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## Review: 'Culturally Responsive School Leadership'

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## **Book review**

Corinne Brion, PhD, University of Dayton Department of Educational Administration

Khalifa, M. (2018). *Culturally Responsive School Leadership*. Cambridge, MA. Harvard Education Press.

Context matters. These two words ring true everywhere, in every situation we find ourselves and for everything we do or say, but they have a particularly strong impact in American schools. Despite the fact that American schools have officially been desegregated since 1954, researchers such as Bolgatz (2005b); Delpit (1995); Lindsey, Robins & Terrell

(2009) and Singleton (2014) argue that schools and classrooms are still largely segregated in a variety of ways. The majority of schools for example do not have a contextually appropriate curriculum, do not promote diversity among students, teachers and staff or omit to engage *all* parents and community members. Besides institutional and deeply rooted cultural, societal and political reasons for these inequities, Di Angelo (2011) posits that white people do not know how to tackle issues of race and racism and would rather avoid the topic all together, perpetuating the inequalities among minorities. In this book, Khalifa focuses on how *all* urban school leaders (from any race and ethnic background) can support minority students. He posits that while culturally responsive methods have been presented and taught to teachers, most school leaders are not familiar with the concept.

Khalifa's present a strong argument, in which Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) must be a priority for urban school leaders in order to become effective instructional leaders and have a positive impact on student learning regardless of the students' cultural and

racial origins and heritages. As a result, CRSL must be promoted by school leaders far and foremost. The author also suggests that schools leaders need to be or become critically self-reflective, support teachers to become culturally aware and responsive, help them develop culturally responsive curricula, provide inviting and safe learning environments, and lastly leaders need to engage everyone in the community. The author offers practical advice and solutions for school leaders and for lasting systemic change. For example, at the end of each chapter the readers can find Discussion questions (self-reflection questions) and in some instances other questions which are drawn from the embedded case study. Khalifa also provides some helpful activities that school leaders can do with their school team. Finally, the book's tables offer activities and salient illustrations. For example, the author lists the behaviors to avoid and others to adopt in order to be culturally responsive school leaders (see page 87 on Inclusive and Exclusive School Space).

Khalifa was once a public school teacher in Detroit, a leader teacher and a central district administrator. Khalifa is now the Robert H. Beck Professor of Ideas in Education at the University Minnesota. Khalifa's research has been centered around the concept of Culturally Responsive School leadership in urban school contexts in the United States. Khalifa also provides consulting to school and school districts around the country, helping them to perform equity audits and addressing the achievement gaps.

*Culturally Responsive School leadership* is part of a series on Race and Education. The goal of the series is to advance the research on race in order to influence practice, policy, theory and action.

## **Summary of contents**

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of culturally responsive school leadership in school reform. Data for this book derived from a two-year ethnographic study of a High School Principal in a mid-sized college town in Greater Detroit area, Michigan. The principal in this study was an African-American who had 40 years of experience working in schools. Secondary data originated from some other districts in Michigan as well as districts around San Antonio, Texas.

Data included field notes and rich descriptions, observations, interviews of students and principals, the analysis of documents such as school, county and district data. Data also included reports and writings from the media about the site studied. In addition, the author visited on schools and community-based sites. Finally, Khalifa captured students' perceptions by following students in schools and in their homes and communities. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the author gathered data from several sources over time, and asked his interviewees to check his findings, otherwise known as member checking. To protect the identity of the study participants and the schools pseudonyms were used.

### **Strengths**

The book is an easy read, it is well-organized and provides helpful activities, examples and self-reflections for teachers, leaders and district staff who are interested in learning more and implementing concepts of CRSL. The content of the book is rooted in empirical research and lived experiences. The manuscript contributes to both the educational leadership literature and the literature on culturally responsive schools (Bazron, Osher & Fleischman, 2005). I believe that the content could be incorporated in leaders' preparation programs around the country. According to the author, to date there is a lack of principal training that teach about culturally responsive leadership despite the fact school leaders play a crucial role in improving student

learning outcomes and well-being ( Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Another strength of this book is the emphasis on self-reflection. Adults learn by doing and reflecting (Knowles, 1975; Mezirow, 2000). As school leaders it is important to understand how adults learn best and to model self-reflection. This book provides many opportunities to reflect. Lastly, the author insists on inviting the communities into the CRSL process and to seek feedback from them. It is a good reminder that schools are the communities and that they are situated within communities. Too often, school leaders work in silos by fear of criticism.

### **Stretchers**

*I use the term 'stretcher' in order to provide some ideas that might stretch your thinking about the book.*

### **Four areas to consider**

First, it would have been helpful for the readers to know more about the participants of the study. Perhaps listing the gender of the students, race, ethnicities, primary languages, socio-economic status etc. Since the book is about finding ways to be culturally responsive, it would have strengthened the Principal's successes and been easier for leaders of similar schools to identify with the book.

Second, In terms of the literature used, I find that Tony Bryk's work on relational trust could have been cited here as well as the seminal work of Joyce Epstein on parent and community involvement. In addition, it would have been helpful to refer to some Educational models and frameworks that school leaders could use on a daily basis to help them become more culturally responsive. Models such as Starratt's Ethical School (1991) or Purkey & Novak's (2008) Invitational School would be salient here.

Third, the author talks about training teachers, leaders and districts staff on the CRSL concepts. In order to foster the implementation of the concepts learned, I would emphasize the importance of the follow up post training. I would also suggest that leaders need to understand 1) how adults learn best and 2) how they can ensure that the newly acquired knowledge gets implemented in the schools.

Finally, researchers interested in this line of inquiry could conduct studies that seek to understand the perceptions of minority groups in particular: African American, Hispanic, Native American, LGBTQ etc. Other studies could target primary students as well since perceptions and beliefs are formed at a very young age. It would be interesting to follow students across the grades as well.

Khalifa's book is a notable contribution to the educational leadership literature and to the literature on culturally responsive schools in urban contexts. I believe that educators at all levels, positions and grades could benefit from reading this book and should engage in self-reflection about it.

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