

What's Old is New Again: The Challenges and Possibilities of Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership

Journal of Educational Supervision

8 – 29

Volume 8, Issue 2, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69772/8.2.2>

<https://jes.lib.buffalo.edu/articles/10.69772/8.2.2>

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Abstract

This narrative inquiry examines how two instructional leaders define and enact Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership (CRIL) within a large urban school district. Using a Culturally Relevant and Responsive Leadership (CRRL) framework, the study explores how identity, context, and experience shape leadership practices that promote equity and inclusion. Findings reveal that participants' conceptualizations of CRIL challenge normative, managerial constructions of instructional leadership by centering relationships, community knowledge, and moral purpose. Both leaders described tensions between district accountability expectations and their commitments to culturally responsive practice. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on culturally responsive instructional leadership by illuminating how leaders negotiate the challenges and possibilities of engaging in race-conscious, equity-oriented leadership.

Keywords

culturally responsive instructional leadership; equity; culturally relevant pedagogy; Jeanes Supervisors; educational leadership

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Introduction

In recent decades, university-based programs, leadership academies, and teacher corps have increasingly emphasized Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership (CRIL). This shift reflects a growing recognition of the need to address the persistent disconnect between the nation's ethnically and racially diverse student population and its predominantly White teaching workforce. As a result, educational leaders are continually challenged to guide schools that are academically rigorous, culturally sustaining, and socially just. CRIL moves beyond both the technical and managerial definitions of leadership by emphasizing the cultural, historical, and community contexts that shape teaching and learning (Gay, 2010; Khalifa et al., 2016). Yet, the ways in which school leaders define and enact CRIL—and how they confront resistance to these practices—remain underexplored in extant research.

Traditional or normative constructions of instructional leadership tend to privilege managerial efficiency, standardized accountability, and Eurocentric notions of instructional efficacy (Hallinger, 2005; Khalifa, 2018; Watson & Tillman, 2024). These approaches often emphasize compliance, performance metrics, and instructional oversight while neglecting the cultural dimensions of schooling. Consequently, what is commonly regarded as “effective leadership” can reflect a normative construction of instructional leadership that inadvertently marginalizes culturally responsive approaches to teaching and learning.

The purpose of this article is to describe and analyze how two veteran educators—a White male principal and a Black woman teacher turned instructional supervisor—in a large urban school district define, enact, and make meaning of Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how these leaders conceptualize CRIL, how they engage with or disrupt normative constructions of instructional leadership, and how they navigate challenges in applying these principles within their respective school contexts. It is within these processes of definition and practice that normative conceptions of instructional leadership often emerge, shaping how culturally responsive leadership is perceived in urban schools.

By foregrounding the lived experiences and identities of instructional leaders, this study contributes to ongoing scholarship on culturally responsive leadership in three distinct ways. First, it extends existing literature by illustrating how instructional leaders define CRIL in practice—an area often assumed but rarely examined empirically. Second, it deepens understanding of how instructional leaders navigate resistance to race-conscious and equity-driven reforms. Finally, it employs a narrative lens to reveal the personal, relational, and moral dimensions of leading for equity and inclusion—dimensions often overlooked in policy-driven analyses. In doing so, this study situates instructional leadership not merely as a professional role, but as a culturally embedded and ethically grounded practice.

Literature Review

Instructional leadership matters. Watson and Tillman (2024) explain that “While there are scores of definitions and models of instructional leadership, education researchers agree that the school leader is the primary instructional leader whose function is to support effective teaching and

learning” (p.234). Scholars such as Gooden and Dantley (2012), Santamaria (2014), and Khalifa (2018) have documented the challenges school leaders face when advancing equity-oriented reforms aimed to improve and increase educational opportunities for historically marginalized children. These barriers include community pushback, political pressure, and institutional inertia. However, what remains underexplored is *how* leaders navigate these obstacles in ways that sustain culturally responsive instructional leadership, rather than erode it.

Culturally Relevant and Responsive Leadership

As Khalifa (2018) notes, culturally responsive leaders engage in acts of resistance, advocacy, and cultural brokerage, yet more narrative accounts are needed to understand these complex processes across diverse identities and contexts. Research on Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) underscores its importance in disrupting inequities, affirming diverse learners, and transforming school culture (Gay, 2010; Johnson, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016). Nevertheless, despite the growing attention to culturally responsive and equity-centered leadership, relatively few studies examine how leaders themselves *define* or *experience* this work within instructional contexts. Much of the literature focuses on leadership preparation, policy implementation, or broad organizational reform, often leaving the lived realities of practicing leaders and instructional leaders, in particular, underexplored.

Instructional leaders who strive to implement culturally responsive practices encounter a range of challenges that are deeply embedded in institutional, cultural, and policy contexts. Based on the theoretical framework of Culturally Relevant and Responsive Leadership (CRRL), which addresses educational equity, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Gay, 2010; Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995), these challenges are associated with factors such as systemic resistance, limited preparation, and conflicting policy priorities. At the same time, CRRL principles inform how school leaders can develop approaches to support equity, cultural understanding, and student participation.

CRRL emphasizes that educational leaders must engage in ongoing self-reflection, acknowledging their own cultural identities and biases, while actively working to dismantle inequitable systems (Howard, 2010; Santamaria, 2014). This requires leaders to navigate complex power dynamics and to cultivate authentic relationships with students, families, and communities, particularly those historically marginalized in educational settings (Horsford, 2012). Such leadership involves not only implementing inclusive curricula and equitable disciplinary policies but also advocating for systemic change that aligns with the lived experiences and needs of diverse learners (Khalifa, 2018). Leaders who embrace CRRL move beyond superficial multicultural gestures toward transformative practices that address structural inequities.

In addition, CRRL underscores the importance of integrating community knowledge into decision-making processes, positioning families and local stakeholders as co-constructors of the school’s vision for equity (Ishimaru, 2020; Lopez, 2015). This approach reframes leadership from a top-down model to a collaborative, relational model where cultural capital is recognized as an asset rather than a deficit (Yosso, 2005). By drawing upon the cultural wealth of the community, leaders can design policies, curricula, and professional development that are

contextually relevant and sustainable (Watson & Bogotch, 2015). This community-grounded perspective enables schools to foster belonging, relevance, and academic success, particularly for students whose identities and histories have often been excluded from mainstream educational narratives (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Valencia, 2010).

Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership

Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership (CRIL) integrates the goals of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995) with the strategic, instructional focus of leadership practice (Johnson, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016). While these frameworks collectively emphasize equity and inclusion, existing studies rarely examine how leaders conceptualize CRIL within their daily practice. For instance, Johnson (2017) explored how principals support culturally responsive teaching, but did not address how leaders interpret the term “instructional leadership” itself. Similarly, Mansfield and Lambrinou (2024) and Boske (2019) discuss resistance to culturally responsive reforms, yet few studies investigate how leaders narrate their personal and professional struggles to implement them. As Mugisha (2013) asserts, CRIL is “purposeful, well-intentioned, creative, and culturally grounded leadership” (p. 1) designed to disrupt deficit narratives and promote student agency. Recent research positions CRIL as a practice of justice—one that challenges normalized systems of exclusion while redefining student success through culturally affirming approaches (Nabirye, 2025).

Effective CRIL requires principals to engage in reflective inquiry, foster culturally sustaining pedagogy, and create school environments that are inclusive and affirming (Horsford et al., 2011). Hepburn (2023) found that culturally responsive leaders emphasize continuous professional development, teacher collaboration, and student voice as levers for instructional transformation. In large urban districts, CRIL practices include integrating cultural competence into instructional coaching, using data to disrupt inequities, and intentionally recruiting diverse staff (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). School leaders who practice CRIL view culture not as an add-on, but as central to instructional excellence and student achievement.

CRIL has profound implications for principal preparation, leadership evaluation, and policy reform. Khalifa, Khalil, and Briscoe (2024) argue that school systems must align values, resources, and accountability structures to support culturally responsive practices at all levels. Leadership preparation programs must prioritize equity-driven pedagogies, mentorship, and fieldwork grounded in community engagement (Haskins, 2020). Likewise, Watson (2025) put forward a Black feminist framework for school leadership that builds on the lived experiences of Black women school leaders to promote equitable, racially just schools. As Pogrebna and others (2024) note, intersectional frameworks are essential for addressing and building upon the unique experiences of Black women leaders who must navigate both racism and sexism in their leadership journeys. Future research should continue to explore how CRIL can transform instructional leadership from mere compliance to radical care (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021) and liberation (Watson & Tillman, 2024).

Challenges to CRIL Implementation

A persistent barrier to Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership (CRIL) is the prevalence of deficit thinking—the belief that students of color lack the cultural or intellectual capital necessary for academic success (Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Watson (2025) explains how Black students, specifically, are hobbled in classrooms across the country by anti-Black rhetoric that denies their humanity. This ideology positions students’ racial, cultural, or linguistic identities as liabilities rather than assets: shaping school policy, instruction, and assessment in ways that reproduce inequities (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Leaders attempting to implement culturally responsive practices often confront skepticism from colleagues, policymakers, or community members who perceive such approaches as political, non-academic, or a deviation from so-called “neutral” instruction (Khalifa et al., 2016; Santamaria, 2014). These perceptions not only stall innovation—they also serve to reinforce a “colorblind” ideology that denies the reality of systemic inequities (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

A second challenge to CRIL lies in the preparation and ongoing development of educational leaders. Many school leaders enter the profession without the knowledge base, skills, or reflective capacity necessary to enact CRIL effectively (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Lopez, 2015). Leadership preparation programs frequently underemphasize culturally relevant pedagogy, racial literacy, and social justice leadership in favor of managerial or compliance-oriented skills (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). While some programs integrate diversity courses, these are often treated as stand-alone requirements rather than a systemic approach wherein meaningful practices are embedded throughout the curriculum (Gordon, 2021). In-service professional development is similarly fragmented, with training frequently delivered in isolated workshops lacking the sustained engagement, coaching, and accountability necessary to transform leader and teacher practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

External accountability systems, particularly those tied to high stakes standardized testing, pose another formidable barrier to CRIL. These systems often prioritize narrow academic metrics over holistic measures of student growth and well-being, disregarding the cultural disconnect between mandated curricula and students’ lived experiences (Au, 2016; Sleeter, 2012). CRIL leaders may be forced into a false choice between compliance with policy requirements and fidelity to culturally sustaining practices (Khalifa, 2018). For many, this tension produces a form of “policy entrapment,” where leaders feel constrained by institutional demands even when they recognize their misalignment with equitable teaching and learning (Jang, 2022).

Additionally, equity-focused leadership also requires significant emotional labor, particularly for leaders of color who must navigate both the institutionalized racism embedded within schooling structures and the personal toll of confronting inequities from within (Grant, 2012; Horsford, 2012). These leaders often shoulder a disproportionate burden as cultural translators, advocates, and role models: this type of modeling extends beyond their official job descriptions (Santamaria, 2014). Without access to supportive networks of like-minded peers or affinity-based professional learning communities, leaders who practice CRIL risk professional isolation and burnout, threatening the sustainability of their efforts (Haskins, 2020; Thompson, 2023).

Instructional Supervision vs. Instructional Leadership

Along with the abovenamed challenges to CRIL, recent leadership research highlights how instructional supervision and instructional leadership are distinct yet interconnected concepts within educational leadership. Each with its own historical roots, purposes, and implications for practice. For instance, instructional supervision has traditionally focused on the monitoring and evaluation of teaching practices to ensure compliance with standards, policies, and expectations (Glickman et al., 2018). Early models of supervision were often top-down, emphasizing observation and corrective feedback rather than collaboration. In contrast, instructional leadership emerged as a broader, more proactive approach that centers on fostering high-quality teaching and learning through shared vision, professional development, and a focus on student outcomes (Hallinger, 2005). While supervision may be a component of leadership, instructional leadership encompasses a deeper commitment to shaping school culture, aligning curriculum, and supporting teacher growth in service of student success.

The evolution from supervision to leadership reflects a shift from a compliance-oriented model toward one grounded in capacity building. Instructional leadership encourages principals and other leaders to engage teachers as partners in the improvement process, emphasizing collaboration, coaching, and data-informed decision-making (Robinson et al., 2008). Where supervision historically asked, “Are you following the rules?”, instructional leadership asks, “How can we grow together to achieve better outcomes for all students?” This transition is particularly relevant in contexts where equity and cultural responsiveness are priorities. Leadership must create space for innovation as well as equity and inclusion.

Culturally Responsive Instructional Supervision (CRIS) integrates equity and cultural competence into the oversight process, ensuring that observation, feedback, and evaluation recognize and affirm diverse students’ cultural identities and lived experiences (Cormier et al., 2024). In practice, this might involve supervisors using evaluation tools that account for culturally sustaining pedagogy, or engaging in reflective conversations with teachers about bias, representation, and inclusivity in the curriculum. This approach reframes supervision from being merely evaluative to being a tool for advancing equity and inclusion.

Similarly, **Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership (CRIL)** goes beyond monitoring instruction to actively shaping a school’s culture so that all students, especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds, can thrive (Khalifa et al., 2016). Leaders in this paradigm center the voices of students, families, and communities in decision-making, disrupt deficit narratives, and model inclusive practices in their own leadership. This form of leadership aligns with the moral imperative to ensure schools are not just academically rigorous but also socially just, serving as spaces of belonging and affirmation for every learner.

Ultimately, while instructional supervision and instructional leadership both influence teaching quality, the culturally responsive versions of these practices shift the focus from compliance to transformation. They challenge leaders to move beyond technical oversight to embrace relational, equity-driven work that empowers teachers and affirms students’ full humanity. In doing so, they bridge the gap between maintaining professional standards and fulfilling the deeper promise of education as a tool for liberation.

Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership: The Legacy of Jeanes Teachers

Over the last two decades, education scholars have begun to examine the leadership practices of Black women principals (see, for example, Jang & Alexander, 2022; Lomotey, 2019; Watson, 2025; Wilson, 2016). Black women principals are often exemplars of CRIL, embodying leadership that is communal, justice-driven, and rooted in the lived experience (Grant, 2012). In her study of nine Black women school leaders, Thompson (2023) found that these principals drew on critical reflection, mother wit, and ancestral knowledge to lead instructional change during times of crisis. Their leadership approaches resisted traditional top-down paradigms, instead elevating culturally grounded leadership that affirmed students' identities and histories. As Jang (2022) documents, such leadership correlates with stronger teacher efficacy and higher student achievement, particularly in racially diverse school contexts.

Today's Black women principals have their footing in the historical work of Jeanes Supervisors, a network of Black women educators who served across the U.S. South from 1907 to the mid-1960s under the *Jeanes Foundation* (also known as the *Negro Rural School Fund*). Funded initially by philanthropist Anna T. Jeanes and later supported by the General Education Board, these women worked as "supervisors" or "industrial teachers" in fifteen southern states, including North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Virginia, Mississippi, Louisiana, and South Carolina (Anderson, 1988; Chirhart, 2006; Fairclough, 2007). Jeanes Supervisors were among the earliest formalized Black women instructional leaders in the United States.

At their height, there were approximately 400–500 Jeanes Supervisors operating simultaneously, and more than 1,500 women held Jeanes positions over the lifespan of the program (Foster, 1997; Jones 1937). Their mission extended beyond pedagogy—they served as instructional leaders, community organizers, and advocates for racial uplift and educational justice. They mentored teachers, organized parent groups, built school-community partnerships, and cultivated culturally affirming curricula that reflected local Black life.

Though not always recognized as administrators in the traditional sense, Jeanes Supervisors functioned as de facto principals and supervisors, supporting teachers, modeling instruction, and negotiating with White superintendents for resources (Anderson, 1988). Their work laid the foundation for Black instructional leadership rooted in community accountability, culturally responsive pedagogy, and a radical commitment to racial uplift. As Alston (2005) notes, Jeanes Teachers *led from the margins*, drawing upon faith, cultural knowledge, and community partnerships to sustain schools in racially segregated systems. Contemporary Black women principals were found to continue this legacy—demonstrating the enduring power of relational, community-based leadership that centers both cultural responsiveness and moral purpose (Lomotey, 2019; Watson, 2025).

Community-Based Leadership to Formal Administration

Jeanes Teachers represent a continuum between community-based Black educational leadership and formal administrative roles. As the 20th century progressed, Black women increasingly assumed official leadership positions—especially in segregated schools—where they exercised

instructional leadership grounded in care, discipline, and culturally relevant expectations (Walker, 1996; Watson & McClellan, 2020). This leadership, often mothering in form but revolutionary in substance, reflected the dual role of educator and community guardian (Foster, 1997; Watson & Baxley, 2021). In this tradition, modern Black women principals often carry forward an ethic of care and communal accountability that mirrors the Jeanes model, blending instructional excellence with advocacy.

Positioning the Present Study

This study addresses the gaps related to CRIL and CRSL by utilizing a narrative approach to understand how two veteran educators—a White male principal and a Black woman teacher turned instructional supervisor—define, enact, and negotiate culturally responsive instructional leadership within a large urban district. By situating their stories within the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016), this research reveals how identity and experience shape their leadership philosophies, actions, and interpretations of success. In doing so, it moves the literature forward by:

- Illuminating the *definitions* of CRIL as lived and interpreted by practitioners.
- Exploring the *challenges and resistances* leaders face in implementing CRIL; and,
- Demonstrating how *narrative inquiry* can deepen the understanding of leadership as an identity-driven, culturally embedded act.

Methods

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does a White male principal and a Black woman instructional supervisor define and enact culturally responsive instructional leadership (CRIL) in a large urban district?
2. What challenges and tensions do they experience as they engage with or disrupt normative constructions of instructional leadership?

These questions align with the study's broader goal of interrogating how leaders conceptualize and practice CRIL amid systemic and institutional constraints.

Research Design and Rationale

Narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodological approach for this study because it privileges lived experience, identity, and context: the very dimensions essential to understanding culturally responsive leadership. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, narrative inquiry centers on “stories lived and told,” offering a means to examine how individuals construct meaning through their experiences. Given that CRIL is inherently relational and situated, narrative inquiry allows for a deep exploration of how leaders make sense of their roles and practices over time and within their institutional and cultural settings.

Unlike case study or phenomenology, which may prioritize bounded systems or shared experiences, narrative inquiry invites attention to individual stories as knowledge forms

(Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021; Wei, 2023). This method addresses a gap in instructional leadership literature, which has traditionally emphasized leadership frameworks and outcomes rather than the meaning-making processes of leaders themselves. Through narrative inquiry, this study illuminates the moral, emotional, and identity-based complexities of culturally responsive leadership.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of two 90-minute semi-structured interviews (Drever, 2003). These interviews were recorded and transcribed and the transcription, as well as the recordings, were shared with each participant to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness. The open-ended prompts invited participants to reflect on how they define and practice instructional leadership and the challenges they encounter in enacting culturally responsive approaches. Each interview was conversational in nature and included the following questions:

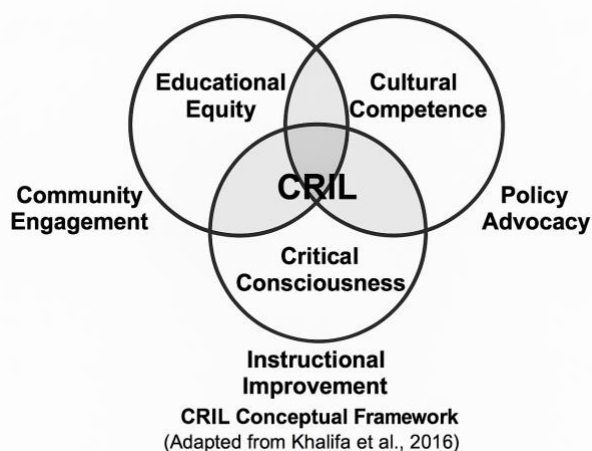
- How do you define instructional leadership?
- How do you function in your role as an instructional leader? (Describe your job)
- What challenges, if any, have you faced in your role as an instructional leader?

Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their stories. Clarifying and follow-up questions were used to elicit “thick, rich” narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018), allowing participants to extend or deepen their responses in their own voices.

Data Analysis

Riessman (2008) identifies four methods for analyzing narrative data: thematic, structural, productional, and visual. For this study, a thematic narrative analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns while preserving the integrity of each participant’s story. The researchers engaged in multiple readings of the transcripts to identify key moments and metaphors that revealed how participants defined instructional leadership, enacted CRIL practices, and negotiated challenges to their leadership.

The Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership (CRIL) framework (Khalifa et al., 2016; Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024) served as the analytic lens guiding interpretation. Specifically, the framework’s tenets: critical self-reflection, culturally sustaining pedagogy, community engagement, and advocacy were used to code and interpret data. These concepts helped to identify both convergence and divergence between participants’ leadership philosophies and the principles of culturally responsive school leadership. Memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were used to capture analytic reflections and to trace how emerging themes aligned with or disrupted CRIL principles. See Figure 1.

Figure 1*CRIL Conceptual Framework***Positionality**

Both authors identify as Black women scholars and practitioners in educational leadership, collectively bringing more than 60 years of professional experience to this work. The lead author conducted the interviews and maintained professional relationships with both participants, which facilitated trust and open dialogue. This served to triangulate the findings and added to this study's trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness

Reflexive memos, collaborative data review, and the triangulation of interpretations across the research team ensured credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement with participants, the use of semi-structured interviews that encouraged elaboration, and member checking, whereby participants reviewed their transcripts and confirmed the accuracy of their accounts. Transferability was enhanced through the provision of rich descriptions of participants' contexts and experiences, enabling readers to determine the applicability of findings to other settings. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail, including interview transcripts, analytic memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and thematic coding records that documented decision-making throughout the study. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive practices, including the researchers' positionality statement and peer debriefing discussions, which allowed for the interrogation of interpretations and the identification of potential biases. Together, these strategies ensured that the findings authentically represented the participants' lived experiences while maintaining methodological rigor (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021; Wei, 2023).

Findings

This study explored how two veteran educators³, a White male principal (Dr. O'Brien) and a Black woman instructional supervisor (Ms. Banks), define, enact, and navigate Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership (CRIL) within a large urban district. Analysis of their narratives revealed three overarching themes:

1. Defining Instructional Leadership through Cultural and Relational Lenses
2. Navigating Resistance and Institutional Constraints
3. Sustaining Culturally Responsive Leadership through Moral and Spiritual Purpose

Taken together, these themes echo the historical legacies of *Jeanes Teachers*—the Black women educators who, during the early 20th century, advanced educational equity through culturally grounded, community-responsive leadership long before the term “CRIL” existed (Anderson, 1988; Fairclough, 2007). Like the Jeanes Teachers, the participants in this study enacted leadership that was local, moral, and deeply relational.

Defining Instructional Leadership through Cultural and Relational Lenses

Both participants challenged normative constructions of instructional leadership that center technical management and standardized accountability. Instead, they described leadership as a culturally informed and relational practice. Ms. Banks framed instructional leadership as “*an act of care, grounded in relationships and equity*,” explaining that her work begins with understanding teachers’ lived experiences and cultural contexts. Similarly, Dr. O’Brien emphasized “*knowing the community and knowing the kids*” as essential to effective instructional leadership.

While their language differed, both leaders rejected a purely evaluative model of supervision. Dr. O’Brien reflected, “*If I’m not listening to teachers and learning from them, then I’m not leading instructionally.*” This relational orientation highlights a central tenet of CRIL—leadership as learning with, rather than managing over, others (Khalifa et al., 2016). This also mirrors the practices of Jeanes Supervisors, who led through connection, care, and community uplift rather than hierarchical control. As Alston (2005) and Walker (1996) note, Jeanes Teachers viewed leadership as service—mentoring teachers, visiting homes, and ensuring instruction reflected local community realities. Likewise, the participants in this study engaged in instructional leadership not as supervision but as shared learning and mutual accountability.

This theme thus bridges past and present: CRIL today carries forward the Jeanes Teachers’ commitment to culturally grounded instruction and relational trust, demonstrating that leadership excellence is inseparable from cultural knowing.

³ Participant names are pseudonyms.

Navigating Resistance and Institutional Constraints

Both leaders faced structural and cultural resistance when enacting CRIL. Ms. Banks described tension between her commitment to equity and the district's focus on compliance:

"There's always a pull toward the data dashboard—numbers over narratives. But if I don't honor the stories behind the data, I'm not doing the work." Dr. O'Brien similarly reflected on district-level mandates that conflicted with his school's contextual needs: *"They tell us to follow the model, but the model doesn't fit our kids. I have to interpret those expectations through what I know about our community."*

These narratives reveal how institutional systems, driven by accountability pressures, often constrain leaders' ability to enact culturally responsive practices. Despite these challenges, both participants found ways to "bend policy toward purpose," demonstrating agency within constraint. This theme aligns with prior literature on the tensions between CRIL and accountability structures (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024) and illustrates how leaders reinterpret mandates through a culturally responsive lens.

This negotiation between institutional authority and community responsiveness parallels the Jeanes Teachers' quiet resistance to segregated, inequitable schooling structures. While working within racially oppressive systems, Jeanes Supervisors subverted expectations—redirecting resources, elevating local curriculum, and advocating for Black children's holistic development (Alston, 2022; Foster, 1997).

Like their Jeanes predecessors, both participants in this study demonstrated *tempered radicalism* (Alston 2005; Meyerson, 2001), balancing institutional demands with culturally grounded advocacy. Their work exemplifies the ongoing struggle of educational leaders who seek to transform systems from within while remaining accountable to the moral imperatives of justice and community care.

Sustaining Culturally Responsive Leadership through Moral and Spiritual Purpose

A recurring element in both leaders' stories was the role of moral conviction and, particularly for Ms. Banks, spirituality in sustaining their leadership. She noted: *"My faith reminds me that this work is sacred. Teaching and leading are spiritual acts—we are shaping lives."* This moral-spiritual grounding functioned as a source of resilience amid systemic challenges. Dr. O'Brien, though less explicitly spiritual, echoed this orientation when describing leadership as *"a responsibility to serve with compassion."* Furthermore, this moral-spiritual orientation strongly echoes the legacy of Jeanes Teachers, whose leadership was animated by "deep faith, purpose, and an ethic of care" (Alston & Jones, 2002).

These reflections align with the concept of *moral purpose* in CRIL, positioning leadership as an act of justice and care rather than compliance (Alston, 2022; Dantley, 2005). In this study, spirituality and moral courage functioned as sources of sustenance amid structural and emotional fatigue. Just as Jeanes Teachers built collective hope and resilience in hostile educational environments, the participants drew upon their beliefs to remain steadfast in equity work. Their

stories remind us that CRIL is sustained not only through technical competence but through moral clarity and spiritual endurance.

Lastly, this theme underscores how “effective” instructional leadership is sustained not only by a managerial and technical skillset, but by deep purpose and ethical commitment

Summary of Key Takeaways

Across these narratives, participants redefined instructional leadership as a culturally responsive, relationship-centered practice guided by moral and spiritual purpose, which is not a new phenomenon. It is an extension of a long tradition of Black educational praxis embodied by Jeanes Teachers and other Black women foremothers and visionaries of culturally grounded leadership (see, for example, Coppin, 1913; Watson & McClellan, 2020). Like these historical figures, the participants in this study defined leadership as service and the ongoing negotiation between institutional demands and leaders’ commitments to equity and care. Together, the findings answer the study’s research questions by showing that CRIL is not a static model but an evolving, context-dependent practice shaped by identity, values, and community. It is both a contemporary framework and an ancestral inheritance.

Positioning the Participants within the Framework

While Ms. Banks’s practice resonates with the historical lineage of Jeanes Teachers and womanist leadership traditions, Dr. O’Brien’s narrative represents another important dimension of culturally responsive leadership: cross-cultural enactment (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). His work exemplifies how culturally relevant and responsive instructional leadership can be embodied by those who seek to lead *with* communities rather than *over* them.

Scholars such as Theoharis (2007), Santamaria (2014), and Khalifa (2018) describe culturally responsive leadership as *identity-situated* but not *identity-exclusive*—requiring all leaders to engage in self-reflection, advocacy, and equity-oriented praxis. Dr. O’Brien in this study models the “co-conspiratorial allyship” (Love, 2019) and “critical humility” (Khalifa et al., 2016) essential for equity-minded leadership. His story illuminates the tensions and possibilities of *relinquishing privilege* to center the cultural and lived experiences of marginalized students and teachers.

Thus, while Ms. Banks’s leadership draws from ancestral and community legacies such as the Jeanes Teachers, Dr. O’Brien’s practice aligns with the transformative strand of CRIL theory that calls for reorienting leadership identity through critical consciousness and shared accountability. Both participants, therefore, reflect the multiple pathways through which leaders can enact culturally responsive instructional leadership within racially diverse educational contexts.

Discussion

Culturally responsive instructional leaders acknowledge and center the cultural identities of their students and communities (Khalifa et al., 2016). This study adds to existing research by

examining how a veteran White male principal and a veteran Black woman teacher turned instructional supervisor in a large urban school district define, identify, and consider the challenges to instructional leadership. In extant research on school effectiveness, instructional leadership was regulated to principals, and they were given expert power (see Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). It is in this unintentional misconception of the notion of instructional leadership that school leaders most often perceive their role(s) as instructional leaders. Meaning, many of today's school leaders consider instructional leadership as their sole responsibility. Nevertheless, while the instructional leaders included in this study failed to provide a concise definition of 'instructional leadership,' they offered their praxis as exemplars and demonstrated culturally responsive instructional leadership.

For example, in response to the question, "*What is Instructional Leadership?*" Ms. Banks assertively identified herself as an "instructional leader." Not only was she professionally trained for this role: she feels "grossly prepared" to be an instructional leader as she was taught by "strong teachers." Her previous school site was led by two Black women, a principal and an assistant principal, who set "high expectations" for the school community. They led by example and with love. They went "hard for kids" and practiced distributed leadership (Spillane et al., 2001). Moreover, they ushered her into the administrative team by providing her with opportunities to mentor new teachers and to lead the school in professional development activities. Finally, Ms. Banks made it clear that she was cultivated by Black women school leaders to become an instructional leader and feels deeply connected to Black and Brown students in the district as they have similar lived experiences.

Similar to Ms. Banks, Dr. O'Brien identified himself as an instructional leader as he is "the only person ultimately responsible for the performance of students" at his school site. As such, he makes it a point to hire a diverse body of teachers. Many of whom are graduates of the high school and share similar lived experiences to those of the student body. He then cultivates this cadre of teachers into master teachers and teacher leaders. From this group, he promotes the best to the role(s) of assistant principals. According to Dr. O'Brien, the assistant principals become "instructional leaders, even sometimes more so than me because their nose is right up in it." Dr. O'Brien makes it a point to hire and recruit a diverse staff (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024), and both Ms. Banks and Dr. O'Brien help to create learning environments that are inclusive and affirming (Horsford et al., 2011) and provide mentorship to teachers (Haskins, 2020) demonstrating culturally responsive instructional leadership.

Next, a growing body of research (Haskins, 2020; Thompson, 2023) examines how culturally responsive instructional leaders risk professional isolation and burnout, threatening the sustainability of their efforts. While Dr. O'Brien, a veteran principal, has his position and tenure to shield him, Ms. Banks is literally in the line of fire. In response to the question, "*How do you practice Instructional Leadership?*" Dr. O'Brien described how he practices instructional leadership by example. Further, he sees teaching not as a science but as an art—"cooking not baking." As former teachers and current professors of educational leadership, we both agree that teaching, in many ways, is subjective and personal. Dr. O'Brien encourages his teachers to be themselves because "People learn from people. People don't learn from books. They don't learn from content." As an instructional leader, Dr. O'Brien sets the tone by modeling kindness and respect for each and every member of the school community. He reasoned, "Because the way I

treat people speaks way more than any word that could come out of my mouth about what's important and how we interact with each other as a community."

In a like manner, Ms. Banks practices instructional leadership by example. She provides teachers with 1:1 coaching and models best practices in the classroom. She will readily teach a lesson and is happy to work directly with students. She is quick to praise the teachers she coaches and will proffer "detailed notes, glows, grows, and next steps after every coaching session." She believes in positive reinforcement and is well liked by almost all of the teachers in her school community. Yet, in response to the question, "*What do you perceive as a challenge to your success as an instructional leader?*" Ms. Banks explained how the most pressing challenge to her success is a veteran classroom teacher who is deeply respected by the school community. The teacher feels that Ms. Banks's age, race, experience, and, in many ways, her 'outsider' status makes her role as an instructional leader 'suspect' at best. Ms. Banks explained, "She would question me out loud in public and kind of see if I was gonna switch my stance. And I never did, and I never gave her the energy back that she was looking for from me. But I absolutely felt like she was testing my limits. And testing my knowledge and I would be remiss to say that me being a woman and Black and young didn't have an impact on that." It must be noted that although Ms. Banks was new to the school community, she does not consider herself an outsider. She grew up in the surrounding community and shares similar lived experiences to those of the student body.

Interestingly, Dr. O'Brien was eager to respond to the abovementioned prompt. He shared a story about the time an "Instructional Leader" from the district accompanied him, an assistant principal, and the deputy superintendent as he performed instructional rounds. Note that in this particular instructional round, Dr. O'Brien was being observed as he supervised an assistant principal, who was conducting a teacher observation. Moreover, during this particular visit, the district's instructional leader criticized one of Dr. O'Brien's most effective math teachers. Not only was the teacher a graduate of the high school, but she was also a well-respected and an effective (and *affective*) math teacher. The "Instructional Leader," on the other hand, armed with "research" and little to no knowledge of the school community, suggested that the beloved math teacher "should be teaching on grade level, on whatever topic you're supposed to be. Even if students in the room don't understand what you're doing." This infuriated Dr. O'Brien and exemplified his point that: "Someone who is not connected can't really be an instructional leader. If you don't know the kids, you don't know the community."

Furthermore, the scenarios put forward by Dr. O'Brien and Ms. Banks in response to the question, "*What do you perceive as a challenge to your success as an instructional leader?*" aligns with research that explained how a recurring impediment to CRIL is grounded in the deficit-based perspectives held by school and district personnel regarding people of color (Khalifa et al., 2016). It must be noted that research on current Black women principals and that of culturally responsive instructional leaders reveal a deep alignment with the Jeanes legacy (Grant, 2012; Horsford, 2012). As instructional leaders, Black women, like Ms. Banks, resist standardization pressures and racialized deficit thinking, instead championing community engagement and culturally responsive pedagogy (Jean-Marie, 2006). This lineage of leadership—rooted in both resistance and reform—reflects what Tillman (2004) refers to as a *culturally anchored praxis*, which continues to distinguish Black women's leadership approaches from dominant white-normed frameworks.

Conclusions, Implications, and Reclamation of a Forgotten Legacy

Despite their foundational impact to instructional leadership, Jeanes Teachers and Black women administrators like Ms. Banks are often overlooked in mainstream educational leadership literature (Watson, 2025). Today, Black scholars, in particular, are calling for a reclamation of this legacy, arguing that it offers vital guidance for equity-focused leadership preparation (Alston, 2005; Lomotey, 2019). Recognizing Black women's long-standing role in shaping instructional practice reframes leadership not merely as managerial or data-driven, but as deeply cultural, historical, and justice-oriented. In centering the Jeanes legacy, educators and researchers alike are reminded that instructional leadership is not new to Black women—it has always been part of their educational activism and informs the broader field and principals like Dr. O'Brien.

Last, instructional leaders often encounter pushback when trying to disrupt Eurocentric curricula, address racially biased discipline policies, or implement professional development focused on equity. These actions can generate discomfort and defensiveness among educators who have not examined their own cultural assumptions (Howard, 2010). Many instructional leaders themselves have not been adequately prepared to lead culturally responsive transformation. The literature highlights a lack of pre-service and in-service leadership training (Cebrián et al., 2022; Dexter et al., 2022; Irby et al., 2023) that emphasizes culturally relevant pedagogy, racial literacy, and social justice leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016; Santamaria, 2014). Without this foundation, leaders may struggle to articulate the value of CRP or guide their staff through the sustained reflection and transformation it requires. Additionally, professional development models often focus on compliance rather than transformation. As a result, initiatives around equity and cultural responsiveness may be reduced to one-off workshops with limited depth that lack continuity. This undermines sustained implementation of CRP and fails to shift the underlying beliefs and practices that perpetuate inequity in classrooms throughout the country.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings from this study underscore the pressing need for systemic, sustained approaches to Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership (CRIL) that extend beyond individual commitment to encompass leadership preparation, district-level policies, professional learning, and advocacy. The lived experiences of the two instructional leaders included in this study revealed that while CRIL offers a powerful pathway to equity, its implementation is often hindered by entrenched deficit thinking, narrow accountability measures, and insufficient professional support. Addressing these barriers requires intentional, multi-level strategies that prepare leaders to recognize and leverage cultural diversity as an educational asset, align policy frameworks with equity goals, and create professional learning environments that nurture ongoing CRIL skill development.

Leadership preparation programs should embed CRIL principles across coursework, field experiences, and assessments, ensuring that aspiring leaders gain both theoretical grounding and practical tools for equity-driven practice. District-level policies must evolve to align accountability systems with equity indicators, incorporating measures of cultural competence alongside academic outcomes. Professional learning should move beyond isolated workshops to

establish job-embedded, collaborative structures that allow leaders to develop and refine CRIL skills in context.

As Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) note, culturally responsive school leaders often need to confront and transform established beliefs that frame cultural diversity as a challenge rather than an asset—a process that may involve navigating skepticism from colleagues, staff, or community members who perceive culturally responsive practices as “political” or inconsistent with traditional standards. Finally, at the state and national levels, advocacy efforts should focus on reforming accountability policies to explicitly support and sustain culturally responsive practices, ensuring that leaders are empowered, rather than constrained, in their pursuit of equitable and culturally affirming education for all students.

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