints they presently see in more traditionally defined administrator roles.

Finally, Berry et al. (2020) maintains that more qualitative research is needed to provide rich insights and firsthand accounts about the “multi-layered” complexities that constitute CLR professional development, teaching practices, and leadership efforts that are currently taking place in schools and universities (p. 224). As Khalifa (2018) remarked, “Leadership and leadership preparation must be a central part of the conversation” for creating CLR schools (p. 22). I would encourage more teachers, teacher leaders, and aspiring school administrators to join that conversation and help to shape it.

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