Culturally Responsive Central Office Leaders: Understanding Culturally Responsive Central Office

Leaders' Best Practices

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A Capstone Project

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Doctor of Education

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By

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Executive Summary

Dr. Michelle Beavers, chair

School leaders represent key players in improving teaching and learning in schools (Fullan, 2014; Harvey & Holland, 2013; Hattie et al., 2015). Considering who might support the school leader, scholars recognize that central office leaders create the working conditions that enable or restrict school leaders from enacting school improvement (Bottoms & Fry, 2009). Central office leaders have a positive, indirect influence on student learning (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Scholars report that effective central office leaders conduct a variety of key best practices that support school improvement efforts (Grove, 2002; Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010; Mattheis, 2017; Roegman, 2020; Stosich, 2020; Wong et al., 2020). However, an increasingly diverse student body (NCES, 2020) paired with a relatively homogenous leader population (Aceves & Orosco, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Perrone, 2022) necessitates the urgent prioritization towards leaders equipping themselves with culturally responsive practices to honor students' diverse cultures and identities in schools (Perrone, 2022; Tanase, 2020). Culturally responsive leaders prioritize developing culturally responsive teachers and fostering culturally responsive learning environments (Khalifa et al., 2016). Through a synthesis of the literature, the Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) Framework determined four latent leadership themes, namely critical self-reflection, developing culturally responsive teachers, promoting a culturally responsive climate and culture, and engaging in positive community relations (Khalifa et al., 2016)

Though scholars established the importance of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) (Khalifa et al., 2016), there is limited research on the role of culturally responsive, instructionally focused central office leaders (Aguayo et al., 2023; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). Scholars show interest in exploring superintendents' impact on division-wide equity and culturally responsive efforts (Kruse et al., 2018; Maxwell et al., 2013; Whitt et al., 2015), yet few scholars have explored the impact of instructionally focused central office leaders, outside of the division's top leadership team, on equity and culturally

responsive efforts (Aguayo et al., 2023). The line of logic suggests that central office leaders create the

conditions that enable school leaders to improve teaching and learning (Bottoms & Fry, 2009),

therefore, it is crucial to understand how culturally responsive, instructionally focused central office

leaders engage in leadership best practices to ensure equitable opportunities and outcomes across

diverse student groups.

Because of this gap of understanding around the importance of instructionally focused central

office leaders, this study examined how instructionally focused, culturally responsive central office

leaders implement best practices. To study this gap, the conceptual framework focused on the

interaction between the literature on the best practices of central office leadership (Grove, 2002; Honig,

2012; Honig et al., 2010; Mattheis, 2017; Roegman, 2020; Stosich, 2020; Wong et al., 2020) and

culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016). In support of this, the study's research questions

focused on how central office leaders defined effective central office leadership and what best practices

culturally responsive central office leaders used, focused on understanding what joint work, coaching

and consulting, networking schools, and policy advocacy looked like for culturally responsive central

office leaders. The design of the study extended from these questions and this conceptual framework,

implementing a case study at a suburban division, based upon semi-structured interviews with three

central office leaders, as well as documents that supported the stories shared during interviews. This

study's data analysis utilized the conceptual framework and research questions to develop findings in

the areas of the best practices of central office leadership and culturally responsive leadership. Major

themes from the study suggest that critical self-reflection involves central office leaders reflecting on

their personal experiences with cultural unresponsiveness/non-responsiveness to spur their motivation

towards culturally responsive leadership, culturally responsive instructional and transformational

leadership involves collaborative trust, a culturally responsive climate and culture involves central office

leaders engaging in critical conversations with school leaders and staff to support the unlearning of

harmful practices in schools, and culturally responsive community advocacy and engagement involves the prioritization of democratic decision-making.

This study recommends four actions for division leaders, a term that encompasses both instructionally focused central office leaders and senior-level division leaders:

1. Cultivate a courageous, safe climate and culture for central office leaders to critically self-reflect on culturally unresponsive/non-responsive experiences

2. Actively build structures that disestablish inter-departmental central office silos and silos between central office and schools to establish multi-directional, culturally responsive trust

3. Create and use clear coaching protocols so central office leaders can initiate culturally responsive critical conversations with school leaders and staff to shift mindsets around culturally unresponsive/non-responsive practices

4. Promote central office leaders' ability to empathetically understand the end-user experiences of school leaders, staff, students, families, community partners, etc.

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This doctoral capstone has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education and Human Development in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Education.

Approved Title of Doctoral Capstone:

Culturally Responsive Central Office Leaders: Understanding Culturally Responsive Central Office Leaders' Best Practices

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Dedication

To the "invisible" central office leader: I hope this study lets you feel seen.

To Nick: Thank you for supporting me throughout this five-year journey.

To Jade: I hope my journey allows you to see your endless possibilities.

To me: "Last but not least, I want to thank me for believing in me. I want to thank me for doing all this hard work. I want to thank me for having no days off. I want to thank me for never quitting." - Snoop Dogg

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my committee. Without my chair, Dr. Michelle Beavers, this study would not have been possible. She walked this journey alongside me for three years and together, we experienced each other's personal and professional highs, lows, and everything in-between. Thank you to Dr. Sara Dexter for expanding my thinking by posing deep, reflective questions throughout this process. Thank you to Dr. David Eddy Spicer for engaging with my cohort as scholars, not merely as students. Outside of the committee, I will never forget the warmth I felt from Dr. Sandra Mitchell during coursework.

Next, I would like to thank my scholarly friends, Judson, Jacqueline, Chris, Kirsten, Grace, Leslie, Faye, and Anna. These scholars allowed me to be my true, authentic self. They have seen me at my best and at my worst. My childhood upbringing ingrained in me that I should avoid speaking up and sticking out in school. These friends honored my voice and affirmed my thoughts when I chose to speak up. Their excellence inspired me to reach for excellence as well.

My central office colleagues supported my pursuit for deeper knowledge. Thank you to Colleen and Kristin for believing in me enough to carry out the mission and vision for culturally responsive pedagogy in our division. Thank you to Dr. Gillespie, Dr. Is, Dr. Saunders, Dr. March, and Dr. Gomez Portillo for imparting your knowledge and experiences with the capstone/dissertation process upon me. Thank you to Jen, Jackie, Roberta, Katie, Libya, and Raven for shaping my understanding of equity and cultural responsiveness as it relates to curriculum and instruction.

Just days after my final defense presentation, the Virginia Educational Research Association (VERA) nominated this study as a finalist entry for the 2024 "Best Dissertation Award". I appreciate the recognition from scholars across Virginia for this finalist nomination and the opportunity to present my research at a larger scale. I will hold the networking and learning experience with me for a lifetime.

This study would not have been possible without the willingness and collaboration from Rose County Public Schools. Thank you to the superintendent for giving me a shot, to the central office leader who helped to approve my study to be conducted in the division, to the director of the Curriculum and Instruction Department for working closely alongside me to initiate communication with their colleagues, and to the three central office leaders who stepped into this study with vulnerability and authenticity.

Lasty, I would like to acknowledge my family. I am the first person in my immigrant family to work towards a doctoral degree. My late mother, a Vietnamese refugee, instilled within me that schooling is paramount to creating a better life for yourself. Mommy, I hope you are looking down with pride. Next, I recognize my daughter, Jade. I began my doctoral studies in 2019, became pregnant in 2020 during Comprehensive Exams, and gave birth to Jade in 2021. I was in labor and bouncing on my pregnancy ball during our cohort's last synchronous class in August 2021. I continued writing my capstone seven days after giving birth while Jade slept beside me. More than anything else, I want my daughter to understand that a woman of color's possibilities is limitless. Lastly, thank you to my partner, Nick, for his unrelenting support in this process. Thank you for caring for Jade while I wrote in the library. You did not allow me to quit this program, even when I faced seemingly insurmountable barriers.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The role of the school principal proves to be critical in supporting student learning (Fullan, 2014; Harvey & Holland, 2013; Hattie et al., 2015). But who supports the school principal in working towards school improvement? School principals reported that their working conditions depend heavily upon the decisions made by central office leaders (Bottoms & Fry, 2009). When central office leaders work alongside and empower principals to be agents of change, principals can effectively impact school improvement and accelerate student learning (Bottoms & Fry, 2009; King Smith et al., 2020).

Traditionally, central office leaders have assumed a focus on educational management, overseeing that schools remain compliant with policies and regulations (Bottoms & Fry, 2009). This tradition contributed to the scholarly perspective that viewed central office leaders as inhibitors of educational innovation and reform (Leon, 2008). However, a shift occurred that describes effective central office leaders focused on educational leadership, not simply educational management (Bottoms & Fry, 2009; King Smith et al., 2020).

Effective central office leaders exercise four key strands of central office leadership best practice. They position themselves as working alongside principals to improve teaching and learning in schools (Grove, 2002; Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010; Stosich, 2020), exercise their subject-matter expertise through coaching and consulting principals (Grove, 2002; Honig, 2012; Roegman, 2020; Stosich, 2020), support partnerships of school leaders and staff (principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, teachers) across different school sites (Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010; Mattheis, 2017; Stosich, 2020), and adeptly influence and manage policy work coming from the state department and senior-level division leadership directed towards schools (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Mattheis, 2017; Wong et al., 2020).

Instructional leadership undergirds the best practices of central office leaders (Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010). Instructional leadership represents a key function in improving teaching and learning

(Bottoms & Fry, 2009; Leon, 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2006). School leaders' instructional leadership

represents an important contributor to improved teaching and student learning (Leithwood et al., 2020;

Supovitz et al., 2010). When turning to central office, effective divisions prioritize and communicate a

clear, collective focus on teaching and learning, with the ultimate outcome of improving student

achievement (Leon, 2008). Central office leaders exercise a positive, indirect influence on student

learning (Waters & Marzano, 2006). School leaders and staff mitigate the relationship between central

office leader and the student. Therefore, in consideration of central office leaders' role in instructional

leadership, effective central office leaders enable the principal to take ownership of the role as a key

instructional leader within the school (Bottoms & Fry, 2009).

But what might effective teaching and learning look like, especially in an ever-changing world?

The changing student demographics highlight an urgency towards adopting culturally responsive

teaching as one way to redress student inequities (Perrone, 2022). To quantify this student demographic

shift, the National Center for Education Statistics (2020) reported a 38.8% increase in students of color

in 2014, and just a mere six years later, students of color represented about half of the overall student

population in 2020. However, public education K-12 leader and staff demographics remain

predominantly White (Aceves & Orosco, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Perrone, 2022). This

incongruence between K-12 leader and staff demographics compared to student demographics

emphasizes the urgent prioritization for schools and divisions to be equipped with culturally responsive

teaching practices that adequately serve diverse student populations (Perrone, 2022; Tanase, 2020).

To understand culturally responsive leadership, it is important to understand the origination

through culturally responsive teaching literature. Culturally responsive teaching encourages educators

to incorporate students' cultural funds of knowledge into teaching practices to make learning more

relevant and rigorous for students (Brown & Crippen, 2016; Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2017; Gay,

2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Hammond, 2016). A commitment to culturally responsive teaching

requires changes in pedagogy, moving away from traditional pedagogy towards transformational, engaging teaching practices (Brown & Crippen, 2016). For example, to adopt culturally responsive teaching in classrooms, teachers critically self-reflect upon and shift hidden personal biases regarding topics of diversity, identity, and culture, ultimately changing their classroom pedagogy to honor students' cultural funds of knowledge (Young, 2010).

While culturally responsive teaching makes a compelling case to shift the teaching paradigm towards asset-based thinking to foster inclusivity and improve student learning (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2017; Tanase, 2020), how might this shift towards culturally responsive teaching at the classroom level parallel the necessary shift towards culturally responsive leadership within a school? Who might support teacher development in implementing culturally responsive teaching? Scholars call attention to the culturally responsive leadership practices that address systemic inequities, especially the inequities related to predictable racial disparities across student groups (Khalifa et al., 2016). To address how leaders create the conditions for culturally responsive teaching, scholars rallied behind the exploration of culturally responsive leadership (Johnson & Fuller, 2014; Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally responsive leaders prioritize developing culturally responsive teachers and fostering culturally responsive learning environments (Khalifa et al., 2016). Through a synthesis of the literature, the Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) Framework identified four latent themes around leadership practices, namely (a) critical self-reflection; (b) developing culturally responsive teachers; (c) promoting a culturally responsive climate and culture; and (d) engaging in positive community relations (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Though scholars established the importance of CRSL (Khalifa et al., 2016), there is limited research on the role of culturally responsive, instructionally focused central office leaders (Aguayo et al., 2023; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). School leaders directly support teachers in implementing culturally responsive teaching, but who supports the school leader in fostering cultural responsiveness? Though

scholars show interest in exploring the superintendent's impact on division-wide equity and culturally responsive efforts (Kruse et al., 2018; Maxwell et al., 2013; Whitt et al., 2015), few scholars have explored how central office leaders, outside of the division's top leadership team, impact equity and culturally responsive efforts in schools and within the district (Aguayo et al., 2023). The line of logic suggests that central office leaders create the conditions that enable school leaders to improve teaching and learning (Bottoms & Fry, 2009; King Smith et al., 2020), therefore, it is crucial to understand how culturally responsive central office leaders engage in leadership best practices to ensure equitable opportunities and outcomes across diverse student groups.

Problem of Practice

Scholars have examined CRSL, as seen in Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis' (2016) meta-analysis, yet we know very little about culturally responsive central office leaders (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). Scholars understand what constitutes a culturally responsive school leader (Khalifa et al., 2016), and what constitutes an effective central office leader (Grove, 2002; Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010; Mattheis, 2017; Roegman, 2020; Stosich, 2020; Wong et al., 2020), yet little is known on how instructionally focused central office leaders use culturally responsive leadership practices (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018).

Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study examined how instructionally focused, culturally responsive central office leaders implement best practices. Drawing upon what is already known about culturally responsive leadership and literature related to central office leaders' best practices, the study's conceptual framework focused on the line of inquiry to understand how culturally responsive leadership informs central office leaders' best practices.

Furthermore, this research addressed the overlooked significance of central office leaders. On a larger scale, the importance of a seemingly 'invisible' central office has come into question (Grove, 2002; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2021), with their influence on student learning often unacknowledged or

negatively acknowledged in past literature (Leon, 2008). By studying central office leaders, this study

attempted to address the significant gap related to the efficacy of central office leaders. Specifically, it

explored how central office leaders play an important role in fostering culturally responsive leadership

through leadership best practices within divisions. The ability of central office leaders to drive culturally

responsive leadership supports the closure of equity gaps persistent in students' outcomes and

opportunities (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). Although this study did not attempt to demonstrate

leadership's impact on student achievement and outcomes, its purpose was to explore culturally

responsive central office leaders' best practices.

Background of the Site

Rose County Public Schools (RCPS) is a pseudonym for the division sampled in this study. In the

2023-2024 school year, the suburban division served a diverse population of more than 14,000 students

in grades Pre-Kindergarten through 12. Thirteen percent of the student population identified as

students with disabilities and 1% of students identified as English learners. Demographically, students of

color represented 72% of the student population in RCPS, and 28% of students identified as White.

More specifically, 55% of the students identified as Black, 8% as Latino/Hispanic, <1% as American

Indian/Native Alaskan, 1% as Asian, <1% as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 7% as Multiracial. At

the time of study, RCPS housed 22 public school sites. Out of these 22 schools, 21 were fully accredited

by the state department, with one receiving an "Accredited with Conditions" status.

In 2023, RCPS adopted its new five-year strategic plan for the division, focused on connection,

educational excellence, and innovation. RCPS met the sampling criteria of having a strategic plan

connected to culturally responsive leadership and the best practices of central office leadership. The

strategic plan names four distinct goals related to the RCPS Vision that strives for excellence in

education, celebrates diversity, and stays committed to students, staff, and the school community. RCPS

articulates its mission to produce 21st-century learners who will become productive citizens in society,

foster a dynamic, safe, and nurturing learning environment, partner with the school community for the benefit of students and staff, strengthen the school division by employing highly qualified and diverse staff, effectively and efficiently manage capital and human resources, and effectively communicate to increase community investment.

Goal 1 conveys that students will develop graduate characteristics, outlined by the state department, to include critical, creative, collaboration, communication, citizenship, and growth to demonstrate academic excellence. Goal 1 directly connects to the work of the Teaching and Learning Department because the Goal 1 measures aim towards increased student access to rigorous instruction and increased student achievement. Goal 2 describes how the division will create a dynamic learning environment that promotes high student achievement, stimulates student engagement, supports staff creativity, ensures school safety, and reinforces positive staff and student relationships. Goal 3 works to ensure the effective and efficient management of capital and human resources for the development and retention of high-quality staff, sustainable operations, and systems. Goal 4 aims at increasing engagement opportunities for families, school communities, and business partnerships.

RCPS hires several central office leaders to support division-level teaching and learning in schools. RCPS's central office is divided into departments, such as the Teaching and Learning Department and the School Leadership and Innovation Department. The Teaching and Learning Department houses the Curriculum and Instruction Department and the Special Education Department. Within the Curriculum and Instruction Department and the Special Education Department, there are 24 different central office leaders, with varying positions, such as Director, Coordinator, and Educational Specialist. This study specifically focused on central office leaders from the Curriculum and Instruction Department. Job tasks for central office leaders within this department include, but are not limited to, coordinating and supporting instructional quality and regulatory compliance of content area specific programs in all K-12 schools, assisting schools in developing their School Performance Plans (SPPs),

working collaboratively within central office to provide quality educational opportunities to students, creating and/or modifying curriculum for school use, meeting regularly with school leaders and staff to provide on-going feedback regarding classroom practices, monitoring student data and providing targeted support for schools and the division, developing and conducting in-service professional development training for school leaders and staff regarding best practices and specific instructional topics, assisting in monitoring compliance with state and federal regulation, assisting in purchasing and monitoring budgets, and preparing information for state and federal reports.

Research Questions

To understand how instructionally focused central office leaders utilize culturally responsive leadership practices through their best practices within central office, I conducted a qualitative study to gather data from semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The following research questions and subquestions guided the data collection of this study, as research questions and subquestions narrow the focus of what to study through the researcher's predictions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study's research questions and subquestions were as follows:

1. Research Question 1: How do participants define effective central office leadership?

2. Research Question 2: What culturally responsive best practices are demonstrated by central office leaders?

    i. Subquestion 1: How do central office leaders engage in joint work with principals?

    ii. Subquestion 2: How do central office leaders coach and consult principals for instructional improvement?

    iii. Subquestion 3: How do central office leaders create a network amongst schools?

    iv. Subquestion 4: How do central office leaders advocate for policy?

Conceptual Framework

The study's conceptual framework was grounded in both CRSL (Khalifa et al., 2016) and best practices of central office leadership (Grove, 2002; Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010; Mattheis, 2017; Roegman, 2020; Stosich, 2020; Wong et al., 2020). These channels inform their practices as culturally responsive leaders and demonstrate the best practices of central office leadership.

Drawing on Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis' (2016) CRSL Framework, four practices were identified: critical self-reflection, culturally responsive instructional and transformational leadership, fostering a culturally responsive climate and culture, and culturally responsive community advocacy and engagement (Khalifa et al., 2016; Carter, 2021). Additionally, effective central office leaders position themselves as working alongside principals to improve teaching and learning in schools (Grove, 2002; Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010; Stosich, 2020), exercise their subject-matter expertise through coaching and consulting principals (Grove, 2002; Honig, 2012; Roegman, 2020; Stosich, 2020), support partnerships of school leaders (principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders) across different school sites (Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010; Mattheis, 2017; Stosich, 2020), and adeptly influence and manage policy work coming from the state and district level towards the direction of schools (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Mattheis, 2017; Wong et al., 2020).

By examining the overlap between the leadership practices in both topics, the conceptual framework sought to understand how central office leaders utilize culturally responsive best practices within the context of central office leadership. The approach provided a framework for understanding how central office leaders integrate culturally responsive best practices into their leadership roles and contribute to equitable processes and outcomes for teaching and learning across school divisions.

Culturally Responsive Leadership — Critical self-reflection — Instructional and Transformational Leadership — Culture and Climate — Community Advocacy and Engagement — Culturally Responsive Central Office Leadership — Policy advocacy — Networking schools — Instructional coaching and consulting principals — Joint work with principals — Best practices of central office leadership

Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework

Methodology

The qualitative study used narrative case study methods, pursuant to the research questions and subquestions, to capture the unique stories and leadership practices of leaders in central office. A qualitative narrative case study was appropriate for exploring information-rich data (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). Sampling involved purposive sampling, as many qualitative studies leverage purposeful, nonprobability sampling to gather information-rich data from participants with special experience and competence (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). The study employed multiple stages of sampling, involving the selection of the division to study, then selecting the study population from two specific departments within the division's central office (the Curriculum and Instruction Department and the Special Education Department), followed by the selection of three central office leaders from these narrowed-down central office departments. To sample participants, I sent an email that outlined the study and attached an optional survey to all central office leaders within the Curriculum and Instruction Department and the Special Education Department (see Appendix A). This anonymous survey asked respondents to identify and/or self-identify possible study participants who could speak to culturally responsive central office leadership through their experiences. Once the survey closed, I collected the names of participants and contacted the individuals with a high frequency of nominations in the survey

results. The three participants signed an informed consent agreement (see Appendix B) to agree to participate in the study.

These three participants engaged in three separate, in-depth semi-structured interviews, otherwise known as serial interviewing (Read, 2018). After each of their three interviews neared conclusion, I asked for relevant documents that supported any of the stories shared during the interview, and after collection, their relevant documents were analyzed. The data collection and analysis aligned with the research questions, subquestions, and the conceptual framework (see Table 1). I prepared open-ended questions (see Appendix C) for the semi-structured interviews to elicit storytelling from participants. Probing questions embedded within each interview question allowed the interview to go in the direction that the conversation naturally flowed towards, based on the interviewees' responses (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). I conducted data analysis concurrently with the data collection to enhance this study's credibility and trustworthiness. I analyzed the interviews, along with document analysis of mission and vision documents, coaching protocol templates, completed coaching protocols with school leaders' and staff responses provided, and Clifton Strengths for Leaders assessment results. Themes that emerged from the literature, the conceptual framework, and data analysis guided the coding process. This approach ensures theoretical thinking, where new ideas were confirmed by the data as they appeared (Morse et al., 2002). The analysis looked both within and across interviews using a cross-case analysis approach (Yin, 2017). This approach balanced both deductive and inductive coding protocols, beginning with *a priori* codes and allowing space for codes to emerge while reading the data, ensuring ideas were confirmed by the data as they emerged.

Table 1.

Research Questions and Subquestions with Data Sources

Research Questions and Subquestions	Data Sources

Question 1: How do participants define effective central office leadership?	Semi-structured interviews and document analysis
Question 2: What culturally responsive best practices are demonstrated by central office leaders?	Semi-structured interviews and document analysis
Subquestion 1: How do central office leaders engage in joint work with principals?	Semi-structured interviews and document analysis
Subquestion 2: How do central office leaders coach and consult principals for instructional improvement?	Semi-structured interviews and document analysis
Subquestion 3: How do central office leaders create a network amongst schools?	Semi-structured interviews and document analysis
Subquestion 4: How do central office leaders advocate for policy?	Semi-structured interviews and document analysis

Role of Researcher

As an Asian American, cisgender woman, I acknowledge my position, power, and bias and how they contribute to my equity orientation. I have experienced moments of both privilege and marginalization as it relates to my experience in the educational realm, both as a learner and as a leader. Reflecting on the White heteronormative, colorblind leadership that I have seen pervasive during my time in education, I recognize the importance of culturally responsive leadership models. I work towards a liberatory leadership orientation that values inclusion and belonging.

Serving as a central office leader during this study, my professional role posed some benefits and challenges. I benefited from my central office leader position by way of connecting, being able to comprehensively understand the stories and artifacts shared by participants through my lived experience as a central office leader. However, my lived experience as a central office leader also posed a threat to credibility and reliability because I potentially drew conclusions about my participants' leadership practices due to my own hidden biases and assumptions related to the role. To address this threat to credibility and reliability, the conceptual framework provided a lens through which I viewed the data with a rigorous, credible, and reliable lens informed by theory and research (Atkins & Wallace,

2012). To enhance rigor, member checking as well as writing reflexive memos after each interview was used to validate findings (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017, Merriam & Tisdall, 2015).

Delimitations

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructionally focused central office leaders utilize culturally responsive leadership practices through their use of best practices within central office leadership. This study contains key delimitations, or, in more simple terms, what this study is not about (Weaver-Hightower, 2018). Namely, key delimitations include a focus on central office leaders, and not school leaders or staff, and a focus on qualitative methods, rather than quantitative or mixed methods.

This study examined leaders working outside the school setting rather than school leaders and staff, such as principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teachers. The decision was made due to the overabundance of literature and studies related to school leadership, and specifically, principalship, yet little literature directly studies central office leadership (Honig, 2012). Additionally, the problem of practice noted the unflattering connotations related to central office leaders as barriers to school innovation and improvement. Hence, this boundary fills a gap in the canon related to central office leaders and attempts to add to the recent literature that shows support for central office leaders as stewards of school innovation and improvement.

Along the same line of thinking focused on the central office leader, this study did not explore perspectives from school leaders, staff, or students. Despite school leaders, staff, and students representing the end-users of the public educational system, this study aimed at collecting the views of central office leaders. Focusing on one type of perspective inherently invites bias. Central office leaders may view themselves as positive agents of innovation and improvement, but the school leaders, staff, and students that they serve might not view central office leaders as positive agents of change. To mitigate this bias, I utilized document analysis alongside semi-structured interviewing to confirm participants' first-person perspectives with documented evidence of said perspectives.

Additionally, to explore the central office leaders' perceptions, this study used qualitative data collection methods through interviews and document analysis. The decision was made to ensure information-rich data (Creswell, 2012) and gain insight into central office leaders' subjective experiences and understanding of culturally responsive best practices of leadership. Although quantitative would have provided anonymity for participants, it would not have allowed for the depth of understanding that qualitative methods provided.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. The sample size of one district means that the study's findings were not generalizable for other divisions, especially if that division does not identify within similar demographics to RCPS. However, the study purposefully employed case study methodology, attempting to study one site, RCPS, and multiple central office leaders within this single site (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). The selection of case study methodology helped to provide an in-depth exploration of cases, allowing readers to transfer findings across similar contexts (Yin, 2017). Future studies may explore studying central office leaders in other districts outside of RCPS to confirm findings from this study.

Another limitation was that this study was limited to qualitative data. Participants provided thick descriptions of their experiences through semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2012). However, participants' willingness to share and describe their experiences invited the possibility for biases to be conveyed in the data collection during the interviews. These biases were mitigated by conducting document analysis alongside interviews (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). This study also leveraged member checking to confirm data analysis themes (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Additionally, the serial interviewing method helped overcome biases associated with one-off qualitative interviewing, which may inadvertently create the context for participants to provide surface-level responses that simplify complexity, reduce the severity of interorganizational conflict, and position respondents in a flattering perspective (Read, 2018).

Within the nature of a qualitative study, internal bias exists. Since I am a central office leader, I possess pre-existing notions of culturally responsive central office leadership best practices. Strategies, such as member checking and reflexive memoing, were employed to address and mitigate internal bias (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). These strategies helped ensure a more objective analysis of the data.

Definition of 'Central Office Leader', 'School Leader and Staff', and 'Teacher Leader'

In this study, I defined the term 'central office leader' to describe a middle-level leader working within a division's central office building. Distinctly, this study did not name study participants as 'district leaders,' despite several research articles using this term, as the state where RCPS resides uses the term 'division' rather than 'district.' Additionally, scholars use the umbrella term 'district leader' to represent their sample population of superintendents, assistant superintendents, school board members, board of supervisor members, etc. My study did not sample any of these division-wide roles. Using the term 'central office leader' signified my study's focus on the instructional leaders who work within a division's central office, excluding the leadership team.

Additionally, my study focused on central office leaders, which differs from 'central office leadership.' Though both exist in a relationship with one another, they also differ. Leaders are the individual actors who engage in the organizational concept of leadership. Researchers conceptualize the notion of leadership as a process (Malik & Azmat, 2019). This study did not aim to explore the organizational processes, rather, it aimed to explore the individual actors who use leadership practices to navigate the organizational processes.

I frequently used the term 'school leader and staff' throughout this study. Though much of the literature explored in Chapter II and this study's research subquestions named a focus on principalship, the three central office leaders interviewed insisted on a systems-wide, distributed lens of naming their work alongside principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and teachers.

Therefore, this study adopted the term 'school leader' to name the collection of different leadership roles under one umbrella term, and 'school staff' to signify the definition of teachers without leadership roles within their school.

Interestingly, I adopted the term 'teacher leader,' especially within Chapter IV's Findings discussion. The literature commonly uses the term 'teacher leader,' rather than other terms such as 'educational leader' or 'staff leader.' The term 'teacher leader' captures the essence of a person working as a teacher within a school with a leadership role. Hence, a teacher leader could be a grade-level leader or a department chair. 'Teacher leader' differs from 'instructional coach,' in that a teacher leader currently works within a classroom setting, while an instructional coach is someone who does not work within a classroom setting, rather, an instructional coach oversees specific content area teaching and learning across grade-levels within a school.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how instructionally focused central office leaders utilize culturally responsive leadership practices and the best practices of central office leadership. Pursuant of the purpose, this study explored participants' perceptions of effective central office leadership, collecting stories related to the ways they engaged in joint work, coached and consulted school leaders and staff, networked various schools, and advocated for policy. The study gathered data in this area by interviewing three central office leaders and analyzing documents shared by those leaders within one division.

In the next chapter, I describe a literature review that situates this study within a scholarly discussion of research on the best practices of central office leadership and culturally responsive leadership. Chapter III reviews a detailed examination of the conceptual framework, including how it was shaped by literature from culturally responsive leadership and the best practices of central office leadership, along with a discussion of the research methodology employed for the study. Chapters IV

and V reviews the key findings of the study and the implications of these findings for district leaders as they attempt to cultivate instructionally focused central office leaders who possess skills related to culturally responsive leadership and the best practices of central office leadership.

Chapter II: Literature Review

A central issue in education research pertains to closing the racial disparities across student groups, particularly in the United States, with studies aimed at addressing equity issues faced by marginalized student populations (Khalifa et al., 2016; Lezotte, 1986). This heightened concern led to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability movement in the early 2000s (Wiliam, 2010). However, the NCLB movement proves to be a double-edged sword by providing standards for minimum levels of proficiency for student learning while also fostering the conditions of narrowed, high-stakes assessments that fail to leverage students' unique cultures, backgrounds, and experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2010). And while NCLB has been enacted for decades, the racialized disparities between student groups persist (Darling-Hammond, 2010). For example, in 2015, Black students were nearly three times more likely to be retained at least one grade level compared to their White peers (Fritzgerald & Rice, 2020).

The racial gap indicates the need for culturally diverse students to be engaged within a complex 21st-century learning environment (Brown & Crippen, 2016; Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2017) and as a result, a need for leadership reform to tend to cultural responsiveness (Khalifa et al., 2016). Educational leaders are tasked with addressing and solving equity dilemmas, promoting harmony, civic discourse, and democracy in an increasingly changing society (Scanlan & Theoharis, 2020). This literature review seeks to identify the gaps in the literature related to the best practices of instructionally focused, culturally responsive central office leaders by presenting what scholars know about the best practices of central office leaders and culturally responsive leadership.

Following a description of this chapter's search methodology, the literature review begins with an introduction to terms used in the conversation around equity, social justice, and cultural responsiveness. Following that, I discuss the role of central office in K-12 education, along with the barriers that prevent central office leaders from effectively impacting teaching and learning, which

dovetails into effective district leadership and the best practices of central office leaders. To segway into

culturally responsive leadership, the literature review examines works related to the critique of

colorblind leadership and its antithesis, being equity-focused systems leadership, followed by a review

of literature on culturally responsive leadership.

Search Methodology

To begin my search methods for this literature review, I identified key terms through the ERIC

Thesaurus. These key terms include *equity leadership, intersectional leadership, culturally responsive*

leadership, central office leadership, leadership styles, and culturally relevant education. I conducted

searches on several education-focused databases, namely the University of Virginia's library access to

EBSCO and the open access source of Google Scholar.

For Google Scholar searches, I used a combination of key terms in searches to see the most

relevant, popular results. Once I found key literature that had more than 500 sources that cited it, such

as Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis' (2016) work on the CRSL Framework, I not only read the popular

selection, but I also selected the "cited by" function to see the studies that cited the original work on the

culturally responsive leadership framework, then selected a custom range between 2012 and 2022 so

that articles would only remain bound within a 10-year frame from the time of searching in 2022.

Additionally, once I located these popular articles that provided significant impact in the body of

literature, I examined these articles' bibliographies, using a mining method that led me to other relevant

articles. If I was unable to access the article on open-access sources, I leveraged the University of

Virginia's library database to bypass any issues related to article access. By employing a comprehensive

search methodology, I sought to gather a diverse range of literature on the themes and concepts

relevant to the study.

Terms that Frame Understanding

Narrow definitions limit understanding, but for Chapter I and framing understanding, the following terms provide the reader with a synthesized understanding of the study. I introduce decades of scholarly work throughout the literature review to frame the developing concept of culturally responsive leadership. Instead of providing single, narrow definitions, this section provides a broad overview of key terms central to this study: equity, social justice leadership, and culturally responsive leadership. The intention is not to narrow down the multiplicity of equity-related definitions and subsequently pick one strand of the definition to use for the study, but rather, to make the multiple definitions within the equity field visible to depict the ambiguity surrounding this topic. This study uses the expansive definitions found within the literature to analyze the expansive ways that leaders might utilize culturally responsive leadership practices and dispositions.

The tension readers may experience when navigating the various understandings of equity, social justice, and cultural responsiveness mirrors the paralleled tension that leaders experience when presented with an invitation to make their understanding of culturally responsive leadership visible. Definitional ambiguity is indicative of the literature's scattered understanding of equity, social justice, and cultural responsiveness.

Equity

The notion of 'equity' encompasses all concepts related to both cultural responsiveness and social justice. In the educational equity field, the interpretivist paradigm leads to various equity stances that inadvertently compete against one another (Boyles et al., 2009: Khalifa et al., 2016). Interpretivism honors the multiple meanings created by individuals and groups through their lived experiences and rejects the notion of definite knowledge that can be generalized across diverse groups (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

The literature indicates that the educational term equity is frequently used in policy documents, and yet, equity is often seldom coherently understood by stakeholders and leaders in an organization (Pinto et al., 2012; Unterhalter, 2009). The challenge of working towards equity in schools involves unpacking the many meanings of equity and creating safe spaces for advocates to explore and make explicit connections between the many subjective meanings of the concept (Bell, 2007; Bogotch, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2013).

The National Equity Project defines educational equity as each child receiving what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential (Educational Equity Definition, n.d.). The notion of equity inherently suggests that the notion of equality, or receiving the same inputs, is not necessarily fair because the social, economic, historical, and political contexts impact how actors in the system perceive and can take advantage of available opportunities (Stembridge, 2019). Though equality is defined by sameness, equity is defined by difference because different learners (students and adults) need different inputs to support their fair opportunities to learn and develop (Stembridge, 2019).

The inability to directly name operationalized leadership practices in these equity definitions leads to an interpretivist paradigm within the educational equity field, and, at times, these multiple meanings and various equity stances compete against one another within an organization (Boyles et al., 2009; Khalifa et al., 2016). Since student success ambiguously evokes the espoused morals and ideals one hopes education impart to students, equity can be conceptualized within multiple, competing equity stances, such as initial equal opportunities, ongoing equal opportunities, personalized opportunities based on student choice, personalized opportunities based on student need, equal outcomes, equal experiences, etc. (Newlin, n.d.). In action, an individual and collective equity stance represent the values, vision, goals, and assumptions related to equity (Scott, 2017). Equity encompasses beliefs and practices related to fairness in people's experiences and outcomes. Philosophically, equity leadership is the implementation of an equity stance into action, operationalizing the values of equity

into leadership practices. In this study, 'equity' will be used to encompass all concepts related to both cultural responsiveness and social justice.

Social Justice

To operationalize ideas of equity leadership, scholars began to explore 'social justice leadership' in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a viable equity leadership framework. Social justice focuses on the experiences of marginalized groups and inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes, well-being, and life prospects for all children (Berkovich, 2014), more specifically, committed to the success of students who experience marginalization within the mainstream K-12 school system (Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). The literature conceptualizes many nuanced definitions of social justice (Furman, 2012). Social justice leadership literature varies in how scholars conceptualize the definition and actualization of social justice leadership in schools (Blackmore, 2009; Brown, 2004; Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007).

Holistically, social justice leadership rejects the sweeping generalization of respecting people's differences for social harmony by recognizing the pitfalls of equality without critical consciousness of systemic oppression (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). Leadership scholars agree that social justice leadership focuses on the experiences of marginalized groups and inequities they face in education, well-being, and life prospects (Berkovich, 2014). Specifically, it is committed to the success of students who experience marginalization within the mainstream K-12 school system (Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). Social justice leadership involves the critique of oneself in the ways that one's identity, power, and position influence one's thoughts and actions, acquiring the advocacy skills to interrupt and change socially constructed mainstream, status quo structures of knowledge and socialization processes (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014).

Cultural Responsiveness

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars also began exploring the term 'culture' in education and leadership. Culture conjures multiple terms with nuanced connotations, such as cultural responsiveness, cultural relevance, cultural proficiency, and cultural responsiveness (Bell, 2007; Bogotch, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

Ladson-Billings (1995b) conceptualizes culturally relevant teaching within a three-pronged approach: academic success, meaning holding high expectations for all learners as they move through learning; cultural competence, meaning that educators and leaders learn about and interweave their learners' cultural funds of knowledge as an asset within practice; and critical or sociopolitical consciousness, meaning that teachers empower students to examine sociopolitical issues positioned as a larger purpose that necessitates the academic learning outcomes. However, the gap of time between the onset of culturally relevant/responsive teaching literature in the 1990s and culturally responsive leadership literature around 2010s resulted in an approximate two decades of a gap in the literature on how leaders can implement cultural responsiveness, ultimately placing the onus of cultural responsiveness onto the teacher (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2016; Khalifa, 2018; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012).

A rigorous meta-analysis of 32 empirical studies and seven books, conducted by Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016), resulted in the development of the Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework (CRSL), which stands as the most rigorous meta-analysis and leadership framework for cultural responsiveness to date. Cultural responsiveness highlights the need for the educational field to understand, respond, accommodate, and cultivate the gifts that all learners (students and adults) bring related to the totality of their multiple identities and characteristics, including, but not limited to, languages, literacies, spiritualities, cultures, ethnicities, appearances, abilities, behaviors, knowledge, and opinions (Khalifa et al., 2016). In other words, cultural responsiveness encapsulates the notion of

valuing diversity and leveraging the cultural funds of knowledge of self and others in one's leadership practices and dispositions (Khalifa et al., 2016).

The CRSL Framework represents the encompassment of various equity leadership articles, aspects of anti-oppressive leadership (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Kumashiro, 2000), transformative leadership (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Shields, 2010), and social justice leadership (Bogotch, 2002; Theoharis, 2007), attempting to paint a picture of the leadership practices embodied within strong educational equity champions (Khalifa et al., 2016). According to CRSL, strong culturally responsive school-based leaders align themselves to four key pillars: critically self-reflecting on their leadership behaviors, developing culturally responsive teachers, promoting culturally responsive/inclusive school environments, and authentically engaging the community, namely, students and families (Khalifa et al., 2016).

'Terms that Frame Understanding' Conclusion

This study examined how instructionally focused, culturally responsive central office leaders implement the best practices of central office leadership. To provide framing, this chapter illuminates the multiple definitions around 'equity,' 'social justice,' and 'cultural responsiveness.' This literature review commences with a broad-to-narrow approach, leveraging three main sections. First, I explore the role of central office in K-12 education, which includes the structural barriers to district effectiveness, then what district effectiveness looks like, concluded with the best practices of central office leaders. Second, I delve into literature around the problem of practice, pinpointed in Chapter I, on the problems and strategies related to homogeneously White leaders serving a demographically diversifying student body, including diversifying the leadership pipeline, systems-focused equity leadership and colorblind ideology, alongside the antithesis of colorblind ideology, being examples of race-conscious leaders. This second section provides a segway into this literature review's third and concluding section on culturally responsive leadership.

The Role of Central Office in K-12 Education

To better understand the role of central office within the U.S. education system, it is important to ground this literature review through the current functions of school districts, then trace the historical evolution of school districts, then lead the literature review to examine the organizational theory and structures embedded within central office leadership. Doing so will provide the reader with a current, historical, theoretical, and structural perspective on school districts.

U.S. schools operate in a decentralized system, with decision-making authority primarily granted to state departments and school districts (Kober & Rentner, 2020). State departments often grant school districts the ability to hire school leaders and staff, appoint salary scales, select curriculum, establish schools, and assign students to specific schools (Shoked, 2016). Therefore, school districts operate as local government agencies to oversee schools within a specified, defined area (Shoked, 2016).

Historically, districts were created in response to exponential population growth because of immigration, and district personnel managed the administrative tasks of educating a large student population (Leithwood, 2013). These administrative tasks, such as assigning students to schools and securing school funding, took on a centralized management approach, as school reformers believed that instilling hierarchical, centralized processes in education, like the industrialized assembly line approach, could more efficiently yield productive citizens for society (Shoked, 2016). Districts were not invented or proliferated to address student learning, as that was seen as the responsibility of the school (Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2013). As a result, scholars have either ignored research focused on central office leaders or conveyed negative perspectives of districts as politicized, bureaucratic barriers to innovation and improvement (Childress & Elmore, 2007; Leon, 2008). Principals have worked around districts, circumventing district-wide policies and procedures to get the support they need to operate as school leaders (Bottoms & Fry, 2009). District central office leaders act sight unseen to the other stakeholders within the district, including school leaders and staff, unless disruptive conflict arises between district

central offices and internal stakeholders, such as schools disagreeing with district-wide mandated

professional development (Leithwood, 2013).

From an organizational theory lens, Johnson and Kruse (2009) conceptualize educational

organizations as human service organizations, which are defined as having the primary function of

protecting, maintaining, and/or enhancing the well-being of human beings they serve. Organizations are

defined by core tasks that distinguish them apart from other types of organizations, and for educational

organizations, the core task is teaching (Johnson & Kruse, 2009). Educational organizations are tightly

coupled, meaning standardized within some areas, for example, teacher certification credentialing

(Weick, 1976), but loosely coupled and exhibit low task clarity in other areas, most notably, what

constitutes best practices for the core task of teaching (Johnson & Kruse, 2009; Weick, 1976). This

means that there is no one best method of teaching, and a method of teaching might be effective for

one student but not for another student (Johnson & Kruse, 2009). Professionals within the educational

organization work to bring clarity to the ill-defined core task of teaching (Johnson & Kruse, 2009).

However, districts operate in a non-monolithic nature, where individuals' varied interpretations of best

practices for teaching and learning often undercut the district's approach to fulfilling state-mandated

policies (Spillane, 1998). Even internally within a central office, Duke (2010) characterizes many school

districts as loosely coupled, with many different central office units often moving in directions

differently from one another.

Structurally, Johnson and Kruse (2009) conceptualize three distinct, interdependent, hierarchical

levels within an organization: institutional, managerial, and technical levels. The institutional level, such

as school board members and superintendents, generates legitimacy and support from the

organization's internal and external environments; the managerial level, such as central office leaders

and school leaders, mediates between the technical level and the environment by procuring the

resources to conduct the organization's core task. The technical level, such as teachers, perform the

organization's core task, which is teaching in an educational organization (Johnson & Kruse, 2009).

Through this line of thinking, the central office leader acts as middle manager to the institutional level

(leadership team) and the technical level (teachers). Often, central office leaders explore data directly

from communities to inform their understanding of local problems while also receiving state-level

messaging about how to address these challenges, resulting in an either/or binary tension with their

decision-making and implementation practices that place them in policy intermediary roles (Honig,

2012). Mattheis (2017) undertook a year-long study with central office leaders to show how central

office leaders developed policies that schools used with fidelity and highlighted how policy does not

travel in a purely linear fashion through a hierarchy, rather, how central office leaders function as policy

boundary-spanning intermediaries.

Structural Barriers for Central Office Leaders

There are unique structures within central offices that can either support or hinder the work of

schools (Leon, 2008), as these structures in central office make it possible or not possible for the

mission, vision, and goals to be achieved (Duke, 2010). Public school central offices are often modeled

after bureaucratic structures, involving a division of labor, hiring a multitude of central office leaders

who possess subject-matter expertise in one specialized area, with each central office leader operating

under formalized sets and rules in a structural hierarchy (Duke, 2010). Within any central office

organization, 'horizontal and vertical segmentation' exist (Spillane, 1998). 'Vertical segmentation'

represents the environmental ambiguity between central office and schools where school leaders may

influence instruction in ways that contradict central office messaging around instruction (Spillane, 1998).

Central office leaders often face competing priorities and challenges in influencing policy work within

schools (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Mattheis, 2017; Wong et al., 2020). For example, a study found that

equity-focused professional learning facilitated by central office leaders tended to be added onto, rather

than integrated, within school-based professional learning, thereby limiting the effectiveness of the

central office-led professional learning (Honig & Rainey, 2020). Additionally, principals have a high

influence on student learning and teachers tend to prioritize the principal's interpretation of instruction

rather than the central office's interpretation (Spillane, 1998). For example, central office may

emphasize deeper learning as a key strategy for high-quality instruction. At the same time, school

leaders tend to stand behind accountability measures, namely standardized test scores, as an indicator

of high-quality instruction (Trujillo, 2013). These two differing interpretations of what constitutes high-

quality, rigorous instruction create a binary, either/or paradigm, where educational leaders and school

staff feel compelled to either support deeper learning or standardized test scores (Trujillo, 2013).

To illustrate how central office leaders navigate the effects of vertical segmentation, Wong,

Coburn, and Kamel (2020) explore central office and school leadership practices utilized as participants

collectively navigated policies and made instructional decisions. In their study, by examining the

interactions between central office and school leaders in two urban school districts, they uncovered that

central office leaders leveraged systemic power by way of persuading, rather than compelling, school

leaders through use of normative strategies, such as marketing, expectations, and linking to other

supports and initiatives, cultural-cognitive strategies, also known as what is believed to be best practice

in the collective organization, and regulative strategies, also known as formal rules (Wong et al., 2020).

Out of the two districts studied, the district that employed a higher frequency of persuasion strategies,

along with a higher frequency of meetings with central office and school leaders, resulted in school

leaders reporting less autonomy in their decision-making and more pressure from the central office to

make decisions that fell in alignment with central office's messaging (Wong et al., 2020). The school

district that employed fewer persuasive strategies and met school leaders quarterly rather than

monthly, resulted in school leaders reporting more autonomy in their decision-making and resulted in

more variance to whether school leaders decided whether to make decisions in alignment with central

office messaging (Wong et al., 2020). These findings suggest a strategic trade-off for central office

leaders between influencing decisions across schools and fostering a climate where school leaders

perceive less autonomy in their decision-making (Wong et al., 2020).

'Horizontal segmentation' represents the inter-departmental ambiguity across different

departments, offices, and teams within any given central office organization (Spillane, 1998). This siloed

nature of a central office organization partly results from the lack of a clear, centralized shared mission

and vision (Spillane, 1998). Without this centralized prioritization, each department, office, and team

unit have agency to pursue what they view as priority (Spillane, 1998). Duke (2010) also describes how

these silos come from an imbalance between differentiation and integration, more specifically, when a

district focuses on hiring as many specialists as possible into central office roles, the more likely these

individuals will not interact with other central office leaders outside of their specialized unit. To combat

the effect of central office siloing, many districts create cross-functional teams, with central office

leaders across many units collaborating on a common goal that impacts their specialized area of focus

(Duke, 2010).

Effective District Leadership

Within the past several decades, a shift occurred in the literature, moving away from painting

district leaders as 'villains' (Leon, 2008) and describing district leaders as supporters of school

improvement by way of supporting school leaders (Bottoms & Fry, 2009; Honig; 2012; Leon, 2008). The

notion of district effectiveness emerged in the 1980s, inspired by the plethora of literature on school

and classroom effectiveness (Anderson & Young, 2018). The recent literature now describes effective

district leaders as focused on educational leadership, not simply educational management (Bottoms &

Fry, 2009), moving away from the educational management origin story of district leadership recounted

by Honig (2012) and Leithwood (2013). School principals reported that their working conditions depend

heavily upon the decisions made by district leaders (Bottoms & Fry, 2009). When district leaders work

alongside and empower principals to be agents of change, principals can effectively impact school improvement and accelerate student learning (Bottoms & Fry, 2009).

Six different frameworks defined effective district leadership communicated through a lens of guiding domains informed by conducted research studies and/or by literature reviews. These reputable research institutions include Springboard Schools, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), Harvard University, the Wallace Foundation, Ontario's Institute for Education Leadership, and American Institutes for Research (AIR).

First, Springboard Schools (2006) sought to name the high-leverage practices of highly effective districts. To do this, the organization looked at test scores from California districts that served over 1,500 students and had high percentages of students in poverty and students receiving English as a Second Language services, then sorted these districts into two groups: high-performing and low-performing districts. After surveying the principals from these districts to examine the different leadership approaches between these two groups, the researchers conducted in-depth case studies of three high-performing district offices to generalize what high-performing districts do, followed with recommendations for district leaders. Four themes arose that distinguished high-performing districts from low-performing districts, including the in-depth use of data to drive continuous improvement, a prioritization on professional development for school leaders and staff, establishing a culture and accountability for a balance between centralized and decentralized strategies, and endorsed the alignment of curriculum to standards with diagnostics to assess student learning and interventions to support students who did not show proficiency over content standards. Springboard Schools' (2006) recommendations for district leaders included: (1) develop and implement strategies to maintain focus and build organizational capacity; (2) invest and use multiple assessments; (3) recruit, manage and develop people and organizational capacity, culture and learning communities that allow for shared learning; (4) report to the public on all subgroups regarding student achievement; (5) create proactive

supports related to teaching English language learning populations; (6) promote relationship building

with unions and the board; and (7) remain focused on improving teaching and learning.

Second, Waters and Marzano (2006), under the support of McREL, published a meta-analysis

that described district leadership and the role of superintendents. The search methodology involved

retrieving 4,500 non-repeating titles, narrowed down to 200 documents that met specific criteria. Of

the 200 documents reviewed, 27 reported a correlation between district leadership and academic

achievement, using a standardized measure of student achievement or some other index based on a

standardized measure. Altogether, these studies involved 2,817 districts and the achievement scores of

3.4 million students. Waters and Marzano (2006) produced four key findings, including that (1) district

leadership matters because effective district leadership correlated with higher student achievement; (2)

effective superintendents focus their effort on creating goal-oriented districts, utilizing five district

leadership practices, including (a) collaborative goal setting, (b) non-negotiable goals for achievement

and instruction, (c) board alignment and support of district goals, (d) monitoring achievement and

instructional goals, and (e) use of resources to support the goals for instruction and achievement; (3)

effective districts establish 'defined autonomy,' meaning that effective superintendents set clear, non-

negotiable goals for teaching and learning, however, provide school leadership teams with the flexible

responsibility and authority to decide how to meet those goals; and (4) superintendent tenure is

positively correlated with student achievement.

Third, Childress and Elmore (2007) developed the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP)

Coherence Framework in partnership with Harvard's Graduate Education School and Harvard's Business

School. The framework serves the purpose of identifying key elements that interdependently work in

coherence with one another to produce an effective district-wide improvement strategy. The

framework assists with achieving coherence by connecting the instructional core with a district-wide

strategy for improvement, highlighting district elements that can support or hinder effective

implementation, identifying interdependencies among district elements, and recognizing forces in the

environment that impact the implementation of the strategy. The center of the PELP Coherence

Framework consists of the instructional core, represented by the teacher's knowledge and skills,

student engagement during learning, and academic content. Outside of the instructional core lies the

theory of change, which is defined as the district's belief about relationships between certain actions

and the desired outcomes of those actions. The concept of strategy surrounds the theory of action,

strategy meaning the set of actions that a district implements to strengthen the instructional core and

improve student learning. The PELP Coherence Framework does not prescribe a set strategy for all

districts, rather, its framework suggests that different strategies work for different districts aiming

towards similar outcomes for student learning. The outer edge outside of strategy describes five key

organizational elements that influence a district's strategy: culture, structures and systems, resources,

and stakeholders. The outermost edge of the framework articulates the environmental factors that

district leaders consider as they craft strategies, such as regulations and statutes, contracts, funding,

and politics.

Fourth, Bottoms and Fry (2009) conducted research under the Wallace Foundation to

investigate one key question: *What perceptions do high school principals have of the conditions their

districts are providing in support of school improvement?* The initial study involved interviewing 22

principals across the United States from various districts who used the Southern Regional Education

Board (SREB) *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* school improvement model. Like Springboard Schools'

(2006) methodology, Bottoms and Fry (2009) examined the interview responses from principals,

comparing responses of principals from high-performing schools to responses of principals from low-

performing schools, learning how the relationship between central office leaders and principals either

enhanced or diminished the principals' ability to lead for school improvement. The interviews focused

on principals' perceptions of seven research-based practices of effective districts, which included (1)

establishing a clear focus and a strategic plan for improving student achievement; (2) organizing and engaging the district office in supporting each school to create and implement a customized school improvement agenda within a district improvement framework; (3) providing instructional coherence by establishing a vision of effective instructional practice by aligning curriculum, instruction and assessment to the vision and to state and national standards and creating the context for meaningful learning experiences; (4) investing heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals and teachers aligned with the district and school-specific improvement agendas; (5) providing high-quality data that link student achievement to school and classroom practices and assisting schools to use data effectively; (6) optimizing human, financial and other resources to provide a level of support sufficient for schools to produce specified student performance results; and (7) using open, credible processes to involve progressive school and community leaders in school improvement. Overall, the findings suggested that principals at high-performing schools experienced a collaborative relationship with district leaders, while the principals at low-performing schools conveyed a centralized, top-down approach in their district that did not allow for the principal's capacity for school improvement to be developed. Bottoms and Fry (2009) concluded the report with the succinct recommendation for districts to move away from oversight and educational management and towards a partnership model between district and school so that the principals' capacities can be built towards school improvement.

Fifth, Leithwood (2013) continued his work on effective school leadership to create a framework specifically on strong districts. He used evidence that led to the development of the District Effectiveness Framework alongside empirical research to provide nine critical features of strong districts. These critical features included (1) establishing broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on ambitious images of the educated person; (2) providing coherent instructional guidance; (3) building district and school staff's capacities and commitments to seek out and use multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions; (4) creating learning-oriented organizational improvement processes; (5)

providing job-embedded professional development; (6) aligning budgets, personnel policies/procedures and uses of time with a district's mission, vision and goals; (7) using a comprehensive performance management system for school and district leadership development; (8) advocating for and supporting a policy-governance approach to board of trustee practice; (9) and nurturing productive working relationships with staff and stakeholders.

Sixth, Hornung and Yoder (2014), under the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at AIR, sought to define effective district leadership to use these domains for district leaders' performance evaluations. They conducted a meta-analysis of the literature pertaining to effective districts. They defined seven domains for effective district leadership, including (1) creating and sustaining a strong mission and vision; (2) establishing a culture of collaborative leadership; (3) promoting effective leading, teaching, and learning; (4) using effective communication skills; (5) establishing coherence; (6) using data to make decisions; (7) and managing resources effectively.

Seven common themes arise through these six different district leadership frameworks (Bottoms & Fry, 2009; Childress & Elmore, 2007; Hornung & Yoder, 2014; Leithwood, 2013; Springboard Schools, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006). First and most importantly, all the frameworks emphasized creating and communicating a clear mission and vision for the district. A clear district-wide mission and vision provides the focused direction for which all stakeholders can align (Leithwood, 2013). This idea of alignment segways into the second theme related to the importance of systems alignment and coherence within the district. Fullan and Quinn (2015) define coherence as a shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of professionals' individual and collective work, seen both within one's mindset and one's actions. Childress and Elmore (2007) define coherence as the elements of a school district that work synergistically together to implement an articulated strategy. Third, these various frameworks articulated a need for districts to focus on key priorities and initiatives. Fourth, the frameworks described a need for districts to prioritize teaching and learning as the core of the district's

work through strong instructional leadership. Fifth, these frameworks pointed towards the importance

of collaboration amongst a variety of stakeholders within the organization. Sixth, these frameworks

underlined the importance of balanced centralized and decentralized autonomy between districts and

schools. And seventh, effective district leaders emphasized the importance of using data to make

informed decisions for districts and schools.

Best Practices of Central Office Leaders

All six effective district frameworks focused on analyzing effective district organizations and the

senior district leaders, such as directors, chief officers, and superintendents, in setting the tone for their

organizations. Yet, these six different frameworks for effective districts underscore the scholarly

emphasis on district leadership as an organization and an examination of the key senior-level leaders

who shape the organization. The umbrella term 'district leader' also encompasses the entry-level

specialists and middle managers who support district efforts to improve teaching and learning. This next

section considers the best practices of instructionally focused central office leaders, namely those

working outside the senior-level district leadership team.

First, scholars name a unique leadership practice known as 'joint work' between central office

leaders and school leaders (Honig et al., 2010; Honig, 2012; Stosich, 2020). A qualitative study involving

interviews and observations of instructional leadership meetings revealed that central office leaders

named collaboration between themselves and principals as 'joint work' (Honig, 2012). For example,

researchers used an in-depth comparative case study of three urban districts engaged in central office

transformation as a district-wide teaching and learning improvement strategy to assert that

transformational central office leaders leverage a partnership between central office and principals

(Honig et al., 2010). Joint work involves setting a purpose, identifying problems of practice, planning

meetings, and executing professional learning alongside principals (Stosich, 2020). Since principals

contribute significantly to improved teaching and student learning (Leithwood et al., 2020; Sebastian &

Allensworth, 2012), and central office leaders directly support principals and schools in their

instructional leadership, logically, central office leaders can indirectly influence student learning through

instructional leadership by way of principal support (Leithwood et al., 2020; Honig, 2012).

Another aspect of effective central office leadership involves exercising subject-matter expertise

through coaching and consulting principals (Grove, 2002; Honig, 2012; Roegman, 2020; Stosich, 2020).

To effectively move into a coaching or consulting role, Honig (2012) asserts that central office leaders

benefit from positioning themselves as teachers rather than managers, reinforcing the learning-

centered orientation in the partnership between central office leaders and principals. Framing is a

critical aspect of leadership (Roegman, 2020), as Stoisich (2020) studied and uncovered that central

office leaders exercise their instructional leadership by explicitly teaching principals about the purpose

of school-based instructional leadership teams. In fact, in the study, eight out of nine principals named

that their instructional leadership team purposely aligned with the central office leaders' vision of

shared, distributed leadership for their instructional leadership teams (Stosich, 2020).

Furthermore, effective central office leaders support partnerships of school leaders (principals,

assistant principals, and teacher leaders) across different school sites (Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010;

Mattheis, 2017; Stosich, 2020). In her qualitative study, Stosich (2020) revealed that principals reported

the networked improvement community as the highlight of their participation in the study because they

could learn from other schools about effective implementation of a school-based instruction leadership

team. Researchers assert the importance of opening a networking opportunity to all principals so they

can be resources for each other around their instructional leadership practice through modeling best

leadership practices in the network meetings, developing and using leadership tools, brokering in

network, otherwise known as bridging important aspects of leadership, and buffering unimportant

aspects of instructional leadership (Honig et al., 2010). Another study found that central office leaders

used networks to laterally span their policy power across the state in various districts (Mattheis, 2017).

They leveraged policy-spanning ideas in these networks, connecting the idea of supporting partnerships. The next section will discuss how central office leaders influence and manage policy work.

Lastly, central office leaders adeptly influence and manage policy work developed at state and district levels directed towards schools (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Mattheis, 2017; Wong et al., 2020). Central office leaders play a key role in policy development and implementation (Diem et al., 2015). Effective central office leaders influence and manage policy work at district and state levels, collaborating with principals to improve teaching and learning in schools (Grove, 2002; Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010; Stosich, 2020). They manage critical issues in many topic areas, such as complex, intertwined policy and legal contexts at multiple levels (Mattheis, 2017). Effective central office leaders bridge what is important and buffer what is unimportant for schools to consider (Honig et al., 2010), while vertically and horizontally spanning their policy influence (Mattheis, 2017). However, the decentralized approach to education in the U.S. often leaves central office leaders without direct power over the actions that schools decide to take (Wong et al., 2020). Overall, educational leaders understand national reforms and policies within the context of their local environment (Gannon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017; Mattheis, 2017; Spillane et al., 2019), highlighting the importance of district-level central office leaders using local knowledge to inform their policy advocacy.

This section marks the completion of a review in understanding the best practices of central office leaders. Hence, the next section focuses on culturally responsive leadership. To do that, the literature review revisits Chapter I's problem of practice of incongruent student-to-leader racial/ethnic demographics, which leads into a historical and theoretical exploration of colorblind ideology along with highlighting race-conscious leadership.

Addressing Student Body Demographic Change

Revisiting Chapter I's problem of practice, the National Center for Education Statistics (2020) reported a 38.8% increase in students of color in 2014, and just a mere six years later, students of color

represented about half of the overall student population in 2020. Data from suburban school districts

show that the recent trend towards an increase in students of color and decline in White student

percentages (Diarrassouba & Johnson, 2014). However, public education K-12 leader and staff

demographics remain predominantly White (Aceves & Orosco, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Perrone,

2022). Student body demographic change represents one of the biggest factors that national, state, and

local policymakers consider when making decisions that impact curriculum, teaching, and learning in

the public education sphere (Diarrassouba & Johnson, 2014). This spotlight on demographic change

begs the question: what can leaders do to address shifting racial and ethnic student body demographics

in public education?

Scholars suggest a multifaceted approach that balances both short-term and long-term

strategies to redress concerns around a homogeneously White leader population attempting to serve

an increasingly diversifying student population (Diarrassouba & Johnson, 2014; Evans, 2007). Regarding

the long-term approaches, scholars emphasize the importance of diversifying the leadership pipeline

(Evans, 2007; Perrone, 2022). Research suggests that there exists systemic bias in teacher hiring

(D'Amico et al., 2017), and a lack of diversity in the teacher workforce directly contributes to the lack of

diversity in the leadership pool, as leaders often receive their promotions after serving as teachers

(Perrone, 2022). The bias in teacher hiring mirrors the bias within leadership development (Perrone,

2022). Diversifying the leadership pipeline produces clear benefits, especially for teachers of color and

students of color, such as added diversification of the leadership pipeline by hiring/recruiting teachers

of color, increased job satisfaction reported by teachers of color who leaders of color supervise, and

positive outcomes and conditions for students and families from marginalized communities (Perrone,

2022).

Regarding short-term strategies, the incongruence between K-12 leader demographics and

student demographics emphasizes the urgent prioritization for schools and districts to be equipped with

training and professional development on teaching practices that adequately serve diverse student cultures as well as leadership practices that focus on authentic community and school partnerships (Perrone, 2022; Tanase, 2020). Hence, the incongruent demographics between leaders and students suggest a short-term strategy of equipping leaders with culturally responsive and equity-focused practices for leading districts and schools. The next section introduces the notion of systems-focused equity leadership, which identifies race-consciousness as a key tenet, followed by framing on colorblind ideology. Identifying systems-focused equity leadership and colorblind ideology provides the background knowledge necessary to explore the literature review on race-conscious leaders, which then leads toward exploring a literature review on culturally responsive leadership.

Systems-Focused Equity Leadership

Honig and Honsa (2020) coined 'systems-focused equity leadership' in a study of aspiring district leaders enrolled within an Ed.D. program focused on superintendency as a systems-approach to leadership that redresses opportunity and outcome gaps for students from marginalized communities. Taking on an equity-centered focus provides leaders opportunities to broaden their scope to see root causes of inequities within systems. It strengthens the implications of how equity work can be pursued across the system. Systems-focused equity leadership is demanding for the leader who attempts to use such practices (Honig & Honsa, 2020). The notion of systems-focused equity leadership proves to be a useful approach in better understanding the components of a leadership framework that prioritizes district leaders who lead for equity.

System-focused equity includes three main components. First, systems-focused equity leaders identify and tackle inequities at their systemic roots (Honig & Honsa, 2020). In contrast, leaders who focus on individuals as a lever for change miss the opportunity to take on a systems-perspective toward leadership (Honig & Honsa, 2020). Second, systems-focused equity leaders recognize and address their leadership as part of the system perpetuating inequities (Honig & Honsa, 2020). Third, systems-focused

equity leaders take a race-explicit and strengths-based approach rather than a colorblind, deficit-mindset approach (Honig & Honsa, 2020).

The third component of systems-focused equity leadership encourages leaders to take a race-explicit and strengths-based approach (Honig & Honsa, 2020). Scholars recognize that colorblind ideology threatens leaders' development towards equity-minded and culturally responsive leadership (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2019). From the inception of culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995a) and the proliferation of specific culturally responsive leadership practices (Khalifa et al., 2016), leaders recognized a need to address diversity but did not possess the leadership frameworks to address such racial, ethnic, and cultural needs (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2019). Therefore, the next section explores the history of colorblind ideology and leadership frameworks that failed to address racial, ethnic, and cultural leadership considerations.

Colorblind Ideology

A leader's journey into culturally responsive leadership requires a deep commitment to critically examine and reject pervasive colorblind ideology (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2019). Colorblind ideology represents neutrality or race-absent ideas towards race/ethnicity and racial/ethnic disparities (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2019). Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2006) assert that the use of colorblind ideology grew commonplace during the 1960s as a method of people in power maintaining the status quo for the racially marginalized, especially the Black community. Bonilla-Silva (2014) argues that a colorblind ideology affords powerful White people the ability to maintain White supremacy without the accountability of naming the marginalization it perpetuates. In contrast, a race-conscious, equity-minded educational leader uses an asset-based approach with students of color and families, fostering staff discussions about race topics to increase cultural awareness, all while also increasing their own racial awareness (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2019).

Scholars criticize the common use of a White, Eurocentric leadership lens in educational leadership scholarship (García & Byrne Jiménez, 2016; Horsford, 2012; López, 2016; Reed, 2012). Leadership and management literature traditionally leans into colorblind ideology, rendering leadership absent of racial/ethnic considerations, which means that leaders do not see equity within the scope of a leader's responsibility (Irby et al., 2019; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). Such an approach fosters a universal neutrality towards all students, inadvertently fostering deficit-based thinking towards students and families of color, without acknowledging systemic inequity (Welton et al., 2015). Additionally, colorblind leadership consequently results in placing the onus of enacting culturally responsive teaching fully on the teacher (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2016; Khalifa, 2018; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012), allowing for inconsistent enactment of culturally responsive teaching in schools and across the district.

Some leaders develop their equity orientation during their first formative years of leadership (Theoharis, 2007), while others build upon and refine their equity orientation from lived experiences (Merchant & Shoho, 2010). Leaders who lack personal experiences with diverse communities tend to perpetuate colorblind ideology (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2019). For example, Shields (2004) observed that most White educators in graduate courses tended to take a colorblind approach when discussing their work in their profession. So, to better understand how leaders develop their equity orientation, it is imperative to understand how leaders develop race consciousness. This paragraph marks the conclusion of the introduction to systems-focused equity leadership and colorblind ideology, which dovetails into a literature review on studies that examine race-conscious leaders.

Examples of Race-Conscious Leaders

Often, a leader's racial/ethnic identity informs their orientation towards equity leadership, as reflected in a handful of qualitative studies (DeMatthews, 2015; Evans, 2007). Evans (2007) conducted a case study analysis within one school district, examining two White leaders alongside one Black leader. The study revealed that, during a period of demographic change in the school setting, the two White

leaders justified their decision-making processes through a colorblind ideology, exemplified through the denial of ethnicity/race as a crucial factor. Similarly, DeMatthews (2015) conducted a qualitative case study method over two years to produce an in-depth analysis of the sensemaking and social justice leadership practices from one White female principal. DeMatthews (2015) concluded that the principal's Whiteness both positively and negatively influenced her social justice leadership, using sensemaking theory to describe successes, challenges, and failures owned by the principal during her tenure. It is important to note that these two qualitative studies analyzed White and Black leaders' perspectives, leaving experiences from other ethnic groups unexplored. Despite the tendency for studies to focus on Black and White perspectives, all three studies underscored that the leader's racial/ethnic identity influences their leadership (DeMatthews, 2015; Evans, 2007).

Flores and Gunzenhauser (2019) added to the research with their findings that leaders of color and White leaders integrate transformational equity leadership into their leadership identities. Their study, involving 22 educational leaders, reported from the findings that, out of the five leaders who were considered as cultivating racial consciousness, two identified as Black females, two identified as Black males, and one identified as White, and the four Black participants were the only four Black participants in the study. Interestingly, one participant who identified as multi-racial (half Black and half White), was considered to have racial recognition with minimal capacity, pinpointed as halfway between the spectrum of cultivating racial consciousness and perpetuating colorblind ideology. The remaining 16 participants identified as White. These findings underscore the notion that belonging to a racially/ethnically minoritized group does not guarantee a culturally responsive orientation toward leadership (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2019; Khalifa et al., 2014). However, it is important to note that 80% of the racially conscious leaders identified as leaders of color, suggesting that lived experiences belonging to a racially/ethnically marginalized group do influence racial consciousness.

One key component within a culturally responsive leadership orientation is critical self-reflection (Khalifa et al., 2016). Leaders engage in introspection and self-analysis to understand the beliefs, biases, and assumptions that shape their leadership practices (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Through critical self-reflection, leaders build a deeper awareness of their identity and its impact on how they approach leadership. Studies illustrate the importance of critical self-reflection as a strategy to develop race-conscious leaders (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Gooden & O, 2015; Honig & Honsa, 2020; Martinez, 2015). For example, in studying critical leadership development, a cohort of White school leaders wrote their ongoing racial autobiographies as a product of critical self-reflection, and researchers noted that their initial colorblind orientation towards race and racism stemmed from their family's influence and their upbringing within racially homogeneous environments (Gooden & O, 2015). As the cohort and autobiographies progressed, paired with professional development on cultural responsiveness, these White leaders demonstrated a culturally responsive understanding that moved away from colorblind ideology and towards racial awareness (Gooden & O, 2015). Similarly, Martinez (2015) found that incorporating critical self-reflection into leadership preparation programs yielded stronger equity conscientiousness from all 19 of the White and Latino/a participants. Gooden and Dantley (2012) agree that leadership development programs must leverage critical self-reflection so leaders can begin developing their internal voice toward transformative change. Gooden and Dantley (2012), Gooden and O (2015), and Martinez (2015) reveal the power of critical self-reflection in leadership development, addressing issues of colorblind leadership frameworks through the antidote of a culturally responsive leadership framework. Connecting back to systems-level equity leadership, these participants from numerous studies recognized and addressed their own leadership as part of the system perpetuating inequities (Honig & Honsa, 2020), representing a crucial leadership practice in being an effective educational leader. Through critical self-reflection, this begins to tie together the two frameworks of culturally responsive leadership and central office leaders' best practices.

Often, non-White leaders' lived experiences with racism and oppression inform their current leadership stance around equity (Evans, 2007; Gooden, 2005; Roegman, 2017). Grounded by their own experiences and knowledge of their communities, Black principals who provide leadership in predominantly Black communities tend to lead with a practical, personalized, and compassionate understanding of their communities and the expectation of high academic achievement for their students (Gooden, 2005). Evans (2007) supports Gooden's (2005) findings by exploring a Black woman's sensemaking as she attempted to combat low expectations for Black students at her school. Despite her efforts, due to resistance, the principal garnered negative, biased representations of her from her staff as a Black woman. The literature calls this phenomenon 'stereotype threat', defined as the perception that a leader of color must work harder to counter perceived negative associations with their marginalized identity marker(s) (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012).

Additionally, Roegman (2017) supports these claims by uncovering how a Black female superintendent's experience with racism as a child shaped her view that all children can learn and succeed, even when faced with systemic barriers. Roegman (2017) interviewed and observed three superintendents, one White male, one Black female, and one White female, over six years through qualitative case study analysis to uncover how these leaders made sense of their equity leadership through the lens of overlapping contexts. Roegman (2017) concluded that highly effective superintendents used knowledge of multiple overlapping contexts, namely, personal, social, organizational, and professional contexts, to inform their equity-oriented leadership. All three qualitative studies highlight the Critical Race Theory stance that these three equity-oriented leaders accepted racism and leveraged racial consciousness to effectively utilize culturally responsive leadership practices (Gooden, 2005; Evans, 2007; Roegman, 2017). Additionally, these three studies (Gooden, 2005; Evans, 2007; Roegman, 2017) underscore the importance of systems-focused equity leaders taking a

race-explicit and strengths-based approach rather than a colorblind, deficit-mindset approach (Honig &

Honsa, 2020).

Culturally Responsive Leadership

Johnson's (2006) definition of culturally responsive leadership emphasizes the need for leaders

to understand their assumptions, beliefs, and values about people and cultures outside of their own

culture to lead settings with diverse student populations effectively. Culturally responsive leadership

creates inclusive environments for students and families from diverse backgrounds by implementing

transformative philosophies, policies, and practices (Johnson & Fuller, 2014). Through modeling and

engaging in culturally responsive leadership practices, school leaders support schools in enacting

cultural responsiveness (Hammond, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016). Scholars agree that school principals'

instructional leadership is an important contributor to improved teaching and student learning

(Leithwood et al., 2020; Supovitz et al., 2010). Moreover, culturally responsive leadership involves the

commitment to cultural responsiveness from multiple levels within a school district, including teachers,

school leaders, and district leaders, and acknowledging the synergistic interaction between these levels

(Khalifa et al., 2016). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the multi-level network, especially the

relationship between schools and districts, and how it promotes culturally responsive classrooms

(Kozleski & Huber, 2012).

Recognizing the need for leadership frameworks that address the connections between cultural

responsiveness and educational leadership, several equity-related frameworks emerged. Santamaría

and Santamaría (2012) suggest the need for alternative models of leadership that place higher, more

explicit value on exploring connections between cultural responsiveness and educational leadership.

Several equity-focused leadership frameworks, namely, social justice leadership, culturally responsive

leadership, Indigenous and Decolonized School Leadership (IDSL), and Applied Critical Leadership (ACL),

aim to address educational disparities and promote inclusive practices (Furman, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa et al., 2019; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012).

Among these frameworks, culturally responsive leadership provides a comprehensive approach encompassing social justice leadership principles alongside updated research on culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016). This framework identifies four latent themes: critical self-reflection, developing culturally responsive teachers, fostering a culturally responsive work culture and climate, and engaging community contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016). By recognizing the importance of integrating culturally responsive practices into their leadership approach, educational leaders can create inclusive, equitable learning environments that meet the needs of diverse students.

Critical Self-Reflection

The literature on culturally responsive leadership emphasizes the importance of critical consciousness, meaning awareness of self and personal values, beliefs, and/or dispositions, to be effective equity-oriented leaders (Furman, 2012; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2019). CRSL emphasizes that leaders should be willing to question their assumptions about race and culture, examining their own identity and how that identity impacts their outlook on topics related to equity and cultural responsiveness (Khalifa et al., 2016). Similarly, social justice leadership and IDSL literature also prioritizes critical self-reflection to include authentically sharing their stories, making space for structured self-reflection and guided reflection alongside personal journaling and prioritizing self-knowledge and self-reflection (Furman, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2019).

Scholars underscore the importance of using equity audits as a form of critical self-reflection to measure equity opportunities and outcomes in organizations, challenging White-centered and hegemonic epistemologies in schools (Khalifa et al., 2016; Roegman, 2017). For leaders of color, additional considerations include awareness of one's personal stereotype threat and highlighting positive aspects of their marginalized identities possibly perceived by White leaders and stakeholders

(Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). ACL emphasizes the importance of leaders of color gaining trust from White leaders and White stakeholders (Santamaría, 2014).

In support of the equity leadership frameworks, Gooden and Dantley (2012) argue that once a leader critically self-reflects on the injustices around them, it feels nearly impossible to ignore leading transformative change to address said inequities. Critical self-reflection is a powerful tool in leadership development, showing that leaders who critically self-reflect can adeptly manage concerns related to equity through their leadership. In a study by Rivera-McCutchen (2014), self-identified social justice principals responded to hypothetical cases of teacher prejudice and discovered that these principals were most strongly guided by their sense of moral obligation and their predispositions toward the goals of equity. Leaders' abilities to critically self-reflect seems to foundationally contribute to their equity-focused leadership orientation (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Gooden & O, 2015; Martinez, 2015; Rivera-McCutchen, 2014).

Culturally Responsive Instructional and Transformational Leadership

Culturally responsive leadership recognizes that developing culturally responsive teachers is essential for creating inclusive and equitable learning environments (Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally responsive leaders leverage instructional and transformational leadership to ensure that teachers prioritize a sharp, refined focus on culturally responsive teaching. This section explores the importance of culturally responsive instructional and transformational leadership, highlighting how these two concepts work together to foster student success and promote educational equity.

Strong leaders ensure that the curriculum honors students' cultural funds of knowledge (Leithwood, 2021). Research indicates that leaders engage and reform the curriculum to become more culturally responsive while also developing teacher capacities for culturally responsive instruction (Khalifa et al., 2016). Theoharis and O'Toole (2011) found that a series of professional development sessions built the capacity for teachers to effectively reach their ELL students in ways that challenged

and reformed their current teaching and learning practices. Additionally, researchers studied the

practices of leaders attempting to improve more inclusive outcomes for students with exceptional needs

and found that professional development stood as a key feature in shifting teachers to aim for a more

inclusive teaching and learning experience for students (Irvine et al., 2010). These studies underscore

the importance of professional development in helping develop culturally responsive teachers and the

impact that leadership has on facilitating this development.

Marshall and Khalifa (2018) examined the culturally responsive leadership practices of central

office leaders focused on curriculum and instruction. The study revealed five latent themes related to

policy, trust, unlearning inadvertently harmful methods of leading for teaching and learning, and

partnerships with enacting culturally responsive leadership practices. Policies influence, either positively

or negatively, the impact that central office leaders have on equity and culturally responsive work in

schools (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). The study found that teachers were mistrustful when central office

leaders prompted them to self-reflect critically, as the act of critical self-reflection did not align with the

absence of equity policies within the district. In relation to trust, the study found that trust between

central office and school leaders often facilitated courageous, oftentimes uncomfortable, conversations

about inequity (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). The director within the district, a Black woman, used covert

hiring of White central office leaders to adequately connect with White school-based leaders, as the

Black female director perceived a racial disconnect between herself and the White school-based leaders

(Marshall & Khalifa, 2018), suggesting that trusting relationships often leverage common identities and

experiences amongst individuals. The study discovered that the central office leaders relied on an

unlearning process towards traditional, inadvertently harmful methods of leading for teaching and

learning, shifting from compliance-based practices and towards decolonized reflection alongside school-

based leaders (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). This shift in leadership practice relates to the previous

commentary on misgivings with traditional, colorblind leadership frameworks (Irby et al., 2019;

Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). The study discovered that the central office leaders benefited from

attending professional development alongside cultural partners who understood the needs of students

in the communities they served (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). Lastly, when the central office leaders used

instructional coaching strategies that reflected cultural responsiveness, researchers noted positive

outcomes in teaching and learning (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018).

Developing culturally responsive teachers and implementing culturally responsive instructional

practices requires strong equity-minded leadership practices. Transformative leadership practices

include engaging in policy development, establishing trust, and providing professional learning that

promotes cultural responsiveness. Through the prioritization of these practices, leaders create an

educational environment that honors diverse backgrounds, fosters equity, and enhances teaching and

learning outcomes.

Culturally Responsive Climate and Culture

Alongside prioritizing instructional and transformational leadership, highly effective leaders

create and sustain a culturally responsive culture and climate in the workplace (Khalifa et al., 2016). This

involves challenging exclusionary policies, practices, and behaviors that marginalize students from

diverse backgrounds (Khalifa et al., 2016). Gooden and Dantley (2012) suggest leaders can use race-

based language in conversations around equity to signal commitment to cultural responsiveness.

Moreover, social justice leadership highlights the importance of critical conversations about noticed

inequities (Furman, 2012).

A study in a university setting revealed that using inclusive, student-centered education closed

the gap between student achievement scores across demographics, both within the same school year

and into the next school year as well, as compared to students who did not receive inclusive student-

centered lectures (Dewsbury et al., 2022). Leithwood (2021) also claims that strong equity-oriented

leaders maintain a safe and healthy learning environment for students, which looks like creating a

culture of belonging and inclusivity in the building. Faas, Smith, and Darmody (2018) discovered that principals helped to create more equitable schools by aligning policies towards inclusion, such as anti-bullying and admissions policies, and public recognition of cultural diversity as something to be celebrated, with wall murals as an example. Together, these three pieces of literature underscore the importance of a culture of belonging that students experience when engaged in the learning process (Dewsbury et al., 2022; Faas et al., 2018; Leithwood, 2021).

Culturally Responsive Community Advocacy and Engagement

In addition to creating an equity-focused culture and climate within the school community, culturally responsive leaders recognize the significance of community advocacy and engagement in promoting educational equity (Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally responsive leadership extends beyond the school's boundaries and extends its reach to address systemic inequities (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Culturally responsive leadership frameworks emphasize that leaders benefit from collaborating with stakeholders in democratic processes (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016; Santamaría, 2014). According to Leithwood's (2021) meta-analysis of equity-oriented leaders, strong leaders create authentic school-home-community partnerships that drive toward student success. Results indicate that improving equity in schools requires leaders to forge strong bonds between schools and communities fostered through quality communication (Leithwood, 2021).

Green (2015) studied how leaders effectively built a shared vision for their schools by connecting closely with the community to understand the schooling that families desired for their children. Santamaría (2014) contributes, adding that leaders should use methods of group consensus and co-constructed decision-making while honoring all constituents, especially marginalized constituents. Finally, leaders who deeply listen to stakeholders in democratic ways as highlighted by Green (2015) and Santamaría (2014) and commit to community voices can begin to decolonize their leadership practices towards justice and equity (Khalifa et al., 2019).

'Culturally Responsive Leadership' Conclusion

Scholars criticize colorblind leadership frameworks and respond by producing equity-focused leadership frameworks. Culturally responsive leadership, one of these equity-focused leadership frameworks, promotes equitable educational outcomes for all students. It encompasses many dimensions, including culturally responsive critical self-reflection, culturally responsive instructional and transformational leadership, a focus on climate and culture, and community advocacy and engagement.

Through a review of literature on these four key strands, it is evident that effective leaders embrace diversity, challenge exclusionary policies and behaviors, and prioritize collaboration and communication with all stakeholders. Moreover, leaders who engage in ongoing self-reflection, learning, and growth are likely to develop the cultural competence and humility required for effective, culturally responsive leadership. In doing so, they build schools that are inclusive, supportive, and empowering for all students, regardless of their background or identity. As leaders continue to work towards more equitable educational systems, a crucial priority lies in developing and supporting culturally responsive central office leaders committed to creating environments that value and honor all diverse strengths, experiences, and perspectives.

Conclusion

The literature review draws upon research on best practices in central office leadership and culturally responsive leadership. This literature exploration identifies a gap in understanding culturally responsive central office leaders, as much of the literature related to culturally responsive leadership focuses on the school leader. Therefore, this study attempted to address this gap by understanding the best practices of instructionally focused, culturally responsive central office leaders. The next chapter details the methodology of this study.

Chapter III: Methodology

The study sought to understand the best practices of instructionally focused, culturally responsive central office leaders. In other words, this study sought to identify the approaches and practices central office leaders use to implement culturally responsive leadership practices. To understand the study's methodology, it is important to remain grounded in this study's conceptual framework, which integrated scholarship from culturally responsive leadership with the best practices of central office leaders.

Chapter II highlighted the need for culturally responsive central office leaders (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). While scholars identified characteristics of a culturally responsive school leader (Khalifa et al., 2016), and what constitutes a highly effective central office leader (Grove, 2002; Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010; Mattheis, 2017; Roegman, 2020; Stosich, 2020; Wong et al., 2020), there remains a gap of how central office leaders use culturally responsive leadership practices (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018).

Focusing on this gap, this study aimed to contribute to the existing literature by studying how effective central office leaders utilize culturally responsive leadership. The conceptual framework was the foundation for studying the intersection between culturally responsive leadership and the best practices of central office leaders. The research sought to provide valuable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in educational leadership. It aimed to enhance understanding of how central office leaders can drive equitable and inclusive educational environments through culturally responsive practices.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study framed the underpinnings of a culturally responsive central office leader, exploring the key assumption that highly effective culturally responsive

central office leaders use a combination of culturally responsive leadership practices and best practices of central office leadership to yield highly impactful processes and products.

Visual Representation of Conceptual Framework

Within the conceptual framework presented, culturally responsive leadership comprises four converging themes: critical self-reflection, instruction and transformational leadership, culture and climate, and community advocacy and engagement. As discussed in the previous chapters, the CRSL Framework (Khalifa et al., 2016) agrees on the importance of leaders critically self-reflecting on their identities, developing culturally responsive teachers, creating and sustaining a culturally responsive workplace culture and climate, and sustaining community advocacy and engagement. With best practices of central office leadership, four themes funnel together, namely, joint work with principals, instructionally coaching and consulting principals, networking schools, and policy advocacy. Together, these two funnels intertwine to constitute a culturally responsive central office leader.

Although culturally responsive leadership and best practices of central office leaders may initially appear unrelated because culturally responsive leadership seems to happen in schools while best practices of central office leaders happen in central office, the two concepts interact with one another. The assumed connection between culturally responsive leadership and best practices of central office leaders lies in the shared goal of promoting equitable outcomes for all students. These culturally responsive leadership practices enhance the overall support central office leaders provide schools in their efforts to improve student outcomes.

The study explored the connections between these two frameworks to describe a potential framework for the best practices of a culturally responsive, instructionally focused central office leader. This study tested the assumption that central office leaders who embrace culturally responsive practices can better address the unique needs and challenges faced by diverse student populations. The design of

the study explored the assumption that leaders can foster a more equitable educational system to support the success of all students.
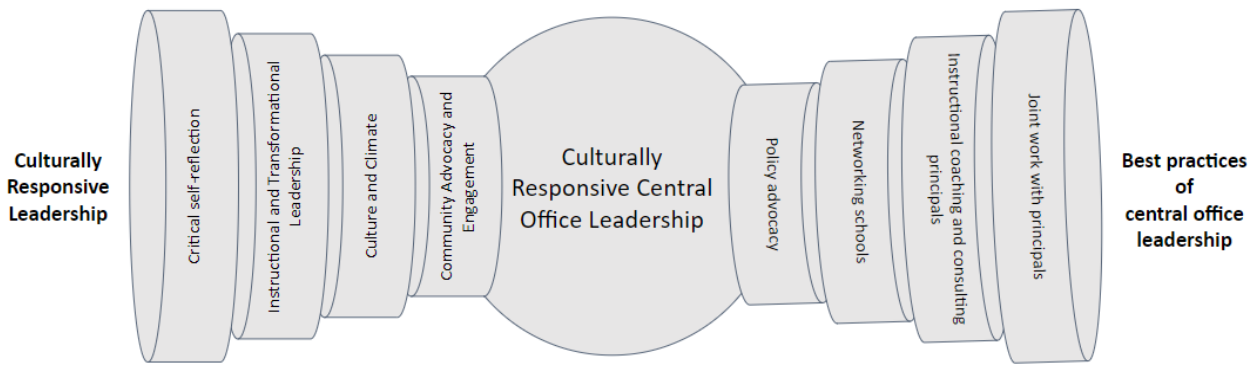
Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework

Connections between Culturally Responsive Leadership and Best Practices of Central Office Leaders

A mapping of the crossover connections between components of the conceptual framework can be found in Table 2. This study rested upon assumed connections between culturally responsive leadership and the best practices of central office leaders. Within the three best practices of joint work, coaching and consulting, and networking schools, central office leaders enact critical self-reflection, instructional and transformational leadership practices, and practices that cultivate a culturally responsive culture and climate. Additionally, when exercising the best practice of policy advocacy, central office leaders implement critical self-reflection alongside cultivating a culturally responsive culture and climate with community advocacy and engagement.

Table 2.

Intersections Between the Best Practices of Central Office Leaders with Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices

Best Practices of Central Office Leaders	Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices

Joint work with principals	• Culturally Responsive Critical Self-reflection • Culturally Responsive Instructional and Transformational Leadership • Culturally Responsive Culture and Climate
Instructionally coaching and consulting principals	• Culturally Responsive Critical Self-reflection • Culturally Responsive Instructional and Transformational Leadership • Culturally Responsive Culture and Climate
Networking schools	• Culturally Responsive Critical Self-reflection • Culturally Responsive Instructional and Transformational Leadership • Culturally Responsive Culture and Climate
Policy advocacy	• Culturally Responsive Critical Self-reflection • Culturally Responsive Culture and Climate • Culturally Responsive Community Advocacy and Engagement

Research Design

This study followed a qualitative case study approach, as this approach aligned with the research questions and subquestions that sought to understand participants' use of central office leadership best practices intertwined with culturally responsive leadership. Agee (2009) states that qualitative research questions invite exploration and discovery into a phenomena or event. This study was a narrative case study, aiming to understand the lived experiences of participants as they work through phenomena (Hays & Singh, 2012). In this study, I examined the personal experiences and leadership practices of culturally responsive central office leaders, uncovering the high-level trends across participants as they engaged with culturally responsive leadership practices at a division-level.

Research Questions

As noted previously, the study gathered data in support of two research questions and four subquestions:

1. Research Question 1: How do participants define effective central office leadership?

2. Research Question 2: What culturally responsive best practices are demonstrated by central office leaders?

i. Subquestion 1: How do central office leaders engage in joint work with principals?

ii. Subquestion 2: How do central office leaders coach and consult principals for instructional improvement?

iii. Subquestion 3: How do central office leaders create a network amongst schools?

iv. Subquestion 4: How do central office leaders advocate for policy?

The primary research questions framed an understanding of what central office leaders consider defining features of central office leadership and culturally responsive leadership practices. The subquestions examined the different components of an effective central office leader, through their use of best practices. Table 3 describes the purpose for how each research question and subquestion serves towards the purpose of the study.

Table 3.

Purpose of Research Questions and Subquestions

Research Questions and Subquestions	Purpose
Question 1: How do participants define effective central office leadership?	RQ1 examined how central office leaders conceptualize a culturally responsive leader, providing the broad framing for understanding what constitutes a culturally responsive central office leader, because the lens of what constitutes as best practice of culturally responsive central office leadership can shift based on context. Building a frame of reference brought clarity towards deeper meanings of leadership practices.
Question 2: What culturally responsive best practices are demonstrated by central office leaders?	RQ2 explored what the participants view as leadership best practices demonstrated by culturally responsive central office leaders. In the first interview, I leveraged RQ2 to explore how central office leaders engage in critical self-reflection, for example, how leaders use a critical lens towards their self-reflection. Throughout the second and third interviews, I combined RQ2 alongside each subquestion to examine the intersection between central office best

	practice and culturally responsive leadership.
Subquestion 1: How do central office leaders engage in joint work with principals?	Subquestion 1 examined the best practices that central office leaders use when engaging in joint work alongside school leaders and staff, for example, establishing trust alongside schools, helping schools identify a problem of practice, etc.
Subquestion 2: How do central office leaders coach and consult principals for instructional improvement?	Subquestion 2 examined the best practices that central office leaders use when supporting culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, for example, how they step into the role of instructional leader, how central office leaders oversee culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, etc.
Subquestion 3: How do central office leaders create a network amongst schools?	Subquestion 3 examined the leadership practices that central office leaders prioritze when fostering a culturally responsive network of different schools across the division, for example, collaborating within central office, collaborating with schools, identifying common goals, etc.
Subquestion 4: How do central office leaders advocate for policy?	Subquestion 4 examines the leadership practices that central office leaders use when fostering culturally responsive policy advocacy, for example, how they collaborate with external stakeholders, ways they work in partnership with families in the community, etc.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred for four weeks during March 2024. Interviews and document analysis were used to understand three central office leaders at one division site. The study had two stages, the first included nine total interviews, in which three participants were interviewed three separate times. Two out of the three participants scheduled their interviews to occur at a cadence of once per week, while one participant chose to be interviewed once during Week 2, then twice during Week 4. The second stage included document analysis of resources shared after each of the three interviews, such as mission and vision statements from the content area program overseen by that participant, coaching protocol templates, completed coaching protocols with answers provided by school leaders and staff,

and personal leadership strengths finder results, all which informed their best practices as culturally responsive central office leaders.

Sampling

The first step towards sampling involved selecting the division to study, then selecting the population from which to sample, and then selecting the participants for the study. Purposeful sampling was most suitable for this study, as it allowed the study to capture the diverse nature of the sample population (Maxwell, 2012). I established criteria for selecting both the population and the participants within the population.

The division, RCPS, was chosen through purposive sampling, as it published a public-facing strategic plan that made explicit connections to culturally responsive leadership. As mentioned in Chapter I, the division published a five-year strategic plan, focused on the mission to produce 21st-century learners that will become productive citizens in society, foster a dynamic, safe, and nurturing learning environment, partner with the school community for the benefit of students and staff, strengthen the school division by employing highly qualified and diverse staff, effectively and efficiently manage capital and human resources, and effectively communicate to increase community investment. RCPS met the sampling criteria of adopting a division-wide strategic plan that illustrated goals and measures related to the best practices of central office leaders and culturally responsive leadership.

There exist many intersections between the best practices of central office leaders, culturally responsive leadership, and the mission for RCPS. The overlap between my study's focus and the division's focus on the culturally responsive best practices of instructionally focused central office leaders, outlined in the strategic plan, allowed for RCPS to be an appropriate fit for the study. The selected division for the study met the criteria of being committed to culturally responsive leadership as identified in the strategic plan. With this designation, positive deviants of culturally responsive leadership could be identified.

When looking at the mission in strategic plan alongside the research shared in Chapter II, connections exist when comparing the best practices of central office leaders to culturally responsive leadership. For example, the notion of producing 21st century learners suggests that central office leaders, who represent RCPS as subject-matter experts in content areas, exercise their instructional leadership by coaching and consulting with school leaders and staff in pedagogical shifts towards current best practices in related content areas. Additionally, the notion of fostering a dynamic, safe, and nurturing learning environment comes as the product of central office leaders supporting the cultivation of a culturally responsive climate and culture, both within central office and within schools. Furthermore, partnering with the school community relates to the best practice of central office leaders engaging in joint work alongside schools. Next, the idea of strengthening the school division by employing highly qualified and diverse staff relates to how central office leaders contribute to a culturally responsive climate and culture in the ways that they hire for, retain, and celebrate diversity within their teams. Lastly, effective communication to increase community investment implies that central office leaders partner with community stakeholders when engaging in policy advocacy.

RCPS recently experienced a change in superintendents. With the new change in leadership came changes in division-wide operating procedures. For example, RCPS adopted a division-wide focus on continuous improvement through Improvement Science. This continuous improvement approach departed the division away from an older RCPS practice called academic review, where schools who showed risk of not meeting state-mandated testing measures received mandatory visits from multiple central office leaders for compliance purposes.

When selecting the population to study, only RCPS central office leaders were considered. After examining the public facing RCPS central office organizational charts and engaging in an exploratory conversation with the Director of the Curriculum and Instruction Department, I decided to focus my target population on all central office leaders working within the Curriculum and Instruction Department

and the Special Education Department. Ensuring that all participants worked within either of these two departments guaranteed that the data revealed leadership practices related to instructional leadership at the division level.

All three participants fell within the age range set by the study. Participants selected for the study ranged from 22-65 years of age. Ensuring that all participants ranged between 22-65 years of age excluded participants who have yet to receive their higher education degree, which most central office leaders receive by the age of 22, and excluded participants retired from full-time service in public education, which most central office leaders reach by the minimum age of 65. Hence, the age range guaranteed that participants possessed a degree from a higher education institute and currently worked full-time for RCPS.

Within the population, I targeted instructionally focused, mid-level central office leaders. Mid-level central office leaders function as a district's middle-managing brokers, playing a significant role in how school leaders both understand and enact district reform policies by translating policies from senior-level leaders and state departments and supporting schools with applying said policies into meaningful practice (Burch & Spillane, 2004). To be successful brokers, Burch and Spillane (2004) suggest that mid-level central office leaders engage school staff in two-way dialogue, seek opportunities to listen to school leaders and staff, value and learn from school staff's expertise and experience with reforms, and demonstrate subject-matter expertise in teaching and learning.

To target mid-level central office leaders in RCPS, I sampled the specific roles of Educational Specialists, Coordinators, and Directors. Educational Specialists are at the entry level of the central office organizational chart. Educational Specialists develop the curriculum, professional development, and policy plans that schools enact. Educational Specialists do not manage, supervise, nor conduct performance evaluations. They collaborate closely with school staff, namely, teachers. Coordinators are in the middle of the central office organizational chart. Coordinators hire, manage, supervise, and

evaluate the performance of Educational Specialists. They collaborate closely with school leaders and can work alongside school staff. Directors are at the top of the central office organizational chart. Directors hire, manage, supervise, and evaluate the performance of Coordinators. They work closely with the division's senior leadership team and can work alongside school leaders and staff.   I excluded the division leaders who rank above Director and who do not work within either the Curriculum and Instruction Department or the Special Education Department. This meant that the roles of Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Chief Academic Officer, etc. were excluded. Incidentally, all three participants held the role of Coordinator in RCPS' central office during the interview and document collection process. All three also happened to work within the Curriculum and Instruction Department. More can be explored about these participants in Table 4.

These three participants happened to vary in their years of experience. Their specializations related to their subject-matter expertise also varied. Having participants who possessed different specializations and experiences enriched the data's diversity. The data's diversity allowed me, as the researcher, to draw compelling commonalities across different experiences and specializations, reported in the findings from Chapter IV and recommendations from Chapter V.

Table 4.

Description of Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Years Served in Education	Racial Identity	Role	Department
Ms. Mot	Millennial	~10 years	White	Coordinator	Curriculum and Instruction
Ms. Hai	Generation X	~20 years	White		
Ms. Ba	Generation X	~27 years	Black		

Recruitment Procedures

Before conducting my research, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Social and Behavioral Sciences approved this study. Once approval was secured, a purposive sampling approach was used to select three participants in the RCPS central office. To sample the target population, I asked the Director of the Curriculum and Instruction Department to email all central office leaders within the Curriculum and Instruction and Special Education Departments with a request for anyone on the email list to complete a confidential, optional survey. This survey asked respondents to nominate and/or self-identify participants for my study focused on exploring the best practices of culturally responsive central office leaders. When the survey deadline passed, I examined the results from the survey and selected the three names that appeared most frequently. Each participant received an email from me, the lead researcher. In this email communication, I notified the participant of their nomination and invited the person to participate in my study. I clearly expressed the study's purpose, requirements, and expectations by attaching the Informed Consent Agreement (Appendix B) and asked the participant to return, via email, the Informed Consent Form with their signature if they consented to participate in the study. I offered to field any questions from potential participants through phone call, email correspondence, and/or Zoom meeting. I reminded the participants that participation is voluntary, and results will remain confidential. In reporting the findings (Chapter IV) and recommendations (Chapter V), I used pseudonyms and removed all identifiable information from the data set that connected participants to their identities.

Interviews

In the first stage of the study, I interviewed each of the three participants using the Interview Protocol specifically designed for the study (see Appendix A). The method of serial interviewing proves to be effective at gaining deep insights about complex or ill-defined issues, as compared to conducting

one interview with many participants, when exploring change over time, and when working with critical, key informants (Read, 2018).

Before conducting the study's interviews for data collection, three pilot interviews were conducted with one sample participant, an individual who did not belong to the group of three selected participants for the study. The pilot interviews served to help me test and refine the interview questions for clarity and ensure the effectiveness of the Interview Protocol. The pilot data was not used for data analysis in this study. After refinement, I conducted three interviews for each of the three participants. Interview questions elicited stories from participants when prompted to reflect on their journey of becoming a central office leader (first interview), their joint work with schools and how they coach and consult school leaders and staff (second interview), and how they network schools and advocate for policies (third interview).

I conducted each interview virtually using Zoom, with participants' consent. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with participant permission granted at the beginning of each interview, using the Zoom recording and transcription feature. The transcripts were saved on a secure device, using Microsoft Excel with password protection to ensure data security and confidentiality. I saved the Zoom recording on the Zoom cloud feature. At the beginning of each of the three interviews, participants were reminded that participation is voluntary, and results will remain anonymous. The participants could change their participant's name and/or turn off their web camera as an added layer of privacy protection.

Document Collection

In the second stage of the study, I collected documents from participants. At the end of Interviews 2 and 3, a concluding question asked each participant to share any artifacts that would give evidence to any stories that they shared during the interview process. Example documents shared included mission and vision statements from the content area overseen by that participant, coaching

protocol templates, completed coaching protocols with answers provided by school leaders and staff,

and personal leadership strengths finder results. I saved the records of the document collection on my

personal device with password protection to ensure data security and confidentiality.

Table 5.

Research Questions and Subquestions with Data Sources

Research Questions and Subquestions	Data Sources
Research Question 1: How do participants define effective central office leadership?	Semi-structured interviews and document analysis allowed for understanding the thought processes when participants defined effective central office leadership
Research Question 2: What culturally responsive best practices are demonstrated by central office leaders?	Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe the best practices of culturally responsive central office leaders. Document analysis examined the artifacts that supported their thinking
Subquestion 1: How do central office leaders engage in joint work with principals?	Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe how culturally responsive central office leaders engage in joint work alongside school leaders and staff. Document analysis examines the artifacts that supported their thinking
Subquestion 2: How do central office leaders coach and consult principals for instructional improvement?	Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe how culturally responsive central office leaders instructionally coach and consult school leaders and staff. Document analysis examined the artifacts that supported their thinking
Subquestion 3: How do central office leaders create a network amongst schools?	Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe how culturally responsive central office leaders create a division-wide network across different schools. Document analysis examines the artifacts that supported their thinking
Subquestion 4: How do central office leaders advocate for policy?	Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe how culturally responsive central office leaders effectively advocate for policy. Document analysis examines the artifacts that

	supported their thinking

Data Analysis

I used thematic coding to examine interview and document data, which supported my ability to identify themes, patterns, and uncover meaning (Check & Schutt, 2012; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Prior to any interviews, I created an *a priori* codebook based on the conceptual framework. The *a priori* codes emerged from the research-based best practices of central office leaders and culturally responsive leadership. I entered the interview transcripts into MaxQDA and then deductively coded data using *a priori* codes. During this coding process, I also dynamically established emergent codes that captured themes and phenomena not accounted for within the pre-established *a priori* codebook. I added the emergent codes within the *a priori* codebook, with an asterisk next to a code noting the status of emergent codes (see Appendix D). The emergent codes reflected key tenets within the conceptual framework not captured within the *a priori* codebook. I used the same codes across the interviews within the document analysis portion of the study. Throughout the data analysis coding process, I recorded analytical memos to keep track of my data analysis process and to reflect on my role as a researcher within the qualitative nature of this study. The combination of interview analysis and document analysis provided a comprehensive approach to address the two research questions and four subquestions. By gathering first-hand perspectives through interviews and examining supporting documents, I developed a deeper understanding of the best practices of culturally responsive central office leaders.

Researcher Bias

I, the researcher, identify as a first-generation, Vietnamese American, cisgender woman. My role as an instructionally focused central office leader in another division placed me in the population of participants. It is crucial to recognize I possessed my own bias as a central office leader of color. My personal orientation leaned towards progressive leadership that critiqued systems of power.

The problem of practice in understanding culturally responsive central office leaders was unquestionably related to my personal leadership journey in the K-12 education sector. While this research study sought to understand culturally responsive central office leaders, this study also represented my mindset shift. Within my time serving in central office, I saw numerous central office leaders make decisions when faced with equity challenges, and some decisions seemed to center colorblind ideology and did not center culturally responsive leadership practices. This study allowed me to shift from viewing these leaders as forces outside of my control to objective data, which informed my developing worldview.

To mitigate researcher bias, the conceptual framework allowed the data analysis to remain grounded in theory and literature rather than steeped within my personal worldview (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). The conceptual framework provided an anchor point to check reality on my perceptions of the data, and to ensure that my coding and analysis remained within the scope of the conceptual framework.

Conclusion

Advancing a conceptual framework that explores the best practices of culturally responsive central office leaders, this study implemented a narrative single case study to build the knowledge base around leaders' navigation of improving teaching and learning that addresses diverse students' needs and backgrounds. Within the case study, interviews and document analysis were combined to better understand leaders' utilization of culturally responsive best practice in central office leadership. The next chapter details the findings from the conducted study.

Chapter IV: Findings

This study examined how instructionally focused central office leaders utilize culturally responsive leadership through their use of best practices within central office. This study explored how central office leaders play a key role in fostering culturally responsive leadership, pursuant of improved teaching and learning, within divisions. A qualitative narrative case study framed this study to gather data from semi-structured interviews and document analysis. To better understand how central office leaders employ culturally responsive leadership, this study addressed two central research questions: (1) 'How do participants define effective central office leadership?' and (2) 'What best practices are demonstrated by central office leaders?' Four subquestions further explored how central office leaders engage in joint work, instructional improvement, networking schools, and policy advocacy through culturally responsive leadership.

This report of findings begins with the background stories of all three interviewees, as I had the privilege of learning about each interviewees' life experiences in the first interview. After this grounding summary, I present the background stories from each of the three participants, then I report this study's findings, organized by research questions and subquestions. By progressing through research questions and subquestions, this analysis attempts to better understand how central office leaders engage in culturally responsive joint work (RQ2 and subquestion 1), facilitate culturally responsive coaching and consulting for instructional improvement (RQ2 and subquestion 2), create a culturally responsive division-wide network amongst schools (RQ2 and subquestion 3), and advocate for culturally responsive policy (RQ2 and subquestion 4). I used a qualitative research method, called serial interviewing, where I interviewed three central office leaders three separate times as well as conducted document analysis. I now share each participants' background story.

Background Stories

Background of Ms. Mot

Ms. Mot, who presented as a Millennial White woman, rose quickly through the ranks of RCPS, from a teacher to a central office coordinator. Despite early academic struggles and a turbulent childhood marked by a verbally abusive parent, Ms. Mot's resilience fueled her determination to reshape education in ways that were missing during her own school years. Though relatively young compared to other central office leaders, Ms. Mot held many accolades that demonstrated early and highly regarded success in her career, such as obtaining doctorate in educational leadership and winning a division-wide award for teaching excellence.

She recounted how adverse she felt about her childhood schooling, sharing that "I had zero desire to go into education. Typically, you hear about how their mom was an educator, their grandma was an educator. That was not the case for me. I actually was a student who barely passed high school." She was a child of divorced parents, so she recalled having a tumultuous childhood, being raised by a single mom with three other siblings. She had a verbally abusive parent who told her that she was destined to be a failure and related this childhood experience to her current ability to empathize with students who shared similar experiences to her own.

While attending community college, her aunt approached her about becoming an educator, and she recalled that "I literally laughed at her face. Because I'm not like the pristine child that did not have great grades and hated education like I was not reading a book." But after thinking about it, Ms. Mot realized that she could go into education to change it for the better in ways that she wished education looked like for her as a disengaged student.

When prompted to recall any influences on her current leadership, Ms. Mot recalled that she learned what not to do from dysfunctional leaders, noting that "I didn't have great leaders. However, I always use that for my strengths and leadership because I always could identify what I didn't want to

do…So I didn't have the best leaders to go off of as an influence." She then recalled a memory from her college teaching professor, who "...completely breathed life into me. She saw me as a leader when I didn't see myself as a leader just because I had already been broken down from childhood stuff. She noted that "I honestly feel as if people are born with leadership skills and traits." According to a third-party leadership strengths finder assessment, her leadership skills included organizational management, being a learner, being an activator, achievement, and individualization.

Background of Ms. Hai

Ms. Hai, who presented as a Generation X White woman, spent her 20-year career with RCPS, transitioning from teacher to central office coordinator. Although she initially pursued a different content area in higher education, her shift to teaching a new subject area ignited her passion for meaningful, student-centered instruction. After teaching for a few years, Ms. Hai was promoted to the specialist position of the department that she currently oversees as coordinator. She served as the specialist for four years before being promoted to her current coordinator position. Influenced by early leadership support, Ms. Hai embraced her role as a teacher leader developer, focusing on strategic thinking and instructional improvement.

She explained childhood memories of being proficient at the content area that she currently oversees, yet never understood the conceptual understanding behind that content area because she described that "...no one really explained it." She described traditional models of education in her elementary and middle school years and recalled having a transformative high school teacher who helped her to see that this content area could be relevant and situated in real-world experiences. She recollected how higher education institutions helped her to see how to teach this content area in a way that was meaningful and engaging to the students. She noted that "A lot of people want to teach the way they've been taught" and mentioned that this shifting of pedagogical practice is the hard and necessary work of a central office leader.

When asked about her leadership journey, Ms. Hai remembered an administrator who helped her to see that she could, in fact, teach the content area that she did not initially go to higher education schooling for, recalling that her principal at the time told her that "...*you know what, a good teacher could teach the phone book and make it relevant*." This principal saw teacher leadership qualities in Ms. Hai that she did not even see in herself as a first-year teacher. When she was approached to become an official teacher leader for the initial school that she taught at, she soon realized that there was such a thing as teacher leadership. Her leadership skills include strategicness, time management, being a teacher leader developer, organizational management, being a big picture thinker, and being someone who also pays attention to intricate details.

Background of Ms. Ba

Ms. Ba, who presented as a Generation X Black woman, dedicated 27 years to education, serving in three divisions across the same state. As the first in her family to earn multiple higher education degrees, she embodies perseverance and leadership in every step of her career. She began as a classroom teacher, teaching various grades and subjects, before advancing into teacher leadership roles, such as academic coach and division lead teacher. For the past ten years, she held the position of coordinator in RCPS.

Reflecting on her childhood in a small, rural town, Ms. Ba recalled experiencing racism, particularly in extracurricular activities. While she was an honors student and active in school, she noticed the limited opportunities for Black girls to advance on her school's varsity cheerleading squad. When she successfully made the squad, it was only after community pressure led to the implementation of an objective assessment system. This experience deeply shaped her commitment to equity and fair opportunities in her work as a leader.

She described going to her undergraduate studies at a university within the same state that she lived in. She found affinity with a group of other Black students at this university. She remembered

seldom experiencing exclusion or racism at the higher education institute, which she attributed to her studies in the liberal arts. However, she explained that she saw her roommate, a Black woman, who had to "jump through hoops" and "prove herself" in her field of interest, engineering.

When asked to identify a core memory related to her leadership journey, Ms. Ba noted that she worries that her racial and gendered status as a Black woman prevents her from being seen as a legitimate leader in her division, where she must work harder than others to be seen as a leader worth listening to, noting that "I've been in rooms where someone of a different ethnicity or a different race has said pretty much the same thing that I said. It was received well by that person, but I just said the exact same thing." Her leadership skills included being flexible, organizational management, coaching skills, and collaboration.

Findings

Negative Memories Promoted Critical Self-Reflection

This chapter's first major finding skips over RQ1 and connects with RQ2, related to the culturally best practices of central office leaders. The rationale for beginning with RQ2 can be explained by the focus on critical self-reflection as a natural introduction to the Interview Protocol (Appendix C). Outlined in the conceptual framework, critical self-reflection represents a key best practice of culturally responsive central office leaders. Evoking participants' critical self-reflection involved eliciting stories about participants' histories to make visible a sense of critical consciousness related to their experiences that influenced their orientation towards culturally responsive central office leadership. This study's Interview Protocol began with collecting stories from participants' pasts to certain themes about critical self-reflection while also building trust amongst participants and the interviewer. Findings suggest that negative memories made up the landscape of their critical self-reflection. The following section walks through the data that supports how memories of trauma, disengaged schooling, proving naysayers

wrong, and learning what not to do from dysfunctional leaders all represent markers of critical self-reflection for these three participants.

Trauma as a Marker for Critical Self-Reflection. Throughout the first interview, the participants' responses illustrated how negative memories related to trauma promoted critical self-reflection. Childhood trauma, whether from a dysfunctional family member or overt racism, seemed to be an important memory for two out of the three participants interviewed. These traumatic memories influenced how these two women critically self-reflected on the educational journey from childhood to adulthood. For example, Ms. Mot was a child of divorced parents and remembered that "I had a very verbally abusive parent who literally told me like you're destined to be a failure." This parental figure had a massive, negative impact on Ms. Mot's life. A later section in this chapter discusses how this memory from Ms. Mot contributed to the insight of proving naysayers wrong as motivation for leadership, but it is important to note that when prompted to critically self-reflect on her leadership journey, Ms. Mot easily remembered painful scars from her past.

Similarly, Ms. Ba remembered moments of racism back from her childhood. In this realm, trauma from family and trauma from racism represent negative memories that influence one's leadership. Ms. Ba shared "In high school, the high school cheerleading team, often when it was time to move from JV to varsity a lot of the varsity team would always be White with maybe one or two Black students." As the only woman of color in the participant sampling, the evidence of racism in her past and how it deeply impacted her view of herself as a leader surfaced. Ms. Ba made mention that she was born and raised in a rural Virginia town with a historical tradition of segregation that contributed to the modern-day racism felt in her childhood.

These painful memories from the past shaped who these women were today as central office leaders. When prompted to share about how their identity(s) became a turning point for their leadership journey, participants made the choice to critically self-reflect on negative memories from the

past. Negative memories seemed to shape the leader's motivation to combat the systems and structures that made those hurtful experiences possible. Moving away from childhood trauma but remaining within the same realm of negative memories, participants described disengaged schooling as another marker for critical self-reflection, discussed in the next section.

Disengaged Schooling as a Marker for Critical Self-Reflection. When prompted to share how their educational journey influenced their leadership journey, two out of the three central office leaders expressed feelings of disengagement in their childhood schooling. Interestingly, early experiences in the content area that they now oversaw were quite disengaging while they were in school. For example, Ms. Hai reflected on early memories of disengaging teaching practices in the content area she now oversees for the division in her current role. There is a motivation within her leadership to do the exact opposite of what was done to her. She noted that "During elementary, [content area] was a bunch of stuff to memorize. It wasn't fun. I was good at memorizing, but I didn't understand anything behind it. We were just doing workbook pages, and that's all I remember." Her leadership reveals that Ms. Hai works towards making her content area engaging for students in RCPS to combat the disengaging methods taught to her as a child.

Similarly, Ms. Mot and Ms. Hai remembered school as not a fun place to learn and develop. Unique to Ms. Mot, her teachers did not inspire her to learn for the joy of learning, rather, they taught in lecture-styled methods and did not engage Ms. Mot or any of her classmates during childhood. She described how deeply harmful practices impacted her life trajectory to the point where she could not successfully apply to colleges and universities:

> As a child, I had no ambitions, grades were poor, teachers did not tap into my strengths or my learning styles and ability. So, it kind of dismissed me as a whole child. And so, I got out of high school and I obviously couldn't get into college, and I just started taking some courses.

Both examples from these leaders exemplified a marked feeling of disengagement when presented with sit-and-get forms of education. Ms. Mot's and Ms. Hai's teachers did not make the learning relevant or authentic to them. Both leaders described a current focus on active, engaged learning in their central office leadership because they were motivated to lead for the opposite of their disengaging experiences in childhood, which will be explored in subsequent sections of this chapter. Moving deeper into negative memories, some participants described a redemptive quality to their leadership, attempting to prove unsupportive people wrong through their leadership. The next section explores how proving naysayers wrong can stand as another marker for critical self-reflection.

Proving Naysayers Wrong as a Marker for Critical Self-Reflection. Building on the general idea that negative memories promoted leaders' critical self-reflection, a latent theme within the interviews involved proving naysayers wrong. Two out of the three leaders interviewed mentioned self-actualizing their leadership, spurred by people who did not believe they could be successful. This theme connects with both personal and professional memories.

During the 2020-2021 COVID-19 global pandemic, RCPS students learned in a virtual environment. Teaching students in a virtual environment posed to be less-than-ideal as students faced many barriers that prevented them from learning the curricular content, including distractions in the home setting and a lack of hands-on, active learning over Zoom. After the year of virtual learning during the pandemic, students took the state-wide mandated test in Ms. Hai's content area, and she noted that the scores were poor, stating "It was bad. Everyone looked at me, and they were like, did you see the scores?" She described the degree of pessimism that people expressed when looking at the low scores. She shared that:

> It was kind of like this, 'Oh, we're not gonna recover.' *Oh yes, we are. Yeah, we are*. And so, you
>
> know, I think that that shaped me more than anything. It could have made me just run, saying I

give up, but instead, I think it just motivated me like, no, we're gonna get back to where we

were, we're gonna be better than ever.

External doubt from others informed Ms. Hai's leadership journey. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a

hunger in Ms. Hai to improve student learning outcomes, despite the people who did not believe in Ms.

Hai to overcome this daunting challenge. She shared that the biggest contributing factor to her

leadership self-actualization was "People telling me that I can't do something. That motivates me. I was

like, *okay, watch me.* I'm gonna work and get the work done."

Like Ms. Hai, Ms. Mot also had her number of naysayers trying to dismiss her abilities. As noted

in previous sections, Ms. Mot had a tumultuous childhood filled with family members and teachers who

did not believe in her capabilities. Instead of allowing the negativity to consume her, Ms. Mot decided to

fight back against the narrative that some children are doomed to fail in life. Ms. Mot noted a strong

position of what she did not want education to look like, based on her own disengaged, lecture-based

schooling:

I decided that day my goal was to change education. I wanted to be a change agent in the K-12

public arena. I realized that it [education] doesn't have to be sit-and-get, and it doesn't have to

be, you know, lecture style. We have to know our kids and the experiences that they're going

through and accept where they are and who they are in order for them to see themselves, be

successful, and have careers in the future.

Ms. Mot believed that she could prove her naysayers wrong by becoming successful as an adult, which

she eventually accomplished by becoming an award-winning teacher and getting promoted to her

current leadership position in the RCPS central office. Ms. Mot also believed that she could champion

students who similarly did not have adults in their lives who believed in them. Ms. Hai's and Ms. Mot's

desire to prove others wrong aligns with fostering culturally responsive leadership, highlighting how

they aim to create inclusive spaces spurred by personal experiences with exclusion. These two central

office leaders recalled moments of motivation in working to prove negative assumptions as incorrect. This segues into the last section nestled under RQ2 findings that support negative memories and markers for critical self-reflection. The concluding section explores how central office leaders define their leadership journey through learning what *not* to do as leaders by learning from dysfunctional leaders in their professional lives. Learning from dysfunctional leaders further shaped the participants' critical self-reflection and desire to model more inclusive, empathetic leadership styles.

Learning What Not to Do from Dysfunctional Leaders as a Marker for Critical Self-Reflection. Stemming off the idea of negative memories as markers for critical self-reflection, some participants discussed their leadership journey forming from negative memories of working for dysfunctional leaders. When asked to consider the greatest influences of their leadership journey, two out of the three participants mentioned that they could easily recall learning how they wished not to lead from dysfunctional, uninspiring leaders.

Ms. Mot experienced significant trauma as a child in her family and schooling, and unfortunately, she could not recall many inspiring leaders in her adult life either. Ms. Mot noted that "I didn't have great leaders." Instead of allowing a lack of great leaders to impact her, she used the lessons learned to influence her leadership journey. She shared "However, I always use that for my strengths and leadership because I always could identify what I didn't want to do…So I didn't have the best leaders to go off of as an influence." Her lack of strong leadership role models pushed her to be more attuned to her staff's needs, orienting towards a leadership style that emphasizes empathy and engagement.

Ms. Ba also recalled uninspiring leaders who helped shape her leadership journey. Throughout her illustrious career as a teacher, teacher leader, and central office leader, Ms. Ba had many leaders with whom she worked for. During her time in schools, Ms. Ba worked with a less-than-inspiring principal who tended to delegate important tasks to other personnel in the building. Ms. Ba could remember that this principal helped her see what *not* to do when she became a leader:

I've worked with [a principal]; she was very much a delegator. Great person, nice person, but she was a delegator. So, I actually learned a lot of how to organize things, how systems and processes work because I was kind of thrown into the fire and had to figure it out. But at the same time, I also learned from her that's not how I wanted to lead.

Ms. Ba recounted how her past principal delegated important tasks for Ms. Ba to complete. One could possibly see this as a purposeful decision on the principal's part to build Ms. Ba's leadership capacity. Ms. Ba admitted that this era in her career allowed her to learn how to organize processes and to see issues from a systems lens. However, Ms. Ba remembered the frustration this delegating leadership practice evoked in her. The naming of "thrown into the fire" suggests that Ms. Ba's principal did not mentor Ms. Ba and instead assigned tasks to Ms. Ba without offering support. Hence, these leaders could easily recall bad memories from dysfunctional leaders when prompted to think through their leadership journey. Ms. Ba's experience with a principal who delegated tasks without proper mentorship shaped her leadership by helping her realize the importance of active support and guidance for her staff. As a result, she actively cultivates leadership capacity in others by providing structured support, ensuring that her team members develop without feeling overwhelmed or unsupported. This approach aligns with the culturally responsive leadership trait of fostering collective growth and empowerment.

Section Conclusion. Overall, the findings demonstrate that negative memories, such as trauma, disengaged schooling, proving naysayers wrong, and learning what not to do from dysfunctional leaders, played pivotal roles in shaping these leaders' critical self-reflection. These experiences not only informed their leadership journey but also spurred their commitment to culturally responsive leadership. By reflecting on the failures they witnessed, these leaders became advocates for a more inclusive, empathetic, and supportive approach in their own leadership practices. This redemptive quality in their leadership, driven by personal pain and frustration, underscores the powerful influence of negative memories in shaping leaders who are committed to fostering equitable and responsive educational

environments. Interestingly, the interview questions were posed neutrally, and yet, despite this

unbiased neutrality, all three leaders decided to lead the discussion towards negative memories,

revealing some redemptive qualities in their leadership spurred by experiences of pain and anguish.

The discussion on RQ2 informed how past experiences shaped these participants' leadership

journey. Moving forward into this study, I discuss RQ1, designed to answer what the participants

defined as effective central office leadership. I explore how these three participants collectively defined

central office leadership using a past to present lens, with the past state underscored by compliance and

the current state defined as supportive of school leaders and staff.

Shift from Educational Management to Educational Leadership

To further understand how participants defined effective central office leadership, I conducted

a cross-case analysis and reviewed the findings in alignment with RQ1. The responses suggested that

central office leaders see themselves as supportive, non-evaluative collaborators alongside school

leaders and staff, such as principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders.

Despite receiving interview questions prompted by their work with principals, all three participants

advocated that they collaborate with all school leaders and all school staff, not just principals alone. The

interviews focused on the perceptions of central office leaders; school leaders were not interviewed.

Consequently, the subsequent findings reflect the perspectives of central office leaders regarding their

leadership.

Throughout the interviews, the participants described a recent shift in perspective within RCPS.

In the past, school leaders and staff generally viewed central office as owning an evaluative position

over schools. There was fear that central office was coming to "get you" and catch schools in practices

that broke the "rules" being upheld by the division and the state. This negative central office reputation

emerged due to a long-established practice within RCPS, known as academic review. This practice

involved the deployment of numerous central office leaders to schools that were facing challenges in

meeting the accreditation standards set by state-mandated tests. Central office leaders were tasked to evaluate teaching and leading and correct any ineffective practices. This placed central office in a hierarchical relationship with schools, where they enforced schools to remain compliant with policies and regulations.

Certain actions took place in RCPS that allowed central office leaders to shift their relationships with schools, and the following sections discuss these actions. These actions include central office leaders being supportive of schools, non-evaluative, and collaborative with schools. All three of these actions helped RCPS shift school leaders' and staff's mindsets from a fearful relationship toward a collaborative relationship with central office leaders.

Central Office Leaders' Compliance-Based Reputation. Historically, central office leaders were perceived as compliance enforcers, primarily focused on ensuring schools adhered to regulations and policies. This 'gotcha' role was evident in discussions about the relationship between central office leaders and their collaborative efforts in schools. For instance, when asked to describe the dynamics between central office and schools, two participants highlighted a previous hierarchical approach to leadership at the division level. Ms. Mot described the traditional relationship that used to exist, sharing "And we shouldn't be seen as an *I gotcha*. It was always like an *I gotcha* situation, which doesn't help anybody like nobody's trying to improve when you feel you're in that vulnerable state." Indeed, Ms. Mot's commentary reveals that central office used to be seen as a 'gotcha', where central office would shame and correct any incorrect practices in schools. She then added:

> Administration felt that way as well. It was the culture of what it used to be. I was a teacher in
> this division, and I felt like I would have never contacted central office. And when they showed
> up, it was like, *holy cow, like everybody gets your ducks in a row*.

Ms. Mot's classroom experiences provide significant insights into the historical context of central office leadership. Her reluctance to seek assistance from central office leaders suggests a broader issue of a

culture in her school that viewed central office as compliance officers. "Getting your ducks in a row" implies that the reality of school practices did not align with central office's mission and vision for schools, so this dissonance had to be disguised by schools. Revealing the dissonance would result in some form of punishment felt by the schools.

Ms. Hai expressed that central office leaders are trying to shift the culture of how central office is viewed by school staff by stating they are "...trying to shift that narrative, right? Those people in the ivory tower. That's not what we want to be." Indeed, central office leaders work hard to dispel past, antiquated views on the function of central office. The imagery of "those people in the ivory tower" paints a picture of central office leaders as out-of-touch people in positions of power who do not understand the realities of schools. This is not what these participants want to be viewed as. These central office leaders expressed wanting to be seen as supportive, non-evaluative, and collaborative. However, despite these efforts to transform central office leadership, the past views of compliance still exist in some schools. For example, Ms. Hai recounted a funny, yet somewhat upsetting situation that resulted from a visit she had with a teacher by sharing "I went to a building to do an observation for a teacher who invited me in, and the rest of her grade level was like *she's not coming into our room is she?*" This anecdote depicts that some school staff still view central office as a 'gotcha'. Some school staff feel hesitant to trust central office leaders. Ms. Ba shared similar sentiments to Ms. Mot and Ms. Hai by stating "It can sometimes start a little bit like a *gotcha* because whenever someone from central office comes in the building, even with the best of intentions, it's often perceived as a *gotcha* because it's central office." Ms. Ba and Ms. Hai both underscore that the positional power of coming from central office enables school staff to retain the harmful memories of central office leaders policing schools towards compliance. Even with current, transformative central office leadership practices put into place, central office leaders must often combat against views that they are a 'gotcha.'

But why do some school leaders and staff still hold onto this view of compliance-based central office leaders, despite the many structural changes in RCPS? According to Ms. Hai, memories of the academic review practice and school leaders placing blame on central office leaders for an overload of division initiatives could be at play here. Ms. Hai recollected distant but lingering memories of academic review, which she perceived was a detrimental approach from the division. In the past, central office used to employ a practice called academic review, where central office leaders "...would disperse onto a school" that was in warning of not meeting testing accreditation. These central office leaders were tasked to provide corrective feedback to school leaders and staff to help shift student academic outcomes and ultimately get the school out of warning from the state. This practice, however, fostered a climate of mistrust amongst school leaders and staff towards central office. Rather than being perceived as supportive, central office was often viewed as punitive, primarily focusing on identifying and reprimanding subpar teaching and leading practices. Ms. Hai expressed a desire to change this perception, noting "That's our goal is to shift it to where they don't see us that way, but unfortunately, some do." After years of employing academic review, senior-level leadership realized that academic review was causing negative implications. They realized that the relationship between central office and schools was tarnished. So, RCPS ceased with the academic review practice and started using more collaborative, non-evaluative, and supportive practices to help schools in need.

Another reason schools see central office as a 'gotcha' could be from using central office as a scapegoat for the stress experienced by school leaders and staff. Teaching is a stressful career, and a piece of the stress comes from the new initiatives and regulations that schools follow to remain compliant. Such added stressors include required professional development, new division-wide assessments for students, etc. According to Ms. Hai, sometimes, school leaders use central office as a scapegoat to shift blame for these educational initiatives, saying "I know it's easy for school-based leaders to say, *they made it* and *they're making us do this*. And so that causes some of that friction. So,

you just have to show up and be helpful." Ms. Hai's response underscores how central office may be

blamed for policies and initiatives. That blame can be attributed to the number of policies, regulations,

and initiatives that seem to come from "the ivory tower" down into schools. "Showing up and being

helpful" will be discussed in the following sections around central office as a support system, as non-

evaluative, and as collaborative with schools.

All three central office leaders made remarks about being viewed as a 'gotcha', which highlights

the idea that schools might be caught by central office leaders doing something incorrectly. However, a

climate of fear does not foster growth and development as employees are less likely to be vulnerable in

asking for help and support. Looking forward to the current state, these three leaders remarked on

attempts at reshaping their roles into more supportive figures and shifting this 'gotcha' narrative, found

in the next section of this study on how central office leaders support schools. While the legacy of

compliance-based leadership lingers in some schools, the central office leaders interviewed emphasized

their dedication to redefining their roles as supportive, collaborative partners. The following section

explores the specific actions taken to foster this new relationship and the impact these changes had on

school leaders and staff.

Central Office Leadership as a Support for Schools. In alignment with RQ1, this study sought to

explore the ways that participants defined effective central office leadership. A central theme that

emerged is the conceptualization of the central office as a supportive entity for schools. All three central

office leaders defined central office leadership as a support for schools. Juxtaposed with the view of

central office as a 'gotcha', central office leaders work hard to reject the 'gotcha' perception and work

towards being perceived as a true support for schools. Ms. Hai highlighted the dichotomy between

evaluative, policing roles and supportive roles, noting that true transformative change happens between

schools and central office, sharing "When they [school staff] realize you're there not as a 'gotcha', but as

a support. That's really something we've worked on is that support piece." Central office leaders show

up as a support for schools by working with all school stakeholders, strengthening their relationships with school leaders and staff, co-leading learning walks with school leaders, facilitating coaching conversations with school leaders, and providing feedback to school staff on teaching and learning practices, discussed throughout this section on how central office leaders support schools.

Central office leaders serve many levels of school stakeholders, including school leaders, staff, and students. Since schools manage many different topics that all contribute to student learning, central office leaders also engage in the vast array of topics that schools manage daily. For example, Ms. Mot described central office as "...a true support system for our entire school division…whether that is the academic lens or a student behavior lens. We, as central office leaders, should be a support system to our leaders, to our teachers, students, etc." Ms. Hai noted similar sentiments of central office leaders collaborating with all types of leaders, stating:

> Our leadership needs to focus on how we collaborate best with building leaders. We influence instructional capacity of their teachers. And not only that, help build instructional leaders at the building at all levels, such as administrators, coaches, so that we can improve the instruction. I really think our role is that of a collaborator.

These two responses from Ms. Mot and Ms. Hai highlight the importance of central office leaders engaging with all types of school stakeholders, not just the principals, to effectively improve student learning outcomes.

Acknowledging a shift in regulatory leadership and positional power, Ms. Ba's following reflection on how central office worked to shift perspectives about its roles provided insights into the importance of relationships. In RCPS, the system is set up where the principal is the ultimate school decision-maker, not the central office leader(s). Therefore, Ms. Ba shared the inherent support role of central office leaders due to the decentralized nature of education by stating "... we can't solely implement the system. We can support the system. Because at the end of the day, the principal is the

shot-caller in the building." Since central office leaders have little to no actual decision-making power in schools, it is imperative that central office leaders exercise their leadership by way of influence. This influence can be felt through the strength of their relationships with school leaders. The importance of these relationships is further illustrated by Ms. Mot, who described how building strong connections with principals helped establish trust and facilitated her role as a supporter:

> So, once I started forming those relationships, I've been truly showing my purpose of supporting them [schools]. I do truly believe that all of the administrators, I can't even say most, all of the administrators do trust me in that sense like they call me on my personal cell phone now, they'll shoot me a text. It is much more of a personal relationship where they recognize like I'm here to help and support them before the directors show up and then we have a problem. So long story, but I think that relationships are definitely key for them just to see your genuine side.

Indeed, a strong relationship enables reciprocal give-and-take between both parties. With a strong relationship, school leaders can openly communicate their needs to central office leaders so that central office leaders can design programming that is most responsive to school needs. Likewise, these central office leaders ensure they have strong relationships with school leaders so that, when the time is needed, they can help shift mindsets in school leaders and school staff to improve the implementation of division-developed curriculum. These central office leaders leverage coaching conversations to help shift mindsets in schools, discussed next.

A key action within school support involves the art and science of instructional coaching. In RCPS, central office leaders are positioned to take on the role of instructional coach for school leaders. RCPS created a new initiative for the school year 2023-2024 where the Curriculum and Instruction Department collaborated with the Elementary and Secondary Leadership Department to conduct quarterly joint learning walks alongside school leaders. To evidence how coaching conversations facilitated their supportive role in schools, Ms. Ba discussed how she leveraged learning walks and

coaching conversations to help school leaders engage in effective change management by saying "So we try to support from that lens of providing feedback and having those discussions about, *well this is what we're seeing* or what's the system that we need to get us there." Ms. Ba's response emphasizes the key role that central office leaders play in school improvement efforts in RCPS. Joint learning walks serve as a vital tool for creating a shared understanding of the classroom realities and facilitating a collaborative discussion on strategies for improvement. Norming on the current realities of what is happening in classrooms allows school and central office leaders to discuss how to progress toward improvement. Central office leaders' support efforts funnel into school improvement efforts, discussed later under subquestion 1 about effective joint work.

Over the course of the nine total interviews, the notion of central office as a support for schools came up eleven separate times from the three participants, representing one of the most frequent codes within the codebook. Hence, many of the findings within this chapter relates to the broad definition of central office as a support for schools. Their supportive nature ties into their non-evaluative nature, discussed in the next section. With the supportive role of central office leaders comes the non-evaluative nature of those interviewed within the Curriculum and Instruction Department. Therefore, in the next section, I expand upon another definition of central office leadership as non-evaluative.

Central Office Leadership as Non-evaluative. Adopting a non-evaluative approach fosters a more collaborative and less hierarchical relationship, where the emphasis is on mutual support and guidance rather than on assessment and judgment. By removing the evaluative aspect from their interactions, these central office leaders create a more open and trusting environment that encourages school leaders to seek assistance, share challenges, and explore innovative solutions. Free from perceptions of judgment within interactions, these central office leaders fostered an atmosphere of openness and trust.

The non-evaluative stance not only underlines the supportive role of central office leaders but also helps mitigate the traditional power differentials, making interactions more collegial and less authoritative. Two out of the three participants mentioned sitting in a non-evaluative space in relation to schools. Ms. Hai noted that relationship-building and collaboration with school leaders is crucial for central office leaders to positively impact schools, noting "Central office leadership is interesting because we're not evaluative at any level…We don't have a lot of teeth. People think we do. They're like, *oh, them* but it doesn't matter what we say if no one buys into what we're doing." People thinking that central office leaders "have a lot of teeth" connects to the notion of perceived and actual power. In RCPS, the principal is the "shot caller" of the building, and yet, some school staff still believe that central office leaders have power over principals to make decisions, which is not reality.

Central office leaders' non-evaluative role means that they exercise their supportive nature alongside schools. When prompted to think through how they support schools, all three participants shared how they exercise their non-evaluative relationships with schools. For example, being non-evaluative strips someone of power differentials, allowing the person to offer a helping hand. RCPS set up central office in a way where the Curriculum and Instruction Department oversees content areas, while principals oversee the school staff who teach the content areas. With this structure, Ms. Ba discussed how "We supervise content, we don't supervise personnel." This distinction between supervising content versus supervising the people who deliver the content plays an important defining factor in the non-evaluative, supportive status of central office leaders. To supervise the content means that central office leaders are responsible for creating the division-wide official curricular documents for staff to use. These curricular documents, developed by the division, make explicit how school staff should teach the content standards, developed by the state department of education. RCPS central office leaders also have the responsibility of observing school staff deliver the content from the curriculum. Ms. Mot noted that "I don't have an evaluative status. So that's nice. So, I really am a

support system, so I can go in." Ms. Mot sharing how it's a "nice" position to not be evaluative in schools

shows how central office leaders no longer must assume a power position with schools that they had to

assume in the past with academic review. To ensure that there is clarity in the non-evaluative role, Ms.

Hai discussed how she ensures that school staff understand that she is not evaluative by directly naming

it whenever she goes into classrooms, noting "I'm always sure to let teachers know, *hey, when I come in,*

I'm not evaluative." This reminder for school staff deescalates any possible feelings of worry, which

effectively disarms the "gotcha" feeling in school staff. Building strong relationships is at the core of

central office leaders' ability to support schools effectively. Leaders, like Ms. Mot, emphasize not only

the importance of open communication but also the intentional efforts to foster trust through

consistent follow-up, problem-solving collaborations, and regular presence in the schools. These efforts

build a foundation of trust, where school leaders and staff feel comfortable sharing challenges, knowing

that central office is there to offer support, not critique.

Like the descriptive shift of central office from being a 'gotcha' to being a partner with schools,

the participants shared similar sentiments when describing their leadership roles as non-evaluative. Ms.

Mot discussed the shift from central office to be seen as non-evaluative, where in the past they were

viewed as threatening:

> And I'll be honest, that's changed a little bit this year. We used to be looked at…as evaluative.
>
> People used to be very fearful of whoever sat in these seats…it caused a lot of division within
>
> our district to be honest. Because it was like, *they are coming*, we were considered *they*. Like the
>
> troops are coming.

Using such strong imagery as "they" and "the troops are coming" suggests that central office was

viewed as an enemy of schools, with "troops" evoking imagery related to combat. The participants

shared that schools typically do not improve when thrust into a state of combat and fear. Therefore, the

participants noted that it took a concerted effort to shift the narrative from being seen as evaluative to

being seen as non-evaluative. Ms. Mot went on to describe the amount of effort and time it required to

shift a division-wide culture related to the role of central office leaders:

> I've been very passionate and very intentional about changing that culture and that stigma,
>
> because I'm not evaluative. I'm not over any person. I'm over content in curriculum. So my goal
>
> is for them to be successful with our students. And I do think that a change has evolved within
>
> that culture, but as you know, that work takes time for sure.

The non-evaluative status of these central office leaders underscores the importance of central office

leaders being perceived as supportive collaborators who coach schools rather than police schools.

Collaboration between central office and schools is key in spreading this view, so the next section

explores responses related to the collaborative nature of central office leaders.

Central Office Leadership as Collaborative. Another latent theme involved the notion of central

office leaders as collaborators with schools. Collaboration is evident in the best practices defined by the

actions conducted among parties, described by the participants, and defined in the research. Two out of

the three participants defined central office leadership as collaborative alongside schools. Additionally,

all three participants shared collaborative coaching protocols that they utilized when conducting

learning walks with school leaders. These protocols prompted open-ended questions for school leaders

to reflect upon, supporting the claim that central office leaders operate in a collaborative partnership

with schools.

One such collaborative practice involves setting the direction of an organization. Engaging with

others in dialogue about the context and ensuring the direction is comprehensive and transferrable into

action creates a concept that reflects a collaborative approach to developing a mission and vision as an

organization sets its direction. Although none referenced the collaborative design approach, Ms. Ba

described the connection between setting the mission and vision for central office and collaborating

with stakeholders to actualize that mission and vision, describing that "Here's our strategic plan and

then collaborating with the rest of the stakeholders to bring that vision to life." In this way, Ms. Ba recognized that central office leaders and schools work in reciprocity to set direction and to act towards that direction as a collective division.

The supportive nature of central office leaders seems closely tied to their non-evaluative approach. By stepping away from punitive measures and focusing on providing constructive, non-judgmental feedback, these central office leaders foster the trust and collaboration necessary for meaningful school improvement. Additionally, Ms. Hai noted similar sentiments of collaboration as key to getting work done in schools, saying "So it's really building those relationships and collaborating to improve instruction and overall student achievement." The previous stories emphasized the collaboration between central office and schools. Additionally, Ms. Ba described the collaborative effort that occurs within her central office team by saying "I'm always checking in with my [colleagues] and I'm always checking in and looking at *this is what we're seeing, what are you seeing?* We do joint observations." The process of joint observations provides the team the opportunity to conduct collaborative preparation on the objective of observation, focus areas, criteria, etc. From there, a collaborative synthesis of outcomes occurs, and feedback is developed together to identify actionable outcomes and move to reflective dialogue.

Section Conclusion. Two major themes emerged from participants' reflections on their leadership journey. First, these central office leaders' negative experiences with trauma, disengaged schooling, uninspiring leadership, and negative assumptions of their potential deeply influenced their desire to lead in more engaging, inspirational ways. Second, effective central office leadership is characterized by a shift from traditional, top-down dynamics toward a more transformational, reciprocal approach focused on support, collaboration, and non-evaluative partnerships with schools. This collaborative partnership not only redefines the central office's role within schools but also mirrors contemporary educational philosophies that prioritize empowerment, mutual respect, and shared

responsibility, rather than control and compliance. Such an approach fosters a more inclusive and responsive educational environment.

In the next section, I delve deeper into the best practices of central office leadership (RQ2), specifically examining how culturally responsive joint work (subquestion 1) and coaching/consulting (subquestion 2) serve as critical strategies for supporting schools. These areas are critical for understanding how central office leaders implement strategies that are not only effective in terms of school administration and leadership but also responsive to the cultural contexts of the schools they support.

Collaborative, Multidirectional Trust for Collective and Continuous Improvement

To explore how central office leaders engage in joint work (subquestion 1), I analyzed responses and documents from the second interview, focused on the nature of collaboration between central office and schools. From this analysis, the major finding suggests that collaborative, multidirectional trust forms the foundation for collective and continuous school improvement.

Highly effective joint work with school leaders and staff requires intentional and explicit collaboration amongst different departments in central office to optimize their work with improving schools. To explore culturally responsive joint work, I discuss evidence that contributed to the finding around the importance of collaborative, multidirectional trust. The evidence includes stories and artifacts that describe how these participants collaborated across central office departments, helped schools identify a problem of practice, supported school improvement, offered differentiated supports for different schools, supported schools through shifting demographics, supported schools in making meaning of data, worked with all staff, helped shift mindsets around teaching and learning, facilitated professional learning, supported Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings, and fostered a culturally responsive culture of belonging and inclusion.

Collaborating Across Central Office Silos - Defying Horizontal Segmentation. Participants characterized the division as defying the phenomena of horizontal segmentation by effectively collaborating across different departments, avoiding the siloing effect in a typical division's central office. Following a recent structural change, RCPS central office initiated closer collaboration between the Curriculum and Instruction Department and the Elementary and Secondary Leadership Department. This novel approach aimed to enhance coordinated efforts in supporting school improvement initiatives.

Ms. Hai stated that, during joint walk-throughs, the Elementary and Secondary Leadership team members compared their notes alongside the representatives within the Curriculum and Instruction Department, noting "But, we'll do joint walk-throughs, and then we'll compare notes." By comparing notes, central office leaders build consensus on anecdotal observations noticed when looking into classrooms. This collaborative note-sharing ensures that the feedback presented to school leaders is comprehensive and grounded in a shared understanding of classroom practices. It strengthens the alignment between leadership goals and instructional strategies, creating a cohesive support system for schools.

Ms. Ba also described the powerful collaboration between the Curriculum and Instruction Department and the Elementary and Secondary Leadership Department, in that the Elementary and Secondary Leadership Department provides principals' performance reviews, while the Curriculum and Instruction Department publishes curriculum intended to be taught in classrooms. Therefore, this central office collaboration bridges the gap between enacting high-quality school leadership and high-quality classroom teaching and learning. Ms. Ba emphasized the strength of collaboration between departments, noting "The power is in collaborating with our directors of leadership and having those conversations…giving feedback to principals." This cross-departmental feedback fosters alignment in leadership expectations and instructional practices, ensuring a unified approach to school improvement. With the role of the Curriculum and Instruction central office leader being non-evaluative, the

participants recognized their natural fit during the learning walk by providing feedback and coaching on teaching and learning. Ms. Mot highlighted the evolving nature of her role, stating "My job has kind of expanded a little bit... I'm kind of coaching principals now." This shift reflects the central office's commitment to building leadership capacity and fostering continuous school improvement. The collaboration between these two departments draws strengths from both; one identifies the best practices for teaching and learning, and the other provides coaching and support for effective leadership. This two-pronged approach offers a formula for comprehensive support for the school leader. Building on the collaborative partnerships between central office and schools, the focus shifts to how central office leaders actively support school improvement efforts by fostering continuous collaboration, particularly with schools at risk of not meeting accreditation, and through their designated liaison roles with schools.

Helping Schools Identify a Problem of Practice - Defying Vertical Segmentation. In addition to overcoming horizontal segmentation, or siloing amongst different central office departments, the three participants described how RCPS also defies vertical segmentation by creating collaborative structures that bridge the gap between central office and schools. The liaison school initiative is at the core of RCPS's approach, a strategic effort that connects central office and individual schools. This initiative forms systems in which unity and partnership leads to the common goal of school improvement. As Ms. Mot described, RCPS central office leaders function as partners, guiding and coaching school leaders as assigned liaisons for individual schools. In this role, they collaborate closely with schools on performance plans (SPPs), fostering direct collaboration, and supporting the school's continuous improvement efforts.

For example, one essential outcome of the partnership relates to identifying a problem of practice towards school improvement. Ms. Mot illustrated her role as a liaison, sharing "Granted, I oversee 21 buildings, but this is my liaison school, so I attend the staff meetings, the leadership

meetings, the data meetings. I'm the central office personal communication bridge between that specific school and downtown [central office]." Her involvement reflects the importance of the central office's consistent, personalized support for individual schools. Ms. Mot described the Improvement Science efforts she undertook with her liaison school:

> And so, our role with school improvement has been to assist them in their SPPs, their school performance plans, which are now centered around improvement. So, the whole fishbone and, you know, taking apart your change ideas, etc. We were taught and trained alongside administrators and now our role is to personally assist our liaison school.

Embedded within Ms. Mot's response suggests the strength of building a collective understanding to fortify collaboration between central office and schools. Both parties attended professional learning on how to use Improvement Science, referencing ideas new to the division, such as the fishbone analysis and change idea management. By attending the Improvement Science training alongside school leaders, central office leaders were able to firstly show their commitment towards supporting the school leaders, and, secondly, deepen their own understanding of Improvement Science.

The benefits of developing an ongoing relationship with liaison schools were echoed by each central office leader. Ms. Ba confirmed Ms. Mot in central office's use of liaison schools as a lever for system-wide school improvement by describing the many ways that the central office point of contact supports their liaison school, saying "We provide support to that building with their improvement, whether it's looking at the school improvement plan, you know, helping establish systems, give any feedback or things that we know that's happening that's coming up."

Although the benefits were evident in the relationships and the ability to systematize and understand the root causes of problems that existed within each school, the practice was not one that occurred overnight. Ms. Ba noted "It starts with understanding the culture in each building because they're all different. As a central office leader, you can't assume that what works in one school will work

in another." This approach underscores the importance of tailoring support to each school's unique

context. These leaders understand the important support role that they play in schools' improvement

efforts by helping them identify a problem of practice that can be positively addressed through targeted

change ideas. The two concepts of school improvement and Improvement Science are tightly

interwoven. I describe responses towards supporting school improvement in the next section.

Supporting School Improvement. These three leaders from central office monitor school

improvement efforts via two primary methods: firstly, by engaging with schools at risk of failing to meet

accreditation standards, and secondly, through their collaboration with their designated liaison schools.

In RCPS, schools in warning of not making accreditation receive more intensive and more frequent

support from central office as compared to schools who are not in warning. This support includes more

frequent learning walks, attending school-led Professional Learning Community (PLC) and SPP meetings,

and leading professional development sessions with key stakeholders. In terms of schools in warning,

Ms. Mot described the close connection that she has with schools, especially the schools that are in

warning for not reaching accreditation in her content area:

> …we're just keeping a close pulse on them for accreditation purposes. So, I'll attend their school
>
> performance meetings or video meetings, which is going over, you know, the school
>
> improvement cycle and their SPP to ensure that their change ideas truly are going to have an
>
> impact.

Ms. Mot recounted a supportive relationship with schools by attending their SPP meetings to keep

schools focused on the improvements they wish to see, based on their change idea generation. Ms. Ba

made similar remarks to Ms. Mot by sharing that "Each building has a school improvement plan, and

based on that school improvement plan, they outline specific things, areas of need, and how they're

going to address those issues and then we collaborate with them to support or execute what's

happening." Clearly, the SPP is a key lever for school improvement, and these central office leaders

make a significant impact on a school's SPP. Similarly, Ms. Hai recollected memories of working with a

particular school on their school improvement plan, sharing that "I worked so closely in that building

with the teachers. And they were not accredited...not saying I got them accredited, [but I was] definitely

part of the team that did. So, I felt very connected to the building." Collaborating on SPPs strengthens

the sense of connectedness and collaboration between central office and schools, fostering collective

efficacy that extends beyond school leaders and staff to include central office leaders.

Collaboration is a two-way partnership, so these central office leaders described a mutual

benefit from the partnership with schools that broadened their leadership capacity. School leaders work

in a school setting, so they easily speak to the school's realities. Central office leaders work in central

office, a building that houses a corporate-like environment with cubicles, office spaces, and adult

colleagues, hence, no students within the building. Ms. Hai talked about her work with her liaison school

and how it, in fact, shifted her mindset, broadening her scope on how to support schools in the multiple

drivers that come up when discussing school improvement:

> So, it was interesting for me to shift my brain. Okay, you're not just thinking about [content
>
> area]. You're helping the whole school improvement [process]. So that's been a good growth
>
> opportunity because I have to now look at attendance. I'm looking at SOL participation with him.
>
> I'm looking at, you know, ways we can do family engagement. So, it's been a great learning
>
> experience for me too. But, just, you know, having that seat at the table. And being a consult is
>
> really how I've been working with school improvement.

Central office leaders are positioned as subject-matter experts in their given content area. So, these

Curriculum and Instruction central office leaders participating in SPP meetings leverage themselves as

consultants who specialize in and illuminate the best practices in content area instruction.

The participants described the process of continuous school improvement as one driven by

small change ideas tested in short cycles. Their stories reflected an Improvement Science mindset of

adapt-adopt-abandon, where incremental changes lead to long-term, systemic improvements. Ms. Ba

highlighted the slow but steady progress, stating "It takes longer to fix something than to break it,"

emphasizing that RCPS central office leaders consistently support schools in this ongoing improvement

effort. The RCPS liaison initiative exemplifies this, with central office leaders partnering with schools

throughout the year to foster meaningful, sustained improvements.

Each central office leader recognized that every school's path to improvement is unique. They

adapt their support to meet each school's specific needs, ensuring targeted and effective interventions.

The next section explores how these central office leaders differentiate their support to meet the

diverse needs of schools.

Differentiated Support for Different Schools. In the exploration of central office support for

schools, the notion of individualized, differentiated support surfaced. Ms. Hai and Ms. Ba emphasized

this approach, underscoring that individualized support is critical to school success. Ms. Hai reflected "It

truly hinges on the specific context of each building and the principal's stage in their leadership

journey." Similarly, Ms. Ba noted "My support for schools is not a one-size-fits-all approach; it's deeply

influenced by the unique data and needs that each principal articulates." This understanding highlights a

key finding: central office support is not a standardized, one-size-fits-all model, but rather a flexible,

responsive strategy. These leaders understand that a principal's leadership and the school's unique

context directly influence the type of support provided. Their focus is on adapting their strategies to

align with each school's specific goals and needs, ensuring that central office interventions truly enhance

student outcomes.

Furthermore, Ms. Hai and Ms. Ba demonstrated a keen awareness of the diverse ecosystems

within schools. They recognize that student demographics, varying leadership styles, and school culture

create unique contexts for improvement. By acknowledging these differences, these central office

leaders adopted a sophisticated, responsive approach, one that empowers school leaders and fosters an inclusive learning environment.

A deeper investigation into student demographic shifts and the evolving role of the central office as a crucial support mechanism follows. This forthcoming analysis aims to further dissect the interplay between school demographics, school leaders, and central office support, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of educational leadership and its impact on fostering conducive learning environments.

Supporting Schools through Shifting Demographics. Building on the insight of continuous improvement, these central office leaders recognized that effective support should be tailored to each school's specific needs. Changing demographics define the current trends in the United States population data. In the third interview, Ms. Ba noted how RCPS has experienced the result of shifting demographics within the state. At the time of study, RCPS was defined as a large suburban division, and Ms. Hai noted the sprouting of more townhomes, apartments, and high-density housing to accommodate the ever-changing increase in student and family population in the area. This increase in new housing shifted zip codes once seen as upper middle-class towards more middle and lower middle-class statuses in the zoned area. She stated how schools that were once seen as "well-off" now face challenges related to demographic shifts. To elaborate on this shift, Ms. Hai described a particular school where "Their demographic is definitely changing. They have in the past been a very, very upper-middle-class area. And so, but they're building a lot of townhomes and high-density housing around, which is shifting their demographics." Ms. Ba also reflected on how some schools recently grappled and continued to grapple with changing demographics. Shifting demographics inherently reveals systemic and structural inequities that were not seen beforehand when demographics were predictable. For example, schools may have performed well on state-mandated tests, but when presented with shifts in student demographics, the test scores dropped. When faced with a problem of practice, culturally

responsive leaders use asset-based inquiry rather than deficit thinking, ensuring that they examine the

structures and systems that perpetuate inequities rather than place the onus on "fixing" the students.

Ms. Ba remarked on the support she provided to help school leaders and staff shift towards an asset-

based lens when faced with changing student demographics:

> I think the other thing that we can look at demographically is [RCPS] is still continually growing
>
> and so with the building up of new homes, new apartment buildings, things of that nature, that
>
> changes some demographics, whether that's your socio-economic, or your ethnicities, your
>
> races, that's something that schools are also getting used to. Especially some of our stronger
>
> schools that were used to a higher socioeconomic group but with the building of additional
>
> apartments and things of that nature that demographics changed. So it's shedding a light on
>
> what was working, whether it was best practice or if it was clientele because they have
>
> resources.

This leads into a deeper exploration of how student demographic shifts influence central office support

strategies and the evolving role of central office. The next section further examines how these central

office leaders respond to these demographic changes by supporting school-based data analysis, offering

a clearer view of their adaptive leadership and its impact on school success.

Supporting Schools in Making Meaning of Data. A key lever to fostering effective joint work lies

in how these central office leaders support schools in making meaning of student learning data. Building

on the earlier discussions of collaboration and trust between central office and schools, a critical next

step in their joint efforts involves how they collectively analyze student learning data. This data-driven

approach further strengthens the collaborative dynamic by ensuring that decisions are rooted in

evidence, supporting not just compliance but true instructional improvement. All three central office

leaders described their role in guiding schools through data analysis, emphasizing the need for both

quantitative and qualitative insights to shape instructional decisions and overall school improvement.

All three central office leaders discussed their role in supporting the analysis and synthesis of student learning data at the schools. For example, Ms. Hai discussed how "We have a lot of assessments…So kind of helping them really hone in on what's really critical and where do you think your school is and what data pieces can I use for that?" In this regard, Ms. Hai supported school leaders in not only data analysis but also data-informed decision-making. Ms. Ba also talked about the accountability of acting after analyzing student data by remarking that she supported school leaders in reinforcing to staff "This is how we're looking at the data. This is what we're gonna do. Here are my expectations after we analyze this data for what I need to see in your classrooms." These two quotes convey that effective leaders understand that data-driven decisions inevitably impact school improvement at the micro-level (classroom) up to the macro-level (division). But the participants talked not only of student test scores as the sole data. After describing various summative and formative assessments created by the division to be passed onto school leaders and staff to implement, Ms. Ba also described street data of qualitative observations by stating "...one of the things we're working on too is getting them to understand that observations can be anecdotal…So that's another data point when you're observing your kids doing something and…it's not something you have to run through a scanner." This balanced approach to data collection and analysis, both quantitative and qualitative data, supports a holistic view of the student experience when engaging in schools, so that the school environment can be welcoming, inclusive, and rigorous for every learner.

The participants shared how data collection and analysis is the responsibility of all school leaders and staff within a school ecosystem. Hence, these central office leaders described how they did not just conduct joint work with principals, rather, they were adamant in describing themselves as working alongside all staff, including teachers. The next section investigates the ways that these central office leaders conduct joint work with all school leaders and staff.

Working with All Staff, Including Teachers. Distributed leadership is a model that creates a network of collaborative interactions between central office leaders, school professionals, and the situations in which they engage. This collaborative approach is not limited to interactions with principals but extends to assistant principals, instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and, notably, classroom teachers. The interactions recalled by the participants highlighted how distributed leadership transcends conventional boundaries, enabling a collaborative approach essential for fostering educational improvement. The three central office leaders claimed that they partnered with school leaders and staff, their schools, and their communities to support transformational practices and enhance school performance.

The data revealed a nuanced landscape of leadership practices, as illustrated by the experiences of participants like Ms. Mot, who articulated her engagement across the school division. "So yes, I get to work with almost everyone, I think I do work with every entity within the school division because instructional leadership is key, obviously, to everything," Ms. Mot remarked that her collaborative efforts, particularly with academic coaches, underscored the distributed nature of leadership. She described her routine interactions, noting "I meet with them monthly as well and I talk to them frequently... I pretty much disseminate all information at the elementary level through academic coaches because they oversee all content areas, so they assist with scheduling events and field trips and that sort of thing." Ms. Mot's interactions with academic coaches indicate distributed leadership. She met with them monthly and communicated regularly to coordinate school activities at the elementary level, emphasizing the pivotal role of academic coaches in managing diverse content areas and organizing events.

The findings challenge conventional expectations of leadership roles, explained in depth during Chapter V's discussion of themes. For instance, despite the typical separation of duties, participants like Ms. Hai and Ms. Mot underscored their direct involvement in instructional leadership at the teacher

level. "We do coaching with teachers. We're a very small department, so even though I'm the coordinator, I also wear my specialist hat with teachers quite often," shared Ms. Hai. Similarly, Ms. Mot's engagement with teachers—"I still have my hand or a pulse on teachers; typically, that's specialist level work. I do have a specialist, but I'm so involved. So, I still meet with teachers"—revealed a blurring of the traditional roles, further evidencing the distributed leadership model's adaptability and importance of interaction between the players.

The collaborative work between central office leaders and various school professionals exemplifies the core of distributed leadership. These findings illuminate how, through effective joint work, central office leaders play a crucial role in shifting school professionals' mindsets on a myriad of topics, setting the stage for meaningful school improvement. Recognizing that data interpretation and action are the responsibility of all school leaders and staff, these central office leaders emphasized their collaborative work with all members of the school ecosystem, not just principals. The next section explores how these central office leaders engage in shifting mindsets of school professionals, supporting comprehensive school improvement.

Shifting Mindsets. To change outcomes for the better, the leaders discussed the need to address core beliefs and mindsets. These central office leaders acknowledged a necessary mindset shift from deficit thinking towards asset-based thinking. When engaged in joint work alongside school leaders and staff, two out of the three central office leaders mentioned how they help shift mindsets, whether the mindset was related to assumptions of central office's roles and responsibilities, the mindset that only certain students can access advanced coursework, or the structures and systems that need to be changed to impact mindset shifts.

First, participants discussed how their roles evolved from being perceived as transactional and compliance-driven to transformational and supportive. Ms. Hai described this shift as a "cultural change" across the entire division, noting that central office leaders are no longer seen as the enforcers

of top-down initiatives. She emphasized how school leaders often rationalized new initiatives by attributing them to central office, which created friction between central office and schools. By fostering trust and partnership, this deficit-driven view of central office gradually lessened.

Second, central office leaders helped schools move beyond deficit thinking about student potential, particularly in relation to advanced coursework placement. Ms. Hai brought up how she supported mindset shifts related to who gets placed into advanced coursework in the division, extending the conversation of shifting mindsets toward challenging exclusionary policies:

> But we're looking at how do our kids get into our advanced classes. And who gets in. Because, you know, unfortunately, we have some people who are rather elitist and like oh they don't belong in this class. They have an IEP, they have 504…So we're looking at, you know, we shift mindsets, teachers kind of.

Ms. Hai progresses the conversation by recalling an instance she had with one school, saying "And one of our schools is a very suburban school…. And they have a history of being very elitist with the kids they place in advanced courses." To support their shifting mindsets, Ms. Hai allowed the school leaders and staff to see the holistic view of the child, reinforcing "Let's look at the whole child. Let's not just look at some test scores. We have to work on the mindset of their teachers." In this example from Ms. Hai, deficit thinking not only impacts central office leaders' collaboration with schools but deficit thinking also impacts students' trajectories into high school and beyond. Culturally responsive leadership combats deficit thinking to ensure that opportunity gaps are reduced for students from marginalized communities.

Third, participants discussed how systemic changes were necessary to facilitate mindset shifts. These central office leaders described that, to shift mindsets, the systems and structures should also be augmented to facilitate mindset shifts. Ms. Ba highlighted that, without intentional systems and structures, shifts in thinking might not happen naturally. By implementing clear expectations and

monitoring progress, schools can promote behavioral changes that eventually influence mindsets, even

if the shift does not occur immediately. She commented that:

> Sometimes the mindset shift isn't gonna happen on its own naturally, but there needs to be
>
> systems and expectations in place and monitoring with it so that that expectation is met. The
>
> mindset still may not change, but this is what we're going to do.

Ms. Ba's commentary depicts that mindset shifts do not necessarily occur on their own. Leaders put

forth an intentional plan of action to support shifting the mindsets of those adults working within the

school. School leaders can implement new systems, expectations, and progress monitoring for staff so

that changing actions can work alongside changing mindsets.

These responses represent the diverse ways central office leaders support school-based mindset

shifts. Additionally, facilitating professional learning represents one strategy where central office leaders

can help change the mindsets of adult learners. The next section explores how central office leaders

leverage professional learning to support school improvement efforts.

Facilitating Professional Learning. Central office leaders in RCPS play a crucial role in delivering

professional learning, using it as a strategic lever for school improvement. When intentionally designed,

these sessions offer school leaders and staff transformative learning opportunities that directly impact

their work in schools. Two out of the three central office leaders talked through the ways they use

professional learning as a lever for school improvement. RCPS central office leaders influence school

leaders and school staff via multiple modalities of professional learning for a variety of purposes. For

example, Ms. Mot described the professional learning modalities that she leverages with teacher leaders

and teachers to positively impact curriculum and instruction in the classrooms:

> I meet with department chairs and I also meet with all teachers. I mean with new teachers kind
>
> of to welcome them and to ensure that they have the curriculum and instructional strategies
>
> they need to be successful. And then I also meet with teachers. I get all of them at one time

every quarter. So that's nice to have everyone together collectively to do some professional

development.

Despite the reluctance to pull teachers from classrooms, RCPS prioritized quarterly gatherings,

understanding that these sessions produced long-term benefits in instructional quality. These

professional learning environments enable teachers to not only learn from central office leaders but also

from one another, fostering a shared sense of professional growth.

Additionally, these central office leaders worked alongside school leaders, teacher leaders, and

teachers to impact schools. RCPS central office leaders understand that collective efficacy occurs in

schools when all stakeholders align toward the same mission and vision. Ms. Hai noted how "We invite

principals to our citywide teacher meetings," emphasizing the importance of school leaders being

learners alongside their staff. Including principals in these sessions ensured alignment with the school's

mission and equipped them to make informed decisions that support both instructional goals and

structural changes. "We invite them also to come to our citywide meetings that we do with teachers."

Inviting the principals and assistant principals to these quarterly citywide teacher meetings strategically

places school leaders as learners so that all school personnel receive up-to-date information on best

practices for teaching and learning. When school leaders attend professional learning meetings, they

also support the teachers and teacher leaders in keeping their staff aligned with the school's mission

and vision for student learning. School leaders also can make informed decisions on structural school

changes that might need to occur so that teachers and teacher leaders can deliver the aims outlined by

these central office leaders.

By involving school leaders and staff in professional learning, these central office leaders

promoted distributed leadership and collective efficacy. They also recognized the importance of

minimizing school leaders' time out of the building, supporting PLC meetings to embed learning within

the school context. The next section explores how these central office leaders further influence student learning by participating in schools' PLC meetings.

Supporting PLC Meetings. RCPS emphasizes the role of PLC meetings as a cornerstone for school improvement and student success. When conducted with purpose and fidelity, PLCs provide a structured, collaborative environment for teachers and leaders to unpack curriculum standards, analyze data, and plan targeted instruction. These central office leaders play a pivotal role in these processes, acting as facilitators and supporters of data-driven decision-making that enhances classroom practice. For instance, Ms. Mot talked about how "I assist them in running their [content area] PLC since I directly oversee [content area]. Helping them get their data, analyze their data, and kind of do the next steps." This support demonstrates how these central office leaders help schools focus on actionable steps tied directly to student outcomes. Ms. Hai added that simply "being that presence" in PLC meetings strengthens the partnership between central office and schools, reinforcing the message that central office is there to support, not supervise. By integrating themselves into the day-to-day work of PLCs, these central office leaders foster collaboration and trust, two crucial elements in any effort to shift a school's culture and climate. These collaborative efforts within PLCs contribute to creating environments where every student can thrive. The next section explores how culturally responsive central office leaders build on this joint work to foster this culture of belonging and inclusion in schools.

Fostering Culture of Belonging and Inclusion. Effective school improvement extends beyond academic outcomes and addresses improvements in the culture of belonging and inclusion. School improvement means improvement on all fronts, including improvements in the culture of belonging and inclusion within the organization. For meaningful progress, these central office leaders cultivated an environment where both staff and students feel valued and included. All three participants commented on how they supported building a culture of belonging and inclusion in schools. A culturally responsive culture and climate can apply to the culture built amongst colleagues, or the culture students feel in

relation to the school community. Ms. Ba emphasized how a principal worked towards shifting the collegial culture in the school building by stating that the principal does "...some things here and there too, climate for sure, culture and climate for sure and trying to lift morale." The ways that adult staff feel about their school contributes to the way that students feel about their school community.

In addition to improving adult staff culture, these central office leaders strived to create a sense of belonging for students. Battling exclusion underpins the work these leaders do. Ms. Hai initiated a conversation with schools in which students get placed into advanced coursework, saying "…that is the ultimate culturally responsive [environment] in [content area] is everyone, that every kid can do [content area skills]." Ms. Hai went on to say:

> If you're looking at culturally responsive practices and how we can kind of partner with the administration to say, don't be elitist with who we let in these advanced courses. Let's give these kids a shot. If a kid wants to do it, let him in.

Ms. Mot mirrored sentiments comparable to Ms. Hai by sharing that her curriculum highlights only White males:

> All of the [famous people] in our state curriculum have been White male…And when I sit and look at the city of [RCPS] and we have over 60% of our population as African American boys, like, they can't see themselves in that curriculum. Like they don't see themselves as a [content area professional] because we don't allow them to see them as a [content area professional].

Ms. Mot noted that the famous people featured in her curriculum do not mirror the diverse backgrounds of RCPS students. Ms. Mot's observation also relates to the demographic incongruence between RCPS leaders and students discussed in Chapter I's Problem of Practice.

Section Conclusion. These findings emphasize how central office leaders' joint work is vital in promoting culturally responsive practices that build a culture of belonging and inclusion. From cross-office collaboration to supporting schools in addressing demographic shifts, fostering mindset changes,

and making meaning of student data, these central office leaders play a pivotal role in creating inclusive spaces for staff and students alike. This joint work naturally extends into the realm of coaching and consulting, where leaders support school improvement efforts more directly. The next section explores the key strategies these central office leaders employ in coaching/consulting school professionals to further enhance school improvement. Joint work with schools closely relates to coaching and consulting school professionals, in that coaching and consulting functions as a key strategy in joint work with schools. The next section describes the data related to coaching and consulting.

Clear Coaching Protocols for Critical Conversations about Harmful Practices

To help answer what culturally responsive best practices central office leaders demonstrate (RQ2) and how central office leaders engage in coaching and consultation work (subquestion 2), I mainly used the responses from the second interview as my modality of data analysis. Interview questions from the second interview focused on the central office leaders' coaching and consulting practices alongside school leaders and staff.

When RCPS implemented new structures to break down the vertical and horizontal segmentation within and across the division, central office leaders were positioned to coach school leaders and staff on instructional best practices. A major finding reveals how clear coaching protocols facilitate critical conversations between central office and school professionals, addressing inadvertently harmful practices and beliefs related to instruction. This section discusses the insights related to clear coaching protocols, instructional coaching, asking probing questions, focusing coaching conversations on students, the positive position of central office leaders as coach/consultant, guided reflection with schools, proactive trust building, difficult conversations with schools, shifting mindsets, and supporting schools in unlearning harmful practices.

Coaching Conversation Protocols. Through interview and document analysis, one of the most compelling pieces of common data lies in the leaders' use of established coaching protocols to support

and facilitate coaching conversations with school leaders and staff. All three central office leaders leveraged protocols for reflecting with school leaders and staff on walkthroughs and classroom observations to enable critical coaching conversations, confirmed through document analysis. One participant shared a protocol to help school leaders identify best instructional practices and areas needing improvement. Another participant shared an eight-step coaching conversation protocol to use with teachers. The third participant shared a 'Start, Stop, Continue' protocol and a 'Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats' (SWOT) analysis to use with school leaders. The common thread between all four protocols rests in the open-ended questions prompted towards the coachee. The participants shared that these open-ended questions embedded within coaching protocols support school professionals' capacity-building in identifying and reflecting upon instructional best practices.

Ms. Hai discussed her use of a Frayer model-inspired coaching protocol. Ms. Hai's central office team realized that they could update their current coaching protocol by helping school leaders name instructional best practices in terms of "*what it is* and *what it is not*. That's the piece we're missing. So that's how we're revising right now." In her interview, Ms. Hai discussed how she attended a professional learning session led by a university and noticed that the university's coaching protocol helped the end-user determine what best practice looks like and what it doesn't look like. Her team borrowed this example/non-example structure to revise their RCPS coaching protocol for their content area walk-throughs. Ms. Hai discussed the purposeful choice to frame the coaching protocol within *what best practice is* and *what best practice is not*, as it places the onus on the school leader to verbalize the examples and non-examples of exemplary classroom instruction. Therefore, the knowledge of best practices rests within the school leader, so the school leader can be self-sufficient in helping their staff implement best practices without needing intensive support from the central office leader(s). Building the capacity of school leaders to be instructional leaders seems to be a key function of the content area central office leader.

Ms. Mot named an eight-step coaching conversation protocol with teachers. In Ms. Mot's leadership role, she observes classroom teachers and provides them with feedback on their delivery of the curriculum. Ms. Mot leveraged crucial, critical moments embedded within the coaching protocol to support deep, guided reflection. The first step begins "...with welcoming, like, thank you so much for allowing me to meet with you." This first step serves to build rapport with the teacher and to ensure that the teacher feels safe in the discussion, positioning the central office leader in a place of gratitude for being allowed to observe the classroom. The second step involves "...going into facts, like the notice and wonder protocol. Like I noticed when I was in your classroom yesterday, you were doing XYZ, and you know, maybe I'm gonna say I often notice that you haven't been giving students the district common assessments." Stating fact-based observations allows for both parties of the coaching conversation to agree with what was seen in the classroom, positioned from a place of neutrality rather than individualized perspective-taking. The third step focuses on the coach stating the impact of the observed actions in the classroom. Ms. Mot noted that "The impact is where it hits the heart hard without being harsh." Using an example of a teacher not assessing students using the division-wide common assessment, Ms. Mot hypothesized by "Stating like the impact this has of you not administering these assessments is I'm not able to support you as an educator, and I'm unable to see the learning gaps for your students to better support you." By stating the impact that the decision has on student learning, Ms. Mot shared "I've completely turned this conversation to be on kids and me being a servant leader trying to help you." Indeed, realizing that instructional decisions might be creating a harmful impact on students is not a sentiment that teachers want to hear. However, grounding the impact statement within the factual data observed in the classroom allows for this message to be properly understood by the teacher, as the neutral, observed data cannot be skewed otherwise. The fourth step focuses on asking questions to the teacher, for example "...*what's going on. Have you noticed that you've been having difficulty with pacing?* So, opening it up for a conversation rather than

like a reprimand has always been good because they want their voice to be heard." This fourth step is where teachers begin to openly share their thoughts in the conversation. Ms. Mot leveraged four steps of central office leader-led conversation before inviting the teacher's voice into the conversation. This was done to ensure that both parties can agree on what was observed and the impact assessed in the classroom so that the teacher does not become defensive when analyzing their classroom practices. Ms. Mot described this fourth step by detailing "And then turning it into some action steps. So like moving forward, like what can we do? Like how can I support you? What can you put in place so that you are more successful?" By inviting the coachee's thinking, the conversation lends itself towards action-based solutions to the identified areas of improvement. By posing questions, the coachee uses data observed to come up with their plan of action. This structured approach facilitates a collaborative and reflective environment, enabling teachers to co-create action steps for improvement.

Ms. Ba described two protocols, the SWOT analysis and the 'Start, Stop, Continue' protocol, to help shift mindsets related to school structures that need to be changed in order to facilitate instructional best practices. She used these two protocols when facilitating leadership meetings at schools. The first protocol is a SWOT analysis, where "...they [school leaders] looked up their internal strengths and weaknesses and then their external opportunities and threats, right?" The purpose of the SWOT analysis serves to help participants see the current state of their organization in relation to future planning. After conducting the SWOT analysis, Ms. Ba then led a 'Start, Stop, and Continue' protocol, where the school leaders determined "...what things are we gonna start doing, what practices are we gonna stop doing because they're not working, and then what things do we want to continue," based on the factual data identified in the SWOT analysis. While the SWOT analysis helps leaders see the current state of the school, the 'Start, Stop, and Continue' protocol helps leaders plan future strategies to help shift the school toward a desired state.

These central office leaders depend upon solid coaching conversation protocols as a means of deepening the conversation towards critical reflection and critical conversations, which supports the finding related to culturally responsive central office leaders not shying away from critical, difficult conversations with school leaders, discussed later in this section. During the interviews, no questions directly prompted discussion about coaching protocols, yet all three leaders readily shared their coaching protocols for document analysis and discussed these protocols during their interviews, which reveals the confidence these central office leaders possess in coaching conversations alongside school leaders and staff. Leveraging coaching protocols was a key action that these leaders took advantage of, supporting the finding of all leaders leveraging instructional coaching and consulting strategies, discussed in the next section.

Instructional Coaching and Instructional Consulting. All three leaders expressed a passion for instructional coaching and consulting school professionals to identify instructional best practices, shifting pedagogy away from the sit-and-get teaching model and towards hands-on, active, critical thinking. To support capacity-building, these central office leaders coached and consulted school leaders on what to look for when entering a high-quality classroom in their given content areas. Ms. Hai described this consulting process with school leaders who might not have background content expertise in that content area:

> Sometimes I'm a consultant with them to help them. Maybe they don't have the strongest background in what a good [content area] classroom looks like. So, I'll do walkthroughs with them. I'm not evaluative, so I always want teachers not to see me as of value.

Ms. Mot showed agreement with Ms. Hai on the notion of building content area capacity within school leaders by stating:

> In this instructional leadership realm, we recognize that that was a gap within our division and so they [principals] needed some support. So, I've been excited to kind of coach principals and

what look-fors are in the classroom. Cause as you know, not all principals have backgrounds in

all these different content areas, but yet they have to go into a classroom and observe…then it

can be very overwhelming. So, my job this past year is kind of empowering them with general

look-fors of what's good tier one instruction. Right? So, like even if you don't have a [content

area] background, what should we see? Like we should see kids talking. We see [hands-on

learning]. So that's been new work that I've done this year with principals.

Ms. Mot's response highlights the overwhelming job responsibilities of the school leader, which means

that the central office leader can come into the school setting to support school leaders' capacity of

content area pedagogical knowledge. In sync with the others, Ms. Ba shared that "Regarding [content

area] or instruction in general and what's gonna work best and what a [content area] classroom looks

like, what are your look-fors." All three central office leaders identified key instructional 'look-fors' and

shared those 'look-fors' with school leaders so these school leaders could identify instructional best

practices when observing classrooms. The central office leaders highlighted that this process should

focus on school leaders' thinking rather than imposing central office perspective. These central office

leaders fostered this transformational coaching partnership by asking probing questions to the

principals, a topic discussed in the next section.

Asking Probing Questions. A key strategy in coaching conversations involves using guiding,

probing questions to elicit deeper thinking and thereby enacting growth within the coachee. All three

central office leaders talked through their use of probing questions in coaching conversations. Ms. Mot

explained that she commonly redirects the coaching conversation with questions rather than answers

for the school leaders by stating "They [principals] always want to hear what I see first. But that defeats

the purpose, right like I wanna know what they saw so that I could help coach them." Ms. Hai shared

similar sentiments to Ms. Mot, discussing the challenge of asking questions instead of solving problems,

emphasizing the importance for school leaders to forumlate their own thoughts:

And I said, *okay, tell me what that means*? So, one of the things I'm growing in is asking

questions versus trying to solve problems, which is a really hard thing for someone in my

position because we're problem solvers. Like, give me a problem. I'm gonna give you a solution.

This response from Ms. Hai reveals the fine line that central office leaders navigate between being

perceived as content area experts alongside instructional coaches by school leaders. Ms. Ba shared

thoughts comparable to Ms. Mot and Ms. Hai regarding the initial awkwardness but eventual depth of

conversations that come with asking probing coaching questions to school leaders:

And then try to pull out those coaching skills where, instead of me telling them what I think, I

typically will take it and start asking guiding questions to get you to where I think the issues

might be so that they are talking about it. They are interacting with me, and it doesn't always go

smoothly at first because sometimes there's crickets, but I try to put it back with them to talk

about it.

These central office leaders engage in probing coaching conversations, so ideas generated are initiated

by the school leaders rather than central office, thereby reinforcing the shift of central office as a

trusting collaborator, not a fear-based manager. This approach places onus on the coachees to

inherently invest themselves in the ideas shared. Ms. Ba explained the powerful impact that the

coaching approach affords her:

So, I will often come in with some ideas of guiding questions I want to ask with the ability to

pivot so that they can kind of start to own it versus me doing it and telling them because if I do

it, and tell them, then there's no ownership in it. There's no buying in it. *Here's downtown*

coming in and telling us what we need to do. They're not in the classroom every day. They're not

this. They're not that. It doesn't mean anything coming that way. It has to be them really willing

to peel back the layers, and that takes time because, of course, you know, in the beginning, it's

gonna be some surface stuff…then as we get more comfortable, they get a little bit more

reflective on practices and other things. And so, it starts to work itself out.

These central office leaders described how their probing questions deepened conversations toward

guided reflection rather than didactic, one-way conversations. Asking probing questions represents a

strategy embedded within guided reflection. The next section explains how these central office leaders

leverage guided reflections with schools.

Guided Reflection with Schools. Guided reflection represents a crucial piece of the puzzle in

making a culturally responsive coaching conversation successful and impactful. Culturally responsive

central office leaders facilitate guided reflection alongside school leaders and staff to help build the

capacity for critical self-reflection. All three central office leaders described how they facilitated guided

reflection.

Ms. Ba noted that guided reflection represents a crucial practice that legitimizes the central

office leader and school leader relationship. She shared that "One of the biggest things…is to get folks to

truly self-reflect." In this quote, Ms. Ba suggests that one of the most important actions of central office

leaders is to support school leaders' ability to self-reflect. In this line of thinking, critical self-reflection

serves the students by allowing school leaders to make decisions based on a deep understanding of the

school ecosystem and what contributing factors might impact student learning. Ms. Ba went on further

to describe guided self-reflection as a way of serving school leaders' ability to identify the root causes of

problems. Ms. Ba shared that she supports "…looking at whether something is a Tier One issue or

another issue. If it's a Tier One instruction issue, then we have to look at our best practices collectively

and…how to analyze your data points, right?" Ms. Ba's musings indicate that school leaders leverage

data analysis to reflect on the changes that might need to occur so that school improvement can take

hold within their building.

Ms. Hai shared similar positive feelings towards the guided reflection she facilitates. Regarding learning walks alongside school leaders, she shared that "The debriefing part is always more powerful to me." Ms. Hai's quote connects similar thinking to Ms. Ba, in that the most powerful, impactful portion of the learning walk occurs in the concluding reflective conversation with school leaders. Ms. Hai described a positive working relationship with an assistant principal, sharing that "He's willing to listen, but he shares his opinion so it's very much a good give and take. We have conversations where he's able to tell me what he sees on a consistent basis. And I'm able to help him…". Ms. Hai's words suggest effective guided reflection is a dynamic two-way conversation between the central office leader and the school leader. From a culturally responsive lens, both parties come into the conversation with unique funds of knowledge that enrich the other person's perspective. By viewing the central office and school relationship as a trusting partnership, both parties can take away new learnings from the conversation that the individuals would not be exposed to otherwise in their setting. The school leader offers in-depth knowledge of the school ecosystem since the school leader works in the school daily. The central office leader offers a broad, systemic view of the division. Having both micro- and macro-perspectives working together in a guided reflection supports both parties generating consensus to better understand the root causes of issues present in the school.

What might guided reflection alongside schools look like in practice? According to Ms. Mot, guided reflection can be a simple, reflective conversation at the end of a learning walk. Ms. Mot described the guided reflection she does alongside school leaders during joint learning walks, detailing that "Every time I do a joint learning walk with an administrator, we always debrief, which is still considered a reflective moment." When prompted to discuss how she leads reflective learning alongside school leaders, Ms. Mot initially replied that she has not gotten through the cycle of learning with school leaders to complete that phase of reflection. Interviews were conducted in the middle of Quarter 3 of the school year. This initial response implies that guided reflection is summative in nature, occurring at

the end of the school year. However, when given more time to discuss guided reflection led by central office, she realized that she had been facilitating guided reflection every time she conducted a learning walk with school leaders. In this sense, guided reflection can be formative as well as summative. These central office leaders leverage their advantageous position as learning walk facilitators to consistently bring the school leader into a reflective frame when discussing what they observed on their learning walk.

All three leaders expressed that they facilitate guided reflection after examining information about student learning, whether through learning walks or through examining student data in meetings. Culturally responsive central office leaders leverage guided reflection to bolster school leaders' ability to critically reflect on student data. In relation to Ms. Ba's assertion about analyzing student data, a key insight arose about keeping coaching conversations focused on student outcomes. These reflections help school leaders gain a deeper understanding of their practices and their impact on student learning. The next section uncovers how these central office leaders keep conversations focused on students.

Focused on Students. A latent insight relates to these central office leaders focusing on student outcomes, especially when engaged in critical, difficult conversations with school leaders. Two of the three participants described how they keep conversations with school leaders focused on students. For example, when approached by a principal and his conflicting feelings of inadequacy as a leader of a school, Ms. Hai ensured that she reminded him of his core value related to student outcomes, stating "I hate saying it, because it sounds so cheesy but back to his core belief on what's best for kids." Ms. Mot also stated that her learning walks remain focused on students by sharing "Like, *did you see kids engaged? Did you see kids talking? Did you?* And I'm very intentional with ensuring we're looking at kids." The data suggests that the ultimate end-user in education should be the student. While there are multiple stakeholders that engage with RCPS, including teachers, families, and community partners,

these two quotes from Ms. Hai and Ms. Mot signify the central office's best practice of refocusing

reflective conversations on student outcomes and student learning.

Why do these central office leaders keep conversations focused on student outcomes?

According to Ms. Mot, remaining focused on student learning brings down the defensive feelings that

typically arise when school personnel feel challenged to change the way they think and act. Ms. Mot

noted "That's how I talk to teachers as well, like, I'm looking at student interactions and that way they

seem less defensive that we're almost like judging them per se, but we're able to shift instruction better

that way." This quote from Ms. Mot implies that teachers may harbor feelings of defensiveness when

central office leaders offer feedback that indicates room for growth in their pedagogy. To shift the focus

off defensiveness, these central office leaders keep a focus on student outcomes. When approaching a

coaching conversation, Ms. Mot mentioned using a protocol that explicitly states the impact of certain

instructional decisions on students, positively or negatively, noting "Then I've completely turned this

conversation to be on kids and me being a servant leader trying to help you." While central office

leaders and teachers might disagree with certain beliefs about education, the data reveals how central

office leaders and teachers find common ground on the prioritized value within student learning.

Indeed, servant leadership seems crucial to helping school leaders and staff see the beneficial

partnership that these central office leaders offer. Focusing on students helps reduce defensiveness and

align conversations with the primary goal of improving student learning. Additionally, it appears that

RCPS created structures and systems that optimize these participants' ability to serve and support

schools. The next section explores this positive positionality for these central office leaders to coach and

consult school leaders and staff.

Positive Positionality for Central Office Leaders to Coach/Consult. Coaching and consulting

constitute a large part of these three leaders' job responsibilities. Interestingly, responses uncovered

that central office stands as an advantageous arena for central office leaders to coach and consult

school leaders. Two of the three participants discussed the positive position that central office leadership affords them in coaching and consulting with school leaders. Ms. Ba summarized this next section on coaching and consulting by saying "I mean, I think part of our job is always the coaching piece." In RCPS, Curriculum and Instruction central office leaders are non-evaluative with school leaders. This non-evaluative position allows for these central office leaders to step into a reciprocal, non-threatening role alongside school leaders. Ms. Hai provided an example of her positive positionality as a central office coach when referring to a situation where she was coaching a principal. She noted that "…it's a different conversation that he [the principal] can have with me that he can't have with his APs [assistant principals]." This illuminating quote from Ms. Hai begs the question: what might be the differences between a principal discussing school improvement with a central office leader versus a principal discussing school improvement with their assistant principal(s)? Ms. Hai shared that "…there's a…different relationship there…You know, they have to be with him in the building every day and he's their leader where I'm not." There seems to be a hierarchical balance of power that a principal navigates when discussing the areas of growth for their school. Since principals directly manage their assistant principals in the same school, this evaluative relationship seems to prevent principals from having genuine, open conversations with their assistant principals about their school's areas of growth. There seems to be the perception that principals should know the answers to topics of ambiguity and complexity. This perception of principalship prevents principals from being openly vulnerable about not knowing the answers to problems when talking with their assistant principals. However, since RCPS established that central office leaders have a non-evaluative role over principals, this has allowed principals to genuinely come into the central office and school coaching relationship without the facade of knowing the answers to their school's problem of practice.

Structurally, central office's non-evaluative nature facilitates an authentic and highly supportive relationship for coaching and consulting to occur. Strategies, such as trust-building, helped these central

office leaders overcome negative perceptions. Trust serves as the foundation of a coaching and consulting relationship. The next section explores expansive responses to the culturally responsive transformational leadership practice of building trust between central office and schools.

Building Trust between Central Office and Schools. Across the board, participants shared a similar sentiment that relationships provide the bedrock of successful coaching and consulting conversations. Foundationally, these central office leaders cultivate positive, trusting relationships with school leaders and staff. Two out of the three leaders verbalized responses related to building trust when coaching and consulting school leaders. Ms. Mot profoundly summed up "But you have to have a relationship with people before you can coach them." Ms. Mot made the analogy between coaching and teaching to emphasize the importance of relationship building, sharing that "No, kids aren't learning from people they don't like. Same thing with adults. Like people are not going to listen to you from people that they don't like and respect." This insight of building trust between central office and schools relates to the previously mentioned major finding of central office and school relationships moving from transactional towards transformational partnerships. She described relationships in schools, especially with teachers, emphasizing that "The number one key to that, and this is what I personally live by, is relationships."

What might be the first step towards fostering trust with schools? According to Ms. Mot, she talked about how she builds trust with teachers in the school buildings through proactive positivity:

> The first time I go into a building, I'm saying everything positive that I see. Like I'm not saying anything that needs improvement. I'm not, I mean, unless like there's a safety and obviously, but like I'm going solely with leaving notes. *Thanks so much. Love that you do that* even if it's the smallest thing. And so that starts that trust where that they recognize like, okay, she's not here, it won't be like just come and tell me everything that I'm doing wrong, cause that's what they're used to.

Ms. Mot expounded the idea of proactive positivity by mentioning how she writes appreciation cards to school leaders, describing that "... the personal touch to them like *you're doing an amazing job you're growing as an instructional leader, keep up the great work*. So, I feel like just the small personal things of being positive, sharing some light." Ms. Mot recognized that school leaders and school staff may still possess negative feelings toward central office leaders. According to Ms. Mot, some teachers expect to be met with negativity by central office. These negative feelings likely stem from the memories of academic review in RCPS. To combat any negativity, Ms. Mot utilizes positive reinforcement, so school leaders and staff see her as someone with an asset-based lens of schools rather than a deficit-based lens.

Another strategy for trust-building involves a commitment to showing up and being actively present within a school building. Ms. Hai described:

I would be in one of the buildings for the whole day from start to finish. I help with unloading buses. I would help with just all these small things, just to be present. And, once they realize you're there to help, [trust occurs].

Ms. Hai outlined an all-hands-on-deck approach that proved beneficial towards trust-building in schools. As previously mentioned, some school leaders and staff view central office as "the ivory tower", meaning that central office can be perceived as a place of privilege where leaders can be removed from the daily challenges of school operation. By showing up and being present, these central office leaders non-verbally communicate that they are willing to get involved with the daily challenges of school operations, like volunteering to unload buses. Helping with the small, unglamorous school tasks communicates a commitment to the schools. School leaders seem to react positively to this commitment from central office leaders and allow for a relationship to be fostered.

Ms. Hai mentioned the inaccurate assumptions that a central office leader might harbor if that person is not in close connection with the realities that the school building must manage daily by stating

"…you will say negative things about a building until you're in the building and see what they're dealing with." Ms. Hai's story depicts the division's commitment to lowering the walls of defensiveness from an all-hands-on-deck approach, which seems to benefit both the school and central office. Schools benefit from central office leaders coming in to help with daily operations because school leaders can lower walls of defensiveness and establish a relationship of trust. Likewise, central office leaders benefit from going into schools by learning the realities that schools manage, so that central office leaders can be better informed when it comes to making decisions for schools. These central office leaders seem to be better equipped with the street data of school operations to make well-informed decisions.

The responses from Ms. Mot and Ms. Hai indicate how RCPS central office leaders enter school buildings with positive, asset-based beliefs and actions. Additionally, trust-building takes time, and it does not occur quickly. For example, Ms. Hai detailed a positive relationship that she secured with all the school leaders at a particular school. She shared that this positive relationship was built over the course of "...three years. You know, those relationships with the APs [assistant principals] and working with the principal and getting his trust [was crucial]. Again, I think it's just by showing up and when he calls, I listen." Listening when the principal called suggests that Ms. Hai assumed a supportive coaching stance in relation to the principal. Rather than offering solutions, Ms. Hai listened to the principal's concerns and acted as a non-evaluative, non-judgmental coach.

Overall, this approach from these central office leaders seems to be effective at gaining the trust from school leaders and staff. Ms. Hai explained how most of her relationships with school leaders are strong by stating:

75% of my administrators and I are lock step…we have a great relationship. I can be real with them. And say *hey this is not working*. Or *this is what I think we might need to do, what do you think? Can this work in your building?*

Based on what was shared by Ms. Hai, most school leaders seem to trust her, and this foundational trust

allows school leaders to accept her critiques about structures and systems in their buildings that might

not be effective at enhancing student learning. This example from Ms. Hai illustrated the two-way

conversation emphasized by the previous insight on guided reflection. These central office leaders offer

their authentic thoughts to school leaders on what might be needed for effective school improvement,

as these central office leaders possess a big-picture view of the school in relation to the division as a

whole, so these central office leaders might see something that the school leader(s) might not

immediately see. Likewise, school leaders possess in-depth knowledge about their school site in a way

that adds site-based nuance and complexity to these central office leaders' division lens.

Ms. Hai expressed a delicate, indirectly influential relationship when working alongside school

leaders and staff. In RCPS, the school leader evaluates their teachers, so there is a clear, evaluative

relationship between school leader and staff. However, these central office leaders neither evaluate the

school leader nor the staff. Through an indirect relationship, these central office leaders coach school

leaders on how to best support staff through evaluation of instruction. Ms. Hai described that "We don't

want to ever be seen as a [blocker], we don't want to ruin our relationships with teachers. So just trying

to help them, I mean, again, helping those administrators recognize what's good [content area] teaching

practices." Based on Ms. Hai's words, these central office leaders carefully balance their relationships

with school leaders and staff. If a teacher shows misalignment with their classroom instruction and

instructional best practices, these central office leaders build the capacity for the school leader to

effectively coach the teacher towards improvement.

Ms. Hai recollected a memory in which she was humbled to realize the power of relationships,

especially when leader turnover occurs in schools. She recalled a school in which she supported heavily

for years through their school improvement efforts and helped that school move away from an

accreditation warning status. Once a new principal took place at the helm of this same school, Ms. Hai

noted that her relationship with that school changed by sharing that "It just took me about a year and a half to realize. It's not the same building. It's not the same people. But that was really hard for me. And I realized you gotta start from ground zero." Trust-building takes time and effort, and unfortunately, the time investment to build trust with a school leader can slip away if staff or school leadership turnover occurs. Ms. Hai's story suggests that trust-building occurs individually, which then builds into a collective level of trust. In this way, central office leaders purposely build trust one-on-one with multiple players in a school until they have collectively built a level of trust across the entire school building.

Strong relationships enable these central office leaders to coach school leaders on instructional best practices. Sometimes, those coaching conversations can be difficult because they press upon school leaders' traditional notions of teaching and learning. The next section discusses how these central office leaders navigate critical, difficult conversations with school leaders and staff.

Critical Conversations. An insight under culturally responsive leadership involves these central office leaders' work in facilitating critical, difficult conversations with school leaders and staff. All three participants conveyed their work in facilitating difficult conversations with school leaders related to high-quality curriculum and instruction in practice. When asked about these critical conversations, Ms. Hai replied "...it is done with fidelity, but you know difficult conversations have to be had to improve instruction." Indeed, much of their work involves shifting mindsets for school leaders to recognize strong curriculum and instruction in their school, especially during learning walks.

Ms. Mot remembered a moment when she challenged a school leader's thinking during the reflective portion of a learning walk. During the learning walk, Ms. Mot and the school leader walked through a classroom where students were working on a worksheet quietly and individually. Ms. Mot asked the school leader to share what they noticed, and the school leader replied that they noticed the students were engaged. Ms. Mot challenged their thinking by asking "...*well, are they engaged or are they compliant?* Because there's a difference between being engaged and being compliant." Ms. Mot's

situation conveys that some school leaders might not know current best practices because of their

personal biases about what classrooms should look like. This school leader seemed to have a

traditionalist perspective that a quiet classroom is a highly engaged classroom. However, Ms. Mot posed

a question to elicit deep thinking from the school leader to consider the differences between

engagement and compliance. The data suggests that personal beliefs and biases about education can

remain hidden unless a coach effectively surfaces these hidden beliefs and biases through a coaching

conversation. Therefore, a school leader's bias towards traditionalist and compliant classroom

instruction can be uncovered when a coach dissects a school leader's worldview by prompting probing

questions.

Conversations regarding instructional practices continued throughout interviews, keeping the

theme of "kids first" at the forefront. Ms. Hai also recounted memories of challenging school leaders'

thinking through learning walks. Similarly to Ms. Mot, Ms. Hai described her ability to initiate difficult

conversations through "gentle guidance" supported by asking probing questions. For example "...if

someone says, *the kids were all working, they're really busy*. I was like, *yeah, but let's look at the [work]*

that they were actually doing. Was it really building critical thinkers?" A school leader shared the

traditionalist belief that classroom instruction appeared high-quality because all the students seemed to

be busy at work. However, Ms. Hai challenged that line of thinking by examining the quality and rigor of

the instructional task. From her perspective, students can appear busy yet conduct low-rigor tasks that

do not support the development of critical thinking.

Instructional leadership includes an emphasis on culturally responsive leadership. And, in this

realm, an aspect of culturally responsive central office leadership includes the advocacy for student

access to high-quality instruction. In RCPS, there exists the tradition of students from dominant,

privileged communities receiving access to advanced coursework. Ms. Hai exercised her strong

relationship with a school leader to facilitate a difficult conversation related to underserved students being placed in advanced coursework at a certain school:

> I said, *do you believe in them?* He looked at me. I said, *do you believe in them*? He's like, *I guess so*. I said, *no, tell me you believe in them, and they will do it*. He said, *I don't know how they're doing.* I said, *how are they doing? Are they happy being in your class? Because if yes,* I said *they're fine.* I said *they will do it for you.* I couldn't have had that [difficult conversation] if the administration wasn't willing to take a risk and say, *yes, let's put these kids in our classes.*

In this example, Ms. Hai effectively addressed a school leader's cognitive dissonance with supporting access to advanced coursework for underserved, marginalized students. Ms. Hai's example underscores the importance of asking probing questions to elicit deep thinking from school leaders so that their cognitive dissonance can be brought to the surface through the conversation. These culturally responsive central office leaders instill critical self-reflection into the school leaders and staff they collaborate with by engaging in difficult, critical conversations.

These central office leaders champion the proliferation of both high-quality instruction and curriculum. Additionally, these culturally responsive central office leaders advocate that high-quality curriculum is also a culturally responsive curriculum. One aspect of a culturally responsive curriculum relates to a curriculum that represents diverse individuals. Ms. Mot recalled a memory from pushing school leaders to consider why diverse, non-White individuals were not represented in a curriculum:

> I posed the question and it was uncomfortable in the room but I'm like *why is there not any brown kids [in this curriculum], it was either White or Asian*…And so for that scenario, they were very honest with me and they actually appreciated my question…because my kids are gonna ask *where are the brown boys where are the brown girls* like *where am I in this situation?*

In Ms. Mot's example, she asked a question that prompted school leaders and staff to consider a racial disparity within the representation of famous individuals in the curriculum. The perceived discomfort in

the room underscores the difficulty in engaging in conversations about equity and cultural

responsiveness, especially when those conversations point towards areas of improvement. Ultimately,

this difficult conversation about inequities pushed upon peoples' internal biases about race and who

might be considered an important individual in the curriculum. A strand of culturally responsive

curriculum and instruction is a diverse representation within the curriculum presented to students.

When central office leaders advocate for culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, they combine

the goal of an inclusive learning environment along with the outcome of school improvement to

produce a commitment towards initiating difficult conversations with school leaders and staff in

identifying and redressing inequities within the curriculum.

While addressing internal biases initiates the journey towards school improvement, the

interview data illustrates how these central office leaders work towards steering conversations towards

addressing actions that address inequities. Ms. Ba expressed support in getting school leaders to

understand the issues present in harmful classroom practices, yet difficulty in getting school leaders to

change school structures which would enable positive improvements to these harmful classroom

practices. Ms. Ba shared that she was able to get "...them [school leaders] to understand…what the

issue might be, but I think I've had a difficult conversation or frustrating conversation in getting them

[school leaders] to move forward with [changing school structures]." This quote indicates that these

central office leaders possessed the skills and strategies to facilitate difficult conversations yet were met

with resistance when these difficult conversations move towards suggesting changes to school

structures.

How do the central office leaders initiate these difficult conversations? According to the data,

coaching protocols, asking probing questions, and keeping conversations focused on students seems to

be the formula that helped these central office leaders engage in difficult conversations. Ms. Mot

outlined a coaching protocol that she uses in which she states the impact that the observed pedagogical

move has on students, whether that impact is positive or negative for student outcomes:

> And I think this is key because the impact is where it hits the heart hard. Stating *the impact this*
>
> *has of you not administering these assessments is I'm not able to support you as an educator*
>
> *and I'm unable to see the learning gaps for your students to better support you*.

This response from Ms. Mot underscores the importance of clear, effective coaching protocols paired

with guiding, probing questions, and a clear focus on student outcomes as a comprehensive method to

explore critical conversations with school leaders.

While difficult conversations might be uncomfortable, these conversations are necessary to help

shift schools towards improvement of student outcomes. The school leaders and staff possess the ability

to impact student learning directly; thereby they can impact school improvement directly. These central

office leaders engage in difficult, critical conversations to help shift the mindsets of the coachees; hence,

I explore how these central office leaders help shift mindsets of school leaders and staff in these

conversations.

Shifting Mindsets. Ultimately, the desired outcome of coaching conversations relates to

elevating awareness of mindsets and actions. These central office leaders coach school leaders to impact

school improvement efforts, which relates to the prior subsection on school improvement, illustrating

the relationship between joint work and coaching/consulting. Centered around ideas of content area

best practices, these three central office leaders expressed two types of shifts within school leaders:

shifting mindsets around understanding best practices and shifting mindsets around enacting best

practices.

In one strand, shifting mindsets relates to changing school personnel's minds and hearts about

antiquated, traditional teaching versus current best practices for curriculum and instruction. RCPS'

mission promotes developing 21st-century learners who will become productive citizens in society. In

RCPS, students are promised a dynamic, safe, and nurturing learning environment. The division's vision promotes striving for excellence in education, celebrating diversity, and a commitment to students, staff, and the school community. In responding to the innovative mission and vision, schools foster an innovative, inclusive learning environment for students. Ms. Hai talked through the importance of hands-on learning in her content area by saying how "We looked at realigning the instructional practices. Using better materials for instruction. Getting them to do more hands-on [learning]. And I saw a lot of worksheets, a lot of just low-level. So just, you know, gradually shifting that." To promote critical thinking in students, Ms. Hai advocated for teachers to move away from worksheets and towards hands-on learning, which supports the RCPS mission of developing 21st-century learners.

School leaders impact teacher pedagogy in their schools by leveraging the teacher evaluation process, and teachers learn what school leaders value in relation to classroom curriculum and instruction. However, some school leaders may show misalignment toward understanding best practices in the classroom. Ms. Mot made remarks related to walk-through reflections she facilitated with school leaders:

> So, I'm able to have those conversations with the administrators start shifting their minds at like, *yes, they're all sitting quiet in rows, but are they really engaged in learning?* Like there's a big difference there. So, conversations are more so almost like teaching administrators the difference of something because they're either far removed, you know, from teaching and might not know what 'best practice' or best instructional strategies are.

Ms. Mot's words suggest that school leaders might not be aligned with current best practices for curriculum and instruction. School leaders often have many responsibilities that shift their focus away from instructional leadership and towards other matters, such as chronic absenteeism, student and teacher health and well-being, community engagement, teacher shortages, etc. Central office leaders

act as a calibration tool to help shift mindsets around what might have been best practice in the past versus what is current instructional best practice.

Ms. Ba echoed nearly identical sentiments of shifting mindsets in her content area for what a high-quality classroom should look like. She shared an impactful memory from a meeting where a school professional's misalignment with best practice was brought to the surface of the conversation:

I was at a PLC meeting the other day and [a staff member] said, *oh, well, [content area] is just recall*…And the actual teachers from the team were like, *no, it's not because they have to take what they know, and they have to apply it and they infer*…So they understand. And they were able to articulate it and I didn't have to say a whole lot to correct.

Her memory of someone's misaligned thinking being brought to the surface by the group reflects the impact that this central office leader had on the culture of teaching and learning in that school. Ms. Ba discussed how she worked with that school for years. The teachers from the team internalized best practices that content area and effectively redirected a staff member who shared an outdated teaching belief in that content area.

Another aspect of mindset shifting occurs with school leaders understanding how to enact best practices in their schools. There exists a knowing-doing gap in schools, where school leaders might know that classroom practice happening is not best practice, but they might not know how to change this suboptimal teaching. A strand of the knowing-doing gap rests in the balance between starting school improvement and sustaining school improvement. Ms. Mot discussed the dichotomy of implementation versus impact in a compelling manner:

The biggest thing that I feel like I've done within that is the difference or helping them understand the difference of implementation versus impact. We're really at this starter cycle where we're getting things in place. We're gonna make teachers give common assessments. We're gonna offer professional development. We're gonna do all of these things but then that

reflective piece, that's what was missing. Like, how do we know any of this is impacting student

learning or student success. And so, they started to change their mindset as we met to say,

okay, great, you did professional learning. But now what? Like how are we going to measure

that it's effective or that they're utilizing it or whatever the case may be.

Connected back to the section on guided reflection, these central office leaders leverage guided

reflection to support growth in school leaders and staff. Ms. Mot's quote depicts that she works towards

changing harmful practices, partnered with accountability and sustainability, to generate long-lasting

impact. In this example, the schools that she worked with seem to be at the beginning stage of their

school improvement journey, where they have begun to change some harmful practices. And Ms. Mot

suggested that lasting change occurs when school leaders and staff experience a mindset shift towards

thinking through accountability and sustainability of their school improvement efforts.

To stay focused on current best practices, some central office leaders described engaging in

coaching conversations focused on student outcomes, which relates to the prior insight on student-

centered data conversations. Ms. Hai described a conversation with a principal who doubted their ability

to effectively change teaching quality in their school, sharing "So it was almost kind of just helping him

realize, *no, you're doing the right thing for kids*." In this example, the principal questioned whether they

made the right decision, as they were receiving negative feedback from their school staff impacted by

the decision. Ms. Hai coached the principal to realize that their decision served the best interest of

students, so it was the right decision, effectively shifting the focus from teacher misgivings to student

outcomes, which aligns with the value of placing students at the center of decision-making.

The notion of shifting mindsets assumes a spectrum of outdated thinking and innovative

thinking. These central office leaders support the long-term coaching outcome of shifting mindsets

around unlearning harmful curricular and instructional practices. The next section explores how these

culturally responsive central office leaders support school professionals in unlearning harmful practices.

Unlearning Harmful Practices. Transformational leadership involves shifting mindsets to improve student outcomes and promote school improvement. All three central office leaders expressed moments where they supported schools in unlearning harmful classroom practices through challenging conversations and guided reflection. When asked if she addressed suboptimal pedagogy with schools, Ms. Mot replied "Lots of that occurs for sure. And you have to do it with fidelity, right? Because like that's how people's feelings get hurt. People shut down…yes, I have those difficult conversations almost daily." Personal ego and defensiveness often become intertwined with beliefs about education, so Ms. Mot implied that central office leaders tend to the balance between objective data and subjective emotions tied to the data. When describing challenging harmful practices and beliefs with school leaders, Ms. Hai mentioned that we typically teach "...how we were taught, right? And that a quiet classroom is a compliant classroom is a good classroom." Indeed, harmful practices might be passed down from one's own personal experience in traditional classrooms that used compliance-based measures for student learning. Unraveling harmful practices suggests that these central office leaders also unravel the subconscious ways that school leaders and staff learned these harmful curricular and instructional practices. To relate back to the concept of shifting demographics, the students that currently sit in classrooms are not the same students from a decade ago, so traditionalist, culture-absent teaching methods may enact curricular harm.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, Ms. Hai noticed that many teachers reverted to traditional ways of teaching. The reliance on Chromebooks during the year of virtual learning inadvertently shifted instructional materials toward consumption-based learning, seen in slideshows, videos, websites, etc. Ms. Hai described the moves she used to challenge this harmful teaching practice:

> It has been a challenge to get teachers to shut the Chromebooks. And get back to doing hands on…When I was going into classrooms and watching kids, I'm like, *but you're standing there*.

You're a teacher. You're having the kids watch a lecture. I'm not gonna lie, I wanted to slam

every Chromebook down…

Shifting practices seems to be fraught with numerous challenges. Ms. Ba explained how she challenged

a school leader's plan of action, or lack thereof, when presented with data that supported

recommended changes in structures and policies at the school:

It's difficult for us to do that because we can't tell, we can't tell people *you have to do this*, *you*

have to do this. So, for me, the most difficult conversations really are not to get them to see

what's happening. But to execute the execution piece of, but this is what needs to be done so

that we can help you here or this is what needs to be done so you can see your teachers grow.

The response underscored the non-evaluative position that Ms. Ba held in relation to school leaders.

Ultimately, these central office leaders cannot mandate school changes, yet they can influence school

leaders to consider school changes. Shifting mindsets and challenging harmful practices go hand in hand

with one another. Ms. Ba attempted to shift the school leader's mindset towards changing harmful

practices that would assist with improved student outcomes.

Ms. Hai extended Ms. Ba's thinking from talking through harmful practices to thinking through

exclusionary policies and how she went about affecting change in which students get placed into

advanced coursework within her content area:

But we're looking at how do our kids get into our advanced [content area] classes? And who

gets in. Because, you know, unfortunately we have some people who are rather elitist and like

oh they don't belong in this class. They have an IEP, they have 504. *Can I do the [content area*

skills]? Have you given me a chance? So, we shift the mindsets of teachers.

Sometimes, a harmful practice ties back to a harmful, exclusionary policy. In Ms. Hai's example, the

criteria set forth for enrolling students in advanced coursework resulted in the marked absence of

underserved students. Ms. Hai worked to challenge biased criteria, suggesting that students with disabilities should have equitable access and opportunity to enroll in advanced courses.

These Curriculum and Instruction central office leaders faced the challenge of helping schools unlearn harmful practices through difficult, critical coaching conversations. Their non-evaluative positions served both as a bridge and as a barrier in progressing school improvement, which underscores the importance of coaching conversations so that these central office leaders shift the mindsets of school leaders and staff by addressing hidden biases that hinder school improvement.

Section Conclusion. This section discusses the participants' use of culturally responsive joint work and culturally responsive coaching and consulting. The major findings highlight the importance of cross-collaboration within central office for school improvement and clear instructional coaching protocols for critical conversations. These two strands of central office leadership interconnect, as coaching and consulting is a strategy nestled under the joint work partnership. The next section discusses the major findings and insights related to best practices of culturally responsive central office leaders (RQ2) in relation to school networking (subquestion 3) and policy advocacy (subquestion 4), uncovered mostly in the third interview.

Collaborative, Multidirectional Trust for Division-Wide Networked Schools

To address RQ2, which sought to identify the culturally responsive best practices demonstrated by these central office leaders, and subquestion 3, which explored how central office leaders network schools with one another, I primarily relied on responses from the third interview and document analysis as my methods of data analysis. Interview questions in the third interview were specifically designed to elicit information about the work of central office leaders in networking schools.

I uncovered that managing a networked PLC cohort requires both horizontal and vertical trust that spans across central office departments and between central office and schools. In support of this primary finding related to networking schools, I discuss the following insights that contributed to this

finding, including building a PLC cohort, building trust horizontally and vertically, leveraging teacher leaders, and unpacking content area standards.

Building a PLC Cohort. As previously uncovered within the joint work section of this chapter, these central office leaders help support school-based PLCs to influence and accelerate school improvement. To expand upon this finding, when approached with a scenario about bringing schools with differing curriculum understandings into alignment, all three participants mentioned the hypothetical idea of a networked PLC cohort.

Due to their close connection with schools along with the existing structures and systems in place, RCPS central office leaders have primed positions to enact a division-wide PLC cohort. To illustrate the example of existing structures and systems in place, Ms. Mot mentioned the ways she already works alongside a variety of positions within schools:

> I meet with department chairs, and I also meet with all teachers. I meet with new teachers kind of to welcome them and to ensure that they have the curriculum and instructional strategies they need to be successful. And then I also meet with teachers. I get all of them at one time every quarter. So that's nice to have everyone together collectively to do some professional development.

Ms. Mot's response conveys that there are existing RCPS structures in place, such as meeting with new teachers every quarter, which would make a networked cohort of different schools successful in the division. When hypothesizing about how to support a network of schools, Ms. Mot discussed how "I would schedule ongoing professional learning automatically throughout the division. So, I would get that approved for an hour or two at a time where schools came together in one location and I was able to go through the curriculum with them." Ms. Mot's quote suggests the importance of ongoing professional learning, like the structure already existing for department chairs, teachers, and new teachers. Hence,

the hypothetical implementation of this division-wide PLC cohort seems to be in alignment with the already existing structures in RCPS.

Ms. Ba echoed Ms. Mot's thoughts about creating a network of schools. Ms. Ba emphasized the importance of the PLC structure by sharing that when people "...work on alignment or planning or whatever the case may be, then I think you have to treat it like a PLC." In RCPS, all schools leverage the PLC cycle when meeting together in teams, either by department if secondary or by grade level if elementary. The PLC structure serves to align the teachers towards common goals, planning, and assessment strategies to improve student learning. With Ms. Ba's logic, central office leaders could leverage the PLC structure embedded within a network of schools. She commented that this network of schools would necessitate work within their school site, sharing "But as a group, if the goal is to make sure they're on one band, one sound in terms of alignment, then we [use the PLC structure]." In RCPS, leaders promote the PLC structure because its main purpose works towards aligning members with common goals and understandings. Using a well-established structure on a division-wide scale, these central office leaders imagined successfully achieving the outcome of coherence and alignment within curricular and instructional practices.

What might a networked PLC cohort look like? According to Ms. Mot, a PLC cohort would involve activities that promote the co-construction of knowledge both individually and collectively. She shared that "I would come together and create a professional development plan, where all the minds are together in one room. We're able to, you know, have discourse back and forth and do that together." Ms. Mot's words depict that one of the purposes of a networked PLC cohort would be to provide the opportunity for schools to make meaning of the content with one another, moving away from didactic and towards dialectical methods of knowledge-sharing. This shift towards co-constructed discussion underscores the supportive, collaborative, non-evaluative position that these central office

leaders reinforce alongside schools, found in the insights under defining effective central office leadership in RQ1 at the beginning of this chapter.

Despite the effort to bring schools together in alignment towards curriculum implementation, Ms. Hai shared the reality that "Attending doesn't mean implementation, right?" Ms. Hai's quote suggests that just because a school attends a networked PLC meeting does not guarantee that the school will enact what was learned in those centralized meetings and that there should be systems and structures in place to ensure implementation is fulfilled after the meeting ends. Therefore, Ms. Ba emphasized the importance of continuing the PLC structure within schools to ensure information implementation:

> So, to me, you have those schools and almost like an ongoing PLC. But there has to be an ongoing series of almost a practicum, so to speak, of the instructional piece of it. And then, of course, there's tasks within their building when they have their building-level PLCs or they're planning to. So, it should be a trickle-down where we had that larger group conversation and, and the opportunity to tackle those pieces a little bit more hands-on practical learning and then the execution at the building level, which is usually also supported by the team.

Ms. Ba emphasized the importance of connecting the division PLC cohort to the school-based PLCs. This continuity between central office and schools assumes the implied bridging work of the school leaders to ensure that the enactment of aligned curriculum continues in schools, indicating that the success of a division-wide networked PLC depends upon all school leaders and central office leaders agreeing on the shared responsibilities both within and outside the meetings.

Ms. Hai brought up a situation where she was tasked to collaborate with another central office leader to bring three schools together in a networked PLC cohort. She described the initial difficulties in getting this cohort up and running, along with the root causes of those difficulties:

[The three schools] had very different thought processes on what PLCs were. Three buildings

that were kind of in the same place with student achievement. What was actually interesting is

that my [content area] team and [other content area] team had different goals for the PLC.

The onset of this networked PLC cohort began with confusion from all parties participating. The three

schools conceptualized the PLC structure differently. Sometimes, RCPS schools use the PLC cycle with

fidelity, and sometimes, schools deviate from the way PLC meetings were intended to be operated.

Additionally, the two central office teams collaborating with one another had two different goals for the

networked PLC cohort. All parties came together with divergent understandings of the purpose of the

networked PLC cohort.

To get everyone working towards alignment, Ms. Hai recollected first talking with her central

office colleague. She worked on naming the mismatch of goals that each other had and working towards

compromising on the goals each person wanted to achieve:

We reckon the biggest thing was recognizing that mismatch because you know sometimes egos

can get involved…So I was very lucky to work with someone who was willing to say, yeah, we

have a mismatch and I was more than willing to go, yeah, I need to learn more about PLCs. It's

more than just planning our goals. And again, we had to really get some common definitions.

The two central office leaders worked alongside each other to develop common definitions and goals for

the networked PLC cohort. Ms. Hai's words depict that setting aside one's ego to admit misalignment

seems to be important in central office leadership, explored later in this chapter. Once alignment in

central office occurred, she helped support the three schools in aligning their goals for the networked

PLC Cohort. Ms. Hai described how they brought the three principals together, she shared "Then we met

with the principals altogether because we wanted everyone to be in the room. Both [central office

teams] were in the room. And we [central office leaders] said, *okay, what are your goals?*" Ms. Hai

described a purposeful calibration meeting where all parties were present in the room. The data

suggests that ensuring everyone is present in discussion communicates transparency in decision-making so that all parties can agree towards common goals. Furthermore, Ms. Hai provided the rationale for why the two central office leaders decided to open the discussion towards the principals' goals:

> Because, you know…it's very touchy to try to enforce your own will on a building when they have their own goals. So, you have to work within what their goals, where their buildings are. And you know you gently massage how to get to the right direction.

Ms. Hai's rationale describes how these central office leaders honor the different goals that each school may have. These central office leaders demonstrated a necessary balance between centralized coherence and alignment while also honoring site-based differences when collaborating with multiple schools.

Another data point that supports the collaborative, co-constructed nature of this networked PLC cohort rests in the usage of an open-ended agenda. To describe co-developing an open-ended agenda for this meeting alongside the other central office leader, Ms. Hai added that "…because we weren't quite sure where it was gonna go and we had to respond, I don't wanna say on the fly, but, you know, having to say, *okay if this happens this is what we'll say.*" This quote infers that the open-ended agenda afforded space for the three principals to lead the discussion organically. Ms. Hai's quote suggests that RCPS central office leaders find success with school leaders by assuming a coaching position rather than an authoritarian position, further emphasizing the transformative partnership between central office and schools.

These quotes nod towards the importance of central office leaders establishing a collaborative relationship with school leaders and staff. The data conveys that transformational collaboration exists with trust as the foundation of the relationship. So, the next section discusses the insights related to horizontal and vertical trust-building as a key to culturally responsive instructional and transformational leadership for running a successful network of schools in a PLC cohort.

Building Multidirectional Trust. Aligned with insights from culturally responsive coaching and consulting, establishing trust is also identified as a critical culturally responsive leadership practice for networking schools within a division-wide PLC cohort. The data depicts that RCPS central office leaders build trust horizontally amongst their central office colleagues and vertically between central office and schools to help achieve improved student learning outcomes. Two out of the three participants discussed relational trust, both horizontal and vertical, in the third interview.

In relation to the trust mediating the partnership between central office and schools, Ms. Ba underpinned the importance of authentic and collaborative leadership through "...an open-door policy." Ms. Ba recognized that school leaders and staff might feel intimidated or untrusting of her due to her perceived positional power, but she tries "...to put them at ease and just be myself, not, you know, yes, my location is at central office. Yes, my job is coordinator for the district. But I'm still an educator just like them." To allow school leaders and staff to see her as a support, she described that "...the biggest thing is just to be myself and be genuine...just that ongoing communication but they know they can call for anything, they can email for anything." Ms. Ba's quote illustrates that presenting one's authentic self to others breaks down perceived barriers and fosters authentic relationships. Her communication style aims towards approachability, demonstrated by "I try to make sure that I'm talking to them [school leaders and staff] and not at them because those are two very distinct things." Ms. Ba's words suggest that talking with school leaders and staff and not *at* them communicates the transformational partnership that should be instilled between central office and schools. Rather than being an authoritative presence, Ms. Ba instills an open-door, collaborative approach to her leadership with schools.

Ms. Ba further emphasized that there might be mistrust between central office and schools when attempting to bring schools together in a network. She shared that "...especially if it's a school that has historically been struggling in an area because there's already a little bit of...hesitation or their

ability to feel like they have to be on the defense." Indeed, schools that have been under sanction in the

past likely received punitive approaches towards improving their data, such as an academic review. Ms.

Hai mirrored similar commentary related to mistrust by recounting a memory of her working with a

school leader who deeply mistrusted central office leaders. She noted that that principal was "...a

person I'm trying to build a relationship with who, you know, has been very kind of at arm's length with

our department…So, you know, I'm kind of very careful how I navigate her." These two responses from

Ms. Ba and Ms. Hai implies that RCPS central office leaders practice self-awareness when working

alongside a large volume of schools, paying close attention to the school leaders and staff who may

harbor mistrustful feelings against central office.

Regarding horizontal trust, a previous finding within the joint work section of this

chapter emphasized the importance of central office teams breaking down silos and working

collaboratively across offices and departments to impact school improvement most powerfully. The

same notion of cross-collaboration applies to bringing schools together in a networked PLC cohort. And,

in discussing trust, the data suggests that RCPS central office leaders work towards building and

maintaining relational trust with other central office colleagues. Returning to Ms. Hai's story about

bringing three schools together in a networked PLC cohort, she accounted for the ability to get the goals

aligned based on the strong relationship she had with the other central office leader collaborating on

facilitating that PLC cohort. In reference to the other central office colleague, Ms. Hai said "We had great

relationships. You have to have great relationships with the people you work with." Horizontal trust-

building seems to be important for a networked PLC cohort because building a network of schools

implies that central office colleagues work together to retain alignment across multiple initiatives in

schools. RCPS central office leaders leverage multidirectional, collaborative trust to operate a successful

networked PLC cohort with schools. Additionally, to run a successful networked PLC, these central office

leaders discussed working alongside many types of school leaders and staff within the cohort. In the

next section, I discuss how these central office leaders leverage teacher leaders when facilitating a networked PLC cohort.

Leveraging Teacher Leaders. In alignment with the previous insight related to working with all types of school professionals, including school staff, the data depicts that the success of a division-wide networked PLC cohort hinges upon how these central office leaders leverage the strengths of teacher leaders. Two out of the three participants discussed the idea of leveraging teacher leaders in a networked PLC cohort.

What might leveraging teacher leaders look like in a division-wide cohort? Ms. Mot emphasized the importance of leveraging a train-the-trainer model of professional learning with teacher leaders so that she could generate the most curricular impact across the division:

> I couldn't have all of elementary together at one time unless I utilized my academic coaches then I could use them to come together in meetings. It would kind of be like train the trainer model where like I train them like we give it one resource per course or per grade level and we kind of go through like rotations and stations to get their feet wet and then they take it back to their schools because they meet with their all of their grade levels, their teams.

This model of tapping into teacher leaders, in this case, academic coaches, underscores the importance of distributed leadership within a school environment. The data conveys that the principal cannot perform all the tasks involved in getting schools closer towards alignment, and the idea of bringing multiple schools together for a networked PLC limits all school staff from these schools coming together into a meeting space. Simply put, a meeting space does not exist in RCPS where all school staff can meet for professional learning. So, for efficiency purposes, RCPS central office leaders leverage teacher leaders in their work of disseminating updated information about curriculum and instruction to school staff. Since teacher leaders regularly meet with school staff during their grade-level or department-level PLC meetings, teacher leaders are positioned to greatly influence teaching and learning in classrooms. In

agreement with Ms. Mot, Ms. Hai discussed how "...we brought their coaches together. Their academic coaches were really part of the facilitating process because we did this virtually." It appears to be logistically impossible to bring all teachers together for a networked PLC cohort meeting in RCPS. Tapping into teacher leaders seems to be beneficial for all parties involved, in that RCPS central office leaders work with teacher leaders who are closely connected with their schools, teacher leaders build their leadership capacity within the networked PLC cohort, and principals distribute and dissolve power hierarchies across staff members, sharing collective efficacy as a school community.

Once trust is initiated and established and the key stakeholders are identified to take part in the networked PLC cohort, these central office leaders consider learning objectives for the PLC cohort meeting(s). The next section defines a feature of networked learning through collaboratively unpacking content area standards.

Unpack Content Area Standards. These three central office leaders oversee division-wide content area departments in RCPS. Therefore, a theme arose related to these central office leaders focusing on a cohort-styled PLC that helps schools unpack content area standards. Two out of the three participants focused on how they would design the professional learning to help school leaders and staff unpack the content area standards. Unpacking refers to the notion of deeply understanding what the content area standards mean and translating that meaning into practice for teaching and learning.

When asked about a hypothetical situation in which multiple schools interpreted curriculum guidance differently, Ms. Ba expressed that "I think when we get down to the root of it, what I found is that some of it is the inability or the lack of capacity to really understand what the standard is asking." She added that the root cause of misalignment rests in a lack of common understanding amongst a group. In her eyes, school leaders and staff do not purposely intend to create harm to students, rather, harmful practices stem from a lack of understanding instructional best practices. Ms. Ba's quote reflects sentiments related back to the practice of shifting mindsets in school leaders and staff, building their

capacity related to best practices of their given content areas. Therefore, Ms. Ba suggests that RCPS central office leaders presume positive intent when faced with varying levels of understanding from schools and address the root causes of the problem through targeted professional learning that intends to build the capacity of school leaders and staff.

Ms. Ba described how she would go about unpacking the content area standards with the school leaders and staff by sharing that the cohort would "…walk through the curriculum to talk about and practice unpacking it so that there's a better or more coherent understanding of what we're looking at in terms of the standards, the rigor and the alignment of the content." The notion of unpacking does not simply mean surface-level understanding. To these central office leaders, unpacking means understanding the reasons why students should be learning those content area standards.

To allow school leaders and staff to become adept at delivering these content area standards, the data illustrates that these central office leaders build an active learning environment where adult participants experience the learning just as the students do. Ms. Mot discussed having the adults engage in the learning together where "It's like an upcoming unit of what they're coming up to so that they feel more comfortable, given whatever the standard is, but they're also able to experience the standard just like a student should experience it." She conveyed her value around adult learners embedding themselves deeply into content by prototyping the student experience during professional learning. This idea of active learning implies that adult learners experiment with new content in a safe, low-risk, non-judgmental learning environment where all professionals assume the role of learner as well as leader. Ms. Mot described that "To be better facilitators and understand the alignment of curriculum, they have to be able to …feel it and do it just like the kids do." This assertion suggests a difference between theoretical and practical learning, where she advocates for practical learning that takes personal experience into application.

Section Conclusion. The data conveys that bringing schools together in a network seems to be a key leadership practice for these central office leaders in working towards division-wide coherence and alignment. The participants' responses suggest that a culturally responsive networked PLC cohort instills horizontal and vertical trust so that they work alongside teacher leaders to unpack content area standards in ways that are responsive to school staff. In the next section, I discuss another key leadership practice for these central office leaders: policy advocacy.

Democratic Decision-Making for Policy Advocacy Centered on End-Users

To help explore the culturally responsive best practices of central office leaders (RQ2) and how they advocate for policy (subquestion 3), I mainly used the third interview's responses and documents as my modality of data analysis, as the interview questions focused on these central office leaders' work with policy advocacy. Through the data, I uncovered that these culturally responsive central office leaders manage the politicized central office hierarchy by balancing quick decision-making alongside democratic decision-making. In support of this primary finding related to policy advocacy, I discuss the following insights that contributed to this finding, including managing the politicized hierarchy of central office, quick decision-making, a culturally responsive community-based approach of democratic decision-making, practicing empathy towards school staff, and advocating for school leaders, staff, and students.

Managing the Politicized Hierarchy of Central Office. When approached to consider their advocacy for new and ambiguous policy, participants' responses nodded towards the politicized hierarchy in central office. Two out of the three participants discussed how they manage the politicized hierarchy of central office through their leadership. Ms. Mot reflected this notion of a hierarchical environment in central office by sharing "...there's different levels. There's like at the cabinet level where it's all the chief and then there's the directors. Of course, there's like this organizational hierarchy chart." In RCPS, a central office hierarchy exists, where senior-level leadership rests at the top of the

hierarchy, who directly supervise the directors, who directly supervise the coordinators, and who directly supervise the specialist positions. The quote suggests that these central office leaders practice care when navigating the organizational chart to complete job tasks. Furthermore, Ms. Mot explained the difference between entry- and mid-level central office leaders compared to senior-level leaders by sharing "But sometimes the people in this position [senior leadership] [don't] necessarily have a pulse of what's happening. So that's why I'm very appreciative when the conversations come down to people at my level who are in buildings every single day." In RCPS, entry- and mid-level central office leaders stay in close contact with schools by scheduling frequent school visits and staying in close communication with school leaders. Her response expressed that the higher one moves up in positional hierarchy, the farther away one gets from being able to stay in close contact with the classroom and school-based daily experiences. Ms. Mot's words imply the importance of senior-level central office leaders to engage with entry- and mid-level central office leaders in decision-making conversations that impact schools.

These central office leaders buffer between the senior-level/state leadership and schools, managing the policies enacted by schools in a way that tends to regulations while still differentiating and accommodating schools based on their unique needs. In fact, the data conveys how these central office leaders are placed into compromising positions when tasked to manage ambiguous policy from senior-level and state-level leaders. Ms. Hai remembered a situation involving an ambiguous policy from the state and shared that "The ambiguity actually started with [me not knowing] what my involvement was." She went on to recount how the state produced a policy, which was communicated to the senior-level central office leaders, and then her involuntary involvement was communicated to her. The data suggests that this ambiguity possibly occurred due to the siloed nature of central office, both within its organization and between divisions and state offices. The phenomena of horizontal and vertical segmentation impact these central office leaders when they attempt to make sense of ambiguous policy.

The stories from the participants described a sense of urgency in central office policy enactment, underscoring attempts to retain legitimacy within the organization. Therefore, the next section expands upon the common insight related to these central office leaders making quick decisions to manage threats to legitimacy.

Quick Decision-Making. These central office leaders noted that quick decision-making is a necessary component of the job, where matters come down the pipeline with a sense of urgency. Two out of the three participants made commentary related to quick decision-making. When asked about a remark she made about democratic decision-making, Ms. Mot stated "And you know, I don't know if that [democratic decision-making] happens with fidelity all the time and I understand that sometimes decisions have to be made very quickly." Her statement illustrates that quick decision-making is not ideal, however, it is required at times to enact. Quick decision-making relates back to the insight of managing the politicized hierarchy of central office, in that these quick decisions work at satisfying the regulatory requests from senior-level leadership and the state department.

Quick decision-making seems to be both enacted onto these central office leaders as well as enacted by these central office leaders. For example, when recollecting an instance involving ambiguous policy from the state, Ms. Hai commented "It [the ambiguous policy] came very quickly. *Oh yes, now [Ms. Hai], you're in charge of this…*it was like the cart without the horse." Oftentimes, RCPS central office leaders are asked to lead ambiguous policy implementation at the school level. Ms. Hai's words of "the cart without the horse" suggest that structures and systems were not quite in place yet before implementing the new policy from the state. The urgency of this new policy placed Ms. Hai in a compromising position where she needed to learn more about the policy while simultaneously attempting to teach other professionals about the policy.

In the face of quick decision-making, these central office leaders conveyed a commitment to leading efforts using democratic, co-constructed decision-making processes. Hence, the next section

uncovers how these central office leaders employ culturally responsive democratic decision-making leadership practices.

Democratic Decision-Making. Considering culturally responsive community advocacy and engagement, these central office leaders try to lead democratic decision-making processes. All three participants expressed how they use democratic decision-making processes in their central office leadership by collaborating alongside community stakeholders, families, school leaders, and staff to create effective and culturally responsive products, processes, and procedures. Broadly speaking, the data conveys that these culturally responsive central office leaders prioritize the best practice of engaging with multiple stakeholders throughout the decision-making process. Ms. Mot emphasized this best practice by sharing:

> You have to have a really broad lens to understand all the different dynamics because whoever is at the table making that decision might be thinking one way but when you start hearing different voices like well it's gonna affect kids and then parents. Those conversations definitely need to be had. So, I'm very vocal in ensuring that we have diverse people at our table to make these decisions before huge decisions are made for that very reason.

Though Ms. Mot discussed the necessary component of quick decision-making in her role, her quote suggests that RCPS central office leaders engage with the community and those outside of central office to inform their decisions in a way that honors the diversity of the community and the schools. Ms. Mot recognized the balance that one must consider between quick and democratic decision-making by sharing:

> Like of course, we can't give everybody what they want, but ensuring we're tapping into different people and stakeholders is essential and it makes people feel as if you do care. Like even if I don't go with your way, like I have a voice and it matters. And sometimes that's all people want.

The reflection about giving people a voice implies that culturally responsive central office leaders foster an inclusive division by embedding diverse perspectives within the organization's fabric.

These central office leaders engage in democratic decision-making at various levels across the community and schools. In terms of community engagement, RCPS central office leaders learn from external partners. For example, Ms. Mot responded "I need to hear from the [community stakeholders]. What do you need from us? What do you need our kids coming to you with when they graduate? So how can we better prepare them to be successful in your workplace?" In this instance, she recognized the gap between inculcated school skills and necessary workforce skills. By engaging with the community stakeholders, such as business partners, she better understood what she could design differently in her program of studies to facilitate the students' transition from high school to workforce.

Another strand of community engagement involves learning from families. Ms. Mot shared an example of this by saying "If we're doing calendar changes, we want to hear from parents. Like, what is your opinion on setting your kid back before or after Labor Day? And I think that allows for transparency." Calendar considerations represent just one strategy that these central office leaders use to engage with families to better understand their wants and needs so that school divisions do not act as barriers for family engagement and student attendance.

In relation to ambiguous policy, central office leaders commonly work alongside school leaders and staff in enacting policies with respect and care in schools. To depict this, Ms. Ba conveyed how she used and continues to use teachers' voices in the development process of division-wide assessments by sharing "The teachers actually have helped develop [division-wide assessments]. As far as the development of them, I do have teacher committees. From the minute that became a thing, we've had teachers that work curriculum writing to help develop those [district-wide assessments]." RCPS formalized the usage of teacher committees when developing division-wide curriculum, instruction, and assessment resources. Ms. Ba showed a commitment to engaging school staff in the curriculum

development process. The data shows that culturally responsive decision-making involves end-users

throughout the development process so end-user perspectives directly inform decisions for other end-

users. Ms. Ba went on to describe the iterative process of curriculum development alongside school

staff. She shared:

> When it's time to revise or tweak them we try to pull those same teachers back in and we get
>
> feedback from teachers to go, *okay, what worked, what did it work* so we know kind of the
>
> direction we might need to go in…So, we definitely don't want to gatekeep on in terms of the
>
> development of them…their [teachers'] feedback is important to how we move forward.

The term "gatekeep" proves to be powerful language as it underscores the act of defying vertical

segmentation and central office staying in close collaboration with schools, related back to the school

improvement insight under the joint work finding of this study. The onset of the division-wide

assessments was mandated through state legislation, starting as an ambiguous policy for divisions to

unpack and for schools to implement. However, in the face of ambiguous policy and quick decision-

making, Ms. Ba committed to integrating teacher voice into the development of these division-wide

assessments. She described working alongside teachers to understand their perspectives and

experiences to develop division-wide assessments that can be used with ease by all the teachers in the

division.

RCPS central office leaders practice mindfulness towards the end-user experiences, whether

that be from the teacher or the school leader, so that products, processes, and procedures can be

responsive to these end-users' needs. Ms. Hai coordinated with the Director of Elementary Education,

and recounted how this director:

> …let me have some time with her principals. And part of that buy-in happened with one of the
>
> principals that she's actually really close with…I'm trying to rebuild that relationship or build that
>
> relationship. And so, I had said, *hey, do you have a few seconds to look at this?* So, working with

her finding out, okay, she's the end-user as an administrator. What are the problems [with the

new platform]?

There are multiple connections in Ms. Hai's response related to other insights throughout this study.

First, the onset of understanding the principal perspective started with coordination and collaboration

across another department in central office, underscoring the importance of horizontal integration

across different departments as a means of accelerating school improvement. Second, she attempted to

foster a relationship with a certain principal who had some mistrust towards central office, connected

with the insight around proactive trust building as a key mechanism. Third, the overall decision to listen

to the principal rather than talk down at the principal for not understanding the new platform

underlines the finding from RQ1 involving central office leaders redefining relationships with schools

from compliance-based relationships into collaborative partnerships.

To add to insights gleaned from Ms. Hai's response, she made mention of an attempt to gain

buy-in from the principal. Indeed, democratic decision-making ensures that decision-makers closely

integrate stakeholders within the process. Democratic decision-making benefits both parties where the

leader of the effort learns new insight from stakeholders while the stakeholders contribute and help

lead the effort to be most accessible to the largest audience of end-users. Ms. Mot reflected these

beneficial outcomes from democratic decision-making by stating "And so it's just being intentional with

including different voices. It's definitely important." Without democratic decision-making, these central

office leaders would reinforce the past perspective of central office as a regulatory organization acting

on schools rather than alongside schools.

To be a leader who values democratic decision-making assumes that one also holds a curious

empathy for the school-based experience. Therefore, the next section explores the ways that these

central office leaders hold space to feel empathy for school leaders and staff as a foundational practice

that reinforces their prioritization of democratic decision-making.

Practicing Empathy towards School Leaders and Staff. The stories from the participants suggest that RCPS central office leaders practice empathy towards school leaders and staff so they can understand the nuances of the end-user experiences when crafting plans for policy advocacy. Two out of the three leaders expressed empathy for school leaders and staff as an important skill for culturally responsive policy advocacy. Ms. Mot expressed the thoughts that "You, you really have to be empathetic in these roles. Even though I have never had the opportunity to be a building administrator, you still can empathize with them and what they're juggling and have that positive intent." Ms. Mot's response implies that there might be negative intent assumed from actions taken by school leaders, meaning that sometimes, school leaders might not be compliant to central office leaders' attempts at enacting policies within schools. Rather than demonize these school leaders for lack of compliance, the response emphasized remaining empathetic for the school leader for all the efforts they must juggle to keep a school functioning daily. Ms. Mot seemed to underscore working with school leaders, not against them, in her culturally responsive policy advocacy.

Ms. Hai also underlined the importance of empathy for school leaders when leading in a central office position. In her response, she conveyed that:

> We only have to deal with our specific content, right? So, as that principal, she doesn't just have to navigate me, she has to navigate [the other content area coordinators as well]. And then, she also has, you know, student behaviors and parents and teachers…So, sometimes we have to put ourselves in their shoes and say, okay, what's going to be the easiest for them? Because something that seems really simple to us is really complex, you know, or not as user-friendly.

Not only do school leaders manage the daily workings of keeping a school running, but they also manage the teaching and learning that happens in classrooms daily, meaning that principals also manage their relationships with the content area coordinators in central office. Ms. Hai expressed empathy for this tough teaching and learning juggling act. The response suggests that principals may not have the time or

capacity to understand ambiguous policy, so it is the responsibility of these central office leaders to act

as a buffer between senior-level leadership and schools, learning from school leaders about their end-

user experiences and making meaning of those experiences to redesign policy initiatives for ease in

application. The data conveys that some central office leaders see the need to act as a buffer in the face

of ambiguous, fast-acting policy. The next section uncovers how these central office leaders advocate

for school leaders, staff, and students.

  Advocating for School Leaders, Staff, and Students. RCPS central office leaders expressed

perceived pressure within their middle management positions, tending to both those in higher positions

and those that they serve, the schools. In the face of ambiguous policy, some central office leaders

enact policy advocacy by advocating on behalf of school leaders and staff and their day-to-day

experiences. Two out of the three participants talked about how they advocate for schools in their

central office leadership. Ms. Mot expressed her strong stance to put kids first by stating "So for

starters, I am very vocal in relation to, you know, what we're pushing out to teachers to ensure that we

do have kids at the forefront of this decision-making." She went on to describe this commitment toward

putting students first throughout the decision-making process by sharing "I'm a very vocal leader. My

hashtag on my email is *do what's best for kids*. And I stand strongly behind that statement, so if things

come down the pipeline at central office above me, I'm never argumentative, but I do stand pretty

firm." Ms. Mot's response relates back to the insight about keeping culturally responsive coaching

conversations focused on students. Her quote implies that, sometimes, policies that travel to central

office do not always center students. She described her fierce advocacy for school leaders and staff

when presented with ambiguous policy:

   And wanting to understand policies and things that I might personally disagree with

   professionally…You don't always get your way just like in life, but I'm very passionate about

   standing firm and speaking on behalf of teachers…I still have a pulse on buildings and what it's

like to be a teacher and sometimes when you're so far removed you kind of forget what that's

like, I even had my chief of academics say, like it's so nice to have like a teacher voice in the

room. I'm like, *right, like we can't forget, we can't forget what they are enduring every single*

day.

The practice of empathy for school leaders and staff demonstrates an understanding that schools

directly impact student learning. In Ms. Mot's eyes, RCPS central office leaders care for school

professionals, which ultimately impacts how the school professionals care for their students. The quote

implies that school professionals experience an immense daily workload, such as instructing students,

tending to students' socioemotional well-being, completing assessments, data sheets, paperwork,

responding to student behavior, communicating effectively with families, and at the end of the day,

ensuring to care for themselves.

How do central office leaders enact their advocacy on behalf of schools? According to Ms. Mot,

she would provide extra support to schools in the face of ambiguous policy. She referenced back to the

notion of central office as a support system that she consistently discussed throughout the previous two

interviews. She shared "So how you go about that is extra support like extra support for the buildings in

relation to what it is like we're gonna work through this. It's gonna be okay." Ms. Mot went on by noting

"And all we can do is put in an extra layer of support so that our staff and team feel as if you know we're

trying to support them in this new initiative." Indeed, being supportive seems to be a key definition of

effective central office leadership.

Ms. Hai mentioned the focus on doing what is best for school leaders, staff, and students,

reinforcing Ms. Mot's perspective on school support. Ms. Hai also made mention of the personal ego

that needs to be managed when advocating for schools:

I think the hardest thing about being in this position is to take your personal feelings out. Like if

there is ambiguity, you're there to support teachers, administration, and students. So if one of

those three groups isn't understanding it, take your emotions out of it, take your feelings out of

it. And what's gonna work best because we are in a service industry.

In the response, there is an assumed ego that underlines leadership. Ms. Hai managed personal ego to

provide the best possible service to school leaders, staff, and students. In this regard, RCPS central office

leaders bring awareness to school leaders' and staff's personal biases. This act of surfacing biases relates

to the notion of critical self-reflection discussed in the first major finding of this chapter.

Section Conclusion. Managing the hierarchical system of central office seems to unpin the work

of culturally responsive advocacy policy for these central office leaders. While ambiguous policy travels

swiftly from the state department or senior-level leadership to these middle managers, these central

office leaders exercised their power by balancing quick decision-making alongside democratic decision-

making so that decisions from central office attempted to satisfy the end-users. Through the act of

hearing all voices, the central office leaders conveyed a commitment to practicing empathy for school

leaders and staff, since the ambiguous policy often falls upon school leaders and staff to enact. RCPS

central office leaders attempt to be active agents of change in the face of ambiguous policy, advocating

for policy changes that meet the needs of end-users, namely, school leaders, staff, and/or students.

Conclusion

This chapter includes six findings from interview and document data. First, participants defined

effective central office leadership as a shift from traditional, compliance-based relationships to

transformational partnerships with schools. They highlighted the role of structures like joint learning

walks, which integrate central office leaders into schools in a non-evaluative and collaborative manner.

Second, participants emphasized critical self-reflection as a key aspect of culturally responsive

leadership. They noted that negative memories, including personal trauma, disengaged schooling, and

uninspiring leadership, shaped their leadership approaches, driving them toward more progressive,

engaging practices. Third, when engaging in joint work with school leaders and staff, participants

described collaboration across central office departments as essential to supporting culturally

responsive school improvement. Their stories demonstrated how breaking down silos and addressing

both horizontal and vertical segmentation allowed for more effective problem-solving and targeted

school support. Participants emphasized differentiated approaches, mindset shifts, and the importance

of professional learning in achieving these goals. Fourth, participants highlighted coaching and

consulting as a best practice for culturally responsive leadership. They stressed the importance of clear

coaching protocols that foster critical conversations, helping to shift harmful practices. By focusing on

student outcomes and building relational trust, these central office leaders created safe environments

for school leaders and staff to engage in meaningful, reflective dialogue. Fifth, participants discussed

creating a network of schools through division-wide PLC cohorts, emphasizing the need for both

horizontal and vertical trust. They described how distributed leadership, particularly through

instructional coaches, helped align schools with central guidance while addressing unique instructional

needs. Sixth, participants shared how they navigate policy advocacy, balancing quick decision-making

with democratic decision-making. They stressed the importance of empathy and collaboration with

community stakeholders when translating ambiguous policies into actionable steps for schools,

advocating for policies that resonate with school leaders, staff, and students.

These six findings illustrate how RCPS central office leaders employ culturally responsive

leadership practices to foster collaboration, support schools, and create inclusive, transformative

environments. Chapter V discusses these findings in relation to the literature and conceptual

framework, leading to practical recommendations for the best practices of culturally responsive central

office leaders.

Chapter V: Discussion and Recommendations

This study aimed to explore the best practices of instructionally focused, culturally responsive central office leaders by examining the leadership practices of three central office leaders within one division. Chapter IV presented findings that provided deeper insights into these practices and their relationship to the study's conceptual framework, emphasizing the best practices of central office leaders. While Chapter IV organized themes based on research questions that centered on central office leadership practices—such as joint work, coaching and consulting, networking schools, and policy advocacy, Chapter V shifts focus to the intersection of these best practices with culturally responsive leadership. Themes in Chapter V include prioritizing critical self-reflection, leveraging instructional and transformational leadership, fostering a culturally responsive culture and climate, and valuing community advocacy and engagement. Ultimately, Chapter V extends the findings by offering four recommendations for practitioners seeking to implement culturally responsive best practices in central office roles.

Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework

Discussion of Themes: Conditions for Culturally Responsive Central Office Leaders

The following discussion illustrates four themes related to the conditions necessary for central office leaders to enact both culturally responsive leadership and the best practices of central office

leadership. Culturally responsive leadership stems from culturally responsive teaching literature, and scholars argue that cultural responsiveness is a collective enterprise owned by multiple players within a school division (Perrone, 2022; Tanase, 2020), including central office leaders.

Diversified student body demographics necessitate the call to action for leaders to enact culturally responsive leadership in their practice. Shifting student body demographics represent one of the most important factors that influence policy and decision-making in school divisions (Diarrassouba & Johnson, 2014), and RCPS central office leaders noted the ways that they supported school leaders and staff through student body demographic shifts, pursuant to school improvement. Therefore, shifting student body demographics shaped the environment in which culturally responsive leadership was enacted.

Critical Self-Reflection

In this study, these RCPS central office leaders critically self-reflected upon negative memories from their personal and professional experiences to define their purpose and influence their development into culturally responsive central office leaders. According to Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016), culturally responsive leaders leverage critical self-reflection throughout their leadership tenure to shape their attitudes, beliefs, and actions toward cultural responsiveness. When prompted to explain how they became the leader they were today, all three central office leaders recalled moments of trauma, educational disengagement, learning from uninspiring leaders, and proving naysayers wrong, all of which motivated them to embody the antithesis of these negative memories.

In examining the leaders' reflections collectively, many of these negative experiences align with concepts of cultural unresponsiveness, meaning the neutral absence of cultural responsiveness, and/or cultural non-responsiveness, defined as the active harm towards an individual's humanity and identity (Isra-Ul, 2023). The participants in this study critically reflected on their own experiences of these harmful practices, shaping their culturally responsive leadership approach. In Ms. Mot's case, her

childhood teachers and parental figure interacted with her using a deficit-based lens, regarding her as a

failure who showed no promise of future success. Her personal experiences with deficit-based thinking

inspired her to become a champion for all students using asset-based thinking. In Ms. Ba's case, her

experiences with racism as a child and as an adult motivated her to create inclusive spaces where all

individuals can feel a sense of belonging. In Ms. Hai's story, she remembered sitting through unengaging

classroom lessons as a student which spurred her on to become a leader who advocated for relevant

curriculum and instruction alongside cultivating high student engagement during lessons. These

moments of cultural unresponsiveness and/or cultural non-responsiveness motivated these three

leaders to act in ways that rectified the harm that was done to them. These three examples underscore

the importance of central office leaders leveraging critical self-reflection of cultural unresponsiveness

and/or cultural non-responsiveness to shape their disposition towards culturally responsive leadership.

Collaborative Trust

While self-reflection shapes internal leadership dispositions, culturally responsive leadership

also requires external collaboration. A key aspect of this is trust, as the following section discusses. The

participants described moments of establishing trust within other central office colleagues and school

leaders and staff. This finding relates to culturally responsive leadership literature. Marshall and Khalifa

(2018) named that culturally responsive instructional and transformational leadership involves

establishing and maintaining trust. These trusting relationships within central office departments and

across schools enabled these three central office leaders to support continuous school improvement

efforts.

Within the RCPS central office, many different departments are charged to focus their

leadership efforts on specialized areas. These areas include curriculum and instruction, special

education, and developing school leaders, to name a few. The Curriculum and Instruction Department,

which focuses on best practices in teaching and learning, recently joined forces with the Elementary and

Secondary Leadership Department to conduct joint learning walks alongside school leaders. Before this collaboration, these walks were conducted solely by leadership departments. This shift allowed Curriculum and Instruction leaders to leverage their subject-matter expertise to strengthen school improvement efforts.

This focus on cross-departmental collaboration addresses the issue of siloing, where specialized departments within central offices often work in isolation (Spillane, 1998). Despite the tendency for siloing in central office structures, the leaders in this study demonstrated how collaboration across departments—particularly in joint learning walks—broke down these barriers and fostered a shared mission for school improvement. Breaking down these silos fosters trust and collaboration across departments, as described by Ms. Ba, who emphasized the "power in collaborating" across departments during joint learning walks. When central office leaders trust one another and work together, their collective efforts are more likely to yield successful school improvement outcomes (Duke, 2010).

Trust within central office departments is crucial, but equally important is the trust established between central office leaders and the schools they serve. Across central office and schools, RCPS senior-level leaders created structures that afforded the Curriculum and Instruction central office leaders more time to establish trust with school leaders. Ms. Hai highlighted how this collaboration deepened trust between her team and school leaders by aligning their goals through a networked PLC alongside three school leaders and one other central office leader. She described how each principal had differing definitions and visions for the purpose of a PLC. Rather than moving forward with the intended timeline, Ms. Hai advocated for a meeting to be solely focused on making visible the common goals for the networked PLC, which meant establishing trust among all five professionals to explicitly name their latent beliefs about PLCs and come to consensus on a common goal for the networked PLC.

Once divisions establish a coherent central office with central office leaders trusting one another and working together, then central office leaders effectively impact schools by establishing trust

with school leaders and staff. The RCPS central office leaders interviewed mentioned their intentional

efforts to collaborate with school leaders to influence school improvement. Principals noted that central

office leaders highly influence the working conditions that either facilitate or prevent them from

enacting school improvement (Bottoms & Fry, 2009). Joint work between central office leaders and

school leaders represents one of the most impactful division-level practices that support school

improvement (Honig et al., 2010; Honig, 2012; Stosich, 2020). Regarding culturally responsive joint work,

these central office leaders combined elements of central office best practices alongside culturally

responsive leadership. For example, the central office leaders cited their work helping schools identify

their site-based problem of practice and work through iterative testing cycles to aim toward school

improvement. One component of joint work emphasizes how central office leaders help schools identify

their problem of practice (Stosich, 2020). These RCPS central office leaders also cited their differentiated

approach towards differing schools and their various needs, as no two schools are exactly alike. Though

the goal towards improved student learning is centralized, the ways that schools approach this goal can

look different from site to site, so these central office leaders work at looking closely at the school site,

their needs, their data, and move forward with addressing school improvement in a differentiated

manner. Though the principal stands as the prominent advocate for improved student achievement

within a school (Fullan, 2014; Harvey & Holland, 2013; Hattie et al., 2015) and Honig (2012) defined joint

work as collaboration between central office leaders and principals, these three central office leaders

mentioned their expansive joint work alongside many types of school leaders and staff, including

principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, department chairs, and teachers.

RCPS central office leaders told stories and shared documents illustrating how they redefined

their relationship with schools from fearful compliance to trusting collaboration. These central office

leaders remembered strained relationships between themselves and school leaders in the past, which

correlated to the division practice of academic review, where central office leaders came into buildings

to manage underperforming schools. Now, these central office leaders joyfully discussed their revived

relationships with schools, defined by supportive, non-evaluative, and collaborative relationships. These

participants shared how they wanted to be seen less as "villains'' (Leon, 2008), and these central office

leaders focused less on exercising educational management and increasingly focused their energy on

educational leadership (Bottoms & Fry, 2009). Additionally, these participants described a differentiated

approach when working alongside schools, rejecting a one-size-fits-all model of school improvement,

and leaning in towards leadership that responded to the unique needs of schools. In other words,

removing fearful compliance from the school to central office relationship allowed for these central

office leaders to practice more responsive leadership when engaging with schools.

A key function of central office leaders involves supporting school leaders and staff's learning

and development through leading professional learning (Leithwood, 2013; Springboard Schools, 2006),

supporting PLC meetings (Stosich, 2020), and leading division-wide PLCs for a network of schools (Honig,

2012; Honig et al., 2010; Mattheis, 2017; Stosich, 2020). The trust established between central office

and schools appears critical in supporting continuous improvement for student achievement. Ms. Mot

mentioned that "…people do not willingly choose to learn from leaders they do not trust." Trust

between central office and schools facilitated joint work that drove school improvement.

Leading professional learning for school leaders and staff supports the mission of improving

student achievement by calibrating school leaders and staff towards the best practices of teaching and

learning in classrooms. Moreover, when these central office leaders come to support PLC meetings in

schools, they continue their advocacy towards the best practices of teaching and learning in these PLC

meetings. Oftentimes, these central office leaders leveraged relational trust to steer their professional

learning facilitation and PLC support towards building the capacity for school leaders and staff to engage

in critical self-reflection upon culturally unresponsive/non-responsive practices that the school leaders

and staff were inadvertently perpetuating. So, trust enables critical conversations on establishing a

culturally responsive climate and learning culture, discussed more in the next section. The shift from

fearful compliance to trusting collaboration redefined the relationships between RCPS central office

leaders and schools. In the past, central office leaders were seen as "villains", overseeing compliance-

based academic reviews. Today, they emphasized supportive, non-evaluative relationships, and joint

efforts toward shared goals. This transformation in trust allowed these central office leaders to focus on

educational leadership rather than merely educational management (Bottoms & Fry, 2009). By building

trust, these central office leaders engage school leaders and staff in critical conversations about

culturally unresponsive/non-responsive practices, supporting growth towards a culturally responsive

climate and learning culture.

Critical Conversations

Building on the foundation of culturally responsive instructional leadership, the following

section discusses how critical conversations and coaching support school leaders and staff in unlearning

harmful practices. One of the central roles of culturally responsive leaders is engaging in instructional

coaching, a practice that allows leaders to address harmful beliefs and practices and encourage data-

driven decision-making (Honig, 2012). Through guided reflection, these leaders help school professionals

confront practices that hinder student success, fostering environments that prioritize equity and

student-centered learning. The past negative experiences influenced these leaders' specific coaching

strategies. The three participants named instructional coaching and consulting as a key function in their

job responsibilities. Culturally responsive leaders support data-driven decision-making (Honig, 2012),

and these three central office leaders described in detail how they supported schools in making meaning

of student data, qualitatively and quantitatively. The data could take the form of student achievement

data on a division-wide assessment or the form of observed behaviors in a classroom. Whatever form

the data took, these three central office leaders described a further step beyond data analysis; they

engaged school leaders and staff in guided reflection. Leaders inculcate critical self-reflection and critical

consciousness within others by facilitating guided reflection (Furman, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2019). In the case of these participants, guided reflection most often took place at the end of a joint learning walk or during a PLC meeting in the form of a coaching conversation. These coaching conversations involved central office leaders asking probing questions that challenged the coachee to think beyond surface-level data. These coaching conversations focused on reflective questions about student data so that the central office leaders could minimize any threatening feelings of defensiveness from the coachees. Participants reported that these coaching conversations entered the realm of discomfort because they attempted to shift the mindsets of those being coached. These interviews noted that discomfort occurred in school leaders and staff when they surfaced the dissonance between educational philosophy and practice, for example, the dissonance between valuing student engagement but cultivating traditionalist sit-and-get models of teaching and learning in schools. In connection with Chapter V's first theme of negative memories that motivated these central office leaders towards culturally responsive leadership, the harmful practices that they combated against often mirrored the harmful practices that they experienced in the past. For example, Ms. Mot worked with a principal to unearth their belief that compliant students equated to engaged students. What Ms. Mot described as a "harmful belief" of compliance being misperceived as engagement related to Ms. Mot's experience with compliance-based teaching and learning when she was a child. Ultimately, these participants expressed a collective long-term teaching and learning vision for unlearning harmful practices to foster learning environments that value the best practice of student-centered inquiry and engagement. This vision connects with culturally responsive instructional and transformational leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). Ms. Hai envisioned an environment where all learners can access advanced curricula in her content area, dispelling the harmful tradition that only students from dominant cultures and privileged backgrounds can learn at higher levels. Ms. Mot saw a path forward for students to engage in high-

quality, rigorous, hands-on, open-ended learning experiences, placing focus on students from

marginalized, underserved communities.

These critical conversations promoted unlearning and served as a foundation for culturally

responsive instructional leadership as these leaders ensured equitable access to high-quality education

for all students. These leaders' critical self-reflection upon cultural unresponsiveness/non-

responsiveness seemed to influence their passion for coaching school leaders and staff to see the

importance of a culturally responsive climate and culture for student learning. Therefore, there seems to

be a through-line that emphasizes the foundation of culturally responsive critical self-reflection

throughout this discussion of themes. Critical self-reflection also becomes apparent in the next section,

which discusses the relationship between policy advocacy and democratic decision-making. By

leveraging their own critical self-reflection on cultural unresponsiveness/non-responsiveness, these

central office leaders guide others toward creating culturally responsive climates and cultures for

student learning. Their passion for coaching and consulting stems from their desire to correct the

harmful practices they once experienced, reinforcing the foundational role of critical self-reflection in

their leadership practice.

Democratic Decision-Making

While coaching is vital for unlearning harmful practices within schools, culturally responsive

leaders also play a critical role in policy advocacy, ensuring that the policies guiding schools reflect the

needs and values of the communities they serve. Policy closely aligns with instructional work, as

instructional policy impacts the type and quality of school instruction (Diem et al., 2015). Policy from the

state and/or division impacts the types of assessments used to gauge student learning, the design of the

instructional material, and the evaluation of effective teaching and learning, to name a few examples.

Effective central office leaders influence and manage policy work at district and state levels,

collaborating with principals to improve teaching and learning in schools (Grove, 2002; Honig, 2012;

Honig et al., 2010; Stosich, 2020). These three leaders navigated the complexities of division policies while ensuring that diverse community voices influence decisions. This balancing act demonstrates the culturally responsive leader's commitment to advocacy and democratic decision-making (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016).

Culturally responsive leadership prioritizes democratic processes when working with community partners and stakeholders (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016; Santamaría, 2014). These participants described the democratic, community-based decisions that bloomed from the culturally responsive disposition of engaging with and listening to diverse voices of end-users, be it families, community partners, school leaders, and school staff. Likewise, they also recognized a top-down political arena within their central office hierarchy, where the sense of urgency with policy enactment often originated from higher-level leaders. Central office leaders play a crucial role as policy boundary-spanning intermediaries (Mattheis, 2017), mediating between the directives of senior-level leaders and the practical needs of school leaders and staff. For example, when policy decisions from the state were misaligned with the needs of students and staff, these central office leaders advocated on behalf of the schools, leveraging their field-based knowledge to influence policy decisions. This balancing act required them to manage the urgency of policy enactment while ensuring that these policies were responsive to the community's needs. In addition to acting as intermediaries, these leaders proactively advocated for policies that benefited schools, especially when they identified top-down policies that do not align with school needs.

This value towards policy advocacy manifested into attuned empathy towards school leaders and staff. Ms. Hai emphasized her prioritization of being physically present in schools to build trust with school leaders and staff by showing her commitment to helping schools operate, even if it meant performing tasks outside her job responsibility, such as helping unload buses at student arrival. Being present in schools also served the central office leaders by assisting them in seeing precisely what school

leaders and staff experience daily. Empathy for school leaders and staff drove these central office leaders to engage directly with schools, ensuring they remained in touch with the realities of daily school operations. This deep understanding strengthened their ability to advocate effectively for policies that serve the school community. This observational data informed these central office leaders as they relayed the school experience to senior-level leaders who might not necessarily have close contact with schools. This observational data, collected through culturally responsive, community-based approaches, also informed these central office leaders as they advocated for policy that tended to school leaders, staff, and students. By engaging in democratic decision-making and advocacy, these culturally responsive leaders ensured that school policies are not only effective but also inclusive.

'Discussion of Themes' Conclusion

The themes indicate that culturally responsive central office leaders require four critical conditions to enact best practices: critical self-reflection, collaborative trust, engaging in critical conversations, and democratic decision-making. When viewing these conditions holistically, it becomes clear that a self-aware central office leader draws on personal and professional experiences to inform culturally responsive leadership practices. Their negative experiences with culturally unresponsive/non-responsive, compliance-based leadership underscores that fear-driven compliance stifles responsiveness. As a result, these leaders sought to replace compliance-driven practices with a model of differentiated, continuous improvement that fosters responsiveness in schools. This high-level discussion of themes dovetails into this study's recommendations for division leaders on supporting the best practices of culturally responsive, instructionally focused central office leaders.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion of themes, I present four distinct recommendations for division leaders, including instructionally focused central office leaders and those who support central office leaders, such as senior-level leaders. These recommendations combine elements from culturally

responsive leadership and the best practices of central office leaders, both found within this study's conceptual framework.

Cultivate a Courageous, Safe Climate and Culture for Central Office Leaders

The first theme highlights how critical self-reflection shapes a central office leader's approach to culturally responsive leadership. This reflective practice influences the leaders' day-to-day decisions, helping them enact best practices within central office. To foster this reflection, division leaders should create a safe and courageous environment where central office leaders can openly share critical memories related to personal experiences that shape their unique lens for leadership.

Compliance-based organizational cultures often focus on external stakeholders but neglect the importance of internal relationships. Without clear structures to support deep reflection and authentic dialogue, the default culture tends to be surface-level and transactional, limiting individual and collective growth. If divisions prioritize reflective learning environments for students, they should also extend these practices to their adult leaders, including those in the central office to facilitate a safe, courageous climate and culture. Critical self-reflection and critical consciousness support a committed orientation towards culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016). For example, in this study, the three central office leaders recalled personal experiences of cultural unresponsiveness/non-responsiveness that motivated them to embrace culturally responsive practices. Leaders from marginalized, underserved communities drew upon their lived experiences of discrimination to shape their leadership orientation. These leaders' experiences with cultural unresponsiveness/non-responsiveness parallel students' experiences, especially with students who belong to marginalized, underserved communities. Leaders from dominant cultures, however, may not naturally develop this critical consciousness from their own experiences. They can, however, build it by listening to and amplifying the voices of colleagues from marginalized, underserved communities. In this way, central office organizations can align their leadership practices with the needs of a diverse student population,

ensuring that culturally responsive strategies are not only adopted but deeply rooted in leadership practice.

To encourage this growth, division leaders should create spaces, whether in professional learning meetings or team meetings, where central office leaders can authentically reflect on both positive and negative past experiences. Cultivating courageous spaces for central office leaders involves the organization prioritizing a culturally responsive culture and climate within central office. Building a courageous environment requires a division-wide commitment to a culturally responsive culture within central office. This climate of openness and reflection should mirror the climate cultivated in schools, reinforcing the importance of critical self-reflection throughout the entire educational organization.

Actively Build Structures that Disestablish Division Silos

The first recommendation emphasizes the importance of cultivating safe spaces for central office leaders to engage in critical self-reflection. By reflecting on their own experiences with cultural unresponsiveness/non-responsiveness, leaders can better align their practices with culturally responsive leadership. However, individual reflection alone is not sufficient to drive systemic change. For culturally responsive leadership to take root across the entire division, trust must be built at multiple levels— within the central office and between central office leaders and school communities. Therefore, the second recommendation focuses on creating structures that disestablish silos and foster multi-directional trust, ensuring that the work of culturally responsive leadership is collaborative and integrated throughout the organization. This study's second recommendation builds off the second theme related to collaborative trust. This recommendation places trust-building at a premium. In fact, the notion of building trust encompasses three out of the eight domains within this study's conceptual framework, namely instructional and transformational leadership, joint work, and networking schools. Therefore, establishing trust is paramount to the effectiveness of a central office leader's impact (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). The success of culturally responsive central office leaders hinges on their

effectiveness in building and maintaining trust with school leaders and staff, so that courageous conversations about inequities can take place between central office and schools. According to this study's data, trust spans both vertically, between central office and schools, and horizontally, across different departments and teams within central office. Effective divisions maintain a narrow, unified focus on teaching and learning (Bottoms & Fry, 2009; Childress & Elmore, 2007; Hornung & Yoder, 2014; Leithwood, 2013; Springboard Schools, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Trust-building enables leaders to foster collective efficacy, where different players work together toward shared goals of school improvement and improved student outcomes. When central office leaders establish trust, they can foster collective efficacy so that multiple players can steer forward toward the unified goal of school improvement and improved teaching and learning.

To shift away from siloed, compliance-based leadership, divisions should actively build structures that promote trust in all directions. Vertical trust, for example, can be established by creating collaborative structures between central office and school leaders. An example of this is RCPS's implementation of joint learning walks, where both central office leaders and school leaders participated in school visits together. This practice signaled an expectation of two-way, transformational relationships and helps align goals between central office and schools. RCPS further solidified this collaboration by requiring joint learning walks on a quarterly basis, ensuring that school improvement efforts are a shared, sustained responsibility.

At the same time, horizontal trust—trust across different departments within central office—can be achieved by creating opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration. Senior-level division leaders should prioritize systems that encourage departments to work together, such as RCPS's joint learning walks involving multiple central office departments. However, leaders should remain mindful of the workload this creates. Without balancing responsibilities, cross-departmental collaboration can become unsustainable when central office leaders have too many responsibilities that render workload

to be overwhelming. To address this, senior-level leaders should reduce the managerial burden on central office leaders, allowing them to focus more on educational leadership than on administrative tasks. For instance, by streamlining reporting processes or reallocating non-instructional duties, divisions can free up time for leaders to engage in transformational leadership and instructional improvement. Ultimately, divisions that reduce silos—both vertically and horizontally—help central office leaders shift from being educational managers to educational leaders (Bottoms & Fry, 2009). This approach supports stronger collaboration and ensures that teaching and learning remain at the core of the division's efforts.

Create Clear Coaching Protocols for Critical Conversations with School Leaders and Staff

Building on the need for critical self-reflection and the importance of fostering multi-directional trust, the third recommendation focuses on the practical steps central office leaders can take to drive culturally responsive change through coaching. While self-reflection and trust lay the groundwork for deeper relationships and open communication, it is through structured, critical conversations that school leaders and staff can challenge harmful practices and develop more inclusive mindsets. To facilitate these necessary discussions, central office leaders should create clear coaching protocols that guide conversations toward cultural responsiveness, helping to shift the perspectives and practices of those they coach. The study's third recommendation stems from the third theme related to engaging in difficult, critical conversations across central office and schools. This recommendation places a spotlight on how central office leaders can both cultivate a culturally responsive culture and climate while practicing instructional coaching and consulting.

To help foster an inclusive culture and climate in schools, central office leaders can create clear coaching protocols that they can readily use for coaching conversations with school leaders and staff. These protocols can be used after analyzing student data, whether it is observational data from joint learning walks or assessment data from a school's PLC meeting, and include defined phases or steps,

guiding coachees through probing questions and student-centered outcomes. For example, a coaching

conversation might begin with a review of the data, followed by a series of questions that challenge

school leaders and staff to reflect on their underlying beliefs, especially if those beliefs are rooted in

harmful or deficit-based views of student learning. These reflective coaching conversations serve to

build the capacity of critical self-reflection and critical consciousness within school leaders and staff,

thereby cultivating cultural responsiveness within the culture and climate. Central office leaders can

help cultivate inclusive learning environments by using coaching conversations to challenge prevalent,

harmful practices that are absent of cultural responsiveness. Challenging these harmful practices also

begins to shift the mindsets of school leaders and staff towards an asset-based, culturally responsive

belief and practice (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Promote Central Office Leaders' Ability to Understand the End-user Experiences

Each of the previous recommendations—critical self-reflection, trust-building, and structured

coaching—provides the foundation for central office leaders to become more effective in driving

culturally responsive leadership. However, for this leadership to truly impact students, staff, and the

broader community, leaders should go beyond internal practices and engage directly with those they

serve. The final recommendation emphasizes the importance of democratic decision-making, rooted in

an empathetic understanding of the end-user experiences—whether it is school leaders, staff, students,

families, or community partners. By engaging in this outward-focused approach, central office leaders

can ensure that their policy decisions are informed by and responsive to the needs of their diverse

constituents.

As culturally responsive central office leaders, these participants not only engaged in policy

advocacy but also ensured that these policy decisions were grounded in democratic processes and

aligned with the core tenets of culturally responsive leadership. Keeping close contact with schools,

families, and community groups allows central office leaders to make decisions informed by the real

experiences of end-users within the school system. When operating under traditionalist approaches of

educational management (Leon, 2008), central office leaders often operate in silos (Duke, 2010),

therefore promoting a compliance culture where school leaders and staff perceive a disconnect from

central office. In contrast, culturally responsive central office leaders break down these silos by

becoming present in schools and communities. For instance, Ms. Hai exemplified this practice by actively

showing up at schools, engaging with school staff, and performing daily tasks like unloading buses.

These small acts established trust and demonstrated a commitment to understanding the needs of the

school community.

Central office leaders should note and honor the tension between the time investment of

listening to constituents while also balancing the sense of urgency created by fast-acting policy. Quick

decision-making is necessary considering the urgency imposed onto central office leaders from the state

department and senior-level leadership. They manage the urgency by responding to policy-related

deadlines while finding opportunities to influence policy enactment by engaging with end-users related

to the policy. Effective central office leaders can function as policy boundary-spanning intermediaries

(Mattheis, 2017), and culturally responsive central office leaders prioritize listening to the voices who

are most marginalized from mainstream culture (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Implications for the Conceptual Framework

This study's integration of two fields of research—central office leadership best practices and

culturally responsive leadership—proved valuable in examining the best practices of instructionally

focused, culturally responsive central office leaders. The initial conceptual framework (see Figure 2)

showed basic interactions between these two fields. However, the findings from Chapter IV and the

discussion in Chapter V revealed deeper, more complex interactions across both frameworks. This led to

the development of a revised conceptual framework (see Figure 3), which recognizes the close,

sophisticated integration of certain strands from each field and illustrates how these practices interact to shape culturally responsive leadership.

In the original conceptual framework, culturally responsive leadership and central office best practices were depicted as separate but interacting components, eventually converging into culturally responsive central office leadership. The themes were separate and remained distinctly divided—culturally responsive leadership on one side, and central office best practices on the other. The revised framework eliminates this separation, recognizing deeper integration between strands of each framework.

Critical self-reflection serves as the foundation of the conceptual framework, underpinning the beliefs and actions central office leaders take. Without critical self-reflection, none of the other leadership practices could be used effectively. It is through this reflective process that central office leaders cultivate their orientation towards culturally responsive leadership.

With critical self-reflection as the foundation, central office leaders are then able to engage in instructional and transformational leadership practices, which facilitate collaborative efforts such as joint work and networking schools. Above critical self-reflection rests the amalgamation of culturally responsive instructional and transformational leadership alongside the central office best practices of joint work and networking schools. Stories from the three central office leaders in this study consistently illustrated the significant role of instructional and transformational leadership in their work, especially in coordinating division-wide PLCs and joint initiatives that brought multiple schools together. Therefore, one can conclude that instructionally focused central office leaders perform many of their job tasks within the realm of instructional and transformational leadership.

The third platform describes the consolidation of fostering a culturally responsive culture and climate alongside coaching and consulting. Central office leaders use coaching and consulting strategies to foster a culturally responsive culture and climate in schools, helping to challenge mindsets around

harmful practices. This interaction reinforces the idea that coaching is not only a function of instructional leadership, but also a critical tool for developing cultural responsiveness within the broader school climate.

Finally, the top platform of the revised conceptual framework illustrates the connection between culturally responsive community advocacy and engagement alongside the best practice of policy advocacy. Central office leaders practice ethical leadership by engaging diverse voices from schools, the community, and families while also practicing hierarchical awareness of the sense of urgency imposed onto them by forces outside of their control, such as the state department and senior-level division leadership. Although community and policy advocacy represent a smaller portion of a central office leader's job responsibility, both represent a portion significant enough to be elevated by the literature and by the stories told by these three central office leaders.

Figure 2.

Original Conceptual Framework

Figure 3.

Revised Conceptual Framework

These integrated platforms within the revised conceptual framework provide a structure that visually captures the interplay between the conceptual framework, themes, and recommendations. Figure 4 visually represents this interplay. With the critical self-reflection platform, the theme reveals how culturally responsive central office leaders learn from harmful, culturally unresponsive/nonresponsive experiences. The instructional and transformational leadership, joint work, and networking schools platform promotes multidirectional trust. The coaching/consulting and climate and culture platform supports difficult conversations to help school leaders and staff unlearn harmful, culturally unresponsive/nonresponsive practices. Finally, community and policy advocacy help central office leaders make decisions grounded in empathy and democratic processes through listening to constituents.
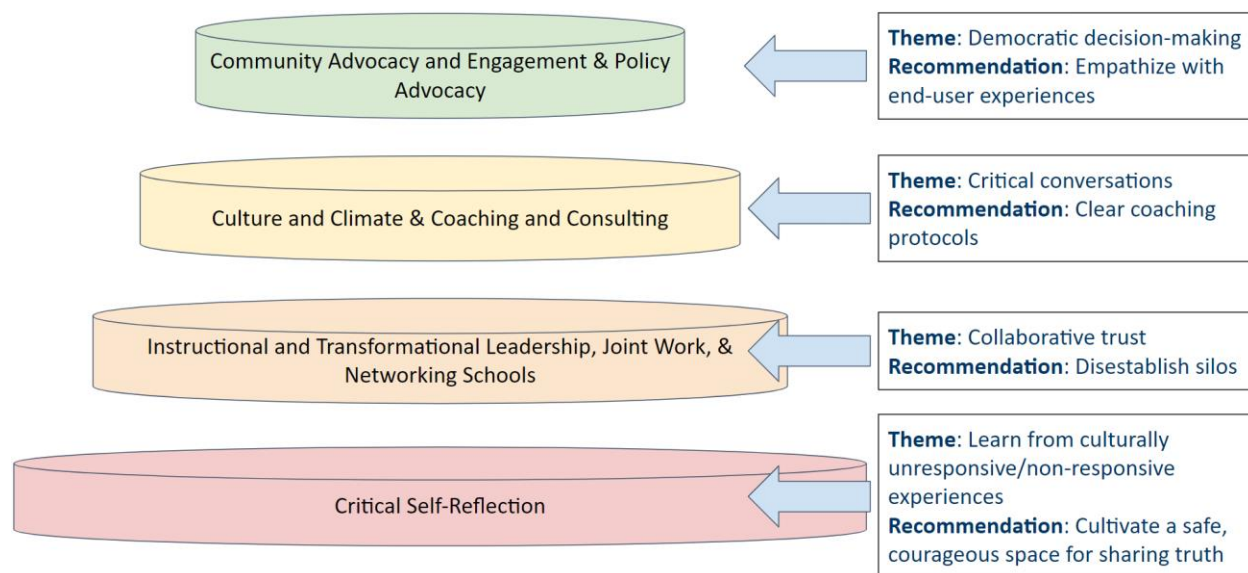
Figure 4.

Interplay between Conceptual Framework, Themes, and Recommendations

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined the best practices of instructionally focused, culturally responsive central office leaders. To replicate this study, a researcher may consider purposive sampling of a division that heralds a strategic plan which prioritizes culturally responsive teaching and leading, as this would mimic the intention behind this study. Such sampling would provide a fertile ground for observing and analyzing how these frameworks are implemented in practice.

Future researchers can continue the line of thinking in examining instructionally focused, culturally responsive central office leaders by leveraging a mixed methods approach, with interviews and surveys. By surveying not only the central office leaders but also the school leaders and staff they collaborate with, researchers could gain a broader understanding of how culturally responsive practices influence school culture, teaching quality, and student outcomes. Such an approach would help identify the impact from central office leaders, translating into specific practices for school divisions.

Another valuable avenue for future research is to examine central office leaders who are not primarily focused on instruction. These leaders, responsible for professional learning, leadership

development, and other functions indirectly related to instruction, play critical roles in shaping the broader school ecosystem. By exploring their culturally responsive practices, researchers can provide a more holistic understanding of central office leadership across diverse functions.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I situated this study's research findings within the context of the bodies of research discussed in Chapter II as well as in relation to the study's conceptual framework. As a result, I put forward recommendations for instructionally focused central office leaders and senior-level division leaders who oversee and manage these central office leaders. These recommendations help steer central office leaders towards cultivating their culturally responsive leadership situated within the best practices of central office leadership.

The key takeaway from this study is that compliance imposes inherent harm for school divisions. Compliance constrains the flexibility and adaptability needed to be culturally responsive. Culturally responsive central office leaders, therefore, shift away from compliance-driven leadership models toward practices that are collaborative and reflective. These leaders recognize that school leaders and staff cannot reach their full potential in a compliance-based culture. For example, these central office leaders noted that schools did not respond well to the compliance-based practice of academic review in RCPS. Their understanding is often shaped by their own negative experiences with compliance-based practices in both personal and professional contexts. Compliance, in all its manifestations, can be considered culturally unresponsive/non-responsive.

This harm caused by compliance-based practices in central office leadership mirrors the harm seen in school environments that adopt a similar compliance-based culture. Compliance encourages a one-directional relationship between leaders and end-users, excluding them from meaningful decision-making processes. It fails to honor the cultural knowledge and lived experiences of end-users, such as school leaders, staff, and students, within a complex and diverse system. Therefore, retiring compliance-

based leadership in central office operations aligns with the need for schools to move beyond compliance-driven models, enabling a more culturally responsive division.

Action Communications

In this section, I present two practical products designed to communicate the study's findings, themes, and recommendations to any division interested in exploring the implications of this research. While every division has different populations and needs, the hope is that these set of recommendations are useful for any division leader, be it superintendent or educational specialist, pursuant to culturally responsive central office leaders focused on best practice. The second product is a presentation template for use in debriefing central office leaders on the purpose of the study.

Action Communication 1: Division Briefing

Culturally Responsive Central Office Leaders: Understanding Culturally Responsive Central Office Leaders' Best Practices

Subject: Central office leaders that integrate both culturally responsive leadership and the best practices of central office leadership

Problem of Practice: Historically, central office leadership has been underrepresented or portrayed negatively in educational literature. However, recent studies emphasize the importance of central office leadership in supporting improved teaching and learning. At the same time, the U.S. student population

is becoming increasingly diverse, while the nation's leadership remains predominantly White (approximately 80%). This creates an urgent need for leaders who can serve diverse student populations, which culturally responsive leadership addresses.

Context: This study examined the perspectives and practices of three central office leaders within one school division, analyzing their reflections and the documents they shared to understand how they integrate culturally responsive leadership into their roles.

Major Themes: The following themes extend from an analysis of the perceptions of RCPS central office leaders and the documents that they shared in support of their storytelling. In sharing these themes, I hope that they are helpful in reflecting on your past journey, your current state, and your future actions.

- **Theme One**: Culturally responsive critical self-reflection involves reflecting on cultural unresponsiveness/non-responsiveness as motivation for culturally responsive leadership

- **Theme Two**: Culturally responsive instructional and transformational leadership involves collaborative trust

- **Theme Three**: A culturally responsive climate and culture involves critical conversations to support the unlearning of harmful practices

- **Theme Four**: Culturally responsive community advocacy and engagement involves democratic decision-making

Recommendations: As a result of these findings, I propose four recommendations for divisions that wish to amplify central office leaders as culturally responsive leaders focused on best practices:

- **Support Critical Self-Reflection**: Create courageous spaces for central office leaders and senior-level district leaders to reflect openly on experiences of cultural unresponsiveness or non-responsiveness. Central office environments often emphasize urgency and transactional tasks.

By building structured, guided reflection opportunities, leaders can slow down to engage in deep critical self-reflection. Instead of surface-level conversations, use guiding questions that explore lived experiences with cultural unresponsiveness. Reflecting on these experiences helps leaders identify negative practices and motivates them to adopt culturally responsive leadership.

- **Foster Instructional and Transformational Leadership**: To break down silos and build trust, senior-level district leaders should promote both horizontal and vertical collaboration. This involves creating cross-departmental structures that encourage central office leaders to work together and with school leaders. One effective structure is joint learning walks, where central office departments collaborate with schools, helping build trust and fostering instructional leadership. This shift from educational management to leadership requires intentional structures that promote collaboration.

- **Facilitate Critical Conversations Through Coaching**: After trust has been established, central office leaders should initiate culturally responsive coaching conversations with school leaders and staff to address harmful practices. To ensure productive conversations, establish clear coaching protocols and guidelines that create boundaries and parameters. By making these structures visible, the focus can shift away from managing the conversation to deepening reflection and developing critical consciousness around cultural unresponsiveness and non-responsiveness.

- **Prioritize Community Advocacy and Engagement**: To enhance policy advocacy, senior-level district leaders should promote central office leaders' ability to empathize with the communities they serve. Often, central office leaders are distanced from the lived experiences of school leaders, staff, students, and families due to the managerial nature of their roles. To bridge this gap, reduce managerial tasks and provide opportunities for central office leaders to be present

in schools and communities. Being physically present allows leaders to better understand the

day-to-day experiences of their end-users and informs their policy advocacy with real-world

insights.

Action Communication 2: Presentation Template for Leaders

Problem of Practice

Principals greatly impact student learning (Fullan, 2014; Harvey & Holland, 2013; Hattie et al., 2015).

But who supports the principal?

Central office leaders directly influence principals' working conditions (Bottoms & Fry, 2009; King Smith, et al., 2020).

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Problem of Practice

Yet, K12 leader demographics remain predominantly White (Aceves & Orosco, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Perrone, 2022).

Student Demographics in RCPS

Two or More Races 7.1%

White 28.3%

Black 55.6%

Latino/Hispanic 8.1%

Asian 1.0%

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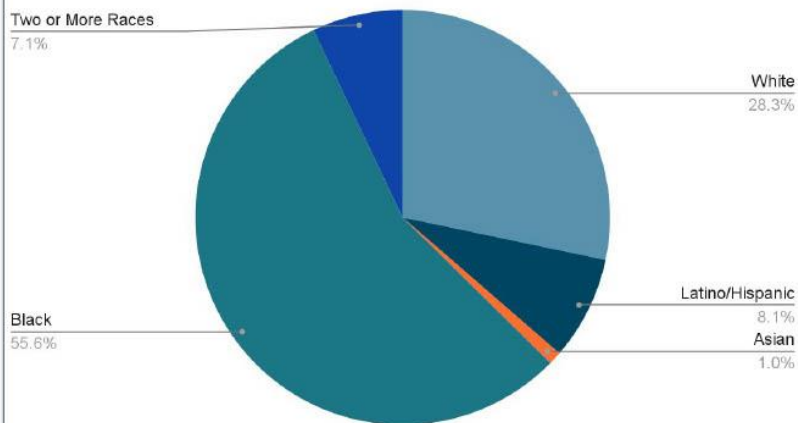
Problem of Practice

We know about best practices of central office leaders and about culturally responsive school leadership, yet we know little about culturally responsive central office leadership

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Purpose of Study

This study seeks to examine how instructionally focused central office leaders utilize culturally responsive leadership practices through the implementation of best practices within central office

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Research Questions

Question 1: How do participants define effective central office leadership?

Question 2: What culturally responsive best practices are demonstrated by central office leaders?

Subquestion 1: How do central office leaders engage in joint work with principals?

Subquestion 2: How do central office leaders coach and consult principals for instructional improvement?

Subquestion 3: How do central office leaders create a network amongst schools?

Subquestion 4: How do central office leaders advocate for policy?

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Review of Literature

Culturally Responsive Leadership

Furman, 2012; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa et al., 2019; Leithwood, 2021; Santamaria, 2014; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012

Critical self-reflection

Gooden & O, 2015; Martinez, 2015; Rivera-McCabe, 2019; Roegman, 2017

Instructional and Transformational Leadership

Irvine et al., 2010; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011

Culture and Climate

Dewsbury et al., 2022; Faas et al., 2018

Community Advocacy and Engagement

Green, 2015

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Methodology

One Division	Three Participants	Central Office Leaders	Interviews and Document analysis
• Single case studies are one of the most common research methodologies for qualitative work (Coburn, 2001; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014)	• Three different interviews of three central office leaders in the department • Survey	• Age range 22-65 • Central office roles	• Inform the findings (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017) • Pilot test interview questions • Data analysis alongside data collection (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015)

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Methodology

(Adapted from Yin, 2003)

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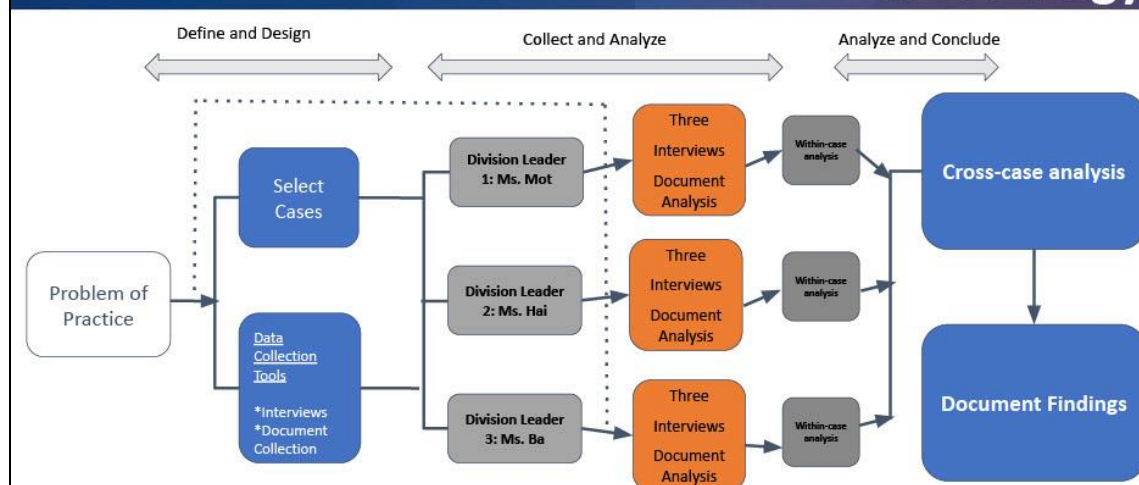
Findings

Chapter IV
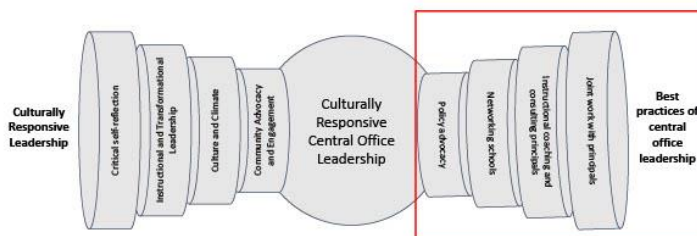
Finding 1

Critical self-reflection on negative memories influenced their motivation towards being a leader

"As a child, I had no ambitions, grades were poor, teachers did not tap into my strengths or my learning styles and ability. So, it kind of dismissed me as a whole child." - Ms. Mot
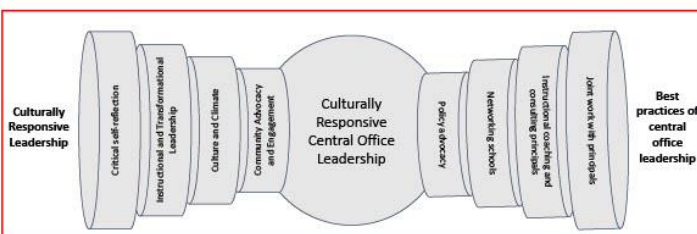
Finding 2

Shifting from compliance-based educational management to educational leadership

"...trying to shift that narrative, right? Those people in the ivory tower. That's not what we want to be." - Ms. Hai

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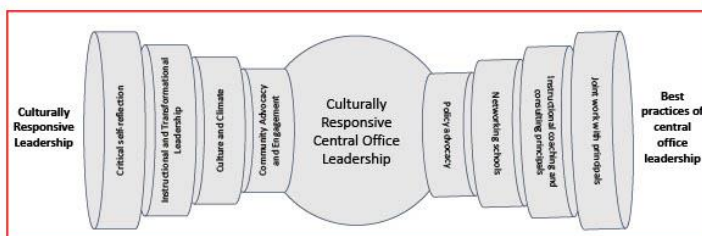
Finding 3

Effective joint work requires central office collaboration to support school improvement

"The power is in collaborating with our directors...giving feedback to principals on what they're seeing, and they have the quarterly reviews that they do with the principals." - Ms. Ba

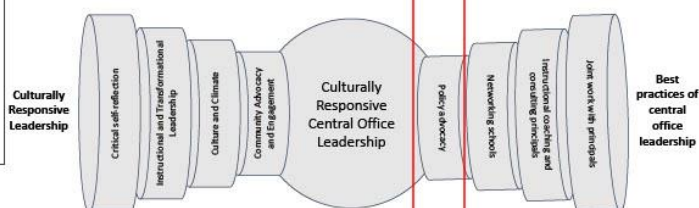UNIVERSITY *of* VIRGINIA | SCHOOL *of* EDUCATION *and* HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Finding 6

Managing the politicized central office hierarchy requires a balance of quick and democratic decision-making

"I am very vocal in relation to what we're pushing out to teachers to ensure that we do have kids at the forefront of this decision-making." - Ms. Mot

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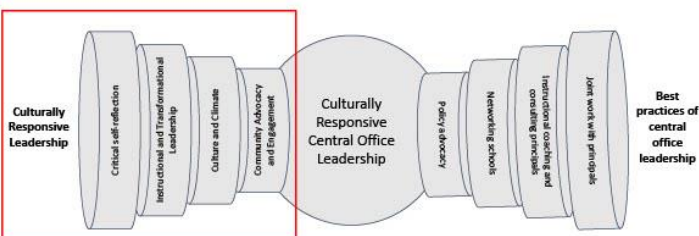

Discussion of Themes

Chapter V

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Theme 1

Critical self-reflection involves reflecting on personal experiences with cultural unresponsiveness/non-responsiveness (Isra-Ul, 2023) as motivation for culturally responsive leadership

"I wanted to be a change agent in the K-12 public arena. I realized that it [education] doesn't have to be sit-and-get, and it doesn't have to be, you know, lecture style." - Ms. Mot
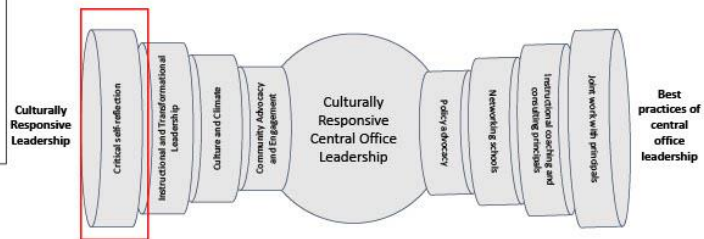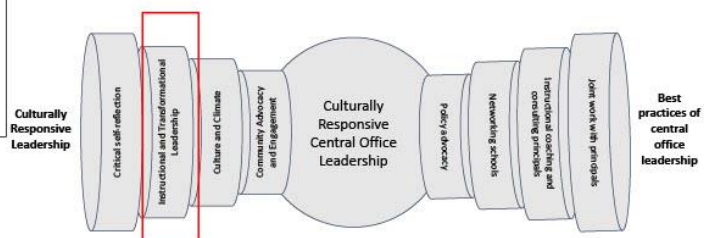

Theme 2

Culturally responsive instructional and transformational leadership involves **collaborative trust**

"...to put them at ease and just be myself, not, you know, yes, my location is at central office. But I'm still an educator just like them." - Ms. Ba
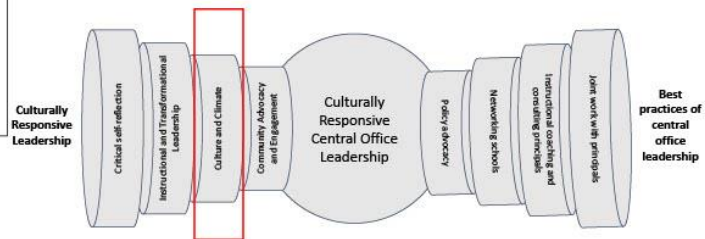
Theme 3

A culturally responsive climate and culture involves **critical conversations** to support the unlearning of harmful practices

"So, I'm able to have those conversations with the administrators start shifting their minds at like, *yes, they're all sitting quiet in rows, but are they really engaged in learning?* Like there's a big difference there." - Ms. Mot

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Theme 4

Culturally responsive community advocacy and engagement involves **democratic decision-making** when advocating for policy

"...we definitely don't want to gatekeep on in terms of the development of them [curriculum]...their [teachers'] feedback is important to how we move forward." - Ms. Ba
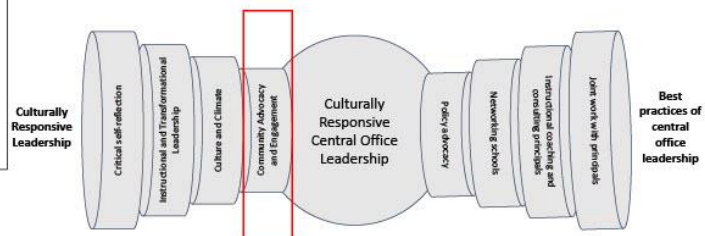
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Recommendations

Chapter V

Recommendation 1

Cultivate a courageous, safe climate and culture for central office leaders to critically self-reflect on culturally unresponsive/non-responsive experiences

Recommendation 2

Actively build structures that disestablish inter-departmental central office silos and silos between central office and schools to establish multi-directional, culturally responsive trust
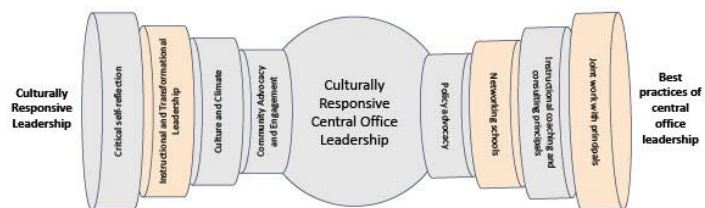
Recommendation 3

Create and use clear coaching protocols so central office leaders can initiate culturally responsive critical conversations with school leaders and staff about culturally unresponsive/non-responsive practices

Recommendation 4

Promote central office leaders' ability to empathetically understand the end-user experiences of school leaders, staff, students, families, and community partners

Conceptual Framework v1

Themes and Recommendations

Community Advocacy and Engagement & Policy Advocacy

Theme: Democratic decision-making
Recommendation: Empathize with end-user experiences

Culture and Climate & Coaching and Consulting

Theme: Critical conversations
Recommendation: Clear coaching protocols

Instructional and Transformational Leadership, Joint Work, & Networking Schools

Theme: Collaborative trust
Recommendation: Disestablish silos

Critical Self-Reflection

Theme: Learn from culturally unresponsive/non-responsive experiences
Recommendation: Cultivate a safe, courageous space for sharing truth
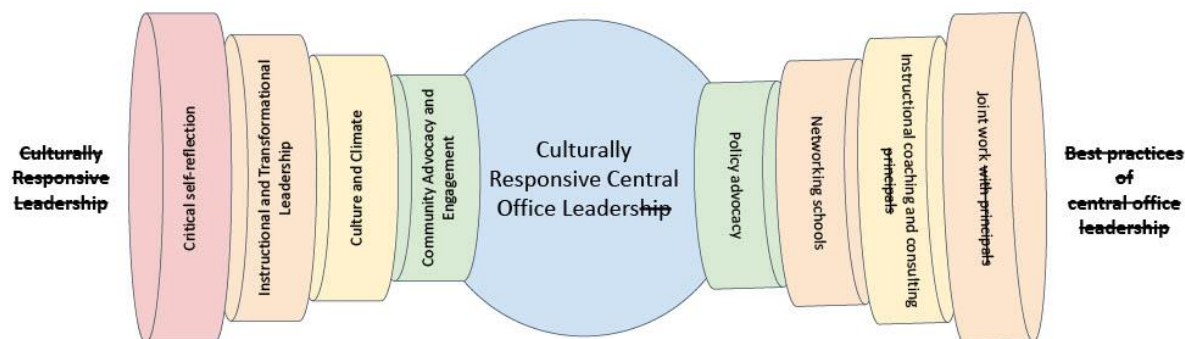
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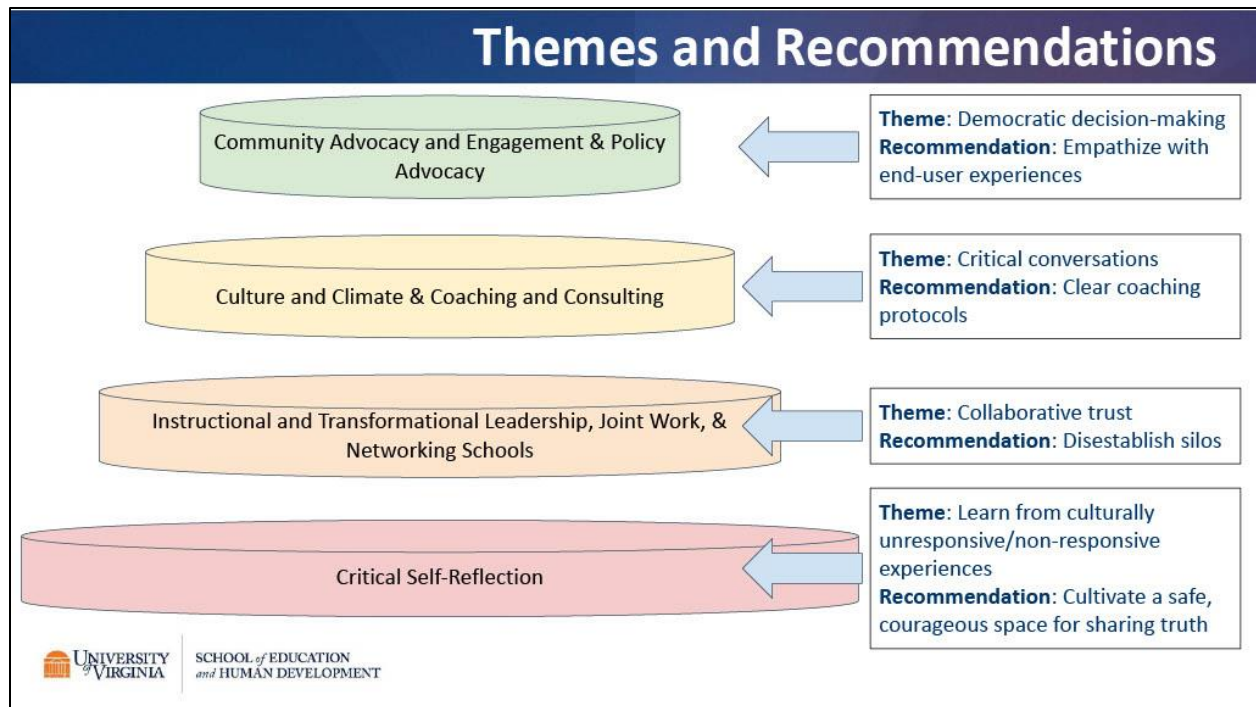
Conclusion

"...compliance, in all its manifestations, can be considered culturally unresponsive/non-responsive"

(Years, 2024)

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Appendix A: Initial Electronic Correspondence for Consent

UVA IRB-SBS Protocol Number: 5681

To whom it may concern:

Hello, my name is Janice Years and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Virginia. To fulfill my capstone dissertation requirement, I am researching how three central office instructional leaders support principals in leveraging culturally responsive leadership practices from the viewpoint of one group of stakeholders: central office leaders.

To better understand how instructional leaders at central office support principals to leverage culturally responsive leadership, I am seeking volunteers as well as nominations for participation in this study. Criteria for involvement in this study include:

- Being a central office leader in the division
- Be a member of the Teaching and Learning Department
- Identify or be nominated as a culturally responsive leader
- Age range between 22-65

Those selected for the study will participate in three semi-structured interviews, each requiring no more than forty-five minutes of your time. You may choose to provide artifacts to showcase your best practices of central office leadership, which will add 15-30 more minutes of your time to the study. There is no compensation for participation in this study. This research poses no more than minimal risk to you personally or professionally. There is a slight risk that the inadvertent release of information that you provide may cause social tension, strain professional or community relationships, or cause you to worry. Your participation is voluntary and any identifiable information will be redacted from transcripts and final publication. This includes all participants' names, including division leadership staff, principals of schools, etc. The division and any participant in the study will be concealed with a pseudonym. Reference to principal or schools will also be concealed. You will be audio and video recorded via Zoom and notes will be taken during the interview. Only your first name will be used in the recording, and both the recording and the notes will be handled in a confidential manner. Regardless of this study's findings, there are no consequences to anyone participating in the study. Your data will not be shared with anyone. Each semi-structured interview participant will have the opportunity to review their responses to questions upon receipt of the transcript.

Despite these efforts, however, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. This study is limited to only three participants. It is possible that those familiar with your division may be able to discover your identity.

To express your interest or to nominate a colleague for participation in the study, please complete the anonymous Google Form within two weeks of time. After receipt of all name submissions, participants will be purposefully selected by those who self-nominated as well as were nominated for participation in the study. At that time, a follow up email will be sent to invite your participation in the study.

Sincerely,
Janice Years
XXXXXXXXXXXX@virginia.edu

Appendix B: Informed Consent Agreement

Title: Culturally Responsive Central Office Leaders: Understanding Culturally Responsive Central Office Leaders' Best Practices
UVA IRB-SBS Protocol Number: 5681

Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this study is to examine how three central office instructional leaders support principals in leveraging culturally responsive leadership practices from the viewpoint of one group of stakeholders: central office leaders. The lessons learned from this study will be shared broadly, both within and outside of the school division.
What you will do in the study: This study will include interviews with representatives from the stakeholder group, the Instructional Services Department. You were selected as a possible participant in the invitational phase of the study. In addition, you will be asked to collect and share any artifacts you may have that relate to your central office leadership. If you decide to participate in this study, you will participate in three semi-structured interviews. During these interviews, I hope to learn who you are as a leader and what leadership practices you employ. You may be asked to provide artifacts to showcase these leadership practices. A review of your semi-structured interview and artifact analysis will be examined to consider how central office leaders support principals in leveraging culturally responsive leadership practices. All these documents will be treated with confidentiality, as described below.
Time required: The study will require up to 3 hours of your time. I expect each interview should take between 30 and 45 minutes, with another 15 to 30 minutes spent collecting and forwarding relevant artifacts related to the study.
Risks: This research poses no more than minimal risk to you personally or professionally. Your participation is voluntary and any identifiable information will be redacted from transcripts and final publication. This includes all participants' names, including division leadership staff, principal of schools, etc. The division's identity will be concealed using a pseudonym. You will be audio and video recorded via Zoom and notes will be taken during the interview. Only your first name will be used in the recording, and both the recording and the notes will be handled in a confidential manner. Regardless of this study's findings, there are no consequences to anyone participating in the study, including principals, division leaders, and teachers.
Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. Participation in the study may support your ability to critically self-reflect upon one's leadership as a culturally responsive central office leader. The study may help us understand effective ways that central office leaders support principals in leveraging culturally responsive leadership practices. The lessons learned may benefit other central office leaders.
Confidentiality: The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially, including the recorded interview, communications regarding the study, and any other artifacts that surface during your semi-structured interview. Your name and other information used to identify you will not be collected or linked to the data. Because of the nature of the data, it may be possible to deduce your identity; however, your data will be reported in a way that will not identify you. Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed and the data has been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report. All interview recordings and collected documents will be stored in a secure workplace and destroyed one year after the study is completed.

The identity of the division and any school or principal referenced during the interviews will be concealed by pseudonyms. Electronic recordings of your semi-structured interview will be used to ensure the fidelity of the transcription. Zoom recordings will be downloaded and stored on a personal, password-protected computer. I will secure Zoom settings by using computer audio-only and disabling Cloud recordings. Passwords will be required for all Zoom interviews with research participants. A new link and password will be generated for your semi-structured interview. This will prevent uninvited individuals from accessing your interview meeting. The data will be stored on a password-protected device to be used for my UVA Capstone and Research. Once the study is completed, all data will be destroyed.

Despite these efforts, however, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. This study is limited to only three central office leaders. It is likely that some of the information that will be included in reports of this research is already publicly known, it is possible that those familiar with your division may be able to discover your identity. Your data will not be shared with anyone, including teachers, principals, and division leadership.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.
Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you decide to withdraw, the recording of your interview and any documents shared will be destroyed.
How to withdraw from the study: If you want to withdraw from the study, please tell the interviewer to stop the interview. Again, there is no penalty for withdrawing.
Payment: You will receive no payment for participating in the study.
Using data beyond this study: The data you provide will not be used beyond this study. It will be retained securely by the researcher for 1 year after the study is completed and destroyed.
If you have questions about the study, contact:
Janice Years
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership, University of Virginia
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Telephone: XXXXXXXXXX
Email address: XXXXXXXXXX

Michelle Beavers, Ph.D.
UVA School of Education and Human Development
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Telephone: XXXXXXXXXX
Email address: XXXXXXXXXX

To obtain more information about the study, ask questions about the research procedures, express concerns about your participation, or report illness, injury, or other problems, please contact:
Tonya R. Moon, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Telephone: XXXXXXXXXX
Email address: XXXXXXXXXX
Website: www.virginia.edu/vpr/irb/sbs
Website for Research Participants: http://www.virginia.edu/vpr/participants/

UVA IRB-SBS Protocol Number: 5681

Agreement:

I agree to participate in the research study described above.

Signature: _____ **Date**: _____

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Date: _____

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to take part in my study. This study seeks to examine how central office leaders utilize culturally responsive leadership practices through their use of best practices within central office. I chose to study this topic because central office presents scholars know very little about what it takes to be a culturally responsive central office leader. If you don't feel comfortable answering a question, you may skip it.

First Interview

Alignment to RQs & Subquestions	Interview Question
RQ2: culturally responsive best practices of central office leaders --> critical self-reflection	Introduction: Tell me a little bit about yourself and how your background has informed your educational journey and your role today. Probes: childhood, schooling, adulthood, professional life, personal life, race, gender, class, religion, regionality, age, etc.
RQ2: culturally responsive best practices of central office leaders --> critical self-reflection	Do you recall any specific times in your life when you felt your identity (however they have named it) became a turning point in their education or career practices? If so, will you share?
RQ2: culturally responsive best practices of central office leaders --> critical self-reflection	Can you describe for me how you describe yourself as a leader?
RQ2: culturally responsive best practices of central office leaders --> critical self-reflection	What do you believe have been the greatest influences on what informs your practices? Probes: Personal, relational, collective, claiming, granting

Last time we met you discussed your background and educational journal to leadership. Today I'm interested in the practices you employ as a leader.

Second Interview

Alignment to RQs & Subquestions	Interview Question
RQ2: culturally responsive best practices of central office leaders Subquestion 1: joint work	Can you share with me what your work looks like with principals to improve teaching and learning? Probes:

Subquestion 2: coaching and consulting	setting a purpose, identifying problems of practice, planning meetings, and executing professional learning alongside principals, teacher not manager, critical self-reflection: share stories, self-reflection, guided reflection, equity audit instructional and transformational leadership: professional development, trust between CO and schools, unlearning harmful practices, coaching, developing culturally responsive teachers culture and climate: challenging exclusionary policies, critical conversations, culture of belonging and inclusion, celebrating diversity community advocacy and engagement, listening to community voices, democratic processes
RQ2: culturally responsive best practices of central office leaders Subquestion 1: joint work	Can you share with me an example of how you have worked alongside school leaders to guide school improvement efforts? Probes: setting a purpose, identifying problems of practice, planning meetings, and executing professional learning alongside principals, teacher not manager, critical self-reflection: share stories, self-reflection, guided reflection, equity audit instructional and transformational leadership: professional development, trust between CO and schools, unlearning harmful practices, coaching, developing culturally responsive teachers culture and climate: challenging exclusionary policies, critical conversations, culture of belonging and inclusion, celebrating diversity community advocacy and engagement, listening to community voices, democratic processes

| RQ2: culturally responsive best practices of central office leaders

Subquestion 2: coaching and consulting | Schools are facing changing demographics and demands. Can you describe a time you've had to coach or consult a principal to help improve teaching and learning?

Probes:
setting a purpose, identifying problems of practice, planning meetings, and executing professional learning alongside principals, teacher not manager,

critical self-reflection: share stories, self-reflection, guided reflection, equity audit

instructional and transformational leadership: professional development, trust between CO and schools, unlearning harmful practices, coaching, developing culturally responsive teachers

culture and climate: challenging exclusionary policies, critical conversations, culture of belonging and inclusion, celebrating diversity

community advocacy and engagement, listening to community voices, democratic processes |
| | Do you have any artifacts that would help me understand your leadership in practice? |

As we close our time together, I'd like to move to focus on your work within the system.

Third Interview

Alignment to RQs & Subquestions	Interview Question
RQ2: culturally responsive best practices of central office leaders Subquestion 3: networking schools	Imagine a scenario where multiple schools are interpreting your curriculum guidance differently from one another yet are expected to work in coherence with one another. How would you approach this situation so the schools can come towards alignment? Probes: Bridging, buffering, networking

	Tackle inequities at roots, self-reflective, race-explicit language, strengths-based language, vertical segmentation, horizontal segmentation, critical self-reflection: share stories, self-reflection, guided reflection, equity audit instructional and transformational leadership: professional development, trust between CO and schools, unlearning harmful practices, coaching, developing culturally responsive teachers culture and climate: challenging exclusionary policies, critical conversations, culture of belonging and inclusion, celebrating diversity community advocacy and engagement, listening to community voices, democratic processes
RQ2: culturally responsive best practices of central office leaders Subquestion 4: policy advocacy	Consider that there's ambiguous policy in your curriculum area. How would you go about handling this situation? Probes: Operationalize mission and vision, integrated professional learning, persuading not compelling, normative, marketing, expectations, and linking to other supports and initiatives, cultural-cognitive, best practice, and regulative strategies, formal rules, autonomy trade-off
	Do you have any artifacts that would help me understand your leadership in practice?

Appendix D: Codebook

*An asterisk next to a code indicates that the code was emergent

Code Category: Leadership Journey	
Code	Definition
*LJ: Racial Trauma	Experiences with racism/racial discrimination
*LJ: Family Trauma	Experiences of emotional pain caused by family members
*LJ: Disengaged Schooling	Experiences in classrooms where lessons were not engaging for the participant as a child
*LJ: Uninspiring Leaders	Experiences within their professional career with leaders who used lackluster leadership skills
*LJ: Proving Naysayers Wrong	Receiving criticism from others that doubted the participants' ability to succeed, either personally or professionally
Code Category: Defining Central Office Leadership	
COL: Supportive	Central office defined as a support for schools
COL: Different Leaders	Central office marked by the ability to work with different types of leaders, including school leaders and other division leaders
COL: Seeks to Understand	Central office marked by actively asking questions to better understand areas of ambiguity when talking through Problems of Practice
COL: Collaborative	Central office defined as a collaborative entity, both with schools and with other central office departments.
COL: Nonevaluative	Central office defined as a nonevaluative support structure for schools, marked by the clear distinction that central office leaders do not evaluate school leaders and staff
COL: Shift from Compliance to Trust	Central office defined as a shift from being perceived as compliance-based management towards trusting collaborators for school leaders and staff
*COL: Managing Secondary versus Elementary Teachers	Central office marked by their differentiation in leadership between working with secondary teachers versus elementary teachers
Code Category: Joint Work	
JW: Best Practices of Teaching and Learning	Working alongside school leaders and staff to identify, improve, and celebrate the best practices of teaching and learning

JW: Shifting Demographics	Addressing schools' shifting student body demographics with school leaders and staff when working towards school improvement
JW: Differentiated Support	Using a different support plan for every school, as every school has different factors that all impact their unique needs for improving teaching and learning
*JW: Getting Involved in the School	Central office leaders going into schools on a frequent basis to be present and indirectly communicate their unwavering support towards schools. Involvement can include job-related tasks, such as planning meetings, or involvement can include helping schools operate daily functions, such as helping to unload students off school buses
JW: Relationship Building	Central office leaders describing the relationships they built with school leaders and staff that enabled joint work to occur
JW: Mistrust Central Office	Recounting the situations where school leaders and staff did not trust central office leaders
JW: Data	Working alongside school leaders and staff to collect, analyze, and make informed decisions related to student data
JW: Working with All School Leaders and Staff	Working with all school leaders and staff, including principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, department chairs, and classroom teachers
JW: Planning Meetings	Working with school leaders and staff to help plan for meetings to be conducted during PLC meetings
JW: Professional Learning	Facilitating professional learning for school leaders and staff, such as division-wide meetings related to updates standards of learning for said content area
JW: School Improvement	Working with school leaders and staff on making progress towards their school's performance plan
JW: Shifting Mindsets	Working with school leaders and staff on their beliefs related to best practices of teaching and learning, helping to shift school leaders' and staff's mindsets towards current best practice in teaching and learning
JW: Help Schools Identify a Problem of Practice	Working with school leaders and staff, using improvement science, to help schools identify a site-specific problem of practice
Code Category: Coaching and Consulting	

*CC: Strength as Central Office Leader	Being non-evaluative by nature positions central office leaders as ideal coaches for principals because principals do not feel comfortable talking authentically about school improvement to personnel that they evaluate, such as their assistant principals
CC: Asking Questions	Asking probing questions in coaching conversations to elicit deeper thinking from the school leaders and staff involved in the coaching conversation
CC: Collaborating Across Central Offices	Working with different central office departments to help facilitate coaching and consulting conversations with schools
CC: Instructionally Focused	Keeping the coaching and consulting conversation focused on instructional topics related to teaching and learning
CC: Focused on Students	Keeping the coaching and consulting conversation focused on student outcomes related to teaching and learning
CC: Shifting Mindsets	Leveraging instructional coaching conversations to help shift mindsets of school leaders and staff towards thinking that supports the best practices of teaching and learning
CC: Positivity to Build Trust	Using a positive demeanor alongside acts of kindness to help build trust before engaging in difficult conversations with school leaders and staff
CC: Coaching Protocol	Leveraging a clear, established coaching protocol when engaging in difficult conversations with school leaders and staff
Code Category: Networking Schools	
*NS: Unpack Content	Bringing together a division-wide PLC of various schools for the purpose of unpacking new content standards of learning
NS: Common Goals	Ensuring that all school leaders, staff, and central office leaders involved in a division-wide networked PLC cohort agree the common goals for working alongside one another during the meetings
NS: Professional Learning	Using a division-wide networked PLC cohort to disseminate professional learning to the school leader and staff participants on best practices for teaching and learning
NS: Teacher Leaders	Leveraging teacher leaders during a division-wide networked PLC cohort so teacher leaders can disseminate information learned during the centralized meetings to their school staff
Code Category: Policy Advocacy	

*PA: Remove Ego	Focusing not on one's personal ego when working with school leaders and staff, rather, listening to school leaders and staff when they express their negative experiences with policy from central office
PA: Autonomy Tradeoff	The concept that when there is more autonomy for school leaders and staff, there is reduced centralization at the division level, and vice versa
PA: Advocate for School Leaders, Staff, and Students	When discussing new policy at the central office leader, these leaders expressed advocating for the school leaders, staff, and students in how these end-users might experience the new policy changes, and then shaping policy to be more end-user focused
PA: Democratic Decision-Making	Going outside of the central office walls to talk with school leaders, staff, students, families, community partners, etc. to understand their needs and to use their stories to shape the decisions that central office leaders make around policy enactment
PA: Political Leadership	Becoming politically-savvy within central office and understanding the political, hierarchical dynamics when working with other departments and/or senior-level division leaders
PA: Support Schools	Prioritizing the support of schools when engaging in policy advocacy
PA: Quick Decision-Making	Recognizing the inherent sense of urgency created in a politicized environment, where central office leaders act quickly in the face of fast-moving policy
PA: Empathy for School Leaders, Staff, and Students	Valuing and empathizing with the school-based experiences from school leaders, staff, and students
Code Category: Culturally Responsive Leadership	
CRL: Challenging Exclusionary Policies	Actively challenging policies that create exclusionary learning experiences for students
CRL: Celebrating Cultural Responsiveness	Actively identifying and celebrating culturally responsive teaching and learning within schools
CRL: Democratic Decision-Making	Engaging with multiple, diverse stakeholders with divergent viewpoints to come to a consensus on a decision that impacts students within the division
CRL: Build Trust	Working alongside school leaders and staff, building trust with personnel

CRL: Guided Reflection	Facilitating guided reflection alongside school leaders and staff on their beliefs and practices related to teaching and learning
CRL: Unlearning Harmful Practices	Helping to uncover and unravel harmful practices in teaching and learning seen in schools
CRL: Difficult Conversations	Engaging in difficult, uncomfortable conversations with school leaders and staff related to harmful practices seen in schools
CRL: Culture of Belonging and Inclusion	Fostering a culture of belonging and inclusion in schools by actively challenging harmful practices and spotlighting culturally responsive practices observed in classrooms
CRL: Critical Self-Reflection	Engaging in personal critical reflection on one's journey towards their current leadership and the influences that shaped them