Culturally Responsive Leadership in Higher Education Milieu:
A Scoping Review

Liderança Culturalmente Responsiva no Ambiente de Ensino Superior: Uma Revisão Exploratória

CAINGCOY, Manuel E.

0000-0002-3862-1561; Associate Professor, Bukidnon State University, Philippines. manuelcaingcoy@buksu.edu.ph

The content expressed in this article is the sole responsibility of its authors

A B S T R A C T

Existing studies lack comprehensive insights into the success and effectiveness of culturally responsive leadership (CRL) in higher education. To address this gap, a scoping review was conducted to provide an integrated framework of CRL and guide current and future school leaders in higher education who aspire to implement it. Initially, 47 literature sources were searched, screened, and 18 articles were selected for thematic analysis based on predefined criteria. The analysis revealed three key themes: culturally responsive school leadership in higher education, the success of culturally responsive leadership, and effective practices of CRL which serve as an integrative framework. The findings underscore the importance of prioritizing culturally responsive school leadership in higher education to promote access, equity, and improvement. Furthermore, the review highlights the potential impact of embracing CRL in higher education settings and fills a gap in the existing literature by offering an integrative framework. It contributes to understanding the potential of CRL to enhance higher education institutions. The recommendations and implications discussed in the review provide valuable guidance for educational leaders seeking to implement culturally responsive practices. Overall, this review enhances our understanding of CRL in the context of higher education and emphasizes its potential benefits for educational institutions.

R E S U M O

Os estudos existentes carecem de insights abrangentes sobre o sucesso e a eficácia da liderança culturalmente responsiva (LCR) no ensino superior. Para abordar essa lacuna, foi conduzida uma revisão exploratória com o objetivo de fornecer um quadro integrado de LCR e orientar os líderes escolares atuais e futuros no ensino superior que aspiram implementá-la. Inicialmente, foram pesquisadas 47 fontes de literatura, avaliadas e 18 artigos foram selecionados para análise temática com base em critérios predefinidos. A análise revelou três temas-chave: liderança escolar culturalmente responsiva no ensino superior, o sucesso da liderança culturalmente responsiva e práticas eficazes de LCR que servem como um quadro integrativo. Os resultados destacam a importância de priorizar a liderança escolar culturalmente responsiva no ensino superior para promover acesso, equidade e melhoria. Além disso, a revisão destaca o impacto potencial da adoção da LCR em contextos de ensino superior e preenche uma lacuna na literatura existente ao oferecer um quadro integrativo. Ela contribui para a compreensão do potencial da LCR para aprimorar as instituições de ensino superior. As recomendações e implicações discutidas na revisão oferecem orientações valiosas para líderes educacionais que buscam implementar práticas culturalmente responsivas. Em geral, esta revisão aprimora nossa compreensão da LCR no contexto do ensino superior e enfatiza seus benefícios potenciais para instituições educacionais.

Introduction

Culturally responsive leadership has gained widespread recognition in higher education for its crucial role in promoting access, equity, and improvement (Apple, 2016). Acknowledging the diverse cultural backgrounds and identities of students, faculty, and staff, culturally responsive leaders create an inclusive environment where everyone feels respected and supported (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). This inclusive environment fosters a sense of belonging, which is instrumental in student success and overall institutional effectiveness. Research has demonstrated the positive impact of culturally responsive leadership on student engagement and achievement. By incorporating culturally relevant practices and curriculum, leaders create learning experiences that resonate with students from diverse backgrounds (Han et al., 2014). Addressing the unique needs and experiences of culturally diverse students helps reduce achievement gaps and improve student outcomes (Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2013).

Furthermore, culturally responsive leadership positively influences faculty and staff. When leaders embrace and celebrate diverse perspectives, they foster an inclusive environment where everyone's voice is heard and valued (Minkos et al., 2017). This promotes collaboration, creativity, and innovation among faculty and staff, resulting in a more enriching and productive work environment (Banwo et al., 2021).

To successfully implement culturally responsive leadership, intentional efforts and ongoing professional development are necessary. Leaders must engage in self-reflection, examine their biases, and actively seek to understand the experiences and needs of culturally diverse individuals within the institution (Genao, 2021). This self-awareness and continuous learning enable leaders to develop culturally responsive practices that align with the institution's values and goals.

Institutional support and commitment are crucial for the adoption of culturally responsive leadership in higher education. Administrators should provide resources and opportunities for professional development, encourage dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders, and embed culturally responsive practices within institutional policies and procedures (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016). This comprehensive approach helps establish a sustainable culture of inclusivity and equity.

While the importance of culturally responsive leadership in higher education is increasingly recognized, there is a lack of comprehensive reporting on its success and effectiveness within this context and environment. Most empirical evidence has been grounded in the basic education milieu and experience. Therefore, a scoping review was conducted to provide a new perspective on culturally responsive leadership in an integrative manner. This review aims to shed light on current and future school leaders in higher education who aspire to embrace culturally responsive practices and integrate them into an advanced curriculum.

Methodology

This scoping review carried a comprehensive search using Google Scholar, resulting in the identification of 47 relevant articles. These articles were carefully analyzed and categorized based on their alignment with the research topic, specifically focusing on culturally responsive leadership in higher education, the success of such leadership, and effective practices in implementing culturally responsive approaches. To ensure the inclusion of high-quality literature, several criteria were applied during the evaluation process. Firstly, the relevance of each article to the research topic was assessed, determining whether it was directly addressed or closely related to the concepts of culturally responsive school leadership, success in culturally responsive leadership, and successful culturally responsive leadership in higher education. Scholarly credibility was another important criterion, considering the reputation and expertise of the authors, publishers, and journals. The review assessed whether the articles were published in reputable peer-reviewed journals, authored by experts in the field, or published by reputable academic publishers.

Methodological rigor was also taken into account, evaluating the research methods employed in the studies. This involved examining whether the literature included empirical research, qualitative or quantitative studies, case studies, or conceptual frameworks that contributed to the understanding of culturally responsive leadership in higher education. Furthermore, the relevance of the literature to the higher education context was assessed, ensuring that the findings and recommendations were applicable to the specific setting of higher education institutions. Lastly, the publication date of the literature was considered to determine its currency (between 2010 and 2023), recognizing that more recent publications may provide updated perspectives and insights into culturally responsive school leadership in higher education. By applying these rigorous criteria, the scoping review ensured the inclusion of valuable and applicable literature, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of culturally responsive school leadership in higher education.

Results and Discussion

Out of the initially identified 47 articles, a meticulous review process resulted in the inclusion of 18 literature sources for the final analysis (Apple, 2016; Santamaría et al., 2015; Banwo et al., 2021; Khalifa, 2020; Chunoo et al., 2017; Genao, 2021; Beachum, 2011; Jones et al., 2016; Horton, 2017; Mitchell, 2015; Mugisha, 2013; Taliaferro, 2011; Dey, 2022; Schofield, 2020; Khalifa, 2013; Merchant et al., 2013; Gurr et al., 2019; Ylimaki et al., 2013). This rigorous approach in selecting the relevant literature allowed the researcher to identify and explore three key themes: culturally responsive school leadership in higher education, the success of culturally responsive leadership, and effective practices of CRL. Each of these themes will now be discussed in more detail.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership in Higher Education

Culturally responsive leadership in higher education plays a critical role in promoting access, equity, and improvement within educational institutions (Apple, 2016; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). The literature emphasizes the significance of leaders who genuinely value and recognize the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identities of students, faculty, and staff (Banwo et al., 2021; Khalifa, 2020). By embracing culturally responsive leadership, educational leaders can create inclusive and supportive learning environments that foster positive intercultural relationships and contribute to the academic success of all students (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017; Genao, 2021).

Within the context of higher education, it is imperative for leaders to prioritize cultural responsiveness, as this approach aligns with the principles of equity and social justice. Culturally responsive leaders go beyond mere acknowledgment and actively affirm the unique strengths and cultural assets of students, faculty, and staff. By doing so, they create an environment that values diversity and promotes a genuine sense of belonging, ensuring that every member of the educational community feels valued and supported.

Expanding on the importance of culturally responsive leadership, scholars argue that this approach fosters an inclusive educational environment where students from diverse backgrounds can thrive. By recognizing and valuing students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities, culturally responsive leaders create an atmosphere that respects and celebrates diversity. This approach empowers students and enhances their engagement, motivation, and academic achievement. Additionally, culturally responsive leadership contributes to the holistic development of students, helping them build cultural competence and navigate a complex and interconnected world.

Concisely, culturally responsive school leadership in higher education is vital for promoting access, equity, and improvement within educational institutions. By recognizing and valuing diversity, fostering inclusive environments, and promoting positive intercultural relationships, educational leaders can create conditions that support the academic success and overall well-being of all students.

Effective Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices

The literature highlights a range of practices that are instrumental in supporting the implementation of culturally responsive leadership in higher education. One key practice is the promotion of faculty diversity and inclusion, which plays a vital role in creating an educational environment that reflects and respects the diverse perspectives and experiences of students (Dey, 2022; Schofield, 2020). By ensuring that the faculty body represents a variety of cultural backgrounds, leaders can establish an inclusive and representative learning environment where students feel valued and understood.

Building relationships and partnerships with diverse communities is another essential practice for fostering collaboration, understanding, and mutual support in higher education (Khalifa, 2013; Merchant & Garza, 2013). Culturally responsive leaders actively engage with various community stakeholders, such as local organizations, ethnic groups, and indigenous communities, to build bridges and create meaningful connections. By forging these relationships, leaders gain valuable insights into the needs and aspirations of different communities, allowing them to tailor their educational approaches to better meet those needs. Engaging in ongoing professional development is crucial for leaders to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies required to effectively respond to the needs of diverse stakeholders (Khalifa, 2013). Culturally responsive leaders understand the importance of continuously learning and growing, as it enables them to stay informed about emerging research, best practices, and innovative strategies. By investing in their own professional development, leaders can stay attuned to the evolving needs of their institution's diverse population and adapt their leadership approaches accordingly.

In addition, implementing inclusive policies and practices that involve shared decision-making among leaders, faculty, students, and community stakeholders enhances the effectiveness of culturally responsive leadership approaches (Gurr et al., 2019; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2013). Collaborative decision-making processes foster a sense of ownership and shared responsibility, ensuring that diverse voices are heard and valued. This inclusive approach not only strengthens the bonds between different stakeholders but also promotes a culture of transparency, trust, and accountability within the institution.

These effective practices collectively promote inclusivity, create a supportive environment, and enable leaders to address the unique needs of diverse individuals within higher education institutions. By embracing these practices, leaders can cultivate an environment that values diversity, fosters intercultural understanding, and promotes equitable opportunities for all stakeholders. Through ongoing professional development, meaningful community engagement, and inclusive decision-making processes, culturally responsive leaders can guide their institutions toward greater success, ultimately benefiting both individual students and the broader higher education community.

Success of Culturally Responsive Leadership

Research consistently demonstrates the positive outcomes associated with the implementation of culturally responsive leadership in higher education. Numerous studies have shown that adopting culturally responsive practices leads to significant improvements in student engagement, retention, and academic achievement (Beachum, 2011; Jones et al., 2016). Effective culturally responsive leaders play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging, cultural competence, and cultural relevance within their institutions (Horton, 2017; Mitchell, 2015).

By prioritizing culturally responsive leadership, educational leaders contribute to the development of culturally sensitive instructional practices, curriculum, and pedagogy (Mugisha, 2013; Taliaferro, 2011). These leaders recognize the importance of integrating students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives into the educational process. By doing so, they create meaningful and relevant learning opportunities that resonate with students' lived realities. This approach empowers students, enhances their academic performance, and enriches their overall educational experience.

Moreover, culturally responsive leadership promotes a student-centered approach to education, which recognizes and values students' cultural identities and strengths. By creating an inclusive and supportive environment, culturally responsive leaders foster a sense of belonging among students from diverse backgrounds. This sense of belonging not only enhances students' motivation and engagement but also reduces feelings of marginalization and isolation. As a result, students are more likely to persist in their educational pursuits and achieve their academic goals.

In brief, the success of culturally responsive leadership in higher education is evident through the positive outcomes it generates. By prioritizing student engagement, retention, and academic achievement, culturally responsive leaders contribute to the overall success of their institutions. Their efforts in fostering a sense of belonging, cultural competence, and cultural relevance further enhance students' educational experiences. By integrating students' cultural backgrounds and experiences into instructional practices, curriculum, and pedagogy, these leaders create an inclusive and empowering educational environment that benefits all students.

Figure 1

Effective and Successful Culturally Responsive Leadership
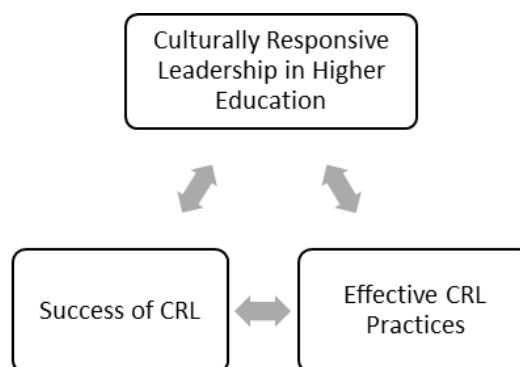
Source: Author

The framework in Figure 1 illustrates the interconnectedness of the three themes. The components demonstrate theoretical and conceptual understanding and demonstration of CRL in practice, and eventually, these practices produce substantial outcomes or impact in the organization. When CRL is properly understood by school leaders and stakeholders, schools

will likely promote access, equity, and institutional improvements. By promoting them, their understanding of CRL can lead them to create an inclusive environment for everyone that is by considering the cultural background of all stakeholders. Such promotion can create awareness among school leaders, students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders.

The understanding and awareness of CRL among stakeholders through their leaders may result in adopting effective practices that can bring results in the future. The word effectiveness has an exclusive meaning in this context. It simply means addressing the unique needs of stakeholders through the efforts of school leaders. Effective leadership practices may include but are not limited to promoting diversity and inclusion, building strong relationships with diverse communities outside the school system, engaging in continuing professional development that is responsive to the needs, making decisions that involve stakeholders, and implementing inclusive policies and practices.

Consequently, the effective practices of CRL highlight the positive outcomes or results. These practices are manifested in enhanced student engagement, academic achievement, retention, and completion rate. Stakeholders may increase their cultural competence which later on translates into a sense of belongingness that everyone can feel and experience within the school premises. The integrative framework highlights the importance and potential of culturally responsive leadership in higher education. This framework can guide school leaders in implementing effective strategies beyond understanding, awareness, and practices.

The proposed framework affirms previous findings which indicated the factors of effective culturally responsive leadership practices. These include a positive relationship with the local community, mentoring program, and shared decision-making. All of them were deemed vital for professional development, improved student academic performance, retention, and engagement of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Washington, 2021).

Conclusion

The literature review highlights the importance of culturally responsive school leadership in higher education for promoting access, equity, and improvement. Culturally responsive leaders who value diversity create inclusive learning environments that support the academic success of all students. Effective practices such as promoting faculty diversity, building community partnerships, engaging in professional development, and implementing inclusive decision-making processes contribute to the success of culturally responsive leadership.

To prioritize culturally responsive leadership, higher education institutions should provide training and development opportunities to enhance leaders' cultural competence. Creating a diverse faculty ensures students have role models who share their backgrounds. Establishing partnerships with diverse communities enriches the educational experience and

tailors approaches to meet their needs. Inclusive decision-making processes that involve stakeholders from various backgrounds promote transparency and accountability.

Embracing culturally responsive leadership has broad implications. It fosters positive intercultural relationships, enhances student engagement and academic achievement, and supports students' holistic development. Culturally responsive leadership also contributes to the overall success of institutions by attracting a diverse student body, improving the institution's reputation, and fostering a sense of belonging among students, faculty, and staff.

By valuing diversity, promoting intercultural understanding, and providing equitable opportunities, institutions create a positive and enriching educational environment for all. In conclusion, prioritizing culturally responsive school leadership in higher education is vital for access, equity, and improvement. Implementing effective practices and investing in cultural responsiveness can create inclusive and supportive environments that enhance student outcomes and benefit the institution as a whole. Ongoing professional development, community partnerships, and inclusive decision-making are recommended. By following these recommendations, higher education institutions can foster diversity, intercultural understanding, and equitable opportunities, ensuring the success and well-being of all stakeholders.

REFERENCES

Apple, M. W. (2016). Culturally responsive leadership in higher education: promoting access, equity, and improvement. *Educational Review, 68,* (3), 376-378. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2016.1161340

Banwo, B. O., Khalifa, M., & Louis, K. S. (2021). Exploring trust: culturally responsive and positive school leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration, 60*(3), 323-339. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-03-2021-0065

Beachum, F. (2011). *Culturally relevant leadership for complex 21st century school contexts*. The Sage handbook of educational leadership, 27-35. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412980036

Chunoo, V. S., & Callahan, K. (2017). Pedagogy in action: Teaching culturally relevant leadership. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 11*(3), 42-47. https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21544

Dey, A. K. (2022). Culturally Responsive Leadership: A Framework to Merge Eastern and Western Educational Philosophies in an Era of Increasing Globalization. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education/Revue canadienne des jeunes chercheures et chercheurs en éducation, 13*(1), 50-58. https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjnse/article/view/74760

Genao, S. (2021). Doing it for culturally responsive school leadership: Utilizing reflexivity from preparation to practice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 16*(2), 158-170. https://doi.org/10.1177/194277512110022

Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., Longmuir, F., & McCrohan, K. (2019*). Successful school leadership that is culturally sensitive but not context constrained*. In Murakami, E. T., Gurr, D., Notman, R. (Eds.), Educational leadership, culture, and success in high-need schools (pp. 25-44). Information Age Publishing, Inc. https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/successful-school-leadership-that-is-culturally-sensitive-but-not

Han, H. S., Vomvoridi-Ivanović, E., Jacobs, J., Karanxha, Z., Lypka, A., Topdemir, C., & Feldman, A. (2014). Culturally responsive pedagogy in higher education: A collaborative self-study. *Studying Teacher Education, 10*(3), 290-312. https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2014.958072

Horton, P. S. (2017). *Culturally Responsive Leadership in High-Poverty, Majority Minority Elementary Schools: A Multicase Study (Doctoral dissertation).* California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. http://hdl.handle.net/10211.3/203965

Jones, T. B., Guthrie, K. L., & Osteen, L. (2016). Critical domains of culturally relevant leadership learning: A call to transform leadership programs. *New directions for student leadership, 152*(2016), 9-21. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15700760500484019

Khalifa, M. (2020). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.

Khalifa, M. (2013). Creating spaces for urban youth: The emergence of culturally responsive (hip-hop) school leadership and pedagogy. *Multicultural Learning and Teaching, 8*(2), 63-93. https://doi.org/10.1515/mlt-2013-0010

Merchant, B., & Garza, E. (2013). *USA–Culturally-responsive leadership*. In Day, C., Gurr, D. (Eds.), Leading Schools Successfully (pp. 192-201). Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203740309-19/usa-betty-merchant-encarnacion-garza-elizabeth-murakami-ramalho?context=ubx&refId=2f40fc93-9706-4b0c-a369-4723cb04f85f

Minkos, M. L., Sassu, K. A., Gregory, J. L., Patwa, S. S., Theodore, L. A., & Femc-Bagwell, M. (2017). Culturally responsive practice and the role of school administrators. *Psychology in the Schools, 54*(10), 1260-1266. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22072

Mitchell, C. A. (2015). *Culturally responsive school leadership: Exploring the characteristics for urban school leaders*. The University of Memphis. https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd/1162

Mugisha, V. M. (2013). Culturally responsive instructional leadership: A conceptual exploration with principals of three New Zealand mainstream schools. *International Journal of Multicultural Education, 15*(2), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v15i2.645

Santamaría, L. J., & Santamaría, A. P. (2015). *Introduction: The urgent call for culturally responsive leadership in higher education*. In Culturally responsive leadership in higher education (pp. 1-13). Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315720777-1/introduction-lorri-santamar%C3%ADa-andr%C3%A9s-santamar%C3%ADa

Schofield, J. (2020). *Culturally Responsive Leadership: Beliefs, Espoused Practices and Supports in High Performing Urban Schools*. University of Central Florida. https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2020/131

Taliaferro, A. (2011). It is simple, but not easy–Culturally responsive leadership and social capital: A framework for closing the opportunity gap. *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal, 9*(4), 9. DOI: 10.58809/ZOSL8249 https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol9/iss4/9

Ylimaki, R., & Jacobson, S. (2013). School leadership practice and preparation: Comparative perspectives on organizational learning (OL), instructional leadership (IL) and culturally responsive practices (CRP). *Journal of Educational Administration, 51*(1), 6-23. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/09578231311291404

Washington, M. L. (2021). Examining Culturally Relevant Leadership Best Practices in Different Educational Environments. *Journal of Leadership, Equity, and Research, 7*(3), 81-103.