

The Criticality of Consciousness in Leadership Preparation and Professional Development

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Abstract

This conceptual manuscript advances the theory and practice of Culturally Responsive Instructional Supervision (CRIS) by grounding it in ethical leadership, reflective inquiry, and culturally responsive decision-making. Drawing from the scholarship on critical consciousness and reflective leadership, it argues that cultivating leaders' ethical clarity and reflective capacity is a moral and professional imperative. The CRIS Framework and the RISA cycle, Reflection, Interrogation, Self-Examination, and Awareness, are presented as complementary tools for examining how identities, assumptions, and epistemologies shape practice. Findings from a secondary mixed methods analysis of a February 2025 professional learning session demonstrate the frameworks' practical relevance. Descriptive quantitative results showed strong agreement about the session's impact, while qualitative themes highlighted its relevance, emotional resonance, strengthened ethical confidence, desire for deeper engagement, and heightened awareness of sociopolitical challenges. Together, these insights illustrate how CRIS and RISA aligned learning environments cultivate reflective, culturally responsive, and ethically grounded leadership leading to meaningful change.

Keywords

culturally responsive instructional supervision; professional development; critical consciousness; critical professional development; ethical leadership

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Introduction

To meaningfully advance culturally responsive instructional supervision as a framework, it is essential to situate the development of critical consciousness within the sociopolitical and historical context of schooling in the United States (US). Educational systems have long been shaped by dominant ideologies that normalize whiteness, uphold deficit thinking about communities of color, and perpetuate racialized disparities in access and outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Wright, 2025). These inequities are not incidental but rather reflective of broader structural conditions that have been legitimized and reproduced through policy, practice, and leadership (Bristol et al., 2025). As such, the work to fully develop culturally responsive instructional supervision as a framework requires school leaders to move beyond technical compliance or performative equity efforts. Instead, it requires that they engage in transformative praxis where critical reflection and sustained action intersect to dismantle oppressive systems and build liberatory educational spaces (Mette et al., 2024; Khalifa, 2020; Waite, 2021a).

The Culturally Responsive Instructional Supervision (CRIS) Framework builds upon this transformative vision by centering four interrelated domains of practice aligned with the principles of developing critical consciousness, namely: (a) self-examination of personal beliefs and values, (b) critical reflection on epistemological and ontological assumptions, (c) interrogation of systems and structures that uphold white supremacy and anti-Blackness, and (d) an unwavering commitment to relational accountability with historically marginalized communities (Waite, 2021a; Waite, 2024). These domains are grounded in the understanding that instructional supervision is inherently political and either reinforces or disrupts inequitable power relations. The CRIS Framework compels leaders to analyze how their positionality, decision-making, and leadership practices such as curriculum design, teacher evaluation, family engagement, and resource allocation are shaped by and contribute to systems of oppression. In doing so, the framework fosters a liberatory approach to instructional leadership that centers racial equity, truth-telling, and justice.

Moreover, operationalizing the CRIS framework requires professional learning environments that sustain ongoing self-examination and cultivate collective critical consciousness. This includes equity-centered coaching, communities of practice grounded in counter-hegemonic narratives, and structured opportunities for leaders to challenge dominant ideologies embedded in education. The CRIS Framework pushes those implementing CRIS practices to intentionally surface and confront the legacy and persistence of anti-Blackness and other forms of systemic exclusion in schooling. Without sustained structures for reflection, interrogation, and growth, leaders risk defaulting to the status quo—practices that normalize whiteness, prioritize standardization, and exclude students of color (Baker et al., 2024; Mette et al., 2024; Waite, 2021b). The CRIS Framework, therefore, demands that leadership development be reimaged as a continuous, courageous process of disrupting inequity. Ultimately, the framework equips leaders not only to supervise instruction but to embody an ethical commitment that pushes them to take actions towards dismantling oppression and reimagining schools as sites of belonging, liberation, and excellence for all learners.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this work draws upon Paulo Freire's (2011) conception of critical consciousness, or *conscientização*, which he defined as the process of perceiving social, political, and economic contradictions and acting against the oppressive elements of reality. Freire's insistence that education is never neutral but always political establishes the ethical grounding for leadership that seeks liberation rather than maintenance of inequity. This perspective is extended through Critical Race Theory (CRT), which positions race and racism as enduring and systemic features of U.S. society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT provides analytical tools for interrogating how educational policies and practices reproduce racial hierarchies and for challenging assumptions of objectivity, neutrality, and colorblindness in leadership (Milner, 2008; Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021). Culturally responsive school leadership scholarship (Khalifa et al., 2016; Gooden & Dantley, 2012) complements these frameworks by emphasizing critical self-reflection, relational accountability, and engagement with marginalized communities. Together, these theoretical perspectives form the foundation for CRIS as a liberatory leadership model grounded in both criticality and praxis.

Utilizing CRT and the concept of critical consciousness as foundations, this study engages with the scholarship on culturally responsive school leadership, particularly as articulated by Khalifa et al. (2016) and Khalifa (2020). Culturally responsive school leadership emphasizes the importance of affirming students' cultural identities, challenging deficit-based narratives, and leveraging community knowledge in service of educational equity (Khalifa et al., 2016). When embedded within critical consciousness, culturally responsive school leadership transforms instructional supervision into a relational, justice-oriented practice (Waite, 2021b). This approach compels leaders to examine how institutional norms and leadership behaviors either disrupt or reinforce systemic inequities, particularly those affecting students of the Global Majority (GM), or students of color, both racially and linguistically.

Methods

The professional development (PD) session analyzed in this study was delivered by the author for the Meridian Leaders Fellowship in February 2025. This session was one among a year long series of professional development programs participants engaged in as a Meridian Leaders Fellow. The professional development occurred over a single weekend and was offered twice, once on Saturday and once on Sunday, to accommodate participant schedules. Each session was structured as a 2.5-hour professional learning community, and participants attended one of the two offerings. All data used in this secondary analysis were collected independently by the Meridian Leaders Fellowship and subsequently shared with the author in the form of two PDF documents. The first document contained pie-chart summaries of four Likert-scale survey items (Questions 7–10), each utilizing a four-point response scale. The second document included responses to an open-ended item (Question 11), which invited participants to provide additional comments or suggestions regarding the session. Together, these materials constituted the complete dataset available for analysis.

Study Design

This study utilized a secondary convergent mixed methods design. The dataset, which included both quantitative Likert-scale survey responses and qualitative written comments, was collected by the program team as part of an internal evaluation of the February 2025 Study Summit. The researcher did not participate in data collection and instead conducted an independent analysis of the existing data to explore patterns related to participants' perceptions of relevance, impact, and ethical leadership development. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately and then integrated during interpretation to generate mixed methods meta-inferences.

Data Sources

Two pre-existing datasets were provided by the program team. The quantitative dataset consisted of responses to four Likert-scale items (Q7–Q10), each completed by 122 participants. These items assessed (a) the impact of the session on participants' ethical decision-making (Q7), (b) the relevance of the ethical frameworks presented (Q8), (c) participants' confidence in applying culturally responsive ethical decision-making following the session (Q9), and (d) the degree to which the session addressed real-world leadership challenges (Q10).

The qualitative dataset consisted of 70 open-ended responses to (Q11), which invited participants to share “additional comments or suggestions for this session.” These responses provided rich narrative insight into participants' emotional reactions, perceptions of content relevance, feedback on structure and pacing, and reflections on leadership practice.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were examined descriptively, with percentages drawn directly from the summary documents provided. No additional statistical analysis was conducted beyond the descriptive reporting of these findings. The Likert-scale data are presented in this study as originally reported by the Meridian Leaders Fellowship program. Consistent with guidance for descriptive mixed methods designs (Creswell & Creswell, 2021), the quantitative results were used to capture overall participant perceptions of the session's impact as reflected in the survey responses.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), a flexible approach appropriate for meaning-based interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021, 2023). The analysis followed the six iterative phases outlined by Braun and Clarke. First, during *familiarization*, all responses were read multiple times, and brief analytic notes captured early impressions regarding recurring ideas such as emotional resonance, relevance, and requests for additional time or practical tools. Second, *systematic coding* was conducted inductively, generating initial codes that captured both explicit content and underlying meaning. Coding emphasized researcher reflexivity, interpretive judgment, and transparency (Saldaña, 2021).

Third, in the theme development and review phases, codes were collated into candidate themes and evaluated for coherence and distinctiveness. Fourth, during definition and refinement, five final themes were developed: (a) high relevance and emotional impact, (b) increased ethical confidence, (c) desire for deeper engagement and additional time, (d) need for more applied strategies, and (e) reflections shaped by broader leadership challenges.

Integration of Findings

In this study, integration occurred at the interpretation stage which is consistent with convergent mixed methods procedures (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), however, there were no statistical analyses conducted. Integration in this study consisted of reviewing the reported quantitative data with the perceived impact reported in the qualitative survey. Quantitative findings provided broad indicators of perceived impact, relevance, and confidence, while qualitative themes offered deeper insight into participants' experiences and suggestions. Triangulation of both datasets strengthened the study's meta-inferences and contributed to a comprehensive understanding of how participants engaged with the session and how they reported the session influenced their ethical leadership development.

Study Context

The following is summarized from the organization's website. The Meridian Leadership Fellowship² operates on an evidence-based premise well-established in the leadership literature: principal effectiveness is one of the strongest school-level predictors of teacher retention, instructional quality, and student achievement. Consistent with research demonstrating the outsized influence of leadership on organizational climate and sustained improvement, Meridian's mission is to develop, recognize, and retain high-performing principals in complex urban systems through intensive, cohort-driven professional learning.

Its signature initiative, the Distinguished Leaders Fellowship, is structured as a one-year, cohort-based developmental model that aligns with theoretical frameworks of adult learning, adaptive leadership, and systems thinking. Fellows selected based on demonstrated leadership effectiveness engage in advanced seminars facilitated by university faculty and national experts. The curriculum draws on adult developmental theory, adaptive leadership, and organizational change literature, positioning leaders to interrogate existing mental models, strengthen diagnostic reasoning, and implement high-leverage improvement strategies.

Summary of Findings

To complement the conceptual analysis and illustrate how culturally responsive ethical leadership frameworks are experienced in practice, this study incorporates an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected during a professional development session facilitated at a virtual Professional Learning Community Summit in February 2025. Although the session was not designed as a formal empirical evaluation, the participant feedback offers meaningful descriptive insight into how leaders engaged with the CRIS Framework and how they perceived

² Organization's name is a pseudonym

its relevance to their leadership contexts. The data, therefore, serve as an illustrative bridge between the study's theoretical contributions and their practical implications for leadership development.

The qualitative data provides additional depth and nuance to these findings, offering insight into the emotional, intellectual, and contextual dimensions of participants' experiences. Participants described the session as "powerful," "eye-opening," and "transformative," highlighting the degree to which the content shaped their thinking and challenged their assumptions. Their reflections also demonstrated how culturally responsive ethical decision-making intersects with ongoing sociopolitical tensions in schools, including issues related to immigration, racialized policies, and legislative shifts impacting equity-centered work. These qualitative responses enrich the interpretation of the quantitative results, revealing not only the session's perceived impact but also the lived complexities of leadership in the current educational landscape.

Together, the quantitative and qualitative data illuminate a set of five core themes that characterize how participants engaged with the session: (a) high relevance and emotional impact, (b) increased ethical confidence, (c) desire for deeper engagement, (d) need for applied and practice-based tools, and (e) recognition of broader sociopolitical leadership challenges. The following section outlines these themes and articulates how they align with the Meridian Leaders Fellowship's problem-of-practice inquiry model.

Findings

A central component of the Meridian Leaders Fellowship is its problem-of-practice inquiry cycle, which aligns with methodologies common in improvement science, action research, and design-based implementation research (DBIR). Quantitative and qualitative data from the February 2025 Professional Learning Community Summit provide strong evidence that this inquiry approach and the frameworks presented within it resonated deeply with participants. The results also indicate that participants ended the session with an increased sense of confidence and felt the experience meaningfully contributed to their growth as culturally responsive, ethically grounded leaders. Quantitatively, **94.26%** of participants rated the session as *Very Impactful* or *Impactful* in shaping their ability to make ethical decisions, and **95.9%** rated the ethical frameworks as *Very Relevant* or *Relevant* to culturally responsive leadership. Similarly, **90.98%** of participants reported feeling *Very Confident* or *Confident* in applying culturally responsive ethical decision-making after the session, while nearly **88%** indicated that the session addressed real-world leadership challenges they regularly encounter. These findings suggest that the fellowship's inquiry cycle strongly aligns with leaders' professional needs and supports direct applicability in school contexts.

First, the theme of high relevance and emotional impact was strongly reflected in both datasets. Quantitatively, **94.26%** of participants rated the session as *Very Impactful* or *Impactful*, and **95.9%** rated the framework as *Very Relevant* or *Relevant* to culturally responsive leadership. Participants described the experience as "powerful," "moving," and "one of the best PD sessions I've ever been a participant in," signaling deep cognitive and affective engagement. One participant wrote, "I left that session with a different perspective on how to engage families,".

This aligns with the Fellowships inquiry cycle's emphasis on identifying meaningful problems of practice grounded in real school contexts.

Second, the inquiry cycle's focus on ethical clarity and reflective decision-making aligns with the theme of increased ethical confidence. Quantitative findings show that **90.98%** of participants felt *Very Confident* or *Confident* in applying culturally responsive ethical decision-making following the session. Qualitative reflections reinforced this finding, with participants noting that the session was "eye-opening" and "transformative". One participant noted that the session "helped me identify my own ethical frameworks... which will help me make better decisions" and allowed them to understand the "why" behind their leadership moves. This supports the Fellowship's goal of building leaders' analytic capacity through theory-of-action development and iterative inquiry.

Third, participants' desire for deeper engagement aligns with the Fellowship's commitment to sustained and iterative learning. Several participants placed emphasis on the need for more time to process emotionally heavy content, engage in richer dialogue, and analyze case studies. As one participant noted, "this session should've been longer than 2.5 hours. There is so much to unpack." Another added, "We were starting to get into real conversations about how our bias affects our schools." This theme underscores a need for extended time in professional learning communities, an element already embedded within the fellowship's cyclical inquiry model, but it is one that participants expressed to see expanded based on qualitative feedback.

Fourth, the need for more applied and practice-based strategies emerged as a meaningful theme. Many participants praised the facilitation as "engaging," "dynamic," and "one of the best PD sessions I've ever been a participant in," noting that the environment felt ***both intellectually rigorous and emotionally supportive***. While the session laid a strong theoretical foundation, participants expressed a desire for more concrete leadership tools, such as "leadership moves to address the items presented," or case studies demonstrating how to enact ethical frameworks. This feedback reinforces the value of the fellowship's Emerging Leader Partner model, which pairs aspiring leaders with experienced practitioners to support skill application, distributed leadership, and sustainability within school contexts.

Finally, the theme of sociopolitical leadership challenges reflects the increasingly complex environments in which Fellows operate. Participants referenced navigating immigration issues, anti-equity legislation, and heightened national instability, noting, "It is hard to face the reality of the politics in education... but comforting to know we are not alone." These reflections affirm the fellowship's role in equipping leaders to situate their problems of practice within larger systems and policy landscapes.

Collectively, the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that the Meridian Leaders Fellowship's inquiry and leadership development model is not only well-aligned with leader needs but also effective in cultivating ethical clarity, cultural responsiveness, and confidence. At the same time, the data point to opportunities for extending time, deepening applied practice, and expanding reflective structures—enhancements that the program is positioned to integrate into its ongoing continuous improvement cycles.

Significance

These results are significant because they highlight the limitations of conventional PD models, which frequently rely on standardized content, scripted curricula, and compliance-oriented objectives. Prior research has noted that such structures often fail to support deep reflection, identity development, or adaptive leadership processes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In contrast, the CRIS-aligned session provided leaders with opportunities for dialogue, self-examination, and contextual problem solving—elements participants described as “powerful,” “eye-opening,” and “one of the best PD sessions I’ve ever been a participant in.” These qualitative responses, coupled with the positive quantitative ratings, support the value of participatory, reflective, and dialogical learning experiences for school leaders. Participants’ comments also signaled a desire for expanded time and deeper engagement, suggesting that meaningful leadership learning requires extended opportunities for processing, discussion, and application.

The five emergent themes identified in the data—high relevance and emotional impact, increased ethical confidence, desire for deeper engagement, need for more applied strategies, and awareness of broader sociopolitical leadership challenges—further underscore the session’s capacity to bridge theory and practice. Leaders described leaving the session with more clarity about their professional ethical frameworks, improved confidence, and a stronger sense of responsibility in navigating issues such as immigration, political uncertainty, and racialized policy contexts. At the same time, their desire for additional case studies, leadership moves, and structured opportunities to translate frameworks into action suggests that effective professional learning must integrate both conceptual depth and practical application.

Together, these findings position the CRIS Framework as a promising model for leadership development. Its emphasis on reflective inquiry, ethical clarity, and culturally responsive decision-making offers a structured yet adaptable approach that aligns with leaders’ needs as evidenced in the study. The implications for policy and practice are substantial: systems seeking to cultivate capable, equity-oriented leaders should consider investing in professional learning that mirrors the CRIS approach, learning that is reflective, contextually grounded, and focused on ongoing inquiry rather than episodic training. By doing so, districts and leadership preparation programs can better prepare leaders to navigate complexity, foster inclusive school communities, and sustain meaningful change across diverse educational settings. The RISA Framework for Developing Critical Self-Awareness is a tool that can help support this growth in personal (intra) and professional (inter).

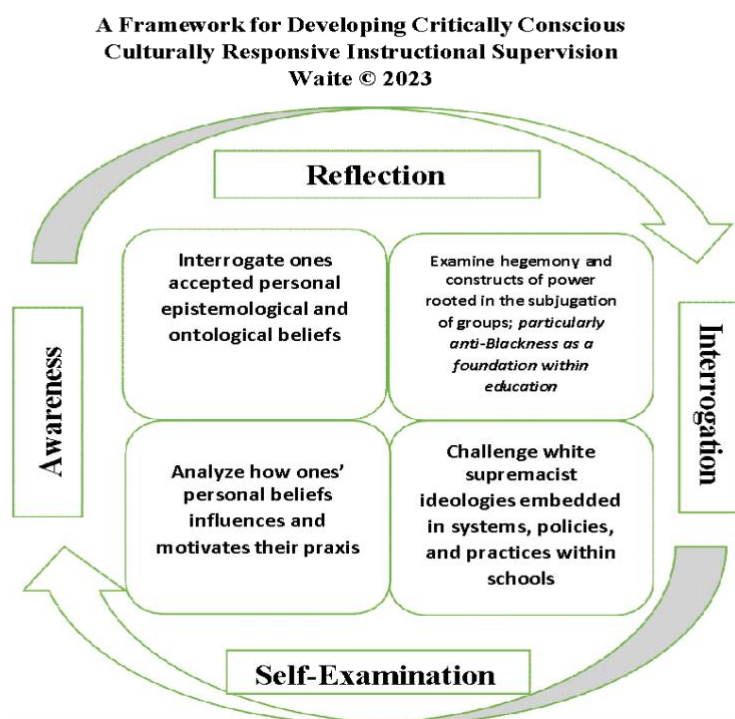
The RISA Framework for Developing Critical Self-Awareness

Waite (2021a) introduced the RISA Framework: Reflection, Interrogation, Self-Examination, and Awareness, as a liberatory pedagogical tool to guide leaders’ intrapersonal development. Grounded in contemporary applications of race-conscious leadership theory (Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2012) and the concept of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; King, 1991), RISA offers a cyclical process through which leaders examine how their beliefs, biases, and epistemologies shape professional action.

Based on the findings, one can see how the alignment supports the personal and professional consciousness of the school leader. For example, **reflection** prompts leaders to examine their assumptions about schooling and leadership, a process echoed in participant comments describing the session as “eye-opening,” “powerful,” and “deeply reflective.” **Interrogation** requires leaders to question dominant ideologies and inherited logics of practice; a need reflected in participants’ recognition that the session challenged them to “look closer at my own leadership role” and understand “the deep-rooted levels of the system.” **Self-examination** demands an honest reckoning with how leaders’ identities and positionalities may either sustain or disrupt inequitable conditions. Participants’ reflections—such as identifying their “own ethical frameworks” or grappling with what they “value and how [they] live out [their] values”—demonstrate how RISA fosters this level of introspection. Finally, **awareness** represents the transformative recognition that catalyzes ethical and culturally responsive action; several leaders noted that the session “gave me the courage” to engage in new practices, including “having courageous conversations with my staff” or approaching families with “a different perspective.”

Together, these responses illustrate how the RISA Cycle positions reflection not as a passive exercise but as a **catalyst for meaningful leadership change**. By supporting leaders in navigating cognitive dissonance, confronting assumptions, and articulating ethically grounded commitments, RISA enables them to model reflective and responsive leadership for their school communities.

Figure 1. The RISA Framework (reproduced from Waite, 2024)



The CRIS Framework and RISA Cycle have significant implications for leadership preparation programs, district professional development, and educational policy.

First, preparation programs should embed critical theory, racial literacy, and reflective inquiry into coursework and field experiences. Doing so cultivates leaders who are equipped to engage in equity-centered decision-making (Gooden et al., 2023; Khalifa, 2020; Waite, 2022). Second, professional development initiatives should move beyond one-time workshops toward continuous, dialogical learning communities that prioritize the development of critical consciousness (Kohli et al., 2015; Waite, 2024). Finally, educational policies should recognize the moral and ethical dimensions of leadership by investing in equity-driven professional learning structures. Embedding CRIS principles at the policy level aligns with national calls for anti-racist and culturally responsive schooling and ensures sustainability beyond individual leaders' efforts (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Waite, 2021a).

Implications and Recommendations

The following implications and recommendations emerge from the central insights, tensions, and opportunities identified throughout this analysis. Together, they offer a strategic pathway for strengthening implementation, deepening impact, and advancing equity-centered leadership praxis for culturally responsive instructional supervisors (Mette et al., 2024). The following implications and recommendations are guided by empirical survey data and aligned with the conceptual frameworks that ground this work. These implications and recommendations are designed to support CRIS by prompting sustained organizational learning, enhanced leadership capacity, and ensuring that culturally responsive, ethically grounded leadership practices are the standard rather than the anomaly.

Implications for Research

The findings from this study point to several critical areas where additional research is warranted to deepen understanding of culturally responsive ethical leadership. Participants' strong responses highlight both the promise of reflective leadership frameworks and the complexity of applying them in dynamic school environments. These insights suggest a need for research that both validates and extends current models while examining how leaders' ethical reasoning evolves across contexts (Khalifa, 2020). The implications below highlight key avenues for advancing the scholarly knowledge base in this field.

- **Need for Further Examination of Reflective Leadership Frameworks:** The strong participant response—both quantitative (94% impact; 91% confidence) and qualitative (“powerful,” “transformative,” “helped me identify my ethical frameworks”)—suggests that frameworks such as CRIS and RISA warrant deeper empirical study. Future research should investigate how these frameworks influence leader practice over time and across different school contexts.
- **Longitudinal Studies on Leadership Confidence and Behavior Change:** Participants reported immediate increases in ethical confidence following the session, but longitudinal research is needed to understand how such confidence develops, stabilizes, or evolves as leaders apply ethical decision-making in real-world contexts.
- **Exploration of Sociopolitical Context in Ethical Leadership:** Participants' comments about immigration, political tensions, and racialized policy environments indicate a need

for research that examines how sociopolitical pressures shape decision-making and ethical leadership enactment in schools.

Implications for Teaching/Professional Learning/Development

The data suggests that professional learning experiences can more effectively cultivate ethical, reflective, and culturally responsive instructional leaders. Participants expressed a strong desire for deeper engagement, applied learning opportunities, and supportive relational environments that nurture vulnerability and growth (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). These findings underscore the need to redesign professional development structures to mirror the complexity of leadership practice. The implications below offer guidance for strengthening the design and delivery of transformative learning experiences.

- **Extended and Iterative Learning Structures Are Necessary:** Given participants' desire for "more time," "longer sessions," and deeper processing, PD must move beyond one-time workshops toward multi-session, inquiry-based learning cycles that mirror the iterative nature of leadership dilemmas.
- **Professional Learning Should Integrate Applied Decision-Making Tools:** Requests for case studies, leadership moves, and scenario-based practice suggest PD should incorporate structured opportunities for leaders to rehearse, model, and analyze ethical actions in context.
- **Emotionally Supportive, Dialogic Learning Environments Strengthen Leadership Growth:** Participants emphasized facilitation that was "engaging," "dynamic," and "gave us courage". Individuals designing PD should intentionally build relational climates that support vulnerability, reflection, and identity exploration.

Implications for Policy

The study's findings also carry important implications for leadership policy, particularly as districts and states seek to prepare leaders for increasingly complex sociopolitical and organizational demands. Participants' responses point to gaps between current policy expectations, and the realities leaders face when navigating ethical and culturally responsive decision-making (Lustick et al., 2025; Waite & Wilkerson, 2023). Addressing these gaps requires policy frameworks that more explicitly support reflection, responsiveness, and context-sensitive leadership practice. The implications below outline policy considerations that can strengthen leader preparation programs and districts with ongoing development.

- **Leadership Standards Should Explicitly Include Culturally Responsive Ethical Decision-Making:** The high relevance and confidence ratings suggest that practitioners may be ready for policy frameworks that embed ethical cultural responsiveness as a core leadership competency.
- **Districts Should Institutionalize Continuous Reflective Practice:** Given the strong emotional and cognitive impact of reflection, policies should require ongoing reflective dialogue (e.g., PLCs, coaching structures) rather than episodic compliance-based PD.
- **Policies Must Acknowledge Sociopolitical Realities Faced by Leaders:** Participants' concerns about immigration, legislation, and political climate signal that leadership

preparation policies must prepare leaders to navigate the complex intersections of schooling and political life.

Recommendations for Research

The findings of this study highlight the need for deeper, practice-oriented research that extends professional learning sessions into series and examines how culturally responsive ethical frameworks function in authentic leadership contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2017). To strengthen the evidence base for CRIS and RISA, future work must capture how leaders enact reflective cycles across varied school settings, and how collaborative inquiry structures support decision-making, capacity building, and organizational change. The following recommendations outline key areas for advancing this agenda.

- **Conduct Design-Based or Improvement Science Studies on CRIS Implementation:** Investigate how leaders apply the CRIS and RISA frameworks within authentic leadership dilemmas across time, settings, and varied sociopolitical conditions.
- **Generate Practitioner-Researcher Partnerships:** Engage leaders in co-research to document how reflective cycles influence school-level decisions, distributed leadership, and organizational outcomes.

Recommendations for Teaching and Professional Development

The work of culturally responsive instructional supervision must extend beyond abstract theorization into actionable practice. Embedding critical theory in leadership preparation requires centering racialized discourse, intersectionality, and liberatory praxis across learning environments (Gooden et al., 2023; Waite, 2022). This integration redefines supervision as a site of ethical inquiry and systemic change, compelling leaders to examine how institutional practices perpetuate inequity (Khalifa, 2020). Frameworks such as RISA and CRIS offer practical tools for translating critical theory into action. When leaders are equipped to reflect, interrogate, and transform, supervision becomes an act of resistance against deficit-oriented paradigms and a mechanism for advancing justice in schools (Mette et al., 2024).

- **Continuous Cycles of Professional Learning:** Replace single-session PD with semester- or year-long modules that integrate reflection, interrogation, self-examination, and awareness across multiple leadership challenges.
- **Integrate High-Fidelity Case Studies and Leadership Simulations:** Respond directly to feedback such as “we needed more time to discuss leadership moves” by embedding structured simulations, role-plays, and decision-making rehearsals.
- **Expand Facilitator Training to Support Emotionally Complex Content:** Given participants’ description of the session as “heavy,” “emotional,” and “eye-opening,” facilitators must be equipped to hold psychologically safe and intellectually rigorous learning spaces.

Recommendations for Policy

Traditional models of leadership preparation and professional development (PD) often emphasize compliance, standardization, and technical proficiency over adaptive and critical learning (Lim et al., 2020). Kohli et al. (2015) critique such anti-dialogical PD as reproducing hierarchical relationships and suppressing transformative inquiry. In contrast, Critical Professional Development (CPD) draws on Freire's dialogical approach to learning, fostering spaces where educators examine power, race, and oppression in their practice. Integrating CRIS within CPD enables leaders to engage in ongoing cycles of reflection and action, aligning professional learning with the principles of social justice.

Results from this 2025 virtual Professional Learning Community Summit demonstrated strong potential. Over 90% of participants reported feeling more confident in applying culturally responsive frameworks to ethical dilemmas, affirming the efficacy of critical reflection as a leadership development strategy. The impact this could have in districts around the country if there was a collective effort to reimagine professional development, employ intentionality in creating professional learning communities, and embed it in an accountability structure by attaching it to licensure.

- **Embed Culturally Responsive Ethical Reasoning into Leadership Licensure Requirements:** State and district leadership standards should operationalize ethical cultural responsiveness as a required competency aligned to PD and evaluation frameworks.
- **Invest in PD Models That Prioritize Reflective Inquiry Over Compliance:** Allocate resources to extended, relational PD structures that support continuous learning rather than checklist-driven requirements.
- **Create Accountability Structures That Support—not Punish—Reflective, Equity-Oriented Leadership:** Policies should encourage leaders to examine their decision-making frameworks and practice transparency, rather than narrowly focusing on technical compliance metrics.

Discussion

Developing critically conscious, culturally responsive leaders is an ethical and professional necessity for contemporary education (Gooden et al., 2023). As Freire (2011) argued, liberation requires awareness and action; reflection alone is insufficient. CRIS, grounded in the RISA framework, provides an approach through which leaders can cultivate the consciousness necessary to challenge systemic oppression and enact equitable change. By embedding critical theory and racial literacy into leadership preparation and professional development, schools can become spaces of belonging, liberation, and justice. The path forward requires courage, reflection, and a collective commitment to transforming educational leadership into a vehicle for emancipation and equity.

As school leaders confront the multifaceted challenges of post-pandemic education ranging from widening opportunity gaps to increased sociopolitical tensions, the need for equity-centered, critically conscious leadership has never been more urgent (Gooden et al., 2023). In the current

national climate, attacks on so-called ‘woke’ education, bans on DEI initiatives, and legislation targeting CRT seek to sanitize history and criminalize race-conscious pedagogy, leaders are navigating an educational landscape marked by heightened political hostility and surveillance. These pressures are not experienced equally: leaders of color, particularly Black women, Black Latine leaders, and other historically excluded educators, often bear the emotional, psychological, and professional toll of these assaults most acutely as they shoulder the dual burden of leading schools while defending their identities, communities, and commitments to justice (Collins, 2015; Fuller et al., 2019).

This moment underscores a critical truth embedded within both the CRIS and RISA frameworks: the enactment of critically conscious, culturally responsive supervision is not race- or gender-neutral. A white leader engaging in CRIS or RISA moves through these frameworks from a different perspective than a colleague of the global majority engaging with these frameworks. While all leaders engage from a perspective rooted in the dominant narratives of white supremacy and the patriarchy, the leader from a racially and/or linguistically historically excluded community interacts with these frameworks under drastically different ideological and physical conditions because of the legacy of white supremacy, racism, and patriarchy embedded in dominant norms (Fuller et al., 2019). Recognizing these embodied differences is essential for understanding how critical consciousness develops and manifests in practice because our personal epistemologies impact our professional praxis (Waite, 2021a, 2021b). These realities reinforce the urgent need for leadership preparation and professional learning that explicitly attend to identity, power, racialized systems, and the uneven distribution of institutional consequences.

Conclusion

Developing conscious educational leaders is a moral, ethical, and professional obligation for leadership preparation programs and school districts. Embedding critical theory and liberatory praxis within leadership preparation and professional development equips educators with the analytical tools and moral clarity needed to challenge oppressive structures and foster inclusive, affirming school environments (Bristol et al., 2025; Mette et al., 2024). The CRIS Framework offers an adaptable model for this work; one that helps leaders examine their epistemologies, engage with the sociopolitical dimensions present in the field of education, and act with purpose to advance racial equity.

Ultimately, cultivating critically conscious leaders through frameworks like the CRIS Framework is essential for enacting sustainable, justice-driven school reform (Haberlin, 2016). Leadership preparation programs, school districts, and policymakers must prioritize and invest in equity-focused professional learning that moves beyond technical compliance toward systemic transformation (Gooden et al., 2023). By doing so, we not only reimagine instructional supervision as a liberatory practice but also move closer to creating the just, inclusive educational systems that all communities deserve.

Ultimately, this analysis reveals that leadership development grounded in reflective, equity-attentive frameworks like CRIS and RISA hold promise for preparing leaders capable of both understanding and transforming the conditions that shape their school communities. As schools continue to navigate pressing instructional, relational, and political challenges, the need for

leaders who can act ethically, think critically, and engage responsively remains urgent. The insights from this study provide a foundation for further research, deeper engagement, and sustained organizational investment in leadership learning models that not only support professional growth but also advance the broader goals of social justice, belonging, and educational excellence towards the goal of liberation.

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