

Aspiring Urban School Leaders' Conceptualizations of Culturally Relevant Instructional Leadership

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Abstract

While just one responsibility of many, urban school leaders play a major role in setting standards for classroom instruction. This paper describes aspiring urban school leaders' (ASLs) conceptualizations of culturally relevant instructional leadership. Drawing from an analysis of data collected during collaboratively taught program modules focused on instructional leadership, several themes were identified. First, when examining ASLs initial grasp of culturally relevant teaching, a wide range of understandings of culture is revealed, from an invocation of deficit orientations related to forms of ableism and trauma-informed approaches to those reflecting critical consciousness. Second, ASLs were found to operate within organizational and district policy contexts that differentially enable their development as culturally relevant instructional leaders. Finally, ASLs' practice and analysis of observations using the culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) tenets and teacher practices support their development as expert observers, and provides practicum instructors with valuable data on ASLs' skill development in this area. The implications for principal preparation programs, K–12 principal practice, related research, and policy are also discussed.

Keywords

culturally relevant instructional leadership; principal preparation; culture

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Introduction

Generally, critical scholars and educators agree that school leaders who are advocates for educational success of marginalized students must be responsive to the interests, histories, positionality, and aspirations of their students, their families and their communities (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Horsford et al., 2011). In particular, given the impact principals can have on teaching practice, it is important that aspiring school leaders build the capacity to support the development of teachers as culturally competent and critically conscious pedagogues (Cormier et al., 2024). This paper reports on research examining how aspiring school leaders (ASLs) conceptualize and operationalize culturally relevant instructional leadership (CRIL) practices during their practicum experiences in a leadership preparation program. Based on three years of collaboration among colleagues from urban teacher education and urban educational leadership programs, this study reports results from the development, implementation and analysis of educational leadership practicum activities focusing on instructional leadership practices aligned with Ladson-Billings' (1995a) framework for culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP).

We developed an approach for teaching and implementing CRIL by addressing three components: (a) becoming an expert observer; (b) analyzing teacher observations using CRP learning activities and resources developed by the authors and (c) engaging in CRP-based feedback conversations with teachers. Building on a larger project with teacher leaders, this study explores how ASLs conceptualize and apply instructional leadership practices aligned with promoting culturally relevant pedagogy and supporting academic performance, cultural competence, and critical consciousness across a school culture. The study lays a foundation for an area of principal preparation that is often overlooked: the development of supervision and evaluation skills that support CRP among teachers (i.e. CRIL).

Culturally relevant and other equity-oriented pedagogies in teacher education are well-developed areas of study (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Paris, 2012) and scholars have developed analogous frameworks for culturally responsive leadership (Banwo et al., 2022; Guthrie et al., 2017; Washington, 2021). Scholars are beginning to articulate the implications of culturally relevant and responsive school leadership for the practice of instructional leadership (Cormier et al., 2024). This study adds to the body of research by better understanding the development of skills necessary for instructional leaders to enact CRIL. The research presented here is guided by the following questions:

1. *How do aspiring school leaders (ASLs) conceptualize CRP?*
2. *How do aspiring school leaders (ASLs) begin to operationalize CRP-informed instructional leadership?*

We investigated these questions with three cohorts of ASLs, whose practices are grounded in culturally relevant instructional leadership.

Context

The literature on critical approaches to instructional leadership, such as cultural relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995b), culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018), or culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), focuses on critical (both important and anti-oppressive) knowledges, dispositions and practices leaders must have to effectively support the development of CRP practices among teachers (Holmes & Young, 2018; Horsford et al., 2011; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Mugisha, 2013; Waite, 2021). Such literature informs how leadership preparation and professional development programs design everything from recruitment of leadership candidates, to course content and experiences that cultivate the critical dispositions and pedagogical understandings required to implement and support CRP in schools. Research on in-service school level leaders promoting culturally relevant and responsive approaches to curriculum and instruction focuses on how they promote the integration of cultural knowledge and community expertise into teaching (Khalifa, 2018).

For example, Khalifa's (2018) culturally responsive school leadership framework advances the need for epistemic shifts among school leaders to include historical and community-based ways of knowing, without which school leaders are unable to advocate and ensure anti-oppressive practices within a school community. Much of this work focuses on the reframing and dethroning of official school knowledge (Apple, 2014) to make space for expertise of marginalized groups to engage and honor the cultures, experiences, and histories of communities represented in classrooms. Khalifa (2018) documents how school leaders can support the centering of community knowledge(s) in school curricula, instruction, and teacher learning communities in a way that cultivates collective responsibility among educators and community members for student success. Additionally, he makes suggestions for adapting teacher evaluation rubrics to incorporate these community-based practices into expectations for instructional practice. Another example is Baker, et al. (2024) who remind us that instructional supervision has largely ignored diversity and race particularly when it comes to supervision frameworks and observational feedback. Instead of recognizing teaching practices that honor more collective ways of being in the world, traditional approaches to supervision promote the perpetuation of a "White Western orientation to time efficiency" (p. 41) and other teaching practices.

These measures address fundamental and necessary leadership understandings and practices required to create shifts in culture and expectations for teaching and learning within a school. However, there is less known about how instructional leadership practices that support the integration of culturally relevant pedagogical moves by teachers are developed and enacted. For example, what do leaders or supervisors *do* in order to promote critical self-reflection and the instructional growth that is necessary for teachers to enact culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy? How do leaders and supervisors themselves develop a deep understanding of how a culturally relevant teaching practice develops and what are the methods of feedback and actions that support growth in teachers' culturally relevant practices.

While this is fundamental to any critical leadership praxis, the preparation and development of CRP-oriented leadership extend beyond knowledge, beliefs, and curricular content, and includes leadership moves focused on influencing instructional practices. Barakat, et al. (2019) explored the development of cultural competence across a sample of educational leadership preparation

programs and found that while candidates demonstrate changes in their CRP knowledge, motivations, and beliefs as a result of their preparation programs, there was no change in their skill development as it related to culturally relevant/responsive leadership. While skill development can pertain to various areas of school leadership, the skills necessary to evaluate and support pedagogical practices are seldom discussed or investigated in the context of the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy.

However, in many district contexts, instructional supervision and instructional evaluation are conflated (see Virella, 2024 for a concise description of the distinction) and in doing so, the evaluation process often defines a structure for what is valued and how administrators and teachers interact about instruction. As such, while advocating for modifications to teacher evaluation rubrics (Khalifa, 2018) in order to incorporate culturally relevant practices as necessary structural measures for achieving equitable learning outcomes, school leaders must also be able to *practice* culturally relevant instructional leadership if the aim is to integrate CRP as an approach schoolwide. This practice of CRIL includes the quality of dialogue among leaders and teachers, the approach to observations, and the support for critical reflection for both leaders and teachers (Virella, 2024). Thus, this study examines three core components of CRIL practice: CRP-focused classroom observations; CRP informed feedback and conversations with teachers; and collaboratively developed CRP-based supports with/for teachers.

Literature Review

Culturally relevant pedagogy, first named by Ladson-Billings (1995a; 1995b), is an approach to teaching and learning that positions students' experiences and questions at the center of instruction, works to interrupt racist practices embedded in school structures and requires students to engage in critical advocacy work. According to Ladson-Billings (1995b), CRP is grounded in three tenets. These tenets are *academic success*, where students strive for deep and interconnected academic understandings moving far beyond correct answers; *cultural competence* where students learn about and increase their appreciation for their own culture and cultural ways of being in the world as well as the culture of other students in their classroom; and *critical consciousness* where students are able to recognize, challenge and respond to social inequities as a result of their learning. At its heart, CRP is an anti-racist practice where the systemic racism, oppression, and inequities entrenched in schools are made visible to students who then work to develop pathways for change.

The development of a culturally relevant practice for classroom teachers starts by building dispositions oriented toward truly believing all students are brilliant and capable. However, asset-based dispositions and strong relationships between teachers and students are not enough to enact CRP (Milner, 2011). Teachers need to unpack their own cultural biases and norms, create a community of support, and understand how to create curricula that give students space and opportunities to be critical learners. Among other things, this requires autonomy for students and curricular change, both difficult ideals in the current age of scripted curricula and teaching to the test for the most underserved students in school—often students of color from low-income communities.

To be successful, CRP requires a deeper, more complex understanding of culture, specifically cultural norms and cultural politics in school settings that position students of color as having deficits or being problematic. Teachers, however, are rarely given the opportunity to explore their own cultural norms, expectations, and positionality within the cultural and racial politics that exist in schools (Magee & Willey, 2024). As such, many teachers need support to teach in culturally relevant ways. Despite a clear need for CRP—even in professional development and preparation programs that attend to racism, equity, and inclusion—teachers rarely develop complex ideas of culture, ideas that can help them to see how their own expectations and behaviors represent unchallenged inequitable cultural norms (Willey & Magee, 2018; Cormier, 2021).

Too often culture is understood as observable traits, such as celebrations, first languages, clothing, or meals regularly prepared (Weaver, 1986), and thus cultural difference is framed along a deficit-oriented continuum, avoiding any discussion of cultural politics, power, and racism imbued in such hegemonic framings (Cotman et al., 2023). More unconscious or invisible (Cotman et al., 2023) cultural practices (e.g., myths of meritocracy; language and speech patterns and related patterns of interaction; definitions of respect; expectations for adult and child relationships; definitions of beauty; ideas about religion, gender, and sexuality) are ubiquitous in many mainstream classrooms. Often left unexplored or evaded are the diverse cultural histories of the 21st century classroom (González et al., 2006; Mensah & Jackson, 2018; Weaver, 1986). Horsford and her colleagues (2011) define culture in terms of beliefs and actions that are the basis of group identification and differences for their work on culturally relevant leadership. In all of these definitions, the *what* of culture includes a complex array of obvious and taken-for-granted understandings, behaviors and patterns. However, an understanding of *how* culture works may also be useful in preparing instructional leaders to interrogate and develop their own practice and to support and influence CRP practices among teachers.

Surfacing Culture in Action in CRP Development

In essence, cultivating CRP practices in a school involves seeing and being self-conscious about the cultural schemas and habits that intervene when trying to learn new ways of doing things. Swidler (1986/1998) explained that individuals draw from cultural tool kits, constructed over time, to devise strategies of action in given social situations. The extent to which an individual has a narrow, wide, shallow, deep, or more/less diverse set of experiences in their cultural repertoire informs the strategies they use in a given context, the interpretations they make of others' strategies, and the extent to which their actions are effective in the context of a given interaction. And, these ways of acting inflect cultural meanings in themselves:

Strategies of actions are cultural products; the symbolic experiences, mythic lore, and ritual practices of a group or society create moods and motivations, ways of organizing experience and evaluation reality, modes of regulating conduct, and ways of forming social bonds, which provide resources for constructing strategies of action. (Swidler, 1998, p.185).

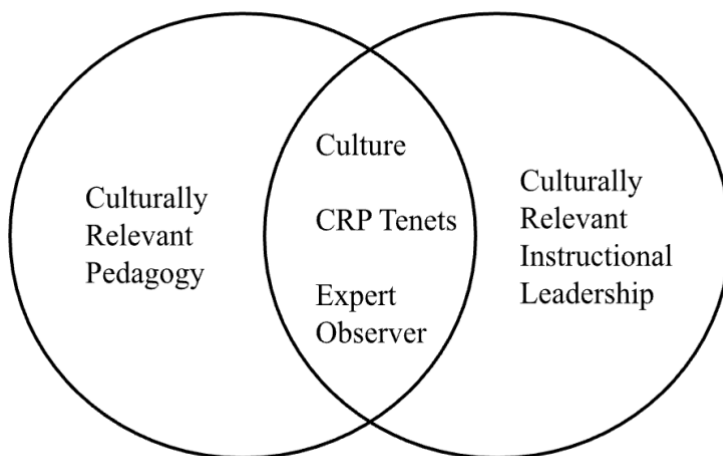
In the case of actors in school settings, even when a teacher may believe they are infusing cultural relevance into their instruction, the cultural logics (Sewell, 2005; Swidler, 2001; Thornton et al., 2012) communicated through their actions may suggest white, middle class, individualistic

meanings that invoke meritocratic patterns of sorting and ranking student knowledge or behaviors. Thus, knowledge of multiple histories and cultures of a diverse constituency (students, teachers, families, etc.) is foundational to developing one's CRP praxis, as a teacher, coach, or administrator. But knowledge alone is insufficient. Anyone in a position to develop instructors skilled in CRP must be able to both observe and articulate actions that reinforce or contest dominant and culturally oppressive norms in American classrooms while also assessing the curricular materials and supporting the integration and cultivation of cultural competence and critical consciousness through pedagogical practices. The development of these skills requires a cultural repertoire that is only developed through practice and experience.

Theoretical Framework

We approached the development of culturally relevant instructional leaders by first identifying the intersection of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and culturally relevant instructional leadership (CRIL). Specifically, we define CRIL as instructional leadership that supports the development of CRP among teachers. As seen in Figure 1, we identified three core aspects of the intersection: (a) a deep understanding of the concept of culture and cultural histories, (b) a sophisticated grasp of the three tenets of CRP and what they look like in practice, and (c) the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of an expert observer of instruction.

Figure 1: *Concepts at the Intersection of CRP and CRIL*

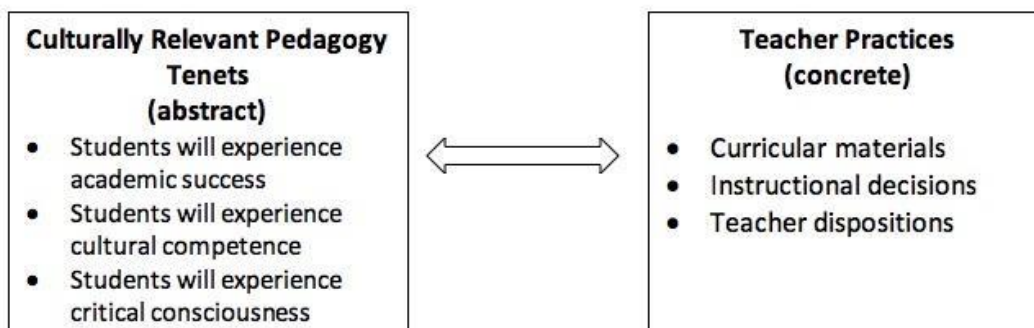


For teachers and leaders, this first means doing work to develop a deep understanding of culture and recognizing how cultural norms and practices in society and schools often conflict with success for all students, particularly marginalized students of color (Milner et al., 2018). To support the development of a culturally relevant teaching practice, ASLs need to become proficient in the CRP tenets and be able to *recognize* them in the teaching they are observing (Dixson, 2021), while at the same time being literate in the patterns of action that interfere with CRP practice. While that may seem like a straightforward task, especially when operating from a perspective limited to visible evidences of cultural difference (Cotman et al., 2023), asking teachers and instructional leaders to make the connection between the abstract tenets of CRP and concrete practices born out of those concepts is not always intuitive.

Most teachers benefit from seeing how they are and/or are not teaching in congruence with the CRP tenets and learning how to approach building upon what they already do to develop a more robust culturally relevant pedagogy (Magee & Willey, 2024). For example, teachers often require students to sit completely still as a sign of “respect and readiness to learn” instead of acknowledging that some students naturally need movement to focus. It is well documented that teachers punish students of color, particularly Black boys, more frequently for this behavior (Milner et al., 2018). A teacher’s reluctance to see their own response to particularly fidgety students is supported by often invisible cultural norms that prioritize specific ways of interpreting some children’s bodily movements. Teachers who do not regularly explore their own cultural behaviors and expectations tend to rely on patterns of action most often evident in the mainstream White culture, strategies that are often exclusionary if not injurious to students from marginalized groups.

Figure 2 illustrates an approach we have used to help teachers and ASLs make connections between teaching practices—i.e. strategies of pedagogical action—and the CRP tenets. Because how teachers teach is in itself a collection of cultural practices, it is important to build critical reflection in teachers and ASLs that informs an analysis of those practices that reinforce a culturally relevant pedagogy in all of its complexity, and those practices that are subtractive. Rather than boiling down skills, knowledge, and dispositions into a checklist of isolated items to be implemented, we argue *building* a culturally relevant practice requires an intentionality born out of observing teachers’ practice through a cultural lens. With this in mind, we encourage readers to consider how the identification of specific teacher practices offers teachers and instructional leaders a way to analyze, discuss, and ultimately grow a culturally relevant practice.

Figure 2: *Connections between CRP/CRIL theory and practice*



First, we acknowledge the CRP tenets themselves are abstract and evidence of them in action is complex and not always easily observable. Additionally, the translation of the tenets into examples of practice require those supporting the development of said practice to understand how the meanings of Ladson-Billings’ CRP tenets are informed by critical understandings of curriculum, teaching, and race/-ism in schools.³

³ It should be noted that Ladson-Billings, along with other scholars, was instrumental in advocating for the relevance and application of critical race theory in educational scholarship. Her many publications related to critical race theory in education inform the critical interpretation of her construction of culturally relevant pedagogy as both theory and educational praxis.

In order to build the necessary competencies among ASLs and teachers, and in order to articulate how instructional practices relate to the CRP tenets, and how they serve a developing CRP praxis, those responsible for preparing teachers and educational leaders have to be able to identify and articulate the meaning of the cultural actions embedded in instruction as connected to or contesting cultural logics that reify or challenge racist, norming, exclusionary structures. This requires what Gooden and Dantley (2012) describe as prophetic and pragmatic voice. The leadership and guidance is prophetic because the leadership and teaching of teachers makes visible the racism institutionalized in traditional classroom practices and structures—as cultural-historical products of US society. The guidance is pragmatic because in moving between theory and practice—i.e., developing a CRP praxis—teaching is situated within a liberatory context, as cultural action that is aimed at creating more democratic, just, and transformative educational settings (Gooden & Dantley, 2012).

In the leadership preparation courses described in this study, approaches to a CRP focused instructional leadership development intentionally connect CRP tenets with observable instructional actions and decisions to develop an understanding of what such a praxis might look like *as well as*, how the development of such a praxis might be developed. For example, in order for a teacher to support academic success (the first tenet) and/or cultural competence (the second tenet), the teacher must do *something* concrete. This could be using a particular current events video or making the decision to have students work in groups and engage in a particular critical thinking protocol. We use the term “teacher practices” to collectively identify the things that teachers decide to do pedagogically. By documenting these concrete, observable teacher practices falling into one or more of the three categories (as *curricular materials*, *instructional decisions* and *teacher dispositions*), ASLs have something to connect to the tenets that can be analyzed and contextualized in the context of the sociocultural and political dynamics of the school community.

For example, if a teacher notices that a student struggles to write notes while watching a video the teacher may choose to use guided notes as a way to support the student. While perhaps a small instructional move, this can be seen as a practice aimed at supporting academic success and therefore a building block towards culturally relevant pedagogy. While using guided notes may not be a robust example of CRP, we argue that it offers a way to begin a conversation about how teacher practices connect to the CRP tenets. Contextualizing this practice in the larger democratic purposes of educative experiences beyond test preparation (Gooden & Dantley, 2012) is important no matter how novice or small the action may be. Alternatively, the previous example where a teacher’s actions may be focused on controlling students’ fidgeting, would be an instance that does not support any of the tenets and can be framed as a problematic practice in the context of supporting a CRP praxis and thereby contributing to just educational settings. This approach opens up space to be deliberative about how culturally relevant practice is not a checklist of specific actions but rather a diverse, complex praxis of teacher strategies of actions embodying the CRP tenets of supporting academic success, developing cultural competence, and enacting critical consciousness (Dixson, 2021). It is a praxis cultivated over time, and culturally, socially, and politically significant in the project of educational justice.

Since teachers and instructional leaders are not often experienced in identifying culturally relevant practices, it becomes challenging to offer critiques that productively move teachers along their trajectory for developing a culturally relevant practice. The same concept applies for instructional leaders. First, instructional leaders must be able to see how teaching practices (i.e., selection of curricular materials, instructional decisions, and teacher dispositions) are being enacted by teachers, how these enactments build toward (or thwart) a culturally relevant practice (i.e. enactments of the tenets) and how these enactments reinforce, contest, or broaden the repertoire of cultural norms and actions honored in classroom processes. Second, culturally relevant instructional leaders need to know how to have productive conversations with teachers to help them see where and how they are engaging with culturally relevant pedagogy, and where and how they need to build their CRP practice. Supporting culturally relevant teachers via strong instructional leadership requires seeing where teachers are in their culturally relevant practice and where they need to go. Culturally relevant leaders who are expert CRP observers can see what practices teachers are using that support one or more of the tenets and can offer feedback to teachers about how to build on what they are already doing to create a more robust culturally relevant practice.

These dimensions of practical knowledge illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 are fundamental for both culturally relevant teachers and culturally relevant instructional leaders. Knowledge and practice informed by deep understanding of culture generally, CRP, and the pedagogical moves teachers make (i.e., skills of the expert observer) necessarily connects theory to practice and vice versa. Therefore, CRP concepts and CRP-informed observational and coaching skills shaped the creation and revision of specific activities intended to support the development of culturally relevant instructional leaders.

Methods

This qualitative study was designed to examine ASLs' development as culturally relevant instructional leaders who apply CRP tenets and practices to their instructional leadership of teachers in urban schools. Guided by the research questions, we collected data during their last two semesters of a three-semester school leadership practicum seminar at a large midwestern university.

Participants

Three cohorts of ASLs participated over three years (see Table 1). All participants were enrolled in the urban school leadership graduate preparation program during their participation in this study. Across the three cohorts, there were a total of 59 ASLs.

Setting

The setting in which this study is situated is the practicum portion of an urban school leadership preparation program. Students in the program complete foundational courses as a cohort during the first summer. Beginning in the subsequent Fall semester, students begin a three-credit practicum that is stretched over the Fall, Spring, and the second summer session. Throughout the practicum, they engage in leadership skill development, inquiry, and practicum activities at their

school sites under the guidance of administrative mentors while attending monthly seminars with a faculty instructor. Then, in the second summer, students engage in focused application courses in which they draw from their practicum experiences and inquiry to develop actionable plans for improvement in various areas such as budget and finance, instructional leadership and development, community/family engagement, and school improvement.

Table 1: *Demographics of Aspiring School Leaders*

Cohort Year	White		Black		Latina/o/x		Total
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
2024	5	2	13	4	0	0	24
2023	6	5	6	1	1	0	19
2022	7	5	1	0	0	1	16

As seen in Figure 3, the practicum is sandwiched in between the two summers of coursework and divided into three domains, reflecting the three core components of the urban school leadership program: urban operational leadership, urban instructional leadership, and urban school-community leadership. All three domains are tied to the coursework (both foundational and application courses) and the designed practicum experiences. The preparation program prioritized the relationship between inquiry and practice in its conceptualization of reflective and responsive practice. Thus, within each domain, students were tasked with collecting and interpreting data (inquiry) and engaging in activities expected of school leaders (practice), informed by the data they collected.

Figure 3: *Sequence of Curricular Activities in Aspiring School Leadership Program*



This study is situated in the second segment of the practicum focused on urban instructional leadership. For three years, the practicum instructor enlisted two faculty colleagues from the urban teacher education program to co-lead seminars on “culturally relevant instructional leadership.” Building on work these colleagues were doing with public school teachers, we collaborated to develop a framework for how practicum students would practice doing observations, interpret their observations, and engage teachers based on their observations. Students were tasked with conducting at least three 45-minute observations and at least two walkthroughs as part of their inquiry and practice.

Design Experiment

This study was designed to understand three cohorts of ASLs’ perceptions of culture and culturally relevant instructional leadership. Since there were three iterations of the course activities, we approached the curricular and pedagogical design from a design experiment perspective (Cobb & Gravemeijer, 2014; diSessa & Cobb, 2016). As such, class activities, homework assignments, and the facilitation of class dialogue were all iteratively refined from year to year. For example, in Year 1, ASLs wrote a short vignette of a teaching episode they observed. Analyzing ASLs’ ability to craft high quality vignettes allowed us to see that the ASLs needed more structure in order to provide more details, connect it to CRP, and begin a strategic process for analyzing the vignettes in light of CRP. Finally, in Year 3, we created a rubric that helped further facilitate the analysis of the vignettes. Specifically, we had ASLs rate the teachers they observed in certain categories, describe how they would start a conversation with teachers, and develop a plan for accentuating their culturally relevant teaching practices.

Our approach to this design experiment also involved how we, ourselves, analyzed the data. In Year 1, we did not have a tool for naming or assessing the value of particular CRP teaching practices. Based on the cultural iceberg metaphor (Weaver, 1986) we devised a resource product that assessed the potential impact, or transformative power, of a teaching practice: the iceberg of culturally relevant pedagogy (Magee & Willey, 2024). We also subdivided CRP teaching practices into three categories: curricular materials, instructional decisions, and teacher dispositions (Magee et al., 2020). The addition of these instructional products and shared language helped catalyze ASLs’ understanding of culture and CRP. This, too, helped us refine the course assignments and anchor class conversations with the CRP tenets and CRP teaching practices.

Data Sources

Four data sources were collected for this study. First, an initial questionnaire was administered to the students at the beginning of the semester. The questionnaire gathered general information about the students’ work setting (school name, grade level, etc.), their opportunities for receiving and providing instructional support (instructional coaching, professional development, etc.), and their current understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. This data provided insight into the range of mis/understanding of CRP and experiences with instructional coaching and teacher development.

Second, the ASLs were asked to provide a copy of the teacher evaluation tool(s) that were used at their school. In general, students provided a copy of an evaluation rubric, such as a modified Danielson Rubric (Danielson, 2013) that was used to evaluate their professional work in their school district. This data provided us information on the policy contexts within which they were working as it relates to instructional supervision and district values regarding instruction as it was expressed in the formal evaluation documents. While the different tools across districts were similarly structured, they varied in specificity and language, so this was useful in comparing the contexts.

Third, as part of the practicum course, the ASLs were required to complete several teacher observations. They completed a minimum of three 30–45 minutes observations of teaching and two 10–15 minute walkthroughs. ASLs were then required to write a vignette that captured detailed teacher practices based on the long form observation and to connect these practices to the tenets of CRP. ASLs were also asked to describe how they would start a conversation about CRP with the teacher they observed.

Finally, the researchers took detailed notes during class discussions making sure to highlight ways in which the students discussed CRP in theory and in practice. These conversations included students' debriefing of their observations, the analyses and comparisons of evaluation rubrics and interpretations of required readings.

Data Analysis

Our analysis process was designed to maximize alignment with the research questions and intended to be transparent (Anfara et al., 2002). The data was coded using a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). First, we individually coded transcripts and documents utilizing CRP tenets and practices as a guide. For example, we developed and classified codes as they pertain to academic success, cultural competence, and social action/critical consciousness, as well as whether they reflected the ASL's views on dispositions, instructional moves, or curricular materials. During this process, we identified ways in which the text (data) aligned or conflicted with the CRP tenets and practices as we understood them.

The second round of coding focused on the cultural logics inflected in the ASLs' language when explaining their views and interpretations of concepts and observations. To do so, we examined how contextual factors (e.g., language from evaluation tools, district professional development resources, salient reforms, colleagues, or practicum instruction) informed ASLs' application of instructional leadership and supervision practice. In doing so, we identified themes that revealed the culture tools ASLs relied on to make sense of their observation and walkthrough experiences.

Findings

Our results represent an evolution of conceptual and practical knowledge and skill development fundamental to developing CRIL practice. This began with addressing ASLs' understanding of the concept of culture—a prerequisite for a deep understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. Along with analyzing the range and limitations of ASLs' understanding of culture and CRP, we investigated the organizational contexts informing their views of instructional leadership. These

two perspectives (concepts of culture and organizational context of instructional leadership) informed the development of subsequent activities and content with which ASLs would engage during this portion of their practicum experience. The remaining portion of the results section outline the iterative development of instructional resources and activities targeting the actions that constitute the operationalizing of CRIL, including how ASLs engaged in observations and analysis of observations of instruction; visual representations developed that reflect the complexity of CRP praxis, and how to engage in pedagogically supportive conversations with teachers aimed at building a CRP praxis.

Initial Understandings of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

For each of the three cohorts included in this study, ASLs were asked to respond to a questionnaire about their understanding of CRP, which revealed their varying understanding of the concept of culture (and cultural politics) generally. Each year we received a common range of responses. Some responses were indicative of varying approaches to multicultural curriculum and content, what we consider to be an important but emergent understanding of culture. Another category of responses represented ASLs' association of culture to students' psychological needs, indicating an evasion of issues of race/-ism and a reliance on differentiation techniques typically associated with special education or trauma-informed learning. Finally, there was typically a subgroup of students who linked CRP to critical understandings of difference, equity and justice. Below we describe the three most common categories of responses, followed by a discussion of how we made sense of these responses.

CRP as Multicultural Curriculum. Many ASLs identified attention to and respect toward cultural diversity in curriculum and classroom environments. Practices such as representing student diversity in classroom decorations and “matching curriculum to student experiences” reflected an acknowledgement that student identities mattered in designing curricular experiences. Respect for diversity, reflecting student identities in the celebrations and classroom environment are fundamental to creating a setting that supports CRP. However, they also live at the top of the cultural iceberg (Magee & Willey, 2024), and, if not aligned to other practices that reflect a deeper understanding of how cultural norms, patterns, and assumptions are implicated in teacher/students and teacher/family interactions and practices, suggests a low probability that teachers and students will engage in critically conscious learning.

CRP as Inclusion, Social Emotional Learning & Differentiation. Another common response was for ASLs to equate CRP to creating inclusive and “safe spaces” for all students. According to ASLs, such spaces are “trauma informed,” “informed by brain research,” and/or “socially and emotionally empowering.” One ASL’s response reflected this category’s theme: “Teachers [are] cognizant of the students within their room, and the needs each one brings.”

Again, while these approaches are, on the face, sound practices in various contexts, we interpret them as evasive of central definitions Ladson-Billings (1995a, 2014) advances in her conception of CRP. Ladson-Billings (1995b) has “. . . defined culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy of opposition (Ladson-Billings, 1992) not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment” (p. 160). That means that pedagogical moves are coordinated and forward-looking, focused on the experience and outcomes of instructions

rather than (only) being responsive to individual needs. Furthermore, the implications of many of the ideas advanced by these ASLs indicate a conflation of cultural difference with individual psychological needs, even trauma. These views imply a deficit, normative view of difference, and an underlying assumption of normality reinforced by many mainstream, uncritical approaches to learning differences.

CRP as Reflexive and Political. In each cohort there was a subgroup of ASLs that integrated critical understandings on culture and cultural politics in their articulation of the meaning of CRP. These ASLs emphasized the importance of positioning students' cultural identities as constitutive of the classroom and school community. Acknowledging the politics of difference, several responses focused on the explicit integration of "discussing [a] lack of fairness or justice" and "permit[ing] opportunities for the oppressed and marginalized to have voice and perspective" in classroom activities.

Additionally, many ASLs' responses in this category recognized the fluidity of who the "knowers" are in a CRP classroom, requiring teachers to be reflexive. One ASL explained, a CRP classroom is a "respectful environment where everyone is a student and the role of teacher is fluid between student and teacher." Another argued, "It should be about making connections, critically reflecting on our own actions and biases, and creating an environment in which students feel comfortable to be themselves and accept others." In sum, the attention to teacher/student power and classroom politics as it relates to culture, diversity, and difference indicate a more critical understanding of the power and intention of CRP.

Making Sense of Cultural/CRP Understandings. The range of understanding of CRP prior to engaging with Ladson-Billings' work and with the instructors reflected ASLs' understandings of culture, the intersection of CRP with institutional logics, and reflexive views of their own positionality as educators. In our analysis of these themes, we paid particular attention to the "cultural resources" (Swidler, 1986/1998) ASLs invoked in their constructions of culture and CRP. For example, the use of language drawn from social emotional discourse to explain CRP and its benefits reflected the centrality of SEL reforms in the districts within which ASLs taught. That is, when an ASL did not necessarily have specific language to describe CRP, they drew on general descriptions of what they considered good teaching, which included references to trauma informed teaching and inclusive classrooms attendant to individual psychological needs, as noted above.

A recognition that classrooms can be hostile to racially and linguistically diverse students is something CRP-proficient educators readily acknowledge (Milner, 2011). As well, trauma-informed pedagogy is a valued approach in many districts and, in the region in which this study takes place, a common approach in school districts. Yet, the ways in which the ASLs link "trauma" to cultural relevance suggests a limited understanding of the difference between cultural difference and individual psychological conditions. Drawing from a cultural repertoire that locates differences in an individualized sphere, such as in the psychological realm, rather than a group or community sphere, i.e., the societal realm, reflects a particular cultural meaning that evades intercultural, sociocultural and sociopolitical dynamics. While we recognize the value of individualized assessments and the importance of understanding students' psychological needs, the individualized schema for navigating difference in the classroom in the context of

cultural differences could situate students' patterns of interaction implicitly on some sort of normative continuum in the mind of a teacher. Therefore, it is important to highlight the assumptions underlying the different interpretations and approaches and build capacities to not let either become a blind spot to the other.

Culturally relevant pedagogy calls for a different emphasis than that implied by trauma informed pedagogy. CRP honors people's cultural knowledges and habits, develops inter- and intra-cultural competence, and cultivates critical consciousness in ways that challenge mechanisms of stratification that marginalize students and communities. Unsurprisingly, ASLs' that seem to understand the differences between these interpretations were ASLs that identified as critical teachers of color *and/or* were teachers who were already proficient in CRP through critically oriented training programs or engagement in professional development projects led by critical scholars. For example, one of these ASLs stated:

Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogical approach that promotes inclusive rather than exclusive practices as it pertains to instruction, learning, and assessments. *It is a practice that is rooted in anthropological, sociological, and psychological theories, thought, and approaches.* Lastly, it is a practice that is *organic and humanist in nature*; is not static but dynamic; *lessens rather than broadens a divide*; and *permits opportunities for the oppressed and marginalized to have voice and perspective.* (Student response, italics added)

Another student explained:

Culturally relevant teaching is teaching with a *critical lens* with a sense of empathy and understanding of all people and cultures. It should be about making connections, critically reflecting on our own actions and biases, and creating an environment in which students feel comfortable to *be themselves and accept others.* (Student response, italics added).

In both of these cases, while the responses were collected prior to engaging in the designed activities, the ASLs signal an understanding that CRP rests on complex understanding of people, cultural differences and social interactions. Neither rely on norming assumptions; both highlight group dynamics. As such, they rest on assumptions that acknowledge the consequences of misreading cultural differences and/or ranking cultures in diverse classrooms. This provided an important foundation for the application of the tools and engagement in observation activities that were to come.

Organizational Contexts of Supervision

In addition to getting a sense of how ASLs understood culture and CRP, we wanted to get a sense of the contexts in which they worked and how policies within these contexts shaped their understanding of instructional leadership in the context of formal supervision practices. In each cohort we required ASLs to provide the district approved rubric used in teacher evaluation. Understanding that instructional leadership amounts to more than the one, summative evaluation required for the annual performance review processes, we identified the evaluation rubric as a

starting point to get a sense of norms and values within a district pertaining to the evaluation of instruction. In comparing and analyzing these documents, we were able to see how ASLs' organizational and district policy contexts differentially addressed criteria relevant to their development as culturally relevant teachers and instructional leaders.

We reviewed five evaluation rubrics from five different school districts, both with ASLs in the course and independently as a research team. We did this to identify evidence of how schools and districts incorporate, apply, and prioritize culturally relevant pedagogy tenets in their evaluation and teacher development structures. We looked for language used to describe teacher actions, the learning environment, and student behaviors and actions. The rubrics varied widely. For example, districts varied in how teacher evaluation tools centered culture and included language focused on students' experiences. The rubric from the largest, urban district represented was explicit about culturally relevant practices focusing on the classroom environment. Others contained vague criteria and descriptions with little-to-no language that recognized and/or attended to students' diversity and lived experiences. Figure 3 provides two examples for descriptions of "highly effective" practice, the highest rating available on the rubrics.

Students in the practicum seminar analyzed the rubrics and conjectured about the alignment of the rubrics with the emphasis placed on CRP within the district. Without explicit language articulating culturally relevant tenets in practice in formal evaluation documents, teachers from some districts struggled to justify whether such tenets were valued by their district and school administrators. In fact, some ASLs pointed out that, on the more vague rubrics, it would depend on the evaluator whether CRP practices were identified. On the other hand, the more detailed rubrics may also reflect a reliance on more scripted approaches to instructional supervision. Without going into districts and examining how these rubrics related to the practice of supervision in schools, we could not speak to how they shaped instruction. However, we did note, along with the ASLs in the courses, that the difference in detail was notable.

Additionally, while all districts represented by ASLs in each cohort served large percentages of students of color and ethno-linguistically diverse students, the stark difference between the two rubrics represented in Figure 3 also aligned with the greatest difference in affluence/SES among the students attending each district. The more affluent district, with the more concise and vague description, served a diverse student population, including resettled refugee students from Burma, Latinx immigrant students and Black students, as well as immigrant children of parents working for local pharmaceutical and engineering firms, along with a more affluent White population. The district represented by the longer, more detailed rubric description is represented by the urban district populated by a majority of lower SES Black and Latine students. While these differences are not determined by the demographic difference, they do raise the question about how leadership teams approach addressing diversity through their instructional policies, given the nature of the diversity. These questions become even more pressing as pressures to sanitize diversity, equity, and inclusion language in school and district policies intensify (Sawchuk, 2021). In sum, interpretations and articulations of supervision and evaluation rubrics as they relate to practices aligned to CRP can certainly shape teachers' and ASLs' own application of CRP tenets in the development of their instructional leadership knowledge and skills.

Figure 3: *Contrasting “Highly Effective” Evidence in Two Evaluation Rubrics*

District A.	District B.
3.c. Engaging Students in Learning: Learning activities that enable students to be intellectually active in exploring important and challenging content and engage in high level thinking. Highly Effective The various elements of the lesson are well aligned with the instructional outcomes and individual needs of the learners. The lesson is entirely suitable to the students’ development, and facilitates all students in constructing knowledge. Teacher demonstrates a variety of appropriate inclusive practices to support specific differences in students’ learning needs. Learning activities, materials, resources, technology, and instructional grouping are complementary, resulting in active intellectual engagement by each student in important and challenging content. The lesson has a clearly defined structure, and the pacing of the lesson provides students the time needed to intellectually engage with and reflect upon their learning, and to consolidate their understanding. Students have choice in how they complete tasks and may serve as resources for one another. <i>Critical Attributes:</i> In addition to the characteristics of Effective: - Teacher incorporates culturally relevant examples throughout lessons - Students have choice in how they complete tasks - Students modify a learning task to make it more meaningful or relevant to their needs - Students suggest modifications to toe grouping patterns used - Students suggest modifications or additions to the materials being used - Students have an opportunity for reflection and closure on the lesson - Virtually all students are highly engaged in the lesson	2.6 Instruction: Engages all students in Learning Activities Highly Effective Clear evidence that students are engaged at a high level through the use of learning activities provided in a variety of ways to engage all students.

Instructional Resources for Building CRP among Teachers

Based on our assessment of ASLs’ understanding of culture and experience with the tents of CRP in their own evaluation processes, we began to develop activities and instructional

resources to support their learning and application of CRP instructional leadership practices. Each year, we revised these based on our experience both in the field, as well as with the prior cohorts to reflect our observations of how students were translating their learning in the practicum seminars to their analysis of teaching through their field-based practicum assignments. Below, we share the evolution of the teaching resources designed to build an approach that requires ASLs to reflexively move between theory and practice as they engage in observations and apply the CRP tenets to their analysis of the data from these observations.

The evolution of this process began as a way to support what ASLs pay attention to in their observations. This led to the development of various instructional resources (some of which emerged from earlier versions developed in another project with teacher leaders), which served multiple purposes. First, ASLs used an observation-based vignette and associated rubric we developed to practice identifying categories of teacher practice that they can evaluate through the lens of the three CRP tenets, tying the tenets to concrete teacher and student actions. Second, ASLs were introduced to a Fractal of CRP Practice, to aid in mapping the complexity of teacher practice, and inform an asset-based approach to supporting teacher improvement. Finally, ASLs practice starting substantive instructional conversations with teachers whom they observed. Below, we describe each resource and related experience in more detail.

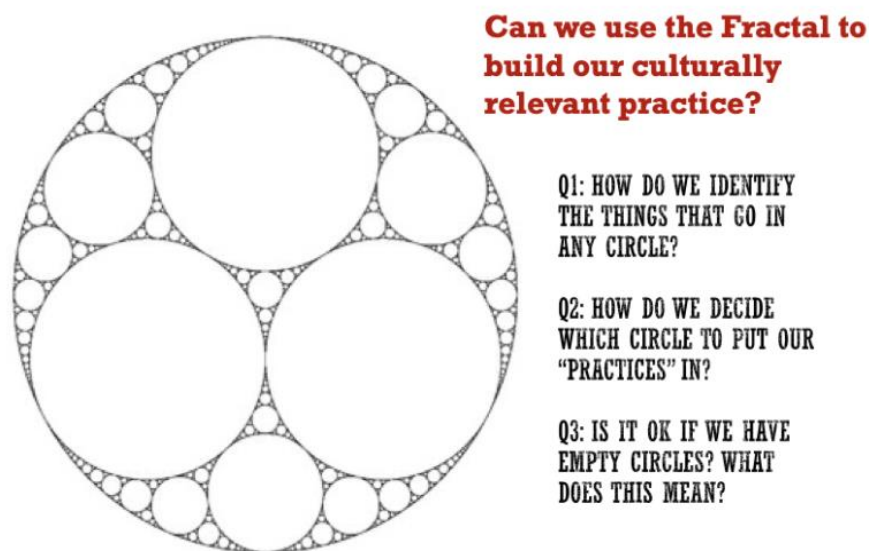
Becoming an Expert Observer: Vignettes and a CRP Theory-Practice Rubric. ASLs were first introduced to CRP observation and analysis using a vignette written by the instructors. The vignette was a detailed description of an instructional interaction that occurred during an actual observation. As a class, the students were guided in applying a rubric that asked them to identify concrete teacher and student actions and analyze the actions through the CRP tenets. Teacher moves were broken down into instructional decisions, curricular materials, and teacher dispositions. As each action was linked to one of these categories, ASLs were asked to identify whether these actions represented the tenets of academic success, cultural competence, or critical consciousness. This stage of analysis allowed them to engage in the analysis of observational data while applying CRP theories to their data. It is important to note that the goal with this activity was not to make sure that the ASLs were always “correct” in what they observed or how they connected it to the tenets, but rather to begin conversations, based on noticings, about how CRP can be enacted in the classroom.

Fractal of CRP Practice. Because instructional leadership can often (d)evolve into an application of oversimplified categories on a checklist (Gold, 2003) and result in a perfunctory experience with teachers experiencing either (sometimes empty) praise or painful slights, entering the process from the other side can be uncomfortable for a new leader. While some excellent teachers cannot always articulate *how* they teach well, most teachers will agree that teaching is a complex technical, philosophical, cultural, political and emotional endeavor. Implementing CRP is no exception. A visual representation we call the Fractal of CRP Practice that helps capture the complexity of CRP for teachers and instructional leaders was developed in the context of professional development by one of the authors, Dr. Paula Magee (Figure 4).

The Fractal is both a metaphor and an image representing the complexity and the iterative nature of CRP in practice. As indicated by the questions presented with the introduction of this resource, it acknowledges that, because teaching is complex, there are often small but important

teaching practices that are part of building a CRP practice, like greeting and checking in with students as they enter the classroom and showing respect to children in the way teachers address students. Importantly, these small moves are often not seen as “cultural,” but they indeed are. Teacher-student interactions are a cultural practice that is often taken for granted and/or not valued by white Western norms (Baker et al., 2024).

Figure 4: *Fractal of CRP Practice*



In addition, there are other, more substantive actions that represent CRP, including the selection and integration of culturally relevant curricular materials or approaches to writing assignments that might occupy larger circles in the portrait of a teacher’s CRP practice. Finally, some teachers may have mastered the integration of major units culminating in students’ expression of their critical consciousness in public spheres that are represented in the largest circles. Using the Fractal encourages the identification of those practices that can be built upon to continuously move toward a fully realized CRP practice. It validates and recognizes these small practices as crucial building blocks as teachers learn how to develop a more robust culturally relevant practice.

Conclusion

Designing and implementing CRP is challenging, especially given the shifting external demands placed on teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Magee & Willey, 2024). Developing instructional leaders to support teachers in CRP is even more demanding. Some obstacles can be mitigated by school leaders who share knowledge and commitment to CRP. This study highlights the outcomes of coordinated learning activities focused on CRIL and data collection focused on understanding district level supports for CRIL. This is significant as higher education scholars and K–12 educators and leaders work together to build momentum in realizing the kinds of educational experiences that children—particularly marginalized children of color, linguistically

diverse children, and children living in poverty—deserve but have been deprived of in the name of narrow articulations of academic success.

This study informs practice related to the preparation of culturally relevant instructional leaders. Most notably, the collaboration between faculty in Urban Educational Leadership and Urban Teacher Education provided for robust planning, development, and critical discussions and analysis of ASLs' experiences and learning in their practicum seminars and activities. While honoring ASLs' current work as teachers and teacher leaders, they were challenged to make sense of their own practice while they also practiced supporting other teachers as they prepared to become school leaders. By integrating a process that enabled ASLs to learn, internalize and apply theory to their observation practice, and then analyze teaching practice through the theoretical tenets of CRP provided a foundation for instructional leadership grounded in CRP. As a result, the development of CRIL in these ASLs, especially in the later cohorts, showed promise for the articulation of CRP tenets into the act of observing and how they provided feedback to teachers. The development of the various instructional resources supported the teaching and learning in this part of the practicum.

In terms of research and policy, this study suggests further research on the relationship between evaluation rubrics and the institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012) of instructional leadership. Given the wide array of instructional evaluation rubrics in similarly diverse districts, inquiry into the varied approaches and the encouragement (or discouragement) of CRIL and CRP is merited. Additionally, further research that follows these ASLs into their roles as administrators may be useful for further professional development of in-service and pre-service school leaders.

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