

The Practical Challenges of Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL) for Educators in Culturally Diverse Contexts: A Systematic Literature Review

Su Dingjun and Azlin Norhaini Mansor

Abstract – Globalization and increasing cultural diversity present growing challenges for educational systems worldwide. Ensuring that educational leaders can effectively enact culturally responsive leadership (CRL) has become essential for promoting equity. However, among various leadership theories, CRL remains relatively underdeveloped, and translating its concepts into practice is difficult. To synthesize recent high-quality evidence, this study conducted a systematic literature review following PRISMA 2020 guidelines. We searched the Web of Science database for articles with “culturally responsive leadership” in the title, focusing on the articles published between 2020 and 2025. After screening 58 records and applying inclusion criteria, 14 articles were retained for detailed analysis. These studies, from 7 countries, underscore the need for leaders to reduce implicit bias by guiding educators to engage in critical self-reflection and to devote more attention to immigrant, minority, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and otherwise marginalized students. At the same time, a lack of accountability mechanisms and performance evaluation has led some educators to be less forthcoming about these issues. Nonetheless, many scholars emphasize the importance of deconstructing power structures and decolonizing education by dismantling systemic oppression. They propose strategies such as diversifying educational teams, increasing family participation, and empowering communities to combat racial inequality through collective action. They also call for increased resources to better address the complex inequalities exacerbated by globalization. In summary, this study concludes that educational leaders should begin by restructuring the teaching force and creating a student-centered, culturally responsive school environment. They should collaborate with families and communities to build comprehensive support systems beyond the school. Finally, government policies must be strengthened to facilitate the transition from individual leadership practices to systemic, institutional change, thereby bridging the gap between CRL theory and practice.

Keywords – Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL), Educational Equity, Multicultural Education, Systemic Oppression, School Leadership, Community Engagement, Systematic Literature Review

I. INTRODUCTION

Globalization and rising cultural diversity are reshaping education systems around the world. More people from different regions are encountering one another, which leads to greater cultural and economic diversification and expands the variety of racial and ethnic groups in a society. As a result, the degree of diversity among students and educators is higher than ever before, a trend confirmed by multiple

studies (Brown et al., 2022; Cai, 2023; Chen & Yang, 2022). Dramatic changes are occurring in education in every country. These shifts force educators to adopt a more student-centered perspective. Past research indicates that advances in educational leadership have not kept pace with demographic changes and that issues of racial inequality and systemic oppression remain unresolved in school systems (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024; Wright, 2024). Even teachers and leaders—despite their profound influence on students—may harbor deeply rooted racial, theoretical, and unconscious biases. These biases not only fail to help students overcome prejudice but can also exacerbate the marginalization of already disadvantaged learners (Leviton, 2020; Wright, 2024). To bridge the longstanding cultural divides among students and to reduce conflicts among diverse groups, researchers argue that educators must adopt leadership styles different from traditional models (Brown et al., 2022; Highfield et al., 2024a; Woodgate, 2023). In particular, Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL) has been identified as a promising approach for effectively addressing the challenges of diversity (Chen & Yang, 2022).

Beyond addressing current conflicts, educators also bear the responsibility of preparing future generations with the values and skills needed for a rapidly changing world. To this end, all United Nations member (2015) states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The fourth goal (SDG 4) explicitly identifies high-quality education as a key area for promoting global sustainable development, aiming to equip our children with the capacity to navigate future uncertainties and to cultivate learners with a global perspective and sense of responsibility (UNESCO, 2016). Other SDGs emphasize related values—such as Gender Equality (SDG 5), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), Peace and Justice (SDG 16), and Partnerships (SDG 17) — all of which provide important guidance for the future of society and industry. A recent study on CRL and sustainability confirms that CRL plays an important role in advancing these SDGs in education (Suvd et al., 2024). This study also points out that, although CRL can positively impact school development, many school leaders lack the necessary knowledge, skills, and training to apply CRL effectively.

Indeed, one of the core drivers of CRL is achieving educational equity. In diverse contexts, serious equity gaps persist: community efforts in Peru often fail to support marginalized youth and female students (Leviton, 2020); in Austria, a largely homogeneous teaching staff struggles to meet the needs of marginalized pupils (Brown et al., 2022); in the United States, minority students may face prejudice from teachers and peers due to language barriers (Wright,

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2024); and in New Zealand, economically disadvantaged Māori students may find it difficult even to access basic education (Highfield et al., 2024b). In each of these cases, educators have an obligation to find solutions for these underserved student populations. Many scholars agree that CRL is key to addressing such inequalities (Cai, 2023; Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024; Woodgate, 2023).

Scholars often conceptualize CRL through the framework of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL), introduced by Khalifa et al. (2016). The CRSL framework identifies four dimensions of CRL: (a) critically self-reflecting on leadership behaviours, (b) developing culturally responsive teachers, (c) promoting a culturally responsive/inclusive school environment, and (d) engaging students, parents, and Indigenous contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016). At its core, this model addresses how leaders in multicultural educational settings can balance cultural differences and identity recognition, guiding their organizations toward equity, inclusivity, and student success. Unlike traditional leadership models that often use academic achievement as the sole measure of success, CRL emphasizes students' cultural backgrounds and experiences, allowing schools to better meet the needs of diverse learners⁵, 6. Evidence also suggests that CRL has positive effects on students' academic and socio-emotional development (Ražali & Hamid, 2022).

Given its potential benefits, widespread adoption and promotion of CRL practices are urgent, especially in culturally diverse educational organizations (Cai, 2023; Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024; Woodgate, 2023). Nevertheless, CRL is a relatively new concept that requires further development and research. In practice, implementing CRL within educational organizations faces multiple obstacles. Scholars have found that even when policies explicitly espouse CRL, there is often a gap between rhetoric and action. Research from multiple countries indicates that barriers to CRL extend beyond internal factors (e.g. school leadership and teachers (Banwo et al., 2022; Genao, 2021; Highfield et al., 2024a)) to include external factors such as family involvement, community support, and national policies (Brown et al., 2022; Phillips & Genao, 2023; Woodgate, 2023). Moreover, existing research has yet to offer a comprehensive system for advancing CRL that accounts for the cultural and political diversity of different regions. There is also a lack of comparative analyses across regions, which limits the ability to summarize CRL's development status and identify new solutions based on current conditions.

The purpose of this study is to examine the implementation of CRL by school leaders in educational organizations across diverse cultural contexts worldwide. This study aims to identify common challenges that hinder the realization of CRL and to uncover localization issues that arise in different cultural backgrounds and focus is on the four core components of school leaders' CRL capacity – namely, (a) critically self-reflecting on leadership behaviors, (b) developing culturally responsive teachers, (c) promoting culturally responsive/inclusive school environments, and (d) engaging students, families, and Indigenous contexts – and on analyzing the interrelationships among these dimensions. Through this review, this study intends to provide a theoretical foundation and practical guidance for developing

effective support strategies that enhance CRL. Ultimately, this study is expected to promote greater success for every student and to inform efforts to improve the quality of education in culturally diverse settings globally.

To this end, we address the following research questions:

RQ1: What obstacles exist in the implementation process of CRL within school systems in culturally diverse contexts?

RQ2: In a culturally diverse school system, what key challenges need to be addressed to promote CRL?

RQ3: In a culturally diverse school system, what are the interrelationship mechanisms among the four dimensions of CRL?

To answer these questions, this study employs the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021) for a systematic literature review. Compared to PRISMA 2009 (Moher et al., 2009), the 2020 version offers a more flexible structure, stricter search strategies, and accommodates a broader range of study designs (Page et al., 2021). It also maintains the transparency and reproducibility of the review process for which PRISMA is known.

II. METHODOLOGY

This review follows the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to systematically collect and analyze literature on CRL published in the past five years. First, to capture internationally influential scholarship, this study conducted a systematic search in the Web of Science (WOS) database and experimented with various search strings, which initially yielded many irrelevant results. To increase specificity, we restricted the search to documents with the exact phrase culturally responsive leadership in the title. The final query was: TITLE: (culturally AND responsive AND leadership). This search returned 58 documents. Next, we applied successive filters. The Document Type was limited to “Article,”

TABLE 1: RICHNESS PRESENTATION OF THE 14 STUDIES

Details of the 14 Studies		
Themes	Categories	Total
Region	Urban	7
	Rural	5
Education Stage	Pre-K	2
	Elementary School	3
	Middle School	9
	K-12	1
	Higher Education	1
Institution Type	Public	9
	Private	2
	Community	2
Method	Qualitative	9
	Mix	5
	Non-Empirical	1
Sampling	Students	3
	Parents	5
	Teachers	5
	Leaders	8
	Policy	1

excluding 16 records that were not journal articles. And then set the “Web of Science Categories” to “Education Educational Research” to focus on education-related literature, which excluded 7 more records that were outside

the education field. Finally, we limited the publication date to 2020 or later to include only the most recent research (since this review was conducted in 2025). This date filter excluded an additional 18 records. After these steps, 17 articles remained for screening.

In the Eligibility phase, we reviewed the titles and abstracts of the remaining 17 articles. One record labelled as an “Article” in WOS was actually a book chapter, so it was excluded. Among the remaining papers, we identified two that, while related to CRL, did not meet the criteria: one focused on “Culturally Responsive Partnerships” and another on “Culturally Responsive Capacity.” These were excluded from the review.

Ultimately, 14 articles were deemed relevant and were included in the systematic review. These studies (both empirical and theoretical) examine the current state of CRL in educational organizations across seven different countries and regions, covering all education levels from early childhood through higher education. The educational organizations studied include public and private schools, international schools, community schools, and institutions in both urban and rural settings. Key features of each study are summarized in Table 1. These works provide important insights for enhancing CRL in schools. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flowchart detailing the identification, screening, and selection process.

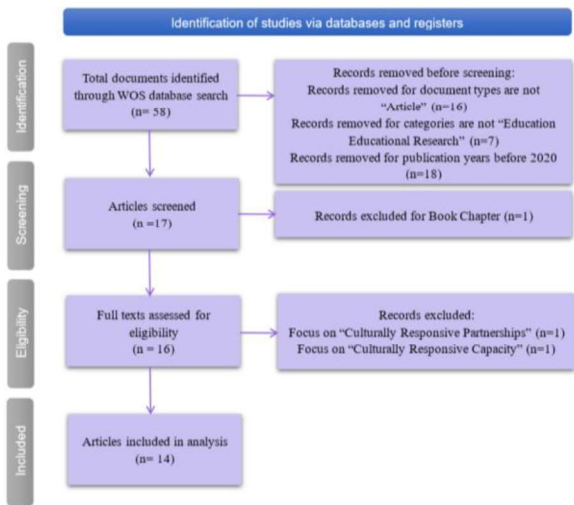


Figure 1. Workflow Chart of the Systematic Review with the PRISMA Method

III.FINDINGS

Descriptive Analysis: Scope, Methods, and Core Focus

The 14 included studies span 4 countries/regions, encompassing the United States, New Zealand, Peru, and a consortium of four European countries (Austria, Ireland, Russia, and Spain). The educational levels examined range from pre-k and elementary school through middle school, higher education, and even leadership training programs. Study participants include school principals, middle-level leaders, teachers, students, parents, community members, future education leaders, as well as analyses of relevant policies and regulations. As Table 1 shows, although the

number of studies is limited, they address a diverse array of research contexts and dimensions. Notably, none of the studies employed quantitative methods.

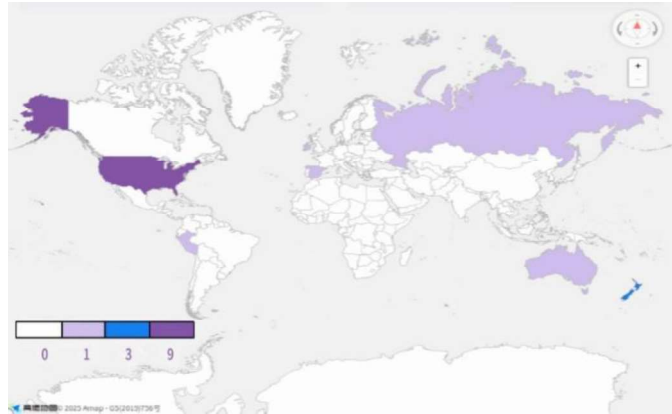


Figure 2. Geographical Visualization of Study Distribution: Number of Publications per Country

Figure 2 shows that 9 of the 14 studies investigated CRL within the U.S. education system, making the United States the most-studied country. In addition, one European Union–funded study spanned four countries—Austria, Ireland, Russia, and Spain—the largest geographic scope of any single study. Methodologically, the studies relied primarily on qualitative approaches. Common data-collection methods including interviews, questionnaires, case studies, and document analysis. For example, several studies utilized coding tools to perform thematic analysis (Chen & Yang, 2022; DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Highfield et al., 2024a; Levitan, 2020; Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024; Thornton, 2025; Wright, 2024), and some guided participants through deep critical reflection using structured frameworks (e.g., the CRILS model, intersectionality, etc.). This suggests that CRL research is increasingly focusing on the transformation of leaders’ internal awareness rather than merely on surface-level management behaviours.

Most of the studies concentrate on the four key dimensions of CRL defined by CRSL: leaders’ critical self-reflection, the development of culturally responsive teachers, the construction of inclusive school environments, and the promotion of collaboration among schools, families, and communities (Brown et al., 2022; Cai, 2023; DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Genao, 2021; Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024; Thornton, 2025; Wright, 2024). These dimensions align closely with Khalifa et al.(2016)’s framework discussed earlier. Furthermore, many studies repeatedly highlight the effects of cultural diversity on marginalized student groups (such as Māori students, ethnic minorities, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and language-disadvantaged learners), identifying these issues as one of the core driving forces behind CRL implementation (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Highfield et al., 2024a, 2024b; Levitan, 2020; Phillips & Genao, 2023; Thornton, 2025).

It is also noteworthy that scholars do not simply regard CRL as a management strategy but view it as a pathway to educational justice – a profound response to racial inequality, epistemic colonialism, and structural oppression (Genao, 2021; Levitan, 2020; Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024; Wright, 2024). However, in practice CRL still faces

significant limitations. Many studies report that CRL implementation suffers from ambiguous pathways, insufficient resources, and a lack of systemic support, which leads to marked variability in effectiveness across different contexts (Chen & Yang, 2022; Highfield et al., 2024a, 2024b; Woodgate, 2023; Wright, 2024).

RQ1: Barriers in CRL Implementation

Although most educational leaders conceptually recognize the importance of CRL, they often lack clear guidance and concrete implementation tools (Highfield et al., 2024a, 2024b; Woodgate, 2023). This results in a gap between “saying well” and “doing well,” and the absence of accountability mechanisms exacerbates this issue within organizations.

A more complex set of barriers arises from educators’ own cognitive and emotional challenges. Some teachers and leaders experience strong emotional reactions—such as anger, denial, and anxiety—when they confront their own biases during the reflection process, which can prevent critical reflection from proceeding deeply (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Wright, 2024). For example, one study found that some teachers initially misinterpreted parents’ lack of school involvement as a disregard for education, only later realizing through reflection that this assumption stemmed from their own stereotyping of those families. This revelation was important yet also very painful for the educators involved (Wright, 2024).

Systemic and cultural obstacles are also prominent. Many schools lack a supportive inclusive culture and do not even show basic respect for linguistic diversity (Chen & Yang, 2022; Wright, 2024). In addition, community engagement mechanisms are often modeled on Western paradigms, making it difficult to genuinely address local cultural practices and needs. This helps explain why, in places like Peru, even though educational leaders value CRL, it remains hard to gain meaningful community support (Levitan, 2020). Finally, shortages of resources, training, and policy support further constrain the depth of CRL implementation. Most leadership development programs still do not include CRL-related content, and teachers and administrators rarely receive sustained, structured professional development in this area (Brown et al., 2022; Thornton, 2025; Wright, 2024). In terms of accountability, the current reliance on standardized testing tends to reinforce cultural biases rather than address them (Highfield et al., 2024b; Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024).

RQ2: Key Challenges and Strategies for Advancing CRL

First, addressing the gap between theory and practice is crucial to breaking the current bottleneck. This requires establishing a clear theory-to-action framework and providing schools with flexible yet guided, localized implementation pathways (Chen & Yang, 2022; DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Highfield et al., 2024a, 2024b; Woodgate, 2023). In other words, educators need both conceptual clarity and practical models that can be adapted to their specific contexts.

Secondly, structured reflection must become an integral part of professional development for teachers and leaders, supported by appropriate emotional support mechanisms. Many educators experience emotional turbulence when confronting injustice and bias, which is an inevitable phase of critical reflection (Wright, 2024). Training programs should therefore incorporate opportunities for guided reflection coupled with counselling or peer support to help educators navigate these difficult feelings.

From a governance perspective, schools and education systems should move from dependence on “personal commitment” to providing robust institutional safeguards. This includes enacting policy support, decentralizing decision-making, adopting culturally inclusive policies, and creating mechanisms for redistributing resources. Without such institutional backing, CRL often remains at the level of “good intentions but no power.” (Banwo et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2022; Genao, 2021)

In addition, it is essential to promote context-sensitive practice models. The cultural backgrounds and educational structures in countries like the United States, Peru, and New Zealand differ greatly, and a one-size-fits-all reform strategy is often ineffective (Cai, 2023; Levitan, 2020). Effective CRL practice needs to be deeply integrated with local cultures, languages, and community traditions. For example, what works in a high-resource U.S. school district may not directly translate to a rural school in Peru, so strategies must be tailored to each setting.

Finally, regarding evaluation, efforts should move beyond the limitations of standardized testing and explore alternative, multidimensional measures of success. Evaluation systems should include indicators that better capture educational equity and cultural responsiveness – for instance, levels of student engagement, parental feedback, and improvements in teachers’ cultural responsiveness (Highfield et al., 2024b; Wright, 2024) – rather than relying solely on test scores.

RQ3: Interrelationship Mechanism of the Four Dimensions of CRL

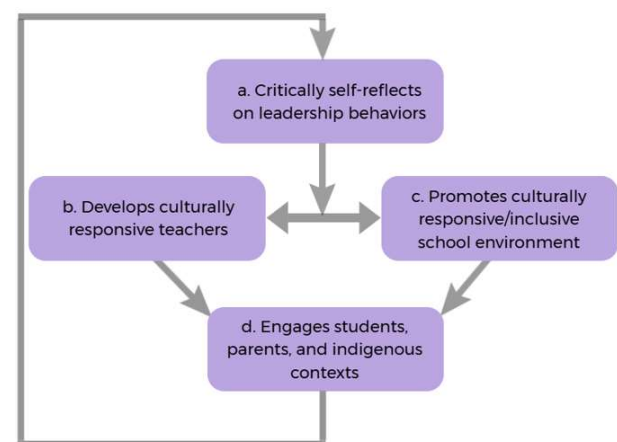


Figure 3. Interrelationship Mechanism of the Four Dimensions of CRL

The literature generally indicates that the four key dimensions of CRL do not operate in isolation but form a continuously cycling, interdependent system (DeMatthews

& Izquierdo, 2020; Levitan, 2020; Wright, 2024). Critical self-reflection serves as the starting point in this cycle: it helps educational leaders identify their own biases and provides the cognitive and psychological foundation for developing culturally responsive teaching practices, environments, and interactions (Wright, 2024).

From there, developing teachers and curricula relies on the support of the school environment and also influences the knowledge and resources that flow into the community. Conversely, whether the school environment is truly inclusive affects teachers' development, and it determines whether families and students are willing to participate in school-community partnerships (Banwo et al., 2022; Highfield et al., 2024a; Levitan, 2020). In other words, a culturally inclusive environment supports teachers' growth and encourages community involvement, while a non-inclusive environment can hinder both. This interactive relationship among dimensions is very close and indispensable (Banwo et al., 2022; Highfield et al., 2024a; Levitan, 2020).

Notably, experiences and feedback from the community can in turn deepen the leaders' reflective process. When leaders see how their actions affect students and families, it can prompt them to re-examine their own assumptions and guide the next steps in their practice (Levitan, 2020). As emphasized by the CRILS framework, structured reflection is not a one-time event but the driving engine of the CRL cycle (Wright, 2024). The interconnected mechanisms among all four dimensions are visually depicted in Figure 3.

It is evident that the four dimensions of CRL support and reinforce each other in a cyclical manner, forming an educational leadership system that continuously evolves. In practice, only by advancing all four dimensions in an integrated way can CRL achieve its full potential for deepening equity and transforming educational structures.

IV. DISCUSSION

This review systematically examined 14 studies from diverse cultural contexts (including the United States, New Zealand, Peru, and four European countries) that focus on the practical implementation and challenges of CRL in education. The analysis indicates that although CRL has a relatively clear conceptual structure and dimensional framework in theory (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Highfield et al., 2024a; Wright, 2024), its implementation in multicultural educational settings remains at a critical transition point. The core dimensions of CRL – critical self-reflection, responsive teacher development, inclusive school environments, and home-school-community collaboration – face practical bottlenecks such as uneven development, unclear implementation pathways, and limited resources. These constraints reveal a fundamental tension between CRL's ideals and the realities of educational practice.

First, while critical self-reflection is widely recognized as the starting point of CRL, educators' reflective capacities are often constrained by the absence of structured mechanisms and emotional support (Wright, 2024). In most school environments, self-reflection takes the form of an individual moral initiative, lacking institutional guidance and continuous tools (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Wright, 2024). For example, a small school in Malaysia used

semi-structured dialogues to surface teachers' awareness of their own cultural biases (Ražali & Hamid, 2022), demonstrating a localized practice model suitable for resource-limited contexts. However, such practices are not yet institutionalized in most settings.

Second, developing culturally responsive teachers is not a matter of recognizing its importance, but of how to effectively build and sustain it at the school level. Middle-level leaders are viewed as critical change agents, yet they often face multiple pressures in reality – such as inadequate training, excessive responsibilities, and resource shortages (Brown et al., 2022). The teacher agency and collective vision that CRL advocates depend on middle managers having the capacity and space to foster a professional learning culture within their schools (Highfield et al., 2024a, 2024b). Without this support, efforts to develop teachers can falter.

Third, constructing an inclusive school environment requires more than a declaration of values; it demands practical capabilities and strategic integration. For instance, detracking and translanguaging strategies identified in the literature can provide mechanisms for transformation (Phillips & Genao, 2023; Thornton, 2025), but if teachers lack a deep understanding and genuine acceptance of cultural diversity, these practices may remain superficial (Phillips & Genao, 2023). In contrast, integrating CRL principles into curriculum design and school activities can have a more transformative effect. For example, an international school in Malaysia has successfully engaged in cultural integration by hosting "International Day" events and cross-grade global issue projects, illustrating a multidisciplinary, collaborative approach to embedding CRL in practice (Adams & Velarde, 2021).

Finally, home-school-community collaboration remains the most challenging yet potentially most impactful dimension of CRL. In many contexts, a deep trust gap and breakdown of communication still exist between schools and families or communities (Levitan, 2020). Traditional models of school-family cooperation often exclude mechanisms for participation by non-mainstream cultural groups, especially in areas where marginalized populations are concentrated (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Levitan, 2020). Research by Kadir et al. (2022) shows that in specific cultural contexts when educators engage more frequently in the "home-school-community interaction" dimension, it is positively correlated with an improved overall school climate. This finding highlights the importance of localized, trust-based approaches to collaboration.

In summary, these findings suggest that the four dimensions of CRL do not develop in a linear sequence but rather evolve together in a mutually reinforcing cycle. Advancing CRL from theory into routine practice requires educational organizations to establish dynamic interconnections among cognitive restructuring (via reflection), structural guarantees (through policy and resource support), and culturally responsive processes. Particularly in the highly complex context of cultural diversity, CRL practice must shift from relying on "individual moral responsibility" toward achieving systemic changes in organizational culture and institutional logic.

V. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review examined CRL practices and challenges in culturally diverse educational contexts around the world, confirming CRL's theoretical significance and practical potential for promoting educational equity and addressing the needs of marginalized students. The findings highlight that CRL involves four clearly defined dimensions (critical self-reflection, responsive teacher development, inclusive school environments, and home-school-community collaboration) and operates through a mechanism characterized by continuous feedback and collaboration across levels. In doing so, CRL contributes to reshaping the governance logic of educational organizations in culturally diverse contexts.

However, at the practical level, the promotion of CRL faces multiple challenges—emotional resistance, cognitive inertia, insufficient organizational resources, and a lagging institutional evaluation system—all of which indicate that the transition from concept to action still requires systematic support. To address these challenges, this study proposes the following strategic recommendations:

Deepen structured reflection training: Integrate critical self-reflection and reflexive practice into leadership development programs, and establish emotional support systems tailored to local contexts. Such measures will guide educators toward sustainable growth in cultural awareness and responsiveness.

Build a teacher development support system: Provide mid-level school leaders with practice-oriented training content, professional learning communities, and dedicated time resources. Empowering these leaders will enable them to foster culturally responsive teaching throughout the organization.

Strengthen diverse collaboration mechanisms: Break down traditional one-way communication models between home and school by creating collaborative platforms based on trust, empowerment, and shared governance. Promoting genuine community involvement in educational governance will amplify the collective power to support students.

Promote policy and institutional transformation: Embed CRL concepts into education policies and assessment frameworks. Establish operational, evaluable, and sustainable support systems at the institutional level to drive responsive reforms.

The main limitation of this review is that all included studies employ qualitative or mixed-methods approaches and focus on a relatively narrow range of geographic regions, which may restrict the generalizability of our conclusions and the ability to draw causal inferences. Future research could combine longitudinal designs with large-scale quantitative methods to more deeply analyze the effectiveness of CRL implementation and its adaptive mechanisms in diverse cultural settings. In particular, further theoretical work is needed to examine intersectional differences across educational levels, regional cultures, and organizational types.

Overall, CRL is not only a theoretical paradigm for educational leadership in diverse contexts but also a practical framework for transforming educational

organizations toward equity, inclusivity, and de-marginalization. By establishing collaborative mechanisms that link educators' individual cognition, school organizational culture, and institutional policies, CRL is expected to become a key tool for guiding educational justice in a diverse society. In such a system, all students can achieve excellence and growth on a foundation of respect for and responsiveness to their cultural identities.

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