

The Criticality of Consciousness and Emancipatory Supervision in Educational Leadership

Journal of Educational Supervision

1 – 7

Volume 8, Issue 2, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69772/8.2.1>

<https://jes.lib.buffalo.edu/articles/10.69772/8.2.1>

Shannon R. Waite¹ and Mark Anthony Gooden²

Abstract

Education has long stood as a paradoxical institution—one capable of both liberation and oppression. It offers the promise of social mobility, intellectual freedom, and self-determination, yet often functions as an apparatus that reproduces inequity, exclusion, and systemic racism (Cormier, Mette, & Oliveras, 2024; Diem & Welton, 2021). Historically, U.S. schooling has sustained hegemonic ideologies that center whiteness and marginalize communities of the Global Majority, thereby reinforcing inequitable power structures that shape who have access to opportunity, who is surveilled, and whose knowledge is deemed legitimate.

Keywords

critical consciousness; culturally responsive instructional supervision; emancipatory education; liberatory education

¹ Howard University

² Teachers College, Columbia University

Corresponding Author:

Shannon R. Waite (Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies, Howard University, 2565 Georgia Ave, NW, Room G13E Miner Building, Washington, DC, 20001 USA)

email: shannon.waite@howard.edu

Introduction

Over the past three decades, scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), Geneva Gay (2000), and Django Paris (2012) have reframed teaching as a deeply cultural and political act. Their work-spanning culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and culturally sustaining pedagogy—has underscored that effective education must affirm students' cultural identities while preparing them to challenge inequitable social structures. This intellectual lineage laid the groundwork for Culturally Responsive Instructional Supervision (CRIS), which expands these pedagogical commitments into the realm of leadership and supervisory practice by insisting that leaders themselves cultivate the racial literacy, political clarity, and ethical courage necessary to transform instructional environments rather than merely manage them.

Building upon this foundation, the evolution of Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership (CRIL) and Culturally Responsive Instructional Supervision (CRIS) has reshaped how we understand supervision as practice. Instructional supervisors who shape, support, and evaluate teaching and learning occupy a unique position to influence educational justice. As Mette, Cormier, and Oliveras (2023, 2024) argue, supervision is not neutral; it is culturally and politically situated. When framed through CRIS, supervision becomes a tool for dismantling deficit ideologies, affirming the cultural wealth of marginalized communities, and ensuring that instructional decision-making actively disrupts not reinforces dominant narratives about who can learn, lead, and thrive.

The Criticality of Consciousness in Leadership Preparation

To advance CRIS, one must first confront the sociopolitical and historical context of U.S. schooling. As Waite (2021b) and Wright (2022) argue, the normalization of whiteness and deficit thinking about communities of color are not incidental—they are structural and intentional. Thus, CRIS demands a profound level of critical consciousness among leaders, requiring them to move beyond performative equity toward transformative praxis (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). Drawing from Paulo Freire's (2011) insistence that *conscientização* is an awakening to one's social, cultural, and political reality, CRIS asks leaders to interrogate how their own identities, biases, and assumptions shape their approaches to teaching and learning—and invites them to reinterpret supervision as a doorway to structural change rather than a mechanism of compliance.

This moral and professional imperative lies at the heart of the CRIS Framework, which centers four interrelated domains: (1) self-examination of personal beliefs and values, (2) critical reflection on ontological and epistemological assumptions, (3) interrogation of systems that uphold white supremacy, and (4) relational accountability with historically marginalized communities. Each domain demands deep, sustained engagement rather than episodic reflection. The CRIS Framework positions supervision as a catalyst for personal transformation and institutional disruption by making explicit the linkage between leaders' internal belief systems and the external policies and practices that govern schools.

The RISA Framework: Reflection as Liberation

Waite (2021a) advances the RISA Framework (Reflection, Interrogation, Self-Examination, and Awareness) as a liberatory model for cultivating leaders' intrapersonal development. Grounded in Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and influenced by the concept of critical consciousness (King, 1991; Khalifa et al, 2016), RISA conceptualizes reflection as a catalyst for transformation rather than a passive act. Through cycles of reflective interrogation leaders come to recognize how personal and institutional ideologies sustain inequity. This recognition becomes the basis for actionable change, enabling leaders to shift from unexamined practice to intentional, justice-oriented decision-making that centers the lived experiences of those most impacted by educational injustice.

Operationalizing CRIS through RISA requires professional development environments that are dialogical, relational, and equity centered (Waite, 2024). Traditional professional development models characterized by standardization, compliance, and content delivery are insufficient for cultivating critical consciousness (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In contrast, CRIS aligned learning communities prioritize sustained dialogue, vulnerability, and counter-hegemonic inquiry.

Toward Emancipatory Outcomes, Freedom, and Liberation

As schools contend with post-pandemic inequities and intensified political attacks on equity and inclusion, the need for critically conscious leadership has never been greater (Gooden et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Instructional supervisors stand at the intersection of policy, practice, and pedagogy, uniquely situated to influence the ethical direction of schooling. When they approach supervision through culturally responsive and critically conscious frameworks, they engage in what Freire (2011) describes as “the praxis of freedom” or the ongoing, deliberate act of naming, questioning, and transforming oppressive conditions. Through this lens, instructional supervision becomes a site of emancipatory possibility where leaders and teachers collectively work toward educational environments rooted in justice, humanity, and liberation.

Ultimately, CRIS represents more than a framework; it is a moral philosophy and political stance; and education is a political act. It challenges the field of educational leadership to reconceptualize supervision as solidarity rather than surveillance, advocacy rather than accountability. CRIS and RISA collectively offer pathways for developing leaders who embody courage, compassion, and consciousness, leaders who view supervision not as oversight, but as co-liberation. Generating research focused on the communal goal of our collective liberation is conceptualized in this special issue. As the *Journal of Educational Supervision* continues to serve as a nexus for critical dialogue bridging theory and practice, this editorial overview offers insights into the manuscripts selected that proffer conceptual, theoretical, and empirical contributions demonstrating the transformative potential of CRIS.

Moving Instructional Supervisory Praxis towards Emancipatory Outcomes, Freedom, and Liberation in Public School Education

In alignment with our call, the contributions in this special issue showcase how the cultural competence, critical consciousness, and/or culturally responsive teaching praxis instructional supervisors developed through ongoing training and professional development have resulted in changes and/or shifts in policies and practices. Each one of the five manuscripts we have selected is aligned with four of the six overarching questions shared in the call. The following are the questions these submissions respond to:

1. How do instructional supervisors within school communities apply cultural competence, critical consciousness, and culturally responsive teaching praxis to challenge and dismantle white supremacy, racism, and anti-Blackness in school policies and practices?
2. What historical and contemporary hegemonic ideologies have shaped policies and practices within school communities, and how have instructional supervisors worked to disrupt these ideologies?
3. How has ongoing training and professional development in cultural competence, critical consciousness, and culturally responsive teaching praxis influenced instructional supervisors' ability to implement policy and practice changes that affirm and support People of the Global Majority?
4. What specific shifts or changes in policies and practices have resulted from instructional supervisors' engagement with culturally responsive frameworks, and what measurable impacts have these shifts had on students, educators, and school communities?

The first contribution by Watson and Alston examines the question of what challenges instructional supervisors face when attempting to implement culturally responsive policies and practices, and what strategies have been successful in overcoming these obstacles. The authors conducted a narrative inquiry that examined how two instructional leaders defined and enacted the Culturally Relevant and Responsive Leadership (CRRL) framework within a large urban school district. Their study explored how identity, context, and experience shape leadership practices that promote equity and inclusion. Findings from the study illuminated that leaders experienced tension as they negotiated the challenges and possibilities of engaging in race-conscious, equity-oriented leadership.

Wiley et al. explored the research around principal supervisors and conducted a literature review to examine the existing literature through the lens of anti-racist district leadership (Shah et al., 2022). Their contribution examined the question of what historical and contemporary hegemonic ideologies have shaped policies and practices within school communities, and how instructional supervisors have worked to disrupt these ideologies. Their findings highlighted a significant gap in the literature and in professional standards regarding the role of principal supervisors beyond technical responsibilities such as coaching and evaluation. The authors argue for a more intentional approach to centering equity and anti-racism.

In addressing the question of what specific shifts or changes in policies and practices have resulted from instructional supervisors' engagement with culturally responsive frameworks, and what measurable impacts these shifts have had on students, educators, and school communities,

Britt engaged this inquiry by conducting qualitative participatory action research. This study explored how culturally responsive instructional supervisors collaborated with teachers to enact equity-driven change in classroom discourse practices toward the goal of improving the experiences of students. Findings indicated that equity-based observation tools and reflective coaching conversations functioned as levers for transforming instructional discourse practices.

Walrond and Bristol's contribution address the question of how ongoing training and professional development in cultural competence, critical consciousness, and culturally responsive teaching praxis have influenced instructional supervisors' ability to implement policy and practice changes that affirm and support People of the Global Majority. Their qualitative study explored how National Board Certification (NBC) facilitators practice CRIS as an expression of justice-oriented leadership. The findings revealed that participants moved beyond compliance-driven supervision toward reflective, justice-minded practice. Their study offers significant implications for reimagining professional learning, leadership preparation, and supervision models that foreground educational equity, critical reflection, and teacher agency as the foundation of liberatory leadership.

Waite's contribution also addresses the question of how ongoing training and professional development in cultural competence, critical consciousness, and culturally responsive teaching praxis have influenced instructional supervisors' ability to implement policy and practice changes that affirm and support People of the Global Majority. This conceptual manuscript advances the theory and practice of CRIS by grounding it in ethical leadership, reflective inquiry, and culturally responsive decision-making. Findings from a secondary mixed methods analysis of a February 2025 professional learning session examine how the CRIS Framework and the RISA Cycle can serve as complementary tools for examining how identities, assumptions, and epistemologies shape practice and push culturally responsive instructional supervisors toward making meaningful changes.

As we suggested earlier, education matters. Relatedly, educational leadership matters. To be exceedingly clear, culturally responsive educational leadership matters. We proudly present the articles here as culturally responsive approaches to supporting instructional supervision that specifically amplify Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership (CRIL) and Culturally Responsive Instructional Supervision (CRIS). We are grateful to the authors for their commitment to the scholarship and we are thankful that you have decided to explore this important issue. So, in a collective effort to move this relevant scholarship to the next level, which for us includes impacting practice, we invite you to please engage with these pieces, contact the authors and/or the editors, and join us in this journey to sow significant seeds in this consequential iteration of educational leadership.

References

- Crenshaw, K. (2005). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against Women of Color. In R. K. Bergen, J. L. Edleson, & C. M. Renzetti (Eds.), *Violence against women: Classic papers* (pp. 282–313). Pearson Education.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/122.311>
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). NYU Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ggjin3>
- Freire, P. (2011). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). Continuum.
- Gooden, M. A., & Dantley, M. (2012). Centering race in a framework for leadership preparation. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 7(2), 237–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775112455266>
- Gooden, M. A., Khalifa, M., Arnold, N. W., Brown, K. D., Meyers, C. V., & Welsh, R. O. (2023). *A culturally responsive school leadership approach to developing equity-centered principals*. Wallace Foundation.
- Khalifa, M. A., Gooden, M. A., & Davis, J. E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 1272–1311. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316630383>
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a Critical Race Theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47–68.
- Mette, I. M., Cormier, D. R., & Oliveras, Y. (2023). *Making a difference: Instructional leadership that drives self-reflection and values the expertise of teachers*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mette, I. M., Cormier, D. R., & Oliveras, Y. (2024). Using cultural knowledge to develop structures and systems that lead to equitable and emancipatory outcomes. In D. R. Cormier, I. M. Mette, & Y. Oliveras (Eds.), *Culturally responsive instructional supervision: Leadership for equitable and emancipatory outcomes* (pp. 112–123). Teachers College Press.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2022). *Strategies for using American Rescue Plan Funding to address the impact of lost instructional time*. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/documents/coronavirus/lost-instructional-time.pdf>
- Waite, S. R. (2021a). Disrupting dysconsciousness: Confronting anti-Blackness in educational leadership preparation programs. *Journal of School Leadership*, 31(1–2), 66–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684621993047>
- Waite, S. R. (2021b). Towards a theory of critical consciousness: A new direction for the development of instructional and supervisory leaders. *Journal of Educational Supervision*, 4(2), 65–79. <https://doi.org/10.31045/jes.4.2.4>
- Wright, J. M. (2022). *Heirs of the great migration: How the past became the future*. Independently Published.

Author Biographies

Shannon R. Waite is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies within the School of Education at Howard University. A career educator of over

20 years, her research interests include topics on diversity recruitment and pipeline programs, culturally responsive school leadership, developing critical consciousness in educational leaders, and examining hyper-segregation and its connection to the school-to-prison pipeline. An award-winning scholar, Dr. Waite won the 2024 University Council of Education Administration (UCEA) Paula Silver Case Award for her co-authored teaching case study entitled *Are Educational Leaders of Color Truly Able to Lead for Equity? Maintaining the Status Quo or Disrupting Unequitable Systems?*

Mark Anthony Gooden is the Christian Johnson Endeavor Professor in Education Leadership at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he is also past chair of the Department of Organization & Leadership. A past president of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), he is the 2017 recipient of the UCEA Jay D. Scribner Mentoring Award and 2021 recipient of the UCEA Master Professor Award for distinguished service in teaching, curriculum development, and student mentoring. Dr. Gooden was inducted as an American Educational Research Association (AERA) Fellow in 2025.