Culturally Responsive Leadership:
How principals employ culturally responsive leadership
to shape the school experiences of marginalized students

by

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CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP:
HOW PRINCIPALS EMPLOY CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP
TO SHAPE THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

Doctor of Education, 2016

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study research examines how 2 elementary principals in Ontario schools employ culturally responsive leadership (CRL) to shape the school experiences of marginalized students. In particular, it explores the strategies 2 principals use to enact this approach to leadership, the barriers and resistance they face that impede their social justice agenda, the supports that facilitate their work in schools, and the impact CRL has on various stakeholders. This study employed semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions guided by the conceptual framework derived from the literature review around culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally responsive leadership, social justice leadership, and educational leadership. Five teachers from each school were also interviewed in order to capture their insights as to how their principal’s culturally responsive leadership practices impacted their teaching and understanding of cultural responsiveness. The findings in the study show that principal participants foster a cultural responsive culture, promote culturally responsive pedagogy, create a welcoming climate in their school and build authentic relationships with all stakeholders, to move their social justice agenda forward. They also advocate passionately on behalf of their community to access resources to benefit students and families in the school community. These administrators also endeavor to change unjust structures that serve to perpetuate inequity and deter students from reaching high academic standards. In doing so, these leaders encounter formidable resistance and obstacles,
despite which they continue to respond to the needs of their community in order to create socially just and equitable schools.
Acknowledgements

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how two principals employ CRL to shape the school experiences of marginalized students. According to Johnson (2014), “culturally responsive leadership, derived from the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, incorporates those leadership philosophies, practices, and policies that create inclusive schooling environments for students and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds” (p.145). Although much of the investigation of culturally responsive practices has related to classroom teaching, recent efforts have attempted to apply a culturally responsive framework to school leadership. In general these studies characterize culturally responsive school leaders as those who emphasize high expectations for student achievement, exhibit an ethic of care, promote inclusive instructional practices, and develop organizational structures that connect parents and the larger community to the life of the school (Johnson, 2007, 2012, 2014; Johnson & Fuller, 2015). Culturally responsive leadership in education also refers to skills demonstrated by school leaders which enable them to influence others to respond appropriately to the educational needs of ethnically and culturally diverse groups of students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). According to Johnson and Fuller (2015), culturally responsive leadership often overlaps with “leadership for social justice” approaches, a term prevalent in educational literature that focuses on improving the educational experiences and outcomes for all students, particularly those who have been traditionally marginalized in schools.

Effective schools research consistently highlights the essential role principals play in determining the success of educational institutions (Fears, 2004; Fullan 2004). Leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student outcomes (Flessa, 2007; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). While many scholars and practitioners acknowledge that
school leaders play an important role in helping to raise student achievement and build school climates in which students thrive and flourish (Dimmock & Walker 2005; Elmore 2004; Fullan 2004; Steiner-Khamsi & Harris-Van Keuren 2009; Suarez-Orozco 2003), schools have experienced much less success in educating many students who have been marginalized within our educational system (Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005; Gay, 2000; Kugler & West-Burns, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The term marginalized is often used to describe people, voices, perspectives, identities, and phenomena that have been left out or excluded from the center of dominant society (Lopez, 2001). For the purpose of this thesis, the term marginalized will more specifically refer to ethnically and culturally diverse or economically disadvantaged student populations that have been traditionally underserved or excluded in Ontario schools.

Elementary schools were chosen primarily because research indicates that when students receive a solid grounding in their educational upbringing in the early years they are likely to flourish and be successful in school in the latter years (Currie, 2001; Nance, 2009; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010). When children come from culturally diverse or low-income families they generally have lower levels of the kinds of cognitive development that are generally rewarded in the educational system (Gorski, 2013). These children are not less intelligent or lacking the potential of their more affluent peers. They are simply less privileged and do not have access to the resources and support system of their wealthier counterparts (Gorski, 2013). Early educational intervention is necessary because early cognitive development is a good predictor of the development path children will take through their educational career, and beyond. In order to make a difference in the lives of vulnerable children it is necessary to intervene on their behalf at an early age to enhance their cognitive and social development (Neuman, 2009).
It is important to acknowledge that educational inequity is rooted in economic problems and social pathologies, which is often beyond the control of schools. Gorski (2013) argues, that while it is impossible for schools to totally eliminate such inequity, if some of the core needs of our most economically disadvantaged and culturally diverse students can be identified, then schools leaders working in collaboration with community organizations and the educational community are in position to address some of these children’s needs. This will at least make it more likely these vulnerable children will reach their full potential (Gorski, 2013). The earlier this intervention takes place, the more likely it will have a lasting impact on a child’s future.

Schools must change in response to the demographic shifts in society that have caused major changes in the student populations as well as to the needs of students and their families (Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, Terrell, & Lindsey, 2005). Schools must become culturally responsive systems, growing, evolving, and adapting to meet the needs of the students and families they serve. Principals must become culturally responsive in order to help educators understand they need additional skills and different perspectives to meet the needs of culturally diverse and marginalized student populations. Students can access the best school has to offer if the educational community can communicate effectively with them, understand who they are, the cultural context from which they come, and perceive and treat them with respect (Nuri-Robins et al., 2005). Culturally diverse and marginalized student populations have unique needs which may not be met by the mainstream culture in which they are expected to function and succeed. Consequently, it is essential to have culturally responsive leaders working in culturally diverse and marginalized contexts, for they are more likely to understand and respond to the dynamics of culture in their school environment in order to shape the school experiences for the marginalized communities they serve. To that end, the study is guided by the main research question:
How do principals employ culturally responsive leadership to shape the school experiences of marginalized students?

More specifically, this phenomenon has been investigated through an exploration of several subquestions:

1. What strategies do principals use to practice culturally responsive leadership?
2. What barriers or challenges do principals encounter in pursuing their goal?
3. What supports do principals need to enact such leadership?
4. What impact does CRL have on students, staff, parents, the school environment, and the principals themselves?

Context

Culturally diverse and marginalized students are often not included in schools, and as a result many of them find it difficult to become engaged within an educational system that does not reflect their experiences or reality. It is not uncommon for a significant number of these students to leave the educational system before they finish high school (Dei, 1997; Yau, O’Reilly, Rosolen, & Archer, 2011). For instance, Kugler and West-Burns (2010) indicate that the dropout rates for minoritized students in Toronto were as follows: 38% of students from the English–speaking Caribbean, 37% of students from Central and South America, 27% of students from East Africa, Western Asia 23%, and 18% of students from South Asia. As a society, we cannot afford to undereducate such a significant number of students because of the negative implication both for their quality of life and for their social contribution (Sullivan & A’Vant, 2009). According to Payne and Slocumb (2011), an inadequate education tends to create a permanent underclass. It makes it difficult for these disadvantaged students to obtain gainful employment, and they may end up in low paying jobs, collecting welfare, or even in the criminal justice system.
The literature indicates that a significant number of marginalized students perform lower than their counterparts from the mainstream even though there is no difference in the mental aptitude or intellectual ability among children of different racial, cultural, or socioeconomic backgrounds before they begin formal schooling (Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011). This “achievement gap” is often defined as the disparity in school performance manifested in standardized test scores, grades, and graduation rates between students of colour and middle class, White children (El Ganzoury, 2012; Kugler & West-Burns, 2010; Smith, 2005). Gilborn (2008) argues that this gap is not due to lesser ability on the part of marginalized students, but rather a reflection of unfair assessment strategies and systemic inequities endemic in the educational system as a whole. Unfortunately, when principals must focus on raising standardized test scores, more often than not they have little motivation or time to ensure that the unique needs of marginalized students are met (Johnson, 2007; Young, 2010). In Ontario, principals are under intense pressure each year to improve their literacy and numeracy scores on the provincial Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) assessments administered in grade 3 and 6 (Volante, 2007). In grade 9 students are tested in mathematics and grade 10 students are expected to complete the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT)–a high-stakes test for students given that it is now a graduation requirement (Volante, 2007).

Further to this, Dantley (2002) asserts that traditional, empirical, and positivist frameworks of school leadership widely applied in educational institutions are unable to address many of the unique challenges facing elementary schools. Most theory and practice in organizational and administrative thought is based on studies and behavior of White men, thereby excluding many marginalized people (Shakeshaft, 1995). Such approaches to leadership focus on efficiency, control, and standardization and usually support the reproduction of the White culture (Tate, 1996). Moreover, traditional training programs for educational leadership
also reflect a culture that minimizes issues and concerns for social justice that tends to limit the voices of those within educational administration who would confront issues of inequity and injustice in this field (Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Marshall & Ward, 2004). Principals however, can no longer avoid providing disenfranchised individuals and groups a more equitable, responsive, and culturally sensitive learning experience or promoting programs aimed at social justice (Carr, 2007). In this vein, there is a call for educational leaders who have both a heightened awareness of the inequities many of these marginalized students face and a desire to work to provide a socially responsible and equitable education for all (Jean-Marie, 2008; Marshall & Oliva, 2006). Building on the work of Blackmore (1989), Foster (1989), and Marshall and Ward (2004), some scholars have moved away from management approaches preoccupied with efficiency and have developed a growing repertoire of new views and approaches to social justice and leadership (Johnson & Ryan, 2006). They have looked to critical race, culturally responsive, democratic, and inclusion theories to explain, understand, and promote issues of social justice in schools with a particular focus on leadership and policy processes. According to Johnson and Ryan (2006) “these perspectives probe, describe, and ultimately advocate for those groups who have been marginalized in schools” (p. 1). Given that demographic indicators suggest the trend toward increasingly multicultural populations in schools will continue, the need to create systems that are responsive to students from culturally diverse, minoritized, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds is imperative (Banks & Banks, 1993; Sullivan & A’Vant, 2009).

There is much culturally responsive school leaders can do to influence what happens in schools, but given that structural inequities linked to race, culture, and class have their origins outside these institutions, it is unreasonable to expect school leaders alone to change educational outcomes for these students (Flessa, 2007). Since social circumstance matters (Noguera, 2006), to truly make a difference for these students it is necessary for school leaders “to advocate school
policies in the context of, but not as a substitute for, mutually supportive social policies” (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004, p. 33). Flessa (2007) argues that such advocacy requires skills in teaching, learning, and organizational management in conjunction with accurate knowledge of community and family needs. Consequently, culturally responsive school leaders need to be capable of making and sustaining school–community relationships with all the challenges and conflicts such authentic partnerships entail.

Similarly, Johnson (2007) holds that schools function best when administrators plan and enact policies that are responsive to the culture of the community in which the school is located. More often than not, though, the cultural underpinning of schools in North America largely reflects Anglo-centric middle-class norms, leading many schools to either ignore the strengths and assets of marginalized students and their families (Bazron et al., 2005; West, 1999) or attempt to assimilate these students via educational structures, policies, and practices that reproduce White social norms (Wilson Cooper, 2009). Disregarding students’ cultural backgrounds may have far-reaching negative effects. Rodriguez and Bellanca (2007) concur with this idea:

What a child learns is rooted in the culture and values of the family. If the cultures and the values of the family are systematically discounted . . . it becomes extremely difficult for the children to extract meaning from the world around them. (p. 60)

This dissertation explores how two principals employ CRL to shape the school experiences of students who are marginalized within our educational system, by highlighting strategies they use to create a more culturally responsive and equitable school community.

**Conceptual Framework**

Since the purpose of this study is to explore how principals go about employing culturally responsive leadership to shape the school experiences of students who have been marginalized
in schools, then central to the framework must be the CRL strategies school leaders enact. The barriers school leaders encounter as they enact CRL as well as the support they receive to facilitate the initiatives they implement affect the impact of their leadership endeavors. To derive a CRL framework that encapsulated this process, I used research around culturally responsive/relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive leadership (Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Johnson, 2007; Magno & Schiff, 2010; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2015), culturally proficient leadership, (R. Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003; R. Lindsey, Roberts and Campbell Jones, 2005), and social justice leadership, (K. Brown, 2004; Furman, 2012; Ryan 2006a; Shields, 2004).

Four dimensions school leaders must consider when employing CRL to shape the school experiences of culturally diverse and marginalized students are: CRL strategies, barriers, supports, and impact. As illustrated in Figure 1, CRL strategies are central to the process, yet each individual dimension affects and is affected by the other dimensions. In essence, when the principal uses a strategy to make the school more culturally responsive, this process nearly always results in some form of resistance that impacts the end result. Consequently, the principal needs to identity the reason for the resistance and put supports in place to reduce or eliminate it. For instance, if a principal attempts to implement a school-wide initiative to promote culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), but encounters a barrier in the form of teacher resistance, the principal has to seek to understand from where this opposition emanates and adjust the strategy accordingly. The principal may find that teachers are resistant to CRP because they do not understand how to adapt the curriculum appropriately; thus, providing relevant professional development for staff about CRP would most likely serve to reduce staffs’ opposition to its implementation. Teachers’ understanding of CRP and their receptiveness to its implementation in all likelihood would have a direct impact on student learning. In effect, the dimensions of the
The framework are dynamic and impinge on and impact each other differently in different school settings. The interactions between these dimensions are constantly changing and evolving in relation to each other as various initiatives, programs, and policies are implemented within the school environment.

![Diagram of CRL strategies, barriers, supports, and impact]

- **CRL strategies**—Determine strategy to implement.
- **Barriers**—Identify and develop processes to address barriers to CRL strategy.
- **Supports**—Provide required and necessary supports/programs (to address barriers, and implement processes)
- **Impact**—Outcome/results achieve

**Figure 1. Culturally responsive leadership framework.**

A brief description of each dimension follows.

**CRL Strategies**

The first dimension of the framework deals with a variety of interrelated strategies school leaders use to enact a culturally responsive approach to leadership such as creating a welcoming school environment (Ryan, 2006a), bridging the gap between the home and school through relationship building (Theoharis, 2009, 2010), advocating for the community, fostering cultural responsiveness school-wide (R. Lindsey et al., 2003), and promoting cultural responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995),
Barriers

The second dimension of the framework deals with barriers school leaders face when they seek to “dismantle oppression and reveal privilege and entitlement within their respective organizations” (Horsford et al., 2011). According to the literature, deeply held bias and beliefs educators hold about culturally diverse students and their families make it difficult for them to acquire the knowledge they need about these students’ cultural background to teach them effectively (R. Lindsey et al., 2003). The Eurocentricity of the curricula makes it challenging to teach from a culturally responsive framework, since this pedagogical approach requires teachers to undertake additional preparation and research (Gay, 2000). Then too, educators often lack the knowledge and skills they need to teach from a culturally responsive perspective (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The intense pressure placed on principals to focus on improving literacy and numeracy skills of students often means they have little time or motivation to enact a culturally responsive approach to leadership and teaching (Horsford et al., 2011). Consequently, it is necessary for school leaders to be provided with the supports they need to embrace this approach to leadership.

Supports

The third dimension of the framework focuses on the supports that facilitate CRL. It is necessary to support culturally responsive leaders who engage in cross-cultural conversations, mediate cultural conflict, and negotiate opposing cultural perspectives (Ryan 2007; Shields, 2004). Staff development courses for educators that promote cultural responsiveness and cultural competence would make it easier for principals to have frank and open conversations with staff about the need to be culturally responsive to the students and families they serve (R. Lindsey et al., 2003; Singleton & Linton, 2006). A more culturally responsive curriculum would enable school leaders to require that educators teach from a culturally responsive perspective, which
ultimately impacts students’ achievement (Gay, 2000; Magno & Schiff, 2010; Sleeter, 2012). According to the literature, training programs designed to prepare leaders to accommodate the needs of culturally diverse, marginalized, and economically disadvantaged students and their families are urgently needed (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Gooden & O’Doherty, 2014). These supports would enhance school leaders’ ability to lead effectively in culturally diverse school communities.

Impact

The final dimension of the CRL framework encompasses the impact CRL has on students, parents, staff, and the principal. The effect CRL has on the school depends to a great extent on the culture of the school environment and the receptiveness of various stakeholders to this approach to leadership (Magno & Schiff, 2010; Wilson Cooper, 2009). For instance, while the ultimate aim of CRL is to create a welcoming environment that promotes parental engagement, collaborative interactions, culturally responsive teaching, and academically achieving and engaged students, in reality, these goals may not be achieved given the formidable barriers those who lead for social justice encounter (Ryan, 2006a; Theoharis, 2009).

Significance of the Study

Few attempts have been made to apply a culturally responsive framework to the study of leadership practice in schools (Johnson, 2006; Johnson, Moller, Pashiardis, Vedoy & Savvides, 2011). The research questions and subquestions guiding this study have yet to be explored in the literature within the context of Canadian elementary schools. The body of literature on culturally responsive leadership indicates that school leaders need more information to improve the ways they lead teachers and students as well as engage with parents in schools that have diverse demographics and cultures (Aguilar, 2011; Johnson, 2006; Madhlangobe, 2009). Within this context, this study expands the limited body of research about culturally responsive leadership,
thereby providing principals with strategies they can use to work within marginalized communities to support these students and their families.

This dissertation also raises awareness of the necessity for school leaders to function in a culturally responsive manner regardless of their student population. Exposing students from the dominant culture to histories, perspectives, and customs of marginalized student populations will help them to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and ways of others, so that they too will develop the critical consciousness they need to challenge inequities in the larger society (Singleton, 2013).

Not enough is known about CRL to understand its effect on student achievement and engagement. There remains a need to document the narratives of principals practicing CRL to understand this phenomenon more thoroughly. Hence, effectively advancing this approach to leadership requires a stronger research base to determine how school leaders facilitate learning for marginalized students (Madhlangobe, 2009). This dissertation sheds some light on these gaps in the literature and illuminates the need for school boards and administrative training programs to actively propagate this form of leadership. The current study also contributes to the emerging literature by exploring ways in which two principals in Ontario schools employ CRL to improve the performance and school experiences of marginalized students.

**Organization of the Study**

The overall organization of this study is designed to provide insight into what culturally responsive school leaders do to improve the performance and school experiences of students who have been marginalized within the Canadian educational system. The thesis is organized into eight chapters, beginning with the introductory chapter which outlines the purpose of the study, the research questions, the conceptual framework, and the significance of the study. This is followed by Chapter Two which provides a review of the literature relevant to culturally
responsive leadership, drawing from critical, social justice, inclusive, and equity leadership literature. Chapter Three describes the methodology used to conduct the study as well as the rationale for participation selection, data collection, and analysis. A qualitative methodology is used to provide the principals and teacher participants the opportunity to share their voice, knowledge, and experience.

The findings of the study are presented in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. Through the analysis and synthesis of interview data and related documents, Chapter Four and Five explores how participants define marginalization as well as the core strategies school leaders use to enact their social justice leadership. Teacher narratives regarding their understanding of their principal’s culturally responsive approach to leadership are included, undoubtedly adding a unique dimension to the data. The impact each principal’s CRL style has had on staff, students, parents, the school environment, and the principals themselves is examined. Barriers each principal encounters as they enact a CRL approach are also discussed in Chapter Six, in addition to the supports they indicate are needed to assist them in their endeavors.

In Chapter Seven, a cross-case analysis is undertaken to examine the two cases in relation to one another and further tease out and synthesize information about what culturally responsive school leaders do to improve the performance and school experiences of marginalized students. The final chapter includes implications for practice for various levels for the system, contributions of the study, suggestions for future research, and concluding thoughts.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Social justice is more fundamental than equality as a guide to how we should act in relation to society and at its base it promotes the well-being of communities and of each of the individuals within them. (Griffiths, 1998)

In this chapter, I first discuss why social justice leadership is needed in schools as well as why CRL is effective within the context of culturally diverse and marginalized school communities; second I outline the connection between this study and several case studies undertaken by Lauri Johnson, since her ideas are central to this study; third, I look at several studies that discuss the practices of culturally responsive leaders to obtain a deeper understanding of this leadership perspective; fourth, I connect culturally responsive leadership and social justice leadership by looking at ways they overlap, intersect, and complement each other. Finally, I situate the study within the context of critical literature, more specifically, social justice leadership, inclusive and equity literature.

While research from some Canadian authors is used to present information about CRL in this dissertation, for the most part the literature relevant to CRL emanates from the United States. The reason for this is that a limited amount of research has been undertaken about CRL within the context of the Canadian school system. However, given the ethnic and cultural diversity existing in Canadian schools and the effectiveness of CRL when enacted in these marginalized school communities (Johnson, 2007, 2014; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012), this dearth in the literature certainly needs to be addressed.

For this review I searched through various data bases to find articles and books published about social justice leadership and CRL between 1990 and 2015. The identification of sources relevant to social justice was based on the following criteria: (a) the terms social justice, inclusive schooling, or equity appear in their abstracts, and (b) the article/book deals with issues
of educational leadership. To select the literature for CRL I looked for school leaders who actively: (a) responded to diversity and demonstrated culturally responsive leadership by promoting inclusive instruction practices such as CRP, (b) supported, facilitated, or became a catalyst for change, (c) built connections with and empowered the parental community, and (d) nurtured community partnerships.

**Social Justice Leadership**

This section first describes why a social justice approach to leadership is needed in schools and ultimately why culturally responsive leadership, which falls under the social justice umbrella, works effectively in schools with ethnically and culturally diverse student populations and communities. Several case studies in which school leaders enact a social justice approach to leadership are discussed because, similar to the principals in this study, these leaders are passionate about focusing their efforts on issues of equity and justice in order to make a positive difference within the marginalized communities they serve.

In response to the ever-increasing diversity and inequality issues in schools a growing number of scholars have looked at leadership with a value orientation toward inclusion, equity, and social justice (Bogotch & Shields 2014; Ryan 2006b, 2012). As Ryan (2006a) notes “not everyone does well in our educational system and not everyone is equally advantaged” (p. 4). To address inequities experienced by diverse student populations, educational leaders must have a heightened awareness of social justice issues in a field struggling to meet the needs of all students (Gooden, 2002; Jean-Marie, 2008). Ryan (2006a) argues that those interested in leadership who are concerned with the obvious and persistent disparities and dissatisfied with traditional management approaches that do little to acknowledge or address these injustices, have begun to search out and develop other models of leadership that focus on social justice. These forms of leadership are concerned primarily with understanding, critiquing, and doing something
about injustices, the ultimate goal being to advocate for those groups that have been marginalized in schools. Such leadership perspectives work to transform educational leadership into imagined spaces where the poor and powerless have voices along with privileged and advantaged citizens (Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Gooden, 2002).

In a similar vein, Joshee (2008) argues that educational approaches ideologically aligned with social justice have focused on some combination of understanding, critiquing, and addressing injustice and oppression. Hence, a commitment to equity and social justice requires us to acknowledge difference and to take such differences into account when enacting policies and practices to redress and eradicate injustice and discrimination. This necessitates creating an inclusive educational system that involves more than achieving a change through negotiation, yet leaving the fundamental injustice in place even as an aspect of it is tweaked in some way (Bogotch and Shields, 2014). To those who encounter injustice, it is a very real and palpable experience; thus, it cannot be disregarded or trivialized. Bogotch & Shields (2014) argue that leaders are needed who consider injustice in their contexts and develop a robust concept of leadership that seeks to eliminate injustice, enhance equity, and facilitate a thorough reshaping of knowledge and belief structures—elements that are central tenets in the concept of social justice leadership.

The following case studies undertaken by Jean-Marie (2008), Theoharis (2010), and DeMatthews (2015) are examples of social justice leadership that illustrate how this leadership approach can be used to make a difference within marginalized communities. Similar to this study, the students in these marginalized school communities thrive because they have principals who focus their leadership efforts on issues of equity and justice.

Jean-Marie (2008) explored the leadership practice of four school leaders faced with the challenges of promoting social justice, democracy and equity in their schools. Data were
collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of school and statistical data related to the demographic composition of the schools. Interview data were used to develop categories and patterns. The findings of the study indicated that these principals believed that school leaders could make change in education if they held strong, equity-focused values and were aggressive in communicating these values inside and outside school boundaries. There was evidence that these school leaders had succeeded in disrupting some inequitable practices in their community. For instance, they found ways to motivate teachers to transform their instructional practices to serve the needs of the diverse student population, as well as made social justice a priority when devising school activities, improvement plans, and fostering ongoing conversation amongst various stakeholders about equity and justice. Furthermore, they recognized and embraced the diversity of their students’ backgrounds by promoting efforts to build on the resiliency and strength of their students. The principals in this study improved access and opportunity for students marginalized within the public education system as well as created the conditions that empowered the staff and community members with whom they worked. These principals engaged in transformative leadership as they worked to change the conditions of students’ learning in the midst of increased accountability and high-stakes testing.

In his study of six school principals, Theoharis (2010) provides insights into the realities of leading for social justice by revealing what principals sought to accomplish and how they approached their work. The purpose of this study was to address the following question: In what ways do principals who identify themselves as committed to social justice narrate how they advanced more socially just practices in public schools? Theoharis used a qualitative research approach for this study. Principal participants were chosen on the basis that they (a) led a public school, (b) believed that promoting social justice in schools was essential, (c) advocated, led, and kept at the center of their practice issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and
/or other historically marginalized conditions, and (d) had evidence to show their work produced a more just school. Data collection took place over one school year and included in-depth interviews with principals, document analysis, site visits, discussions and interviews with school staff, a field log, and a group meeting with principal participants. These principals took specific actions in response to equity and justice problems they found embedded in their schools. The strategies these principals used to disrupt four kinds of injustices they encountered are listed in Table 1 (Theoharis, 2010).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies Principals Used to Disrupt Injustice</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Injustice 1: School structures that marginalize and impede achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategies to Disrupt</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Discontinue segregated programs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Increase expectation for student achievement and access opportunities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Increase student time on task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Increase accountability systems on the achievement of all students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Injustice 2: Deprofessionalized teaching staff |
| Strategies to Disrupt |
| - Provide ongoing staff development focused on equitable practices. |
| - Hire and supervise for justice. |
| - Empower staff to enable them to work effectively in the community. |

| Injustice 3: Lack of connection with the community, low-income families, and families of diverse cultural backgrounds |
| Strategies to Disrupt |
| - Cultivate a welcoming and caring school environment. |
| - Reach out intentionally to the community and marginalized families. |
| - Incorporate social responsibility into the school curriculum. |

| Injustice 4: Disparate and low student achievement |
| Strategies to Disrupt |
| - Confluence all efforts and strategies. |
The findings from this research indicate that social justice can be realized if leaders are committed and apply appropriate strategies and processes to impact the school environment. It was evident these principals created more just schools by moving beyond lip service to foster a school culture that embraced diversity and connected with the community in authentic ways. They also built socially just classrooms and schools by providing students with the skills and mindset needed to create their own social change (Freire, 1990). By developing community activism and social responsibility, these principals established an emancipatory and action-oriented pedagogy for their schools (Theoharis, 2010).

DeMatthews (2015) uses a qualitative case study method (Yin, 2003) to explore how one principal makes sense of the marginalization of students with disabilities in a high-poverty public school and takes action to alleviate the inequities encountered. The criteria used to select the principal for this study were as follows: The principal (a) was committed to implementing inclusion, (b) recognized how race and class contributed to inequities, (c) demonstrated a heightened need for equity-oriented change, and (d) worked in a high-poverty urban school with a history of segregating students with disabilities.

Data collection, which took place from September 2010 to July 2012 inclusive, consisted of an in-depth interview with the principal, interviews with staff, observations made by the researcher as the principal engaged in leadership actions, and documents collected from the school and district. The practice of social justice leadership in low-income school communities creates many challenges and requires principals to draw upon their skills, experience, and personal strength. Some of strategies the principal used to create a more inclusive environment for students with disabilities were as follows: (a) moved students from more restrictive placements into more inclusive classrooms; (b) built capacity and addressed deficit perspectives of staff; (c) created structures that would better support all students; and (d) reallocated school
resources. Due to these interventions, the school made significant progress in moving students from segregated placements into more inclusive classrooms within one academic school year. This case study highlights the need for school districts to recruit, select, and train principals to work in marginalized communities who have an orientation towards social justice and inclusion.

Taken as a whole Jean-Marie (2008), Theoharis (2010), and DeMatthews (2015) provide evidence that social justice leaders are able to make a positive difference for marginalized school communities, despite educational policies, organizational cultures, and historic structures that contribute to a discriminatory educational system. Similarly, the principals in this study recognize inequity, restructure school processes, allocate resources, and disrupt deficit thinking to help reshape school culture and create more socially just schools.

According to Bogotch and Shields (2014), while social justice is focused on redressing wrongs and overcoming inequities, the where-when-how-to-proceed related to social justice varies depending on the context of the school setting in which it is enacted. From the literature review it can be seen that within the social justice leadership literature there are several approaches to leadership that look at creating equitable, inclusive environments for students; however, a culturally responsive approach to leadership is most promising within culturally diverse and marginalized school contexts (Beachum, 2011; Johnson, 2007; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). It stands to reason, then, that while the leadership strategies used by the principals in the case studies undertaken by Jean-Marie (2008), Theoharis (2010), and DeMatthews (2015) to create socially just schools were relatively effective in the contexts of the schools in which they served, a culturally responsive approach to leadership would be more efficacious in ethnically and culturally diverse schools. Considering the increasing diversity within Canadian schools as immigrant populations continue to grow, how principals go about employing culturally responsive leadership to shape the school experience of culturally diverse
and marginalized students is the focus of this study, as such this approach to leadership is explored in the next section.

**Culturally Responsive Leadership**

For the most part, the curriculum in Canadian schools primarily presents the world from a Eurocentric perspective, and schools have largely failed to recognize and affirm the knowledge, experiences, and strengths of culturally diverse student populations (Ryan, 2006a, 2012). This has contributed to the marginalization and disengagement of ethnically and culturally diverse students and their families. This continues to happen despite the reality of the presence of large number of culturally diverse and marginalized students in Canadian schools. Consequently, there is a need for leaders who are willing to challenge deeply rooted assumptions about communities different from their own and achieve an understanding of the realities of other people’s lives. Culturally responsive leaders seek to know their school communities and put strategies in place to level the playing field for the marginalized communities they serve.

Central to this study are ideas about culturally responsive leadership contained in several studies undertaken by Johnson (2006, 2007, 2014). While most approaches to culturally responsive education have focused on classroom teaching, some researchers have used a culturally responsive framework in relation to school leadership. Johnson (2006) describes the culturally responsive practices of Gertrude Ayer, the first African American woman to become a principal in New York City. Johnson uses archival records to create an account of Ayer’s life as a community advocate in the 1930s and 1940s who worked to transform the curriculum, promote equality, and make schooling more responsive to diverse students and their families. Johnson examined newspapers, Ayer’s scrapbook, investigative reports and articles written by Ayer, as well as curriculum projects she implemented to obtain the data for her historical case study. Johnson (2006) examines Ayer’s leadership practices in light of the precepts of “culturally
responsive” pedagogy (Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994) to analyze how she incorporated students’ cultural knowledge as vehicle for learning, fostered the development of sociopolitical consciousness, and advocated for social and political reform in the wider Harlem community. A progressive administrator with a strong ethic of care, Ayer created a community-centred school where parents were welcomed, material resources provided for parents in need, and the cultural life of the surrounding neighborhood was viewed as a resource. Ayer’s impact on her school community was phenomenal. One of her students became a lawyer, another a banker, another a dentist, and another a famous writer. Even after Ayer retired she continued to be very active in the community.

Similar to Johnson (2006), the principals in this study incorporate students’ cultural knowledge into the curriculum, exhibit a strong ethic of care, foster parental engagement, and strive to raise the sociopolitical consciousness of students and parents. Ayer also extended her activism and advocacy beyond the school community, while the principals in this study confined their advocacy efforts primarily to the school community. Since the data for Johnson’s study were obtained from archival records, she was not able to capture Ayer’s experience through spoken utterance. However, excerpts from principal and teacher narratives were used to express their ideas and philosophies, thereby employing their voices as the vehicle of conveyance. In her 2006 study Johnson does not discuss the barriers Ayer encountered in her efforts to make her school community more culturally responsive, an area which is discussed at length in this dissertation.

Johnson (2007) scrutinized principals’ effort to involve the community and build parent–community partnerships using a culturally responsive approach to leadership. In particular she reanalyzed data from the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) through the lens of “culturally responsive leadership” to search for practices that affirm students’ home
cultures, increase parent and community involvement in poor and culturally diverse
eighbourhoods, and advocate for change in the larger society. The project was initially set up in
2001, the aim being to work with leading practitioners to create a range of case studies
examining successful and sustained school principalships in Australia, Canada, China, Denmark,
England, Norway, and the United States. Multisite case study methods were employed, and each
research team developed case studies in their own countries. The interview process involved
interviewing a stratified random sampling of teachers, students, parents, and school district officials to capture their view of the school and the school’s leadership (Johnson, Moller, Jacobson & Cheung Wong, 2008). The findings from the project indicated that in addition to the core leadership practices of setting direction, developing people, developing the school, and leading learning and teaching, successful principals in the ISSPP: (a) ensured a physically and emotionally safe environment; (b) clearly articulated core values; (c) constructed context-sensitive improvement plans; (d) established trust progressively; (e) were visible in school; (f) influenced teaching and learning; and (g) worked collaboratively in the broader context to develop new opportunities (National College, 2010). According to the National College report (2010):

These successful schools were not successful in every way however, and their upward trajectories did not rise evenly: it was a bumpy ride of highs and lows. Many successful principals also routinely worked 75 hours a week which impacted on their relationships outside school and they were often less concerned with their own well-being than the well-being of their pupils and staff. (p. 4)

The project reanalysis undertaken by Johnson (2007) indicated that while principals in the project held high expectations for student achievement and worked to create a trusting and welcoming environment in their schools for parents and community members, there was little
evidence from the data that these leaders incorporated students’ home culture or community “funds of knowledge” into the curriculum. The commitment and time these administrators spent to create more socially just schools impacted negatively on their personal lives in some respects. Similarly, the principals in this study focused on improving student achievement, creating trusting and welcoming school environments and fostering parent engagement, but they also incorporated students’ home cultures into the curriculum.

Building on her earlier studies, Johnson (2014) expands the tenets of culturally responsive leadership beyond the school site to encompass community-based educational leadership that advocates for cultural recognition, revitalization, and community development. In this study Johnson describes CRL as:

those leadership philosophies, practices, and policies that create inclusive schooling environments for students and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. (Johnson, 2014, p. 145)

Through the actions of three educational leaders, Johnson discusses how their actions linked community activism with culture-based curriculum in three national contexts: New York, London, and Toronto. Although the basic tenets of CRL used to frame this study are similar to Johnson’s model, this study focuses on the practices of principals at the school site. While the data for this study were gathered from information provided during interviews of principal and teacher participants as well as the analysis of various documents, Johnson drew her data from archival records and newspaper articles when she undertook historical studies about the role of community activism in the development of multicultural policies and curriculum in New York City, Toronto, and London. During her research Johnson uncovered historical information about three Black educational leaders: Gertrude Ayer, a community activist and principal in the 1930s; Len Garrison, a curriculum developer and community-based historian in the 1980s; and Lloyd
McKell, a school–community relations specialist and district leader who worked in an urban school board from 1976 to 2011.

The principals in this study primarily work within their schools with staff, students, and parents, although they do access resources outside of their school to benefit the marginalized communities they serve. Johnson’s (2014) study dealt more specifically with what these three leaders did to benefit their communities. For instance, Gertrude Ayer worked tirelessly in her community to obtain resources to establish the first cafeteria in a New York school. Lloyd McKell served as the bridge between the people and the school board so the parents’ and students’ voices could be heard. He created a school–community consultative structure which provided parents with a voice in school decision-making and assembled Black academics, teachers, and historian to produce Africentric curriculum units which were uniquely focused on the African Canadian experience. Len Garrison worked with Black teachers and librarians to produce several curriculum guides and provide professional development to many London teachers about African Caribbean culture and history. Ayer, McKell, and Garrison were able to navigate the boundaries between educational bureaucracies and community organization to develop programs and curriculum that centered Black students in their culture and history. As culturally responsive leaders, Ayer, McKell, and Garrison became the link between educational institutions and the broader community (Johnson, 2014).

Unlike Johnson’s study which spans various historical periods, the research for this study was undertaken over a few months in two urban schools and focused primarily on the strategies two principals enacted at the school site to shape the school experiences of the marginalized communities they serve. Ayer, McKell, and Garrison, used their political savvy to promote and advocate for culture-based curriculum and community-based cultural institutions and organizations (Johnson, 2014), while the educational leaders in this study advocated and engaged
with community organizations to obtain basic services and resources for their marginalized school communities. Much like Ayer, McKell, and Garrison the culturally responsive principals in this study also advocated for the transformation of an unequal educational system. Similar to the educational leaders in Johnson (2014), the principals in this study have worked to improve the life chances and opportunities for their marginalized school communities as well as become the bridge between educational institutions and the wider community. The next section further explores the practices and impact of culturally responsive leaders.

**Practices and Impact of Culturally Responsive Leaders**

Several recent studies that have examined culturally responsive leadership practices in culturally diverse schools have identified similar findings. For instance, Riehl (2000) reviewed the literature to explore the role of the administrator in responding to the needs of diverse students. She argues that given the growing diversity in schools, the idea that all students should be educated using a single way of knowing is contested and the concept of cultural pluralism is receiving more serious attention as a social and educational ideal. According to the literature on culturally relevant or culturally responsive teaching, such practices promote learning among diverse students because educators honor their different ways of knowing, focus on caring for them, as well as support their academic achievement. Moreover, provisions ought to be made so that all students, whatever their cultural background or socioeconomic status, experience success in school.

In this vein, the growing literature on how schools can more effectively serve diverse student populations focuses on various approaches to social justice leadership, teacher education, professional development, curriculum, instructional methods, and the relationship between schools and students’ families and communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Riehl, 2000; Ryan, 2006a). Moreover, according to Riehl (2000), school leaders are morally obligated to promote
forms of teaching that enable diverse students to succeed and foster school cultures that embrace and support diversity, equity, and inclusion. As Riehl (2000) notes,

> When wedded to a relentless commitment to equity, voice and social justice, administrator’s efforts in the tasks of sense-making, promoting inclusive cultures and practices in schools, and building positive relationships outside the school may indeed foster a new form of practice. (p. 71)

Johnson et al, (2008) applied a culturally responsive framework in cross-national studies of school leaders in the United States, Norway, and Cyprus. Although there were differences across national contexts, Johnson and her colleagues found that school leaders who exhibited culturally responsive leadership practices rejected a deficit approach towards students from culturally diverse backgrounds, expressed high expectations for academic achievement, and worked to include parents from diverse backgrounds in decision-making processes. These leaders considered the local and cultural contexts when choosing leadership strategies, and students’ academic achievement improved in most cases. For instance, in the US, all schools experienced improved student performance. That being said, these leaders also experienced tensions between incorporating students’ home language and culture in the face of accountability mandates that tended to narrow the school curriculum.

Wilson Cooper’s (2009) study of two elementary schools in North Carolina explored how educators can serve as transformative leaders by performing cultural work that addresses inequity, crosses sociocultural boundaries, and fosters inclusion. She argued that:

> In the midst of demographic change, students need leaders and advocates who are prepared to be cultural change agents – educators armed with the knowledge, strategies support, and courage to make curriculum, instruction, student engagement, and family partnerships culturally responsive. This partly entails educational leaders’ rejecting
ideologies steeped in blatantly biased or color-blind traditions to transform schools (p. 695).

The principals in her study were equity-minded leaders who endeavored to provide equal educational opportunity and a high quality education to all students regardless of their socioeconomic and cultural background. These leaders encountered obstacles to their equity agenda in the form of cultural tensions and separatist policies that serve to marginalize ethnic and linguistic minority students and their families. Nonetheless, these principals continued to perform cultural work, broaden their cultural knowledge, and use various strategies to combat forces of resistance in order to build partnerships with culturally diverse groups to promote cultural responsiveness, educational equity, and social justice (Wilson Cooper, 2009).

Similarly, Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) describe how a culturally responsive school leader, Faith, promoted equity in a linguistically and racially diverse high school. Faith enacted her culturally responsive leadership practice by building relationships, being persistent and persuasive, communicating and modelling culturally responsiveness and fostering cultural responsiveness among others. According to Madhlangobe and Gordon, Faith’s culturally responsive approach to leadership improved the attitude of staff, parents, and students towards each other. The history, values, and cultural knowledge of students’ home communities were incorporated into the school curriculum, and their academic achievement improved. With her caring and persistent support all stakeholders became more collaborative, worked on projects, and shared activities. Parents were encouraged to be involved in their children’s schooling. As a result they became more engaged in the school environment, visiting classrooms and sharing their expertise and experiences in the process.

An inquiry undertaken by Mugisha (2013) sought to explore the concept of culturally responsive instructional leadership by studying the knowledge, actions, motives, perceptions, and
challenges of White principals in a primary school, an intermediate school, and a high school in New Zealand. Here principals made instructional quality their top priority and attempted to bring this vision to reality through partnerships forged with teachers. Instructional leadership targeted classroom practices that recognized and promoted diversity and equity, focused on differentiated instruction, and helped teachers implement culturally responsive teaching practices. Participants found that students performed much better when a culturally responsive approach to instruction was used.

Taken collectively, this literature presents culturally responsive leadership as those practices that serve to create inclusive, caring and equitable school environments for students and families from culturally diverse and marginalized backgrounds. School leaders’ ability to create a culturally responsive school system for students and their families depends a great deal on their level of commitment to social justice and equity. It is far easier to maintain the status quo than to advocate for change or go against the tide. However, while these leaders seek to challenge dominant notions of schooling, they still have to do what they can to ensure students are successful within the existing system. Mansfield (2014) supports this notion, for she argues that it is necessary to teach marginalized students what is valued in the dominant society so they can acquire negotiable currency to gain entrance and navigate new contexts, for instance, through higher education. In essence, it is necessary to know the “rules of the game” in order to play it successfully. The literature clearly indicates that there is an urgent need for school leaders with the capacity to lead culturally diverse school communities in the field of education who implement various strategies to move their social justice agenda forward.

**Culturally Responsive and Social Justice Leadership**

CRL and social justice leadership are closely connected through the shared goal of identifying and restructuring policies and frameworks that generate inequity and social
disadvantage (Shields, 2009). Furthermore, CRL often overlaps with social justice leadership, as both these terms prevalent in the educational literature focus on improving the educational experiences and outcomes for all students, particularly those who have been marginalized in schools (Johnson, 2014; Ryan, 2006a). However, while CRL also focuses on socially just leadership as Johnson (2014) notes, it places emphasis on those school leadership theories and practices that respond to issues of ethnicity, culture, language, and race.

Agosto, Dias, Kaiza, Alvarez McHatton, and Elam (2013) have advocated to bridge social justice leadership and cultural based leadership given their similarities and approach to equity leadership. Thus, although subtle differences exist between the terms, according to Johnson (2014), these leadership approaches generally encourage school leaders to “lead for diversity” and work with teachers, parents, and the larger community to develop curriculum frameworks, pedagogical practices, and organizational structures and routines that are consistent with the cultural orientation of ethnically diverse students and their families. (p. 149)

In particular educational institutions are perceived as forums that can be used to bring forth change since, as Quantz, Rogers, and Dantley (1991) argue, they are sites of cultural politics that serve to both reproduce and perpetuate the inequities inherent in gender, race, and class constructs as well as confirm and legitimize some cultures while disconfirming and delegitimizing others. As Shields (2004) indicates, when we ignore differences of color or ethnicity, we are suggesting that there is no need to determine whether some groups are advantaged and others disadvantaged by our practices. Furthermore, there is a need to acknowledge that the culture of schools reflects the dominant values of the wider society and attend to cultural differences by enacting education that is socially just and academically excellent. However, the literature strongly suggests that in order to create socially just schools,
educational leaders must recognize diversity and respond to difference by enacting pedagogical and inclusive leadership practices and policies that support culturally diverse and marginalized students (Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ryan, 2006a; Shields, 2004). To be successful in achieving equitable outcomes for marginalized students, then, leaders for social justice and equity must acquire a robust understanding of how to bridge the gap between cultural and racial boundaries that exist within our educational system. As Shields (2004) notes, “Unless all children experience a sense of belonging in schools, they are being educated in institutions that exclude and marginalize them, perpetuate inequity and inequality rather than democracy and social justice” (p. 122). To this end, culturally responsive school leaders must maintain a social justice focus centered on providing equity of access, and making available to all children programs that meet their cultural, social, and academic needs. All children should have access to the curriculum through the inclusion of their lived experiences and be exposed to educational opportunities that equip them to leave school fully prepared to lead productive and successful lives (Shields, 2004).

Situating the Study in the Literature

This section of literature review provides an overview of the literature relevant to the four subquestions previously posed. Through this review, the literature related to culturally responsive leadership as well as discourses on culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy will help shape and define the four dimensions critical to culturally responsive leadership: CRL strategies, barriers, supports, and impact.

Culturally responsive principals care deeply about what is happening in marginalized communities; however, they are concerned not only with critiquing unfair practices as they apply these communities but also with doing something to redress the inequities they notice. They see such injustice as systemic, rather than natural or unavoidable, which situates them under the
canopy of social justice leadership. As Ryan (2006a) notes, it “provides another lens to help those concerned with social justice to recognize social injustice in schools and to do something about it” (p. 3). According to Madhlangobe (2009), while CRL encompasses most facets of other forms of social justice leadership, CRL goes deeper by placing the emphasis on understanding relationships, embracing diversity, and using an understanding of that diversity to respond to the needs of the school community, especially those from culturally diverse and marginalized groups.

**CRL Strategies**

Considering the demographic shift in many urban schools, students need school leaders who are prepared to be advocates and cultural change agents—principals armed with the knowledge, strategies, supports, and courage to make curriculum instruction, student engagement, and family partnerships, culturally responsive (Wilson-Cooper, 2009). Three key strategies administrators can use to accomplish this are: (a) foster cultural responsiveness, (b) promote culturally responsive pedagogy, and (c) create a welcoming school environment focused on building relationships.

**Foster cultural responsiveness.** Leaders are better prepared to promote culturally teaching practices, respond to the needs of marginalized student populations and build meaningful partnership with families and school communities when they become culturally responsive (El Ganzoury, 2012; Sullivan & A’Vant, 2009). Cultural responsiveness is a personal journey of growth and development individuals embark on that enables them respond to difference in order to facilitate change. That being said, only a limited amount of literature highlights what school leaders need to do to become culturally responsive to the students and communities they serve. However, administrators first need to become culturally competent by developing the ability to identify and challenge their own cultural assumptions, accept and
respect differences, continuously expand their cultural knowledge, and make adaptations to their belief systems, policies, and practices (R. Lindsey et al., 2003; Nuri- Robins et al., 2005; Perso, 2012b). Cultural competence necessitates that knowledge and values must be integrated with skills relevant to education and that these skills must then be adapted in response to the needs of marginalized students (Perso, 2012b). In a similar vein, Bustamante et al. (2009) suggest that “school-wide cultural competence refers to how well a school’s policies, programs and practices reflect the needs and experiences of diverse groups in the school and outer school community.” In any case, inference and understanding between the terms “cultural competence” and “cultural responsiveness” would seem to imply that cultural competence gives one the capacity to act, whereas, cultural responsiveness is cultural competence in action. In essence cultural responsiveness is that response planned for and delivered that comes from possessing cultural competence. (Perso, 2012a, 2012b). In this dissertation for instance, since these school leaders were culturally competent, they exhibited cultural responsiveness by taking action to fulfill the needs of their school community. In effect, cultural responsiveness requires moving beyond superficial knowledge of cultural groups in order to understand the social realities and histories that shape their lived experiences and intervening to enact policies and programs to level the playing field on their behalf. Cultural responsiveness then, is a viable strategy used to improve links between access and equity for marginalized populations as well as to enhance the effectiveness of educational experiences for all (Sullivan & A’Vant, 2009; Sullivan, A’Vant, Baker, McKinney, & Sayles, 2009).

Many school leaders find it difficult and uncomfortable to engage in open and frank conversations about race, culture, class, ethnicity, privilege, and inequity with their staff, students, and families; however, this is something they should do to show their commitment to equity and cultural responsiveness (D. Lindsey, Martinez, & Lindsey, 2007; R. Lindsey et al.,
In spite of the literature that points to the benefits of CRL, the question still remains as to how principals enact this approach to leadership within the Ontario elementary school setting. This dissertation explores CRL through documentation of the narratives of principals who practice this approach to leadership. This study further investigates how two principals work with their staff to foster cultural responsiveness within their respective school communities to benefit students and their families. The strategies and resources these principals use to facilitate cultural responsiveness within their respective schools are also explored. To date this phenomenon has not been examined to any great extent in Canadian educational literature.

**Promote culturally responsive pedagogy.** Culturally responsive school leaders also assist teachers in identifying and implementing teaching strategies that are appropriate and effective for diverse learners (Smith, 2005; Wilson Cooper, 2009). There is a considerable amount of research supporting the idea that teaching from a culturally responsive/relevant pedagogical frame of reference has a positive impact on the learning and achievement of students from culturally diverse or minoritized backgrounds (Au & Kawakami, 1994; M. Brown, 2007; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Darling, 2005; Gay, 2002; Howard & Terry, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1990, 1994, 2006; Saifer, & Barton, 2007). In addition, mounting research suggests that culturally responsive educational leadership positively influences academic achievement and students’ engagement within the school environment (Johnson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Riehl, 2000). According to Ladson-Billings (2002), culturally responsive leaders help their teachers and students develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally by “using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (p. 382). Moreover, Nelson and Guerra (2007), argue that culture is the lens through which we see and understand the world thus:
This broadened cultural lens allows teachers to see students for what they bring and use student knowledge and contributions as a bridge for teaching and learning. As a result, students feel valued and are engaged in learning, leading to higher achievement. (p. 60)

In other words, rather than just tolerate or celebrate cultural diversity, culturally responsive leaders support and encourage their educational communities to implement culturally responsive/relevant teaching across the grade levels (Cooper, 2009). For instance, they ensure that the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students are used to make learning more relevant and effective for them (Gay, 2002). These culturally responsive leaders encourage teachers to build positive, constructive, trustful relationships with their students involving honoring students’ home cultures while emphasizing student achievement. In this culture of learning, teachers not only become researchers of their students, but they also create spaces in which they can learn with their students (Neito, 2000). This interaction is transactional in nature since it leads to heightened awareness of each other’s culture, thereby maximizing the learning experience for both teacher and students (Vassallo, 2015). Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) becomes a two-way communication process in which both teacher and student actively participate to construct a new pedagogy as a result of their interaction.

Culturally responsive leaders also change school programs and structures to meet the needs of students and parents (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). How the principals in this study go about promoting CRP and supporting student achievement in their schools serves as an example for other practitioners in the field. Teacher narratives as to the impact their principals’ culturally responsive leadership approach has on their teaching practice are also examined.

**Create a welcoming school environment focused on building relationships.** As mentioned in the literature around CRL and social justice leadership, a common attribute of these
principals was that they demonstrated an ethic of care towards all stakeholders and endeavored to cultivate a welcoming and inclusive school climate as well as develop strong relationships with their school community (Jean-Marie, 2008; Johnson, 2006; Riehl, 2000; Ryan, 2006a; Wilson Cooper, 2009). All stakeholders were invited into the school and encouraged to become actively involved in the life of the school. These school leaders reached out to marginalized communities to form meaningful coalitions with families and community groups (Auerbach, 2012; Jean-Marie, 2008; Riehl, 2000; Wilson Cooper, 2009). According to Kalyanpur (2003), many parents feel inadequate when dealing with school personnel in the process of ensuring an appropriate education for their children. Culturally responsive leaders help parents gain the necessary skills they need to negotiate the educational system and obtain knowledge of the norms of behavior that govern schools (Briscoe, Smith, & McClain, 2003). Without this support parents are more likely to flounder through the educational system, unable to advocate for their children.

According to Perez Carreon, Drake, & Barton, (2005), culturally responsive leaders “allow parent life experience and culture to inform schools’ cultural worlds” (p. 468). Parents and caregivers come from many different places, speak various languages, and have a variety of experiences which can serve to enrich the school environment. Various strategies these principals use to create a welcoming and inclusive school culture can serve as a model for other school leaders.

Furthermore, West (1999) argues that cultural responsiveness also entails recognizing power inequities, making them explicit, aligning oneself with marginalized groups, promoting collective action, and striving to empower oppressed groups. Political action is needed to transform schools and develop culturally responsive school environments (Giroux, 1989; Riehl, 2000; West, 1999). When administrators create a welcoming school environment and build meaningful relationships with families and community organizations, treating them as partners
and important allies, students benefit greatly from these collaborative alliances (Auerbach, 2012; Gorski, 2013).

**Impact of CRL**

Drawing from the literature in previous sections, when principals enact a culturally responsive approach to leadership, marginalized students achieve better academic results as well as have more positive and engaging school experiences (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The school culture is welcoming, and parents are more inclined to become actively involved in their children’s schooling. In addition, schools leaders and educators are more likely to develop authentic partnerships with families and community members (Auerbach, 2012; Johnson, 2006). How leaders develop the critical consciousness of others is not discussed to any great extent in the literature, however, this phenomenon is explored through the narratives of participants in this study.

**Barriers**

School leaders tend to find it difficult to examine their own bias and deeply held beliefs and assumptions about students and families that have cultural backgrounds or life experiences different from theirs (Horsford et al., 2011). Another barrier to the acquisition of cultural responsiveness is the lack of awareness and understanding among principals about the cultural backgrounds of students in their school community (Davis, 2002).

To mitigate the tendency that some educators have to view marginalized students from a deficit perspective, culturally responsive leaders must provide them with the training they need so that students’ cultural norms and language are not treated as deficits but recognized as attributes that can be used to effectively connect with and reach them (Combar & Kamler, 2004; Flessa, 2009; Garcia & Guerra, 2004). This tends to be a difficult barrier to bridge because deficit thinking is often deeply entrenched and training courses that combat this type of thinking
are not readily available. It is not uncommon for school leaders to encounter opposition from staff when they begin to facilitate discussions about entitlement, bias, cultural awareness and racism (R. Lindsey, Karns, & Myatt 2010; Singleton & Linton, 2006). Unless skillfully handled, an adversarial relationship can easily develop between teachers and principals. This dissertation provides insight into effective strategies school leaders use to discuss these sensitive issues with their staff.

Teacher workload, personal bias and lack of expertise are well documented in the literature as reasons why teachers resist teaching from a culturally responsive perspective (Fears, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This teaching methodology tends to involve more work and planning because of the Eurocentricity of the curriculum (Young, 2010). It can be physically and mentally draining for administrators if they encounter resistance as they strive to enact culturally responsive practices (Theoharis, 2008, 2009). Some principals mentioned that their limited budget made it difficult for them to purchase culturally diverse resources and provide professional development opportunities for teachers to enable them to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to teach from a culturally responsive perspective (Bustamante et al., 2009).

Initiating parental engagement can also pose a challenge. Reaching out to marginalized families can be a daunting task for school leaders, since these parents often seem reluctant to participate in their children’s schooling in the traditional sense (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Olivos, 2012). Soliciting parental involvement can be frustrating for school leaders when repeated efforts to engage parents fail to generate reasonable levels of involvement. Nonetheless it behooves culturally responsive principals to be committed to the process and become adept at initiating and sustaining the vision of shared leadership and meaningful parent engagement (Fullan, 1997).
Supports

It is well documented in the literature that students from culturally diverse backgrounds perform better academically when they are taught from a culturally responsive pedagogical perspective (e.g. Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Consequently, it would seem necessary for culturally responsive leaders to ensure educators receive professional development about CRP to make it easier for them to understand how to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of marginalized students. In this vein, this dissertation attempts to explore whether principals who have a strong understanding of the underlying principles and instructional methodologies which benefit culturally diverse and minoritized students, are instrumental in positively shaping the instructional program for them.

Principals assert that university-based programs should be designed to train them for the task of addressing the needs of marginalized communities. Traditional administrative preparation programs have focused on management skills rather than on preparing school leaders to mediate the new diversity that characterizes many urban schools today (Contreras, 1992). Leaders urgently need specific training on how to work with students and families from marginalized communities to advocate for their needs and facilitate their navigation of the Canadian educational system. These issues are addressed in this dissertation.

Research also suggests that principals need specialized training to enable them to ensure that all students have equal access to an education based on academic excellence and high expectations (Herrity & Glasman, 2010; Wilson Cooper, 2009). Yet there are limited opportunities for administrators to receive the training necessary to work effectively with culturally diverse and minoritized school populations. This study raises awareness that it is unlikely school leaders can meet this challenge unless they acquire effective strategies, and skills they need to manage and succeed in such diverse school environments (K. Brown, 2004;
Furman, 2012; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Potts & Schlichting, 2011). Implementing such training programs would make it easier for principals to enact culturally responsive leadership practices within their school, as all educators would come into the profession with at least a basic understanding of this concept (Riehl, 2000).

**Summary**

The first part of this chapter reviewed the literature to ascertain how leadership and social justice are interpreted and understood in the field of education. The literature revealed that persistent disparities in educational outcomes for marginalized students (Jean-Marie, 2008; Ryan, 2006) have made it necessary for educational leaders to look beyond traditional management approaches to search out and develop models of leadership that focus on social justice and equity. The unifying goal in these approaches to leadership includes the need to eliminate injustice, enhance equity, and enact practices that create a more accessible and inclusive educational system (Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Ryan, 2006a; Shields, 2009). Also discussed is why CRL is an effective leadership approach to enact in culturally diverse and marginalized school communities.

The second section of this chapter explores the connection between this study and several case studies undertaken by Lauri Johnson, since central to this study are the tenets and ideas she postulates. While much of the investigation around culturally responsive leadership practices has centered on classroom teaching (Gay, 2000, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994), in several of her studies Johnson (2006,2007, 2014) applies a culturally responsive framework to school leadership. Johnson (2014) explores how various community leaders achieve greater social justice in education for culturally diverse and marginalized communities. Similar to the school leaders in this study, they seek to ensure that all students, especially those who have been
traditionally marginalized within the educational system, are provided with an equitable and inclusive environment in which to thrive and flourish.

The third section of this chapter examines several studies that document the practices and impact of culturally responsive leaders. Taken collectively, the literature around CRL strongly suggests that this approach to leadership has a significant impact on the performance and school experiences of culturally diverse and racialized students. Moreover, the review also revealed there is a need to prepare school leaders to lead culturally diverse school communities competently and effectively while focusing on achieving equitable outcomes for these marginalized students (Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Herrity & Glasman, 2010; Jean-Marie, 2008; Wilson Cooper, 2009).

The fourth section of this chapter looks at ways in which social justice leadership and culturally responsive leadership overlap, intersect, and complement each other. Although subtle differences exist between the terms, these approaches to leadership generally encourage school leaders to enact equitable practices such that marginalized students and their families experience a sense of belonging within school and students are exposed to pedagogical practices, organization structures, and policies that provide them with an inclusive and equitable education.

The final section of this chapter situates the study within social justice, equity, and inclusive leadership by drawing on literature related to social justice leadership, CRL, and CRP to provide an overview of the literature relevant to the four subquestions posed in Chapter One. Gaps in the literature on which this study seeks to shed some light are also identified.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences [emphasis added]. (Merriam, 2009, p. 5)

Research methodology is not just a set of methods or procedures. The philosophical underpinnings of the research question understandably influence the research methods employed to answer it. In this chapter I outline and justify the design of the study. In particular I explore why a qualitative research approach best suits the purpose and philosophical underpinnings of the study and describe the methodology utilized, including the choice of case study methods, the research context, and the methods of data collection and analysis. The use of cross-case analysis in examining themes, similarities, and differences across both contexts is also explored. Finally I explain the ethical considerations of the study.

Research Methodology and its Rationale

The purpose of this study is to generate an in-depth and rich exploration of CRL. To achieve this I present two cases of culturally responsive leadership in practice. These cases are primarily embedded in principals’ perceptions of how they shape school experiences for marginalized students through their culturally responsive approach to leadership. The insights of five teachers at each school were also explored in order to understand their perception of their principal’s leadership practice and how that leadership has influenced their cultural responsiveness and approach to teaching.

This study seeks to understand how participants construct meaning as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998). As such, qualitative methods were used in this study because this technique best lends itself to capturing the variations of complex human behavior as well as understanding how participants, embedded in their particular contexts,
attach meaning to their experiences (Stewart, 2009). It is also a viable technique to use when seeking to understand the how and why of a particular human or social phenomenon or issue (Merriam, 2009), as is the case in this study.

This study is concerned with generating a rich understanding of how participants construct reality in interaction with their social worlds and thus lends itself well to a qualitative approach. More specifically, the study can be situated within the four broad characteristics of qualitative research as outlined by Merriam (2009): there is a focus on understanding how the participants make sense of their experiences, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection, data are collected through interviews, observations and documents which are analyzed inductively to address the research question, and theory is built inductively from the data gathered and supported by authentic participant narratives, leading to the creation of an end product that is richly descriptive.

This study takes a critical approach to qualitative research, as in addition to seeking to understand a particular phenomenon, it also “promotes understanding about how to transform current structures, relationships and conditions which constrain development and reform” (Higgs, 2001, p. 49). The goal of this study is to reveal power dynamics within social and cultural contexts as well as challenge the status quo. By focusing on marginalized groups within the larger society, I endeavour to produce counternarratives to dominant ways of thinking. In essence, this research aims to be transformative and raise consciousness by both revealing injustices as well as highlighting more equitable possibilities (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore this study adopts a critical approach in that it attempts to confront the marginalization of culturally diverse, marginalized, and low-income students and their families, while seeking to raise the school community’s critical consciousness of forces that serve to perpetuate inequity and impede social justice practices.
Case Study Methods

Relying on the use of several data sources, case study research is an empirical inquiry that investigates a particular phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 1984). In particular, case study methods are used when the phenomenon being investigated is multifaceted in nature and confined by particular contexts. According to Yin (2003), it is useful to employ case study methods when you want to cover contextual condition—believing these are highly pertinent to the phenomenon of study. As such, case study methodology was chosen for this study since the culturally responsive leadership practices of principals are best understood in their real-life contexts. I specifically used this approach with the hopes of yielding an in-depth understanding of how principals employ CRL to shape the school experiences of the marginalized students they serve.

Examining such practices within and across multiple contexts provides a deeper interpretation of the results and increases the relatability of the study (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 1984). As such, cross-case analysis was carried out to examine each case in relation to one another so as to further illuminate the phenomenon of how elementary principals improve the performance and school experiences of students from marginalized backgrounds. Including teachers’ perception of how their principals’ commitment to social justice impacted these marginalized students added depth and richness to study.

Participant Selection

Given the nature of this research, I employed purposeful stratified sampling; a method that not only enabled me to choose “information-rich cases to study in-depth” (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993, p. 378), but also allowed me to select participants from whom I could gain insight into issues of central importance to my research. I sent an email to various principals, superintendents, and an instructional leader in the school board in which I am employed, asking
them to identify principals working with culturally diverse, marginalized, or low-income student populations, who use a culturally responsive approach to leadership. To enable these school leaders to make informed suggestions, they were provided with a detailed outline of the competencies of culturally responsive leaders mentioned in Chapter Two. The principals, superintendents, and instructional leader each sent me names of principals they felt met the criteria for culturally responsive leadership. In total this amounted to six recommendations.

I contacted these six principals by email, attaching a letter that invited them to participate in a research study (see Appendix A). The principal’s letter of invitation outlined the purpose of the study, my qualifications, participants’ rights, and a request for an interview. Principals were advised that the study also required the voluntary participation of five teachers from their school. It was left to the discretion of the principals to decide whether they wanted to participate in the study. Principals were asked to distribute the teacher’s letter of invitation to all educators on staff (see Appendix B) in the event they agreed to participate in the study. The teacher’s letter of invitation contained the title of the project, information teachers required in order to decide whether they wished to participate in the study, and the researcher’s contact information. The teacher’s letter of invitation informed them that the goal of this study was to understand what culturally responsive leaders do to improve the performance and school experiences of marginalized students. Teachers were advised that their principal had been identified by colleagues as being culturally responsive; consequently the researcher would like to interview teachers in the school in order to capture their insights as to how the principal’s leadership style impacted their pedagogical practice and understanding of cultural responsiveness. After their principal agreed to participate in the study and distributed the teacher’s letter of invitation, to maintain their privacy and confidentiality teachers were asked to contact me directly if they were interested in participating in the study. A specific criterion for choosing teachers was not
employed. I worked with the first five teachers from each school who contacted me. Once this threshold was reached, I advised the principal to let staff know that I had sufficient participants for the study.

The first three principals contacted accepted my invitation to participate in the study; however, their teachers did not respond to the invitation. I attributed the lack of response from teachers to the timing of the invitation, which was sent towards the end of the school year when teachers were busy preparing report cards and wrapping up for year-end. The fourth principal agreed to participate in the study and distributed the letter of invitation to her staff. Subsequently teachers from this school contacted me individually to let me know they would also participate in the study. Once I received responses from five teachers I advised the principal to let her teachers know I had sufficient participants. The fifth principal indicated her workload was too heavy at the time to enable her to become involved in the study. The sixth principal expressed an interest in being involved in the study and distributed the letter of invitation to teachers. Three teachers from this school contacted me individually by email to let me know they would participate in the study. I contacted the principal and asked her to reissue the letter of invitation to teachers since the study required five teacher participants. Once two more participants responded, I advised the principal to let her staff know the required sample size had been reached. I followed up with those who agreed to participate in the research study through emails requesting they indicate when and where they would like to meet. Although educators were given the option to be interviewed offsite, the majority chose to have interviews conducted at their schools. One participant elected to have the interview conducted at a casual eating place.

The participants in this study were two administrators from two different elementary public schools within the same school board. Five teachers in each school also participated in the study. For the purpose of anonymity, participants, schools, and programs have been assigned
pseudonyms, and the name of the board that might identify the schools or participants has been excluded.

**Research Setting**

The student population in both schools is predominately culturally and ethnically diverse, as well as economically disadvantaged. The principal of each school has been identified their colleagues as practicing culturally responsive leadership (CRL) and exhibiting a commitment to social justice. Both schools are located in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the largest and most diverse urban area in Canada. According to Statistics Canada Census of 2006, almost 47% of residents in GTA are born outside Canada and approximately 30% speak a language other than English or French at home (Wang, 2012).

Oregon Bray Elementary School is located in an impoverished area of the city. This school is also involved in the Spark Schools Program, consequently additional funding is provided for resources in order to attempt to level the playing field. The school has a population of 800 students inclusive of kindergarten to grade 5. Families primarily come from South Asia, and the main language spoken in the community is Bengali, otherwise known as Bangla. Other languages spoken are Tamil, Urdu, Arabic, and Farsi. Seventy percent of the students speak a language other than English. The majority of families are newcomers to Canada and have a very low socioeconomic status. Many parents are highly educated professionals with university degrees (see Table 4).

Mayfield Public School is located in a middle class neighbourhood with the majority of students being bused in from subsidized apartment buildings situated in a high-poverty district. The school is involved in the Spark Schools Program, an initiative that ensures students in the inner city grow up with basic supports and opportunities children in more affluent neighbourhoods take for granted. The Ministry of Education funds the program at the board
level, and the school board then distributes funding to various schools depending on their needs. This financial support is allocated to schools for resources such as field trips, technology, professional development for teachers, and parent engagement initiatives. The school has 220 students inclusive from kindergarten to grade 8, many of whom come from single-parent families. The student population is quite diverse including a significant number of children of African heritage, 70% of whom were born in Canada but whose parents are of either Somali or Caribbean background. There are a small percentage of students who were born in South Asia and South America and a few students of European origin who were born in Canada. In terms of the educational background of the parent community, there is a mixture of parents who have not completed high school and those who have. About half of the parents have post-secondary education. The majority of parents in the school community have been in Canada for many years but have a very low socioeconomic status (see Table 5).

The professional experience principals bring to their administrative positions varies somewhat. Hailey, the principal at Oregon Bray, self-identifies as Canadian with ancestral roots from Britain and Ireland. She was born in Ontario and has worked in education for 24 years. She has been a principal for 15 years, most of which have been spent in various inner city schools. Hailey has been at Oregon Bray Elementary School for two years and really enjoys working in the school community. She has a passion for social justice and believes that all children have the right to receive an inclusive and equitable education.

Tessa, the principal at Mayfield Public School who self-identifies as a Black Canadian, was born in Nova Scotia. She has been a principal for 11½ years and has been at Mayfield Public School for 8½ years. She has taught as well as been an administrator in several inner city schools throughout her career. Tessa sees the inequity in the system as something that can be neutralized to some extent if school leaders do what they can to access resources for marginalized students.
and their families as well as work with them to help them understand how to navigate the educational system.

At the time of the interviews, the professional experience of teacher participants ranged from 4 to 21 years. As a group, teacher participants were diverse in terms of their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Demographic information and the pseudonyms of all participants are summarized in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2

Profiles of Participants at Oregon Bray Elementary School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudo</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Racial Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hailey</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>K–5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>K–5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lottie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>K–5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>K–5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>K–5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Egyptian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>K–5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Profiles of Participants at Mayfield Public School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudo</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Racial Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tessa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>K–8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Black Canadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>K–8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>African Canadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>K–8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>K–8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>K–8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>K–8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The demographics of the students at Oregon Bray Elementary School and Mayfield Public School are shown in Table 4 and Table 5.

Table 4

*Demographics of Students at Oregon Bray*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial Background</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Income (annual household income in dollars)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100,000+</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75,000 – 99,999</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000 – 74,999</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30,000 – 49,999</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 30,000</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother’s Educational Background</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Father’s Educational Background</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

Demographics of Students at Mayfield

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial Background</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East Asian</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin American</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Income (annual household income in dollars)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100,000+</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75,000 – 99,999</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000 – 74,999</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30,000 – 49,999</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 30,000</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother’s Educational Background</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>5%</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Father’s Educational Background</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

According to the literature, the quality of a case study is improved when various data sources are used to triangulate the findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 1984). With this in mind, I used three primary sources of evidence in this study in order to provide as robust an interpretation of the research as possible: interviews with principals; interviews with teachers, and document analysis.

Data collection for the study occurred over a period of three months from May 2014 to July 2014. I conducted interviews with both the principals and teachers throughout this time. Simultaneously I gathered documents from participants including School Improvement Plans, school calendars, lesson plans, curriculum units, minutes from parent council meetings, staff meeting notes, and District Process Reports. This process continued through to the winter of 2014.

Interviews

Interviewing is an effective strategy to use for gathering qualitative evidence as it lends itself well to probing the ways in which the participants understand and perceive the social realities they are experiencing and constructing (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Butin, 2010; Merriam, 2009). Thus the significance of qualitative interviews lies in understanding the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, and to uncover their lived world (Kvale, 1996). With this in mind I employed semistructured interviews to collect the primary data for this study. This technique allowed participants to reveal, in their own words, how they understood cultural responsiveness as well as divulge their feelings about the school community they served.

Interviews guided by general questions designed to elicit responses relevant to the purpose of the study outlined in Chapter One, (see Appendices C and D) were also predicated
upon the construction of the conceptual framework. Participants sometimes offered unanticipated information that was relevant to the study and, as such, the questions were adapted throughout the process. As new issues emerged in earlier interviews, probes were added to elicit opinions about similar themes from subsequent interviewees (Stewart, 2009). Principals were asked about their understanding of CRL, why they thought this type of leadership was needed in their school community, the strategies they used to enact this approach to leadership, and the impact this approach to leadership had on various stakeholders of the school community. Teacher participants were asked to articulate their understanding of marginalization within their school community and how their principal’s approach to leadership had impacted their pedagogical practice and the school community on a broader scale. Overall, the interview process was informative and served to help me understand both the principals’ experiences within their school environment as well as teachers’ perception of the impact their principal’s approach to leadership had on various stakeholders within the educational community.

I began each interview with an informal introduction to create a relaxed atmosphere for the participants and maintain a conversational flow to the interaction. All interviews were audio-taped with the permission of the participants and lasted about 40–60 minutes. One principal had to be interviewed in two stages because of her busy schedule. For the first part of her interview she indicated she did not feel comfortable being taped, but allowed me to take notes. She gave me permission to tape the second part of the interview, which took place on a different day. I transcribed each interview myself, which enabled me to familiarize myself with the data. Later, participants were mailed a copy of their transcribed interview with an invitation to add, delete, or change any material. One participant made some minor revisions that were primarily grammatical in nature.
As I reviewed the transcripts I endeavoured to delve into participants’ understanding of the issues under exploration. It is critical, however, that I acknowledge that my position within this research is not neutral, as I bring personal and professional experiences to the process of gathering and interpreting data that most certainly influenced the questions I asked, the manner in which I probed for responses and my interpretation of the responses given. Having been a teacher for 10 years and a principal for 13, I have developed an understanding of how our educational system serves to marginalize certain groups and privilege others as well as a conviction of the need for courageous leaders who have a strong commitment to social justice and equity. These accumulated perceptions most assuredly affected the way I interacted with participants and interpreted the data in this study. Nonetheless I have made a concerted effort to honour the voices of the participants and maintain authenticity in the findings through their narratives.

**Documents**

Utilizing interviews as the only source of data is not ideal due to the potential for bias in the information provided. While interviews convey an in-depth understanding of participants’ perspective of the phenomenon being studied, including documents adds another dimension to the research since they were not specifically created in response to the study (Merriam, 2009). Such documents stand apart from the research and provide information that supports the phenomenon being studied. Consequently, I felt it necessary to incorporate document analysis to support the findings. Specific documents analyzed for each school are listed in Table 6 below. Documents were either obtained from various participants or accessed via Internet or the school’s website.
Table 6

*Overview of Documents Analyzed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mayfield Public School</th>
<th>Oregon Bray Elementary School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Improvement Plan</td>
<td>School Improvement Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Process Report</td>
<td>District Process Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Census Data</td>
<td>School Calendar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Meeting Minutes</td>
<td>On-line Newsletters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice Books</td>
<td>Sparks School Units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Units</td>
<td>Staff Meeting Minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQAO Assessments</td>
<td>EQAO Assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Development Instrument</td>
<td>School Website</td>
</tr>
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**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed in two phases, beginning with an inductive analysis of the interviews and documents. Upon completion of this process I employed cross-case analysis to look for themes as well as similarities and differences across the cases to develop a deeper understanding of the culturally responsive leadership practices of principal participants.

The first task was to put a plan in place to manage the large volume of data collected and reduce it in a meaningful way (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). I decided to use thematic strategy of qualitative data analysis to categorize and make judgments about the interpretation of the data. More specifically, I employed the constant comparative method of data analysis with an inductive component (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method was
appropriate since “the basic strategy of the constant comparative method is compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of qualitative research” (Merriam, 1998, p. 159).

NVivo software was used during the analysis to sort, index, compare, and analyze the rich, extensive data obtained from the interview transcripts and related documents. Coding is an interpretive data analysis technique that organizes as well as provides a means to interpret the data for different purposes (Wang, 2012). To do this I read all the transcripts several times; then I coded the transcripts using meaningful patterns, themes, and similarities across and within the cases utilizing the research questions as a general guideline to organize the patterns and similarities into conceptual categories, which NVivo terminology identifies as nodes.

This was an iterative process in that I visited and revisited the data multiple times making new connections and developing a growing understanding of the categories in the data (Wang 2012). During this process I reflected upon the meaning of the narratives of the participants in order to arrive at new categories (nodes). First, I identified categories for classifying data, and then placed all the data into the categories in order to identify the themes that emerged from that categorization. I sorted the data into broad categories that reflected the purpose of the research and helped answer the research questions (Merriam, 1998). When reading interview transcripts, one question remained at the forefront of my mind: “What strategies does the principal employ to shape the school experiences of marginalized students?” As the analysis of data continued to develop, I collapsed the categories that carried a similar meaning into five major themes. The main themes that emerged from the data were: (a) what the principal does with various stakeholders and the school culture; (b) what the principal does in relation to curriculum and instruction; (c) impact of CRL on various stakeholders; (d) barriers principals encounter in enacting CRL; and (e) supports that facilitated CRL.
To analyze data from the documents, I created a document summary form and attached it to any document analyzed (Merriam, 1998). The summary form enabled me to place the documents into the context of the study and link the information retrieved from them with data provided during the interviews. When analyzing documents, I used many of the same categories utilized to analyze interview transcripts. I coded the data from the documents according to the emergent thematic system. I looked for information in these documents that contained statements that demonstrated alignment to culturally responsive leadership practices (Butin, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Evidence provided in these documents enabled me to substantiate the information provided by various participants. For instance, scrutiny of picture books created by students at Mayfield Public School allowed me to verify teachers’ assertions about their focus on issues of social justice. Examining documents such as the School Improvement Plan, the school’s District Process Report, displays on bulletin boards, school calendars, and newsletters provided me with key data to substantiate other claims that emerged during the interview process. Categories and themes relevant to particular research questions were recorded on a display chart I developed to help organize the data collected from various documents.

Once the significant patterns and themes were identified, the coding process was completed by constructing a framework to convey the essence of what the data revealed with respect to the purpose of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The conceptual framework became the means of managing the data; consequently data were categorized within its construct. The main themes which emerged from the data were: CRL strategies, the impact of CRL, barriers to CRL, and supports that facilitate CRL. These themes, and a number of subthemes, will be further broken down and addressed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.
Quotations

As the thematic structures emerged during the data analysis, I used the interview transcripts to stay grounded in the foundation of the study. I used direct quotes from principal and teacher participants in Chapters Four, Five, and Six to support my interpretation of the findings. At times principal excerpts were used to illustrate what was happening in the school and evoke emotion and response from the reader. Sometimes teacher quotes were included to match or substantiate principals’ claims or assertions as to what was transpiring in the school. Using direct quotes is important because it allows readers to examine the data collected and analyzed by the researchers, to understand the findings of the analysis, and to evaluate the plausibility, credibility, or face validity of the researchers' claims (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection the research proposal was reviewed by the University of Toronto’s ethics review board that scrutinized the proposal to ensure all ethical issues were addressed. The school board’s External Research Review Committee (ERRC) approved the study in May 2014. The school board’s ERRC did not require a renewal prior to the completion of the study. The ERRC does however require that both a hard copy and an electronic copy of the dissertation be sent to the board upon completion.

All participants were advised that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained through a participant consent form, which outlined the purpose and significance of the research (see Appendices E and F). To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the names of schools, principals, and teachers. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcript for verification of accuracy. Participants were advised that only my thesis supervisor, Dr. James Ryan, and I
have access to the data and that all data gathered will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home and destroyed 5 years after completion of the study. A copy of the final study will be sent to participants who have indicated an interest in receiving one.

**Summary**

This study employed semistructured interviews and document analysis to explore how principals in elementary schools in the GTA utilized culturally responsive leadership to improve the school experiences of marginalized students. Principals were interviewed about their understanding of culturally responsive leadership and the impact this approach to leadership has on staff, students, parents, and the school community. The interview questions were designed to elicit from these school leaders the strategies they used to sustain their practice. Five teachers from each school were additionally interviewed to ascertain their perception of their principal’s approach to leadership and the impact this has had on their own practice as well as the impact on students, their families, and the broader community. Responses were critically analyzed using NVivo to categorize, organize and manage the data. The results from these interviews as well as information gathered from documents are presented in Chapters Four to Seven.
CHAPTER FOUR: OREGON BRAY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

In this chapter I first describe the school setting, student population, and their families to provide the context for the study. Since the focus of the study is to investigate the actions and practices culturally responsive principals undertake to fulfill their commitment to social justice for the marginalized students in their school community, I also examine how participants understand marginalization in connection with the students at Oregon Bray Elementary School. Second, I explore how Hailey, the principal of Oregon Bray, understands culturally responsive leadership and outline the strategies she uses to enact this approach to leadership. Teachers’ perceptions of her leadership practice are incorporated in this section as well. The summary presents the impact Hailey’s culturally responsive leadership has had on students, staff, parents and Hailey herself.

Demographics of Oregon Bray Elementary School Community

Oregon Bray Elementary School is located in an impoverished area within the city of Toronto. The school opened in September 1967 with 13 rooms, a kindergarten, and a Library Resource centre. It has undergone significant development since that time and is now a junior kindergarten to grade 5 community school with an enrolment of 800 hundred students organized into nine kindergarten classes, one diagnostic kindergarten class, and six classes at each grade level. There are 60 teachers and 32 support staff which include educational and special needs assistants. The school is highly multicultural, comprised primarily of English language learners from South Asia. The main language spoken in the community is Bengali, otherwise known as Bangla. Other languages spoken are Tamil, Urdu, Arabic, and Farsi, with 70% of students speaking a language other than English.

Most students live in the densely populated subsidized housing complexes and apartment buildings. The majority of families are newcomers to Canada, most having arrived within the last
five years. While many parents earned masters or doctorate degrees in their home countries, since moving to Canada most have been relegated to low-income jobs far below their education and skill level.

Parents regard the school as the hub of the community and it is where they go when they need advice about employment opportunities or support for medical emergencies that arise. Hence, parents have a significant presence in the school and are often visible in the kitchen, the office, hallways and various classrooms. The office is bustling as the staff attends to the multiplicity of needs of students and parents.

**Participants’ Understanding of Marginalization within the School Community**

When speaking about the students who attend Oregon Bray Elementary School, both the principal and teacher participants consistently mention poverty, race, and cultural and linguistic diversity as well as their newcomer status as factors that contribute to their marginalization. Hailey, the principal, considers poverty to be the underlying cause of these families’ marginalization:

All the students in the school community are marginalized in that they come from a background of poverty. Although the majority of students come from two parent families, the average family income is approximately $35,000. The parent community is highly educated with many of them having multiple degrees. The primary goal of these newcomers is to provide a better future for their children. (Hailey)

Hailey’s remarks substantiate the significant association between low-paying jobs and new immigrants, especially visible minorities. Skilled professionals with university degrees and years of experience in their field are often unemployed or underemployed. In many cases their qualifications are not recognized in Canada, thus, they are forced to acquire jobs that are well below their capabilities, skills, and experience. Even with coaching and support, many find and stay in what are known as “survival jobs,” earning minimum or very close to the minimum wage,
with no benefits and no work stability (Chun & Cheong, 2011; Nangia, 2013). In a similar vein, Lottie further elaborates on the notion of marginalization within the school community:

The big umbrella is poverty and cultural diversity. Most of our students are marginalized both because of their cultural backgrounds and the poverty in which they live. These are the largest respects in which they are underserved and marginalized. These newcomer groups that come here are definitely underemployed. They are just as highly educated as people who live in the wealthy areas just about 5 minutes from here, but the income levels are drastically different. When they come here they are relegated to working in low-paying jobs to support their family. They often make under $30,000 yearly holding down two jobs, for instance, driving a taxi and working at Tim Horton. (Lottie)

According to Lottie, families in the school community are marginalized because they live in poverty, are culturally diverse, and are unable to obtain jobs commensurate with their level of education. As a result, they struggle to support their families.

Factors such as cultural and linguistic diversity combined with new immigrant status and poverty further exclude students from many opportunities and services available to those who are born in Canada and live in more affluent communities. According to the principal and teachers interviewed, students at the school often find they are unable to participate in activities and programs such as sports leagues, music lessons, and tutoring sessions, which their parents are unable to afford due to their limited economic resources. Students from families with low incomes often live marginalized lives within their communities because family budgets are tight and parents juggle limited funds to pay rent and buy food, clothing, transportation, and other necessities for their children (Mayhew, 2013). This is consistent with the findings of the 2008 report of the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto.

While she realizes it is not possible to address all the inequities these newcomers face, Hailey believes that as a leader who is committed to social justice she must advocate for the marginalized students and families in her community. This necessitates that she does her best to create a series of opportunities that provide the basis for teachers and others to support students
and their families as they adapt to the Canadian educational system.

**Culturally Responsive Leadership at Oregon Bray**

Hailey’s understanding of culturally responsive leadership inherently emerges as she speaks about the students and families in her school community, exhibiting the ability to accept and respect differences as well as look beyond her personal beliefs and value systems to embrace the beliefs and values of others. More specifically, she embraces the philosophies, practices, and policies that create inclusive schooling environments for students and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds (Johnson & Fuller, 2015). She passionately explains how important it is to assess the needs of the students and their families in order to provide them with adequate services and supports. She put it this way:

I envision serving the community by hearing the voices of the community, families, parents, and children and using these to shape what the school needs to do for the community. It’s about addressing what the students and parents need. Taking into consideration the culture of the students and parents adds to the richness of school. I also believe it is important to use poverty reduction strategies to level the playing field for these marginalized students and their families. For instance, I will do what I can to ensure these families have full access to supports and resources that meet their needs. (Hailey)

Hence, Hailey believes it is imperative to listen to the voice of students and parents and to take their needs into consideration when implementing initiatives within the school. Her CRL approach also necessitates the development of a full service model to support students and their families. This involves reaching out to agencies in the communities that are able to offer resources to these families including, health services, employment opportunities, and recreational programs. Many of the problems these families face originate outside of the school and exist because of systemic barriers. Consequently, while the school can help to alleviate some of the inequities these students face, it certainly cannot eradicate them or tackle them effectively without the infusion of outside support and resources (Gorski, 2013). In this vein, Hailey noted that she encourages community agencies to work hand in hand with the educational community
to support students and their families, recognizing that the school alone cannot supply all their needs.

Hailey also underscored that her understanding of culturally responsive leadership focused on looking at the resilience and strengths of the students rather than perceiving them from a deficit perspective:

CRL means to look at the children in a community from a strength-based approach and regard them in a holistic manner. I encourage staff to refrain from judging the community but instead to look at the strengths and resilience of the students–student stories and experiences and rich community background to bring meaning, value, and relevancy to the curriculum (Hailey)

She places emphasis on working with staff to move their thinking to a strength based way of seeing the community, better enabling them to develop authentic relationships with families in the school community. In terms of the specific strategies Hailey uses at Oregon Bray to promote a CRL approach to leadership, four main themes emerge from the data: (a) building a welcoming and caring school environment; (b) advocacy for the community; (c) fostering cultural responsiveness, and (d) promoting culturally responsive pedagogy. These themes and their related subthemes are described in the sections that follow. The impact Hailey’s CRL practice has had on staff, students, parents and Hailey herself is also discussed.

**Building a Welcoming and Caring School Environment**

Hailey believed it was essential to build a welcoming and caring school environment in which students and their families feel a sense of belonging and inclusion. She used various strategies to create an inclusive culture within the school. First she endeavoured to get to know her community; secondly, she forged meaningful relationships with students, parents, and community members and finally she fostered parental engagement within the school environment.
**Getting to know her community.** Hailey began to build a welcoming and caring school environment by first conversing with various stakeholders within the community to familiarize herself with the needs of students and their families. Hailey commented that when she initially arrived at Oregon Bray she knew little about the school community’s needs, strengths, aspirations, or challenges. However, realizing she needed to build relationships within the community, she commented:

I spoke to a colleague who was a former Vice Principal at the school, held discussions with the outgoing principal, and gained insights from the Vice Principal who was already at the school when I took over. Since I live close to the community I interacted with community members, listened to parents, conversed with key staff members and division leads, scrutinized the school’s website, and analyzed school data such as the EQAO standardized test results, as well as walked about in the school and made observations.

(Hailey)

Hailey gained some insight from staff and other administrators as well as existing data about the school, but she also ensured she listened to the voice of staff, parents, and community members to help her understand the community’s needs. Teachers also noted Hailey’s focus on building relationships with the community. Sandy remarked:

I think Hailey is very sensitive to the needs of parents and students because whenever issues are brought up she addresses them right away, always putting parents and students first. She listens to the parents, which doesn’t always get her on a positive side with the staff. When you are a leader your primary goal is to make the school the best it can be for students. That’s the kind of motto she follows. She sticks to her guns and does what’s right for the community.

(Sandy)

Sandy perceives Hailey as a leader who connects with parents and students and responds to their needs even in the face of opposition from staff. Hailey’s goal is to provide opportunities for these families within the school community that would not have been available to them otherwise. Similarly, Lottie commented on Hailey’s response to various issues that have arisen in the school community:

Our principal in particular goes out of her way, out of the boundaries of being a principal to assist individual parents. Whenever the need comes up she has an open door and talks
to them and finds exactly what is going on in the family, what the crises are and makes connections. She makes sure that they get appointments with pediatricians, and she makes sure that a faculty member will take the parent and the family to where ever they need to go, whether it’s to get a pair of glasses, whether it to meet with a health professional, whatever the need is, for instance, mental health nurses to get support. I’ve witnessed her get legal support for a parent that was physically attacked. She has gone beyond getting support for parents, involved in legal battles, getting them into shelters, she has been extremely supportive to the socioeconomic, emotional, and mental health needs of all families in this community. (Lottie)

From Lottie’s narrative, it seems that she perceives Hailey as a very committed and caring administrator who takes time to get to know her community and respond to their needs. She goes above and beyond her role as a school leader to support and assist parents and their families.

**Developing relationships.** Fortified with the information gained about her school community, Hailey worked to develop authentic relationships with all stakeholders, both in the school community and beyond. With respect to the staff, Hailey noted that one of the key strategies she used to build positive relationships was to listen to them and incorporate their reality into the change process so as to seek “buy-in” from them when introducing new initiatives or ideas. This was sometimes a struggle because teachers who had been at the school a long time tended to prefer things to remain unchanged. Nonetheless Hailey endeavoured to build a shared vision with the entire school community and has worked to translate that vision into agreed objectives and plans that promote and sustain school improvement and student achievement.

Hailey has also ensured that the School Improvement Plan reflects the diversity, culture, values, and experiences of the students and their families. She has built strong relationships with staff, students, parents, and community members by engaging in genuine interactions and affirming and empowering others to work in the best interests of all students. Marie expressed her perception of how Hailey worked to build relations with the school community.
The principal promotes the math night, the literacy night, and school the barbeque events. She wants us to be a real hub in the community to be open to various groups coming here. This is just beginning to happen because she has only been here 2 years. I think the longer she is here we will start to see more of that. She is so passionate about wanting the parents to feel welcome and developing programs to get them in, hence the Parenting Centre. (Marie)

Marie articulates various strategies Hailey uses to develop strong partnerships with parents and community groups. In a similar vein, Walter expresses his perception of how Hailey fosters relationships within the community, “I believe Hailey interacts with parents and students on school grounds beyond what is related to classroom work. She connects with them socially as well. She is quite active that way.” Here, Walter focuses on informal methods Hailey uses to build a strong bond with parents and students, such as connecting with them on a personal basis in a relaxed setting.

In order to make parents feel more comfortable entering the school, Hailey also purchased signs in various languages which include a welcome message as well as information about the location of the main office. She ensures newsletters are also sent home in various languages so that parents are kept abreast of what is happening in the school. Marie comments on this,

Hailey has purchased signs in different languages. There are some inside the front door that are in various languages so that’s quite helpful because even though the kids speak English a lot of the parents still struggle with that. Also the newsletters that go home, they are written in various languages as well. (Marie)

Hailey has made authentic attempts to understand and become immersed in the cultural context of the school community by participating in community walks and interacting with residents in the community. Carter commented on this, “Our principal has encouraged us to become involved in community walks which have been pretty great. These have helped staff gain a better understanding of our community.”

Fostering parental engagement. When Hailey arrived at Oregon Bray, parents were
rarely sighted in the school. According to Hailey they were not encouraged to come into the
school so they maintained their distance. This did not fit in with Hailey’s conception of a school,
which she felt should be the heart of the community. Consequently, Hailey has worked tirelessly
to ensure that parents and students are actively involved in the school and that their voices are
heard. She commented, “I envision serving the community by hearing the voices of the
community, families, parents, and children and using their ideas to shape what the school needs
to do for the community.” In this vein, she immediately went to work to create a more inclusive
environment within the school noting:

The school did not have a Parenting and Family Literacy Centre so parents tended to be uninvolved in the school. It was not that they lacked interest, but they did not have the opportunity to participate. Opening of the Parent and Family Literacy Centre has given parents the forum they need to become more engaged at Oregon Bray. This has become a hub in the school. (Hailey)

Parenting and Family Literacy Centers are free, school-based programs for parents and
caregivers with children from birth to age 6. These play-based programs, designed to support
children’s early learning and development, are aligned with the kindergarten program and
located directly on the school site. They offer a safe, nurturing, and stimulating program where
children can play and parents can connect.

Teachers at the school commented that parents now readily bring their children to the
Parenting and Family Literacy Centre to help them improve their English language skills and
facilitate their adjustment to the Canadian educational system. The Parent and Family Literacy
Centre initiated under Hailey’s leadership has become a place where preschool children are
exposed to basic literacy and numeracy concepts to help prepare them for entry into school.
Although Hailey initially experienced some pushback from staff as a result of opening the
Parenting and Family Literacy Centre, this did not deter her from implementing this initiative.
Teachers had to share classrooms to make room for the Parenting and Family Literacy Centre. Consequently some educators exhibited resistance to the initiative. I had to work to shift the mindset of educators so they would realize that school does not belong to them, but rather to the community. (Hailey)

She remained committed to opening the centre, despite the opposition she has faced from staff. She felt that the school belonged to the community and as such needed to adapt its structures and procedures to accommodate students and their families.

Hailey is also a firm believer that parents who are English language learners (ELL) should be able to support their children’s education, even though English is a second language for them, by using the Home Oral Language Activities (HOLA) Program with their children (Westernoff, 2014). She commented:

We want parents to be real contributors to the school beyond just the snack program. Many of our parents are highly educated and want to be involved in the literacy programming and what not. So we’re looking at our English as a second Language (ESL) delivery model next year. We are looking at a program called HOLA, which is an oral language literacy program for newcomers so that our families will be able to access copies of books in their first language to enable them to read to their children. There would be an English version of each book and activities to do at home. Our Special Education team will guide and lead this initiative. (Hailey)

Hailey wanted parents to take an active role in their children’s education and recognized that even though they may not be fluent in English they still have a lot to offer, both in the way of supporting their children’s academic aspirations as well as partnering with teachers to provide input into the literacy program. Hailey also felt that parents’ active involvement in the school could make a huge difference to the school’s culture in addition to enhancing their ability to work with their children at home. She envisioned that if parents volunteered in the classroom they would be aware of what was being taught at school and be better equipped to reinforce the same learning, at home. Hailey also thought it would be beneficial for students to see their parents included as a part of the school community. Consequently, she also encouraged parents to become involved in other areas of the school such as the nutrition program, assemblies, and
other activities in the school.

Hailey’s outreach efforts did not go unnoticed by her staff. For instance, Lottie recollected one particular strategy that was used to reach out to parents and invite them into the school:

Our principal has made a big change in our school based on the parents being in the class and in the school. It began with papers going home in which she requested volunteers in the school. From that it went from the office staff calling all the parents who had ticked off yes . . . then police checks had to be done, then just following up, having one person connect with those parents to get them in. (Lottie)

Without Hailey’s desire to be responsive to the community, however, it is likely that things would have remained status quo. Even with her perseverance, creating an environment within the school in which parents were willing to become involved in its day-to-day operations took much effort on the part of the educational community. In particular, Carter voiced his perception of how parent engagement has changed since Hailey’s arrival.

Parent volunteers are always in the school, they are readily available. There is more of push since Hailey has been here to sort of connect with parents. . . . They run the snack program and they do some of the reading program. It really is beneficial and they are always here. It is great. (Carter)

Carter evidently attributes the increase in parental engagement to Hailey’s influence. Parent volunteers are much more visible in the school and have become active in various classrooms.

**Advocacy for the Community**

Hailey is aware that many parents from diverse cultural backgrounds and those who are poor, or are English language learners, are often disempowered within educational institutions, because they do not understand how to negotiate on behalf of their children (Cooper, Riehl & Hasan, 2010). Hence, Hailey routinely advocated for her community in the following ways: accessing programs and resources, providing employment opportunities, standing up for her community, educating parents about special education, and lobbying for school reform.


**Accessing programs and resources.** Hailey explained what she felt were her greatest accomplishments in terms of accessing programs for her school community.

I have been able to obtain medical care for newcomers through the pediatric clinic which is affiliated with Mountain Park Public School. This school’s pediatric clinic has a support team that we are able to access when we have different crises with kids that are going through settlement changes or transition or their families are in need of resources. We are able to link the families quickly to obtain the support they need, usually within a week. I have been able to phone the clinic and say “I have a student in crisis can you please organize an appointment?” I, or members of my support team will often take the parent and student with me to the Mountain Park Public School clinic and help with the intake meeting and then get them connected to a pediatrician or specialist or psychiatrist, or whatever it is the family requires. So we have had a number of kids that require assessment for attention, for anxiety or for depression and we have been able to use the clinic that way. (Hailey)

Thus through connections Hailey has made in the community, parents, and students now have access to medical resources previously unavailable. Her advocacy work highlights her sensitivity to the adjustment issues newcomers experience, and her desire it to alleviate the stress they undergo as they settle in Canada.

**Facilitating access to employment opportunities.** According to Hailey, part of her CRL at the school is to help parents obtain employment in Canada. She remarked on the importance of the library and the support provided therein:

Making sure that the library it is a real learning hub where we don’t just have the multilingual books but we have areas where parents can go and access the computers and update and create their resumes. We work with them in the school and help them to market themselves and obtain employment. (Hailey)

Hailey does what she can to ensure parents have access to computers to help them compose and update their resumes. She has been instrumental in encouraging staff to coach parents as to how to respond during interviews and conversations with prospective employers. Hailey has also been able to offer several parents employment in the breakfast or snack program as well as jobs with the school board as lunchroom supervisors. This has also served to increase the number of
parents in the school as well as the significance of their contribution to the school community.

Hailey’s efforts in this area were also acknowledged by her staff:

Parents do want work. They do want to find employment and they are desperate for that. I think that is really how it started and then word just travels. Everybody wants employment and our principal has had to turn some away from employment, not from volunteering though. You can’t get everyone jobs. (Lottie)

According to Lottie, Hailey has gone out of her way to provide jobs for parents through the school’s nutrition program as well as obtain positions for parents as lunch room supervisors with the school board. While she is not able to provide gainful employment for all the parents that need jobs, they are always encouraged to volunteer in the school.

Standing up for her community. Lottie was also amazed at the tenacity and perseverance Hailey displays as she champions various causes on behalf of students and parents to ensure they receive the benefits to which they are entitled. Lottie remarked:

She is the greatest administrator I have ever seen. I have been here 13 years and I she is the bravest–taking on issues with the union, taking on issues with resistance, going to even human rights level. Because this is a human rights issue, this isn’t a union issue, this isn’t board issue, this is human rights; this is what they deserve, this is what they need, this is what’s right. I really see her as having that moral compass guiding her, taking on the fight even if it means that it causes her stress and backlash possibly from teachers, from coworkers, from the board–she takes it on because she believes it to be right and she continues on the journey and she does it every day. She is very brave. I am inspired. (Lottie)

Thus for Lottie, Hailey is a warrior who battles on behalf of the students and parents and does not let anyone deter her from her purpose. When she sees injustice she takes up the fight even though it would be easier to look the other way. Likewise, Carter also commented on his perception of Hailey’s advocacy for the community:

I know we had a student who was close to being sent back home. She was eventually deported, which upset a lot of us, but Hailey was great about doing what she could to advocate for those parents and their child. (Carter)
Carter perceives Hailey as an individual who passionately advocates on behalf of her community because she realizes that in all likelihood they have no one else to turn to for support and assistance. Even when she realizes she may be fighting a losing battle, she takes on the case because it is important to her that students and their families receive the support they need to achieve an equitable outcome.

In a similar vein, Sandy also sees Hailey as a strong leader who does what is beneficial for the students and parents even in the face of staff resistance, noting that the needs of students and parents are Hailey’s top priority.

She listens to the parents, which doesn’t always get her on a positive side with the staff, but when you are a leader your primary goal should be to make the school the best it can be and to meet the needs of the students in the school. That’s the kind of motto she follows. For instance, kids in this school have never had visual arts in Bangladesh—that’s huge. How are we going to reflect that? Well next year our principal decided we are getting a visual arts teacher. How did that affect teachers? It required a lot of change in terms of timetabling. It moved everybody’s schedule around. People were very upset and she recognized this, but she also listened to the parents. She focused on what they wanted. It takes a lot of courage to do something like that. (Sandy)

Sandy reiterates how committed Hailey is to ensuring she makes decisions that are beneficial for students and parents. Although this does not make her popular with some staff members, she continues to enact her social justice leadership on the premise that it is her responsibility to do what is best for students and their families.

Hailey made it clear that it is not that she is insensitive to what teachers want, but she is cognizant that in order to meet the needs of these marginalized students and their families it is sometimes necessary to change school structures and policies. It would be far easier for Hailey to sit back and take the path of least resistance, which in this case would mean leaving things status quo. However, changing the way classrooms are structured and transforming the policies and practices of the school are critical aspects of the enhancement of learning for all students (M. Brown, 2007). Hailey strongly believes that the school serves the community and as such must
adapt its policies, procedures, and structures to meet their needs. Consequently while Hailey many have alienated some staff who do not share her vision, she has built a strong relationship with staff who understand what she is trying to do for students and parents.

**Educating parents about special education.** According to Hailey, parents who have children with special needs must understand how to interpret their children’s Individual Education Plan (IEP) to ensure they receive appropriate support, modifications, and accommodations. She also feels children should be involved and consulted in the creation of their IEPs.

When I talk about equity I am also talking about the special education piece and how students need to have an active voice in creating their Individual Education Plan (IEP). The parents also need to be aware of and trained on how to understand what the IEP actually means and what their children are entitled to from an equity arm. (Hailey)

Hence Hailey contends that unless parents are cognizant of the modifications or accommodations their children are entitled to receive as specified in their IEPs, they will not be able to advocate for their children to ensure they are provided the appropriate level of support. Moreover, according to Lottie, Hailey insists that students be taught to advocate on their own behalf to ensure they receive the support stipulated in the IEP. Lottie commented, “She really worries about that because she believes in equity for all students and that all students deserve the same opportunities.”

**Lobbying for school reform.** According to Oakes, Roger, & Lipton (2006), the most transformative family—school partnerships are those that help learners gain awareness of systemic inequities and then support them in using their new knowledge and relationships to make their communities and educational institutions more democratic and socially just. In this vein, Hailey believes not only in advocacy for students and parents but also for change and social justice. For instance, she has worked diligently with parents and students to petition municipal
authorities to install a playground that is more suitable for students than the old dilapidated one currently at the school. At the time of the study she had involved parents in working with staff to design a playground for students. She commented that the next step will be for staff, students, and parents to lobby City Council for funds to build the playground.

Hailey also noted that she wants parents to become more involved in school governance and policy:

I think truly by using parents more effectively and upping their level of advocacy around what they can do, will meant that change will happen more quickly. Next year when we have our staffing committee meetings I intend to have a parents sitting in and asking good questions. Maybe parents can ask questions around the arts program. I think it will up the level of professionalism in meetings. So that’s my strategy moving forward. (Hailey)

In other words, Hailey wants parents to participate in decision-making and have input into the way the school is organized to meet the needs of students. She feels that including parents on the staffing committee will enable them to advocate for change that is in the best interest of their children.

**Promoting Cultural Responsiveness**

Educators must be prepared to respond to the needs of communities that are diverse in many components of culture. Hence, the role of the culturally responsive principal is to help staff understand that they need to be open to different perspectives if they are to work effectively with culturally diverse communities. Schools must change in order to respond to demographic shifts in society that have led to significant changes in student population and the needs of the students’ families (Nuri-Robins, et al., 2005). The next section will explore the strategies Hailey has used to promote staff’s cultural responsiveness, promote cultural responsiveness with families, and promote cultural responsiveness school-wide.
Promoting staff’s cultural responsiveness. Hailey believes it is important for staff to develop an understanding of the cultural context from which students come in order to serve them effectively. Howard (2001) contends that the acquisition of this knowledge requires more than reading literature about the school community’s experiences; rather “it entails talking to parents, students, and community members and immersing oneself in various facets of the day-to-day environment that students experience” (p. 147). To this end Hailey has provided various opportunities for staff to engage in conversation and interaction with parents, which has enabled them to get to know the families in the community they serve. For instance, Hailey has encouraged staff to share weekly cultural meals with parents as well as invite them into the classroom in order to tap into their skills, knowledge, assets, and expertise. This has created the forum for educators and parents to converse and communicate with each other in order to further strengthen their relationships. Hailey has also fostered a climate of parental engagement such that they are visible in the school and encounter many opportunities to engage in interactions with staff. Moreover Hailey has been instrumental in working with staff and parents to plan a community fair involving both the families in the school community and beyond. Hence, it is particularly evident that Hailey recognizes that both educators and parents need to work in partnership to develop mutually beneficial relationships based upon shared power and decision-making. When partnerships between school and home are founded upon a reciprocal platform of respect and caring, the school is seen as having a stake not only in student achievement but also in the “multiple dimensions of students’ lives,” such as, family well-being, community revitalization, and social justice (Theoharis, 2009). Through Hailey’s leadership, educators have begun to develop an understanding of the social realities and histories that shape students lived experiences and use what they have learned to inform what they teach (Saifer & Barton, 2007). This has also enabled staff to communicate more effectively with students and
parents as well as respond more readily to their needs. Staff has begun the journey of learning to accept, respect, and respond to differences as well as expand their cultural knowledge. This has enabled them to make adaptations to their belief systems and teaching practices.

**Promoting cultural responsiveness with families.** When asked about how the school responds to the needs of the various cultural groups within the school community and how the principal has facilitated this, Lottie remarked:

> We do have Settlement workers but, they are not here frequently enough to serve all the needs of the community. Given the level of poverty and the adjustment to a new country, separation from their families, and being newcomers, there are a lot of mental health issues as well that need to be dealt with. Our principal has worked with several families to ensure they receive the medical support they need. (Lottie)

Settlement workers are employed by the Settlement and Education Partnerships in Toronto (SEPT) program to provide support by connecting families to services available in the community as well as the school system. They focus on facilitating the settlement and adjustment of newcomer families into Canadian society. As Lottie indicates, some children in the school community experience mental health issues as they attempt to adapt to a new country. This adjustment is often stressful for children for they not only have to cope with a totally new way of life but they also have to deal with being separated from family in their home country. Through her advocacy efforts Hailey has been able to access medical support for families during this settlement period. Consequently, if students are experiencing social or emotional needs, they are referred for treatment to the appropriate medical facility.

Marie, Sandy, and Walter also expressed their perception of the various supports and resources Hailey put in place to assist the school community. According to Marie, the school’s calendar which is designed by the principal in collaboration with the Community Support Worker (CSW) as well as the school website, have information about the location of various agencies such as the multicultural health services, the community library, Toronto Public Health,
and the neighborhood hospital:

Our principal has worked with the CSW to put together a school calendar as a resource for parents. The school calendar and school website both contain information so parents can obtain information about various supports and resources they can access in the community. (Marie)

The school calendar and school website provide parents with information about agencies and organizations through which they can obtain various resources to benefit their families. Through these means parents are also kept abreast of activities and events that are happening at the school. School events and significant dates related to religious holidays of students from diverse cultural backgrounds are also included in the school calendar.

Sandy discussed other ways Hailey supports her school community:

If the parents can’t afford to pay for a field trip, our principal insists we cover the cost of that. We never make students feel like they can’t participate if they can’t afford it. Whatever they can’t afford our principal ensures we supply for them. So text books, notebooks, pencils, everything, all supplies come from us and we never ask the parents. Our principal is fantastic. She’s really good because she introduced the nutrition program (which I forgot to talk about) through which breakfast or snack is provided for our kids. First there is the breakfast club that she started up. Then there is snack which gets delivered to our kids at a very minimal amount of money. She organized the entire program. (Sandy)

Sandy comments on how students are treated when they can’t afford to pay for school supplies or excursions. They are never made to feel uncomfortable because the school has to pick up the tab on their behalf. Hailey also started the nutrition program that provides students with breakfast and a snack each day. This helps to prepare students for learning, a difficult task to engage in on an empty stomach. In order to ensure students’ basic food requirements are met, the school has a nutrition program in which students can participate. In a similar vein, Walter commented:

Well our principal has fought hard and obtained resources to have a morning meal club, a breakfast club and a snack club throughout the day. We do many fundraisers. We also do clothing donations to help our families in the wintertime to prepare them, to outfit them with winter clothing. (Walter)

Hailey has initiated various interventions in response to the needs of students and their families
in the school community. She is aware of the poverty in the community and does what she can to support families in terms of procuring food and clothing for students and their families.

**Promoting cultural responsiveness school-wide.** When students are nurtured within a school culture that shows respect for diversity and values differences, they are much more likely to feel accepted and as a result flourish and succeed. As such, it was important for Hailey to promote cultural responsiveness throughout the school by encouraging students, teachers, and parents to be open to learning about cultures and value systems different from their own. Under Hailey’s leadership, regular assemblies were initiated during which she encouraged teachers to ensure students’ talents, lived experiences, and voices were incorporated. Carter expressed his view of the school-wide attempts to include the cultural backgrounds of students into the daily life of the school:

We have our assemblies and a spring concert. We are encouraged by our principal to try to incorporate music and dancing from the backgrounds of the students. Our talent show is the same way. It’s usually organized based on student suggestions. We have our equity committee who make announcements. We focus on different events in the classroom based on what the kids are celebrating. (Carter)

Carter emphasizes how Hailey encourages staff to ensure that assemblies, school announcements, and class events are connected to the background of students. He also mentions that student voice is taken into consideration when organizing the talent show. On a similar note, Marie also explained that Hailey encourages staff to recognize the various cultural events and religious days to ensure all students feel included:

We have special days like cultural dress, cultural food days, during the morning announcements we mention different cultural days included in our community calendar. So this is the one that goes home to the community. A large variety of holy days are outlined and acknowledged in the morning announcements. Our principal encourages us to honor our community’s cultural heritage, knowledge, and experiences. (Marie)

Sandy also noted the process the school follows to recognize the various cultural groups within
the school and Hailey’s role in promoting this:

Our principal expects us to recognize, acknowledge, and honor all the families in our school. Consequently all cultural celebrations are announced over the PA system. Eid Al-Fitr is celebrated, because it’s primarily Muslim, so we are sensitive to that. In addition to that, social justice and character traits assemblies happen every month. Students are recognized in the classroom and at the monthly assemblies. The assemblies are thematic based on social justice issues. We also have a calendar that lists all the events and assemblies. Each morning at the beginning of the announcements there is a blurb about something that is culturally relevant. (Sandy)

Likewise, Walter echoed Sandy’s account of students being given the opportunity to share aspects of their cultural background with their teachers and peers. He noted that this helps students to achieve a sense of belonging and for educators to develop an understanding of the students they teach, their social reality, and factors that shape their lived experiences. He remarked:

We also recognize them in very meaningful ways, we celebrate cultural diversity through many different assemblies and other functions. Our principal encourages this. During our monthly assemblies we recognize various character traits and students share songs, poems or dances from their culture. We also have special days where we have potlucks and other food exchange events where community members and parents actually bring in food or share music from their culture with us. Our most well-attended event would be our annual community BBQ. That draws almost 70% of our parents and their children. There is usually a huge cultural celebration around that as well because this event includes Bollywood dancers, fashion shows, and fashion display from students’ home countries. (Walter)

Moreover, Carter, Marie, Sandy, and Walter all agreed that they have learned about the broader community through direct interaction and conversation with students, parents, and their colleagues. They also indicate that assemblies and morning announcements are used as a forum for students to share various aspects of their culture with the school community and that Hailey encourages them to recognize and honor all cultures in the school community. These teachers have gradually developed an understanding of the context from which their students come.

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Cultural responsive pedagogy (CRP) is defined as teaching to and through students’
personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments (Gay 2010). When teachers build on the many cultural skills and ways of knowing students have already mastered, academic success will result (Delpit; 1995; Gay 2010). Moreover, it is well documented in the literature that when students’ classroom experiences are connected to their home culture they develop a sense of belonging, see purpose in learning, and are motivated to do well (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 2012). This section explores the CRP professional development educators receive at Oregon Bray, how CRP is implemented in the classroom, the impact this teaching methodology has had on student engagement and raising the critical consciousness of various stakeholders.

**Professional development of staff.** Hailey has provided a variety of opportunities for staff to receive training to enable them to teach from a culturally responsive perspective. Through the Ministry of Education’s Spark Schools Program, Oregon Bray is given extra funding to purchase resources to help offset the poverty in the community. As evidenced in the passage below, Hailey also considered the program to be a great source of professional development for teachers with regards to culturally responsive pedagogy:

I believe it is essential to hire excellent educators and provide professional development for teachers to improve their teaching practice. I have also made a commitment to share effective teaching practices with staff by linking staff with faculty from other schools involved in the Spark Schools Program which embraces the idea of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). For instance, this year we were able to send teams of teachers to visit Bainfield Elementary School, which has been in Spark Schools Program for longer. It was good for our teachers at Oregon Bray to visit and see a school that is farther along the continuum with respect to implementing CRP and social justice teachings. So I am hoping next year that just with the physical change of having the program’s office based here, it will elevate the status of the program within the school. (Hailey)

Hence, it is clear that Hailey’s focus is to have teachers teach from a culturally responsive perspective. She further indicated that since Oregon Bray is involved in the Spark Schools Program teachers have the opportunity to attend professional development sessions relevant to
Next year the program’s head office will be located in the school, and she is hoping once the Spark Schools Program is based at Oregon Bray, teachers on staff will be more aware of the opportunities it provides for professional development and take advantage of all the program offers. She also arranged to have teachers visit another school site that was further along the continuum of teaching from a culturally responsive and social justice perspective. She recounted how this has panned out.

I wanted the staff to go to Bainfield Elementary School to see what they were doing. The staff didn’t like this, they felt that what they were doing should be honoured and that they were doing a good job so why did they have to change their teaching practice. The kindergarten team, although reluctant at first, eventually went to Bainfield Elementary School and loved what they saw there. They have since learned a lot from these educators about CRP and inquiry-based learning. (Hailey)

Although teachers were initially reluctant to visit Bainfield Elementary School, once they did they were more receptive to adopting some teaching strategies they observed during this visit. Hailey’s hope that teachers at Bainfield Elementary School would serve as role models for educators at Oregon Bray was realized to some extent, in that her staff were impressed by what they learned about CRP at Bainfield and strived to implement this teaching practice.

The teachers interviewed for this study expressed their appreciation of the opportunities Hailey has provided for them to receive professional development about CRP. For instance, Lottie commented:

So I would say my principal looks for leaders in the school that are passionate about CRP and gives them every opportunity to pursue professional development in order to implement this teaching approach in the classroom. She gives them anything they need—all the release time, resources, anything possible to help them spread that leadership and to hopefully change their teaching practice. She has also encouraged teachers to use the Spark Schools Program units, which are culturally responsive. (Lottie)

Thus, it is evident that Hailey not only provides professional development for teachers who are committed to teaching from a culturally responsive perspective, but that she also encourages those who attend these sessions to influence other teachers to do likewise. The school receives
funding from the Spark Schools Program to provide professional development (PD) about CRP for four teachers on staff called the Lead Learning teachers. These four Lead Learning Teachers attend training sessions related to CRP and share what they have learned at these workshops with the rest of the staff during staff and division meeting. According to Hailey, “The focus of their professional development is how to bring changes into the school using an equity lens.” As a leader who is concerned with implementing culturally responsive practices, equity is an important concept. Hence, Hailey indicated that she provides support to teachers whom she perceives as being able to bring on board those who may be struggling with CRP. Sandy commented:

My principal chose me to be a Lead Learning Teacher because she knows my commitment to implementing CRP. As a Lead Learning Teacher I go for professional development once a month, which is fantastic. The workshop is so rich in value and so informative. You learn how to implement culturally responsive pedagogy, how to deliver it, and how to share it. After the workshop the Lead Learning Teachers come back and share what they have learned with other educators at staff and division meetings. (Sandy)

According to Sandy, a Lead Learning Teacher, the professional development about CRP is valuable and integral in providing a base for encouraging others to adopt similar practices. In a similar vein, another Lead Learning Teacher, Walter, commented, “We have attended many, many workshops about CRP and we bring that back to the school and try to share it with our colleagues. We also try to implement what we do see at these workshops, in our classroom.” Both Sandy and Walter mention that not only do they learn about CRP but that they also come back and share this information with their colleagues to help them become more familiar with and willing to teach from a culturally responsive perspective. From these teacher narratives it is evident teachers at Oregon Bray have received training about CRP and that a core group not only endeavor to teach from this perspective but strive to influence others to do the same.
**Practicing CRP at Oregon Bray and student engagement.** CRP should not be viewed as learning about culture but rather “learning to teach challenging academic knowledge and skills through the cultural processes and knowledge students bring to school with them” (Sleeter, 2012 p. 563). Ladson-Billings (1995) views culturally relevant pedagogy as having high expectations, reshaping the curriculum to build on what students already know, establishing authentic relationships with students and their families, and teaching students to be critically conscious concerning power relations.

At Oregon Bray, Hailey encourages teachers to acknowledge the legitimacy of the cultural heritage of different ethnic groups both as legacies that affect students’ dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning as well as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum (Gay, 2000). This serves to build a bridge between home and school and teaches students to be aware of their own heritage as well as accepting of others. This means literature in the classroom reflects multiple perspectives and literacy genres (Gay, 2000). More specifically, teachers explained how the history, values, and cultural knowledge of students are incorporated within the school curriculum, the impact CRP has on student engagement, and how Hailey has influenced their teaching. For instance, Walter remarked:

> Our principal encourages us to deliver pedagogy based on non-Eurocentric non-European background and history and things like that. Consequently we try to present lessons from the viewpoint of our students’ cultures and the part of the world where they originally came from. I don’t think that it is consistently delivered this way in all classrooms, but the teachers who do, have often commented on how the students are much more motivated when things are presented to them from their knowledge base. (Walter)

According to Walter, although not all teachers use a culturally responsive approach to teaching, those who do find it to be a more effective way to reach students. Several studies connect CRP with student engagement, reasonably suggesting that academic learning follows engagement (Copenhaver, 2001; Gay, 2000; Hill, 2009; Howard, 2001; Sleeter, 2012). Taken collectively
these studies demonstrate how culturally relevant and responsive classroom practices positively contribute to student confidence, curricular engagement, student learning, and teacher—student relationships (Hill, 2009).

On a similar note, Carter explained what he does to support the school’s focus on CRP implemented under Hailey’s leadership:

I always try to connect with books that explore the backgrounds of my students. I am way more successful when I do that. Students are much more willing to participate and become involved when lessons are taught this way. Our principal has provided our librarian with funds to purchase books that reflect this. That’s not to say that some educators are not teaching through the guise of a European perspective, but we have had in the last few years way more professional development on social justice and how to teach using the background of the students. Evidently not all staff are on board but those who are make a concerted effort to teach in a way that draws on information that is relevant to the students they teach. (Carter)

Like Walter, Carter also found that when he teaches in a culturally responsive manner students are more engaged in the learning process and participate enthusiastically in the lesson. He also commented on the extensive amount of professional development he has received and how this has made him more conscious of the necessity to teach in a culturally relevant manner. He is also appreciative of the culturally relevant resources available in the library which have been purchased by funds allocated by Hailey to the librarian. While Carter does mention that not all educators use CRP, Hailey continues to work with staff trying to show them how beneficial it is for students when they teach from a culturally responsive perspective.

Several teachers spoke about the impact that Hailey’s focus on CRP has had on their teaching practice. Walter explained how he modified his teaching to ensure his lessons are culturally responsive to the students in his classroom:

I try to implement CRP as encouraged by our principal. When I am planning a lesson I try to weave in either elements of their culture, language, and things that are very particular to them. I try to seek out notable figures that come from their culture who’ve made contribution to science, history, mathematics, and things like that as opposed to talking about European figures. Most teachers here are trying to teach what is relevant to
the students so a lot of the books we order are books that sort of reflect the students in the class. A lot of the projects we do are sort of tied back to their background too. In my class we did a tradition story about their family, what their family does, and it turned into a movie. So it’s always sort of tying it back to what they know—their background. Students really enjoy this and are much more willing to participate and voice their ideas and opinions. (Walter)

Walter also finds that when he teaches in a manner so as to connect the home cultures to the classroom experience students become more interested in learning. He includes well-known individuals from the students’ culture rather than focusing on the European characters often included in the text. When he uses this strategy in teaching, he indicates students find the learning experience far more enjoyable.

Hailey has encouraged teachers to be cognizant that students’ lived experience may be far different than what they are learning about in school. Consequently, she encourages teachers to ensure that students are not placed at a disadvantage because they are unable to relate to a curriculum that is unfamiliar or irrelevant to their lived experiences. Sandy mentioned how she went about introducing students to activities they may not be familiar with:

A lot of these students may never have been exposed to something simple like a hockey game or a camping trip because they are new immigrants and they can’t afford it or they don’t even know how to go about it. So for me personally I am always sensitive to that so I bring pictures into the classroom to help them understand these activities or take them out so they can experience these things firsthand. I try to bring those rich connections back into the classroom. Our principal really encourages us to do this. (Sandy)

Both Walter and Sandy go out of their way to make the curriculum come alive for students by ensuring that they are given the necessary background knowledge they need to develop a contextual understanding of what they are taught. Clearly teachers at Oregon Bray are encouraged by Hailey to seek out resources that match their students’ cultural backgrounds and lived experiences as well as teach from a culturally responsive perspective.

When asked whether culturally responsive teaching impacts student engagement, Walter responded:
I think it does because they see themselves reflected in these people so to them it is something that is attainable. They’re not looking at someone that does not look like them and then thinking, only people that looks like that can achieve these things. So I find that yes it does and when we do talk about these famous people or these important people, they do light up when they realize that the teacher is talking about someone from their country or their culture and they truly identify with that. (Walter)

In essence, for Walter, when the curriculum is presented from multiple perspectives and inclusive of people from diverse cultural backgrounds, students are better able to realize that individuals from any culture or racial background can attain notable achievements or accomplishments.

**Raising critical consciousness.** Students need to develop the necessary skills to enable them to critically examine what they read, hear, and are taught so as to perceive social, political, and economic oppression. Ultimately the hope is that this will galvanize them to act as change agents, intervening in the world around them to create a society that is equitable for all (Freire, 1973). As a culturally responsive leader Hailey has worked to develop critical consciousness among both students and teachers to challenge inequities in the larger society and empower parents from diverse communities. In particular, Hailey discussed a project which has served to activate students and parents to confront “the powers that be” to lobby for a more functional playground structure.

An example that really sheds light on inequity and the need for social justice is the fact that our school has a particularly antiquated playground apparatus that is unsafe and services 800 kids. So the grade 5 students video- taped and researched other schools in our direct community that were socioeconomically higher on the grid than ours and had much better play structures even though they had far fewer students. This created discomfort with trustees, superintendents, and other principals who were hearing about it….So there are some neat things that the kids are doing and they are doing it in a respectful way, but they’re challenging the status quo. (Hailey)

Hailey encouraged her school community to express their dissatisfaction with the inequity they noticed when comparing their dilapidated playground equipment with play structures located at more affluent schools nearby. She pointed out the channels they needed to go through to effect
change. In essence, Hailey sought to empower her school community by encouraging parents and students to challenge inequity in the educational system. It was important to her that students and their families realized that when they united and mobilized their forces their voice would be so powerful that it would not be ignored by those in the position to effect change. Sandy reflected on how the issue of the playground arose:

It was outreach to the community where parents were involved and participated in their students’ learning and then brought into the school to talk about a very relevant issue, which is our playground. It’s not equitable to all kids, we have 800 kids in the school and the playground we have is suitable for 100–150 kids. If you look around the neighborhood you will see way better playgrounds in schools that have far less students. So that was a huge issue and it’s still on the table and it’s pending right now. We brought in the community. It was presented by students to the Parent Council so they could have a voice. A survey was conducted to say what they need and what they wanted and now it’s just in the process of happening. (Sandy)

Hence, Hailey believes that it is imperative to give students and parents the tools they need to advocate for change rather than accept the status quo.

When teacher participants were asked how the principal has worked to develop the critical consciousness of both students and staff to enable them to recognize and challenge inequities in the larger society, Lottie commented:

So I would say the principal has taken leadership by really putting a lot of resources into acquiring resources that are culturally responsive which really looks at character traits and social justice issues. She also encourages us to use the Spark Schools units that are culturally relevant. I would say that that’s the way, and enabling teachers in the school to take leadership in those areas. (Lottie)

Thus, for Lottie, the attention Hailey has placed on the provision of resources that are both culturally responsive and focused on social justice issues was an integral component of teaching students to be critical thinkers and change agents. With these resources in the classroom, it made it easier to teach students to be aware of injustices that exist in the world as well as show them how they can act as agents to create a more equitable world. On a similar note, Marie commented:
There are a lot of teachers that do a lot of work with social justice within their classrooms and questioning the whys and how can we do things and make things better. So that’s more of a teacher focus and of course the principal always supports that sort of learning in the classroom. (Marie)

Thus, while Marie does teach students to be critical learners and to become change agents, she sees this as a school-wide focus rather than just some teachers embracing this teaching methodology. Teachers who use the Spark Schools units noted that the program tended to raise the critical consciousness of students as the units are specifically designed to highlight system inequities and challenge social and political contradictions. Other educators deliberately teach students to question what they hear, to examine what they are taught from multiple perspectives and to endeavor to become catalysts for equity and social justice.

**Summary of Impact of CRL at Oregon Bray Elementary School**

It is evident from the data presented in this chapter that both Hailey and the teacher participants feel that she has made some gains in terms of creating a more culturally responsive school environment. This section summarizes the impact Hailey’s culturally responsive approach to leadership has had on students, parents, staff members and Hailey herself. While students, staff, and parents have experienced mostly positive outcomes, the impact on the principal has been primarily detrimental. Drawing on data from interviews, artifacts, and institutional documents, however, it is apparent that under Hailey’s leadership, Oregon Bray Elementary School is gradually becoming a more culturally responsive system.

**Impact on Students**

In particular, Hailey has accessed resources from a pediatric clinic to provide services for students and their families. As a result, many of these newcomers have been able to obtain medical services they would otherwise not have been able to access. Students who experienced emotional, psychological, or psychiatric problems were also able to obtain medical treatment
more expediently than they would through the usual processes, and this has served to enhance the quality of their lives. As Hailey commented, “We have had a number of kids that require assessment for attention, for anxiety, or for depression, and we have been able to use the clinic that way.”

The nutrition program initiated under Hailey’s leadership has also had a positive impact on students in that they are well nourished and ready to learn each day which would not have been possible for all children given the low-income status of their parents. Participation in this program set the stage for students to focus on learning because inadequate nutrition often leads to fatigue, irritability, headaches, and lack of concentration.

According to teacher participants, Hailey’s focus on CRP has resulted in increased student engagement and learning. Once educators changed their teaching practice to become more culturally responsive, students more readily participated in classroom activities and became more engaged in the learning process. Central to the idea of CRP is the facilitation of academic success without compromising cultural integrity (Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995); hence, through Hailey’s influence teachers focused on students’ academic achievement endeavoring to scaffold their learning through their cultural funds of knowledge.

Hailey also worked to provide students with curricular opportunities by changing the delivery model to ensure all students received art classes, something they had not been exposed to in Bangladesh. As a result of this change, Hailey is hopeful having students taught by a teacher trained in this subject area will also help them to be able to express their ideas in new ways, unearth hidden abilities and talents, and realize personal growth through exploration of untapped abilities and skills. This however is not something that can be ascertained until the change in delivery model has been implemented.
Impact on Staff

Hailey additionally stated that students whose teachers embraced the culturally responsive Spark Schools units were exposed to a richer more relevant curriculum. She indicated students in grade 3—5 as well as classrooms with the Learning Lead Teachers have been impacted positively because they were all using the units. Hailey hoped that, through the influence of the Learning Lead Teachers, other staff would come on board and begin to embrace the philosophy of CRP more wholeheartedly. Some teachers had already begun to do so. For instance, Lottie indicated that due to Hailey’s influence she has made a concerted effort to teach in a manner that is relevant to her students. She remarked:

So I do feel the curriculum from the Ministry is still very Eurocentric. Some educators in this building and definitely spearheaded by our principal, are very aware of that. This is driving change by causing us to look at the curriculum to see how we can serve the cultural needs of the community, to make it more relevant to them. I think that we still have room for growth definitely in the area of looking at the curriculum from diverse perspectives and trying to make adjustments to ensure it relevant to the students in the building. (Lottie)

Likewise Walter explained the impact professional development about CRP has had on his teaching practice, noting, “It has raised my awareness so it makes me question what I read and change the way I develop lesson plans.” Evidently both Lottie’s and Walter’s teaching has been influenced by their exposure to culturally responsive professional development as well as Hailey’s desire to have them teach from this perspective. Not all the teachers at Oregon Bray embrace CRP, but the core group that do have begun to convince others that this is a viable teaching methodology to use to capture the interest of students. They remarked that students have benefited greatly from CRP because the lessons are more relevant to them; they are more engaged in the learning process and, as a result, achieve better academic results.

Impact on Parents

Shoring up the culturally responsive pedagogy, Hailey has fostered a welcoming culture
within the school and developed positive relationships with parents such that they readily volunteer in classrooms and participate in many activities in the school. As a culturally responsive leader she felt this would enable all parents to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion, and she believed that engaging and involving parents had a positive impact on children’s achievement.

She has changed the physical organization of school so that some areas, for instance, the library and Parenting and Family Literacy Centre, are specifically designed so as to accommodate parent usage. She has also established an open-door policy such that parents know they are welcome to come in and speak to her about things of importance to them. She said, “They are our partners and I feel like my door is always open to them.” She conversed with parents informally in the school yard and encouraged staff to participate in community walks with her to further strengthen ties with the school community. Through these strategies she was able to build a strong and caring relationship with the parent community, who appreciate her assistance and caring attitude. Parents reciprocated by participating in school activities and becoming more involved in school events, activities, and the parent council.

Carter and Lottie both agreed that one of the biggest changes that has occurred since Hailey’s arrival is that parents are far more visible and involved in school activities and programs. Walter commented, “Hailey is active in encouraging teachers to involve parents and she herself does encourage parents to participate in many ways. For instance, Hailey has encouraged parents to become involved in the Parenting and Family Literacy Centre, the nutrition program, the Parent Council, and a variety of school assemblies.” Similarly Lottie remarked:

Our Parent Council has grown exponentially since Hailey’s arrival, from maybe
seven to 50 parents. The presence of parents in our school is a dramatic change from 2 years ago. We have parents running the snack program, the nutrition program, and now they are volunteers. A lot of them have gotten employment through volunteerism in the school, so it’s one way she is helping to support the parents. So she has involved them a lot. (Lottie)

In these ways, Hailey ensured that she did more that just pay lip service to parents’ needs. Rather, she took specific steps to show her understanding of their concerns and the issues they faced. Hailey also did much to foster an atmosphere of respectfulness and receptiveness to parents by modelling responsive and open communication with families. She also routinely engaged staff in discussions about effective ways to communicate with the parental community they serve.

**Impact on Hailey**

Hailey’s culturally responsive approach to leadership has impacted her both positively and negatively. She is pleased with what has been accomplished given the short time she has been at Oregon Bray. She commented that the school was slowly, but surely, becoming a more culturally responsive system and that parents and staff more readily and positively engaged with each other. Most important, Hailey noted that the various programs and initiatives that have been implemented under her leadership have led to an improvement in the performance and school experiences of students. This idea was substantiated by interview data provided by teachers.

Unfortunately her health has suffered because of the constant stress she is under due to the resistance of some staff to change and the myriad demands of the job. The pain and frustration were evident in Hailey’s voice when she spoke about the consequence of trying to dismantle entrenched practices:

I have been sabotaged, I’ve been maligned I guess. I have had a whole team of teachers trying to advocate to get rid of myself and my vice principal, so I guess that is a consequence of change. My health has not been 100%. I ended up getting really sick. I
got shingles as a result, and I believe it is completely related to my commitment to equity. I believe the stress of taking things on and doing what is right sometimes has far-reaching effects. (Hailey)

Overall, Hailey has encountered many obstacles and become very ill, which she attributes to the pressure she is under due to the enactment of her social justice agenda. Nonetheless she remains undaunted and continues to work on behalf of marginalized students and their families in pursuit of equitable outcomes and the creation of a culturally responsive school system.
CHAPTER FIVE: MAYFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOL

This chapter first describes the school community and then explores how participants from Mayfield Public School understand marginalization in relation to their school community. Following this Tessa’s understanding of CRL is discussed as well as the strategies she uses to enact this leadership approach. Teachers’ perceptions of Tessa’s leadership practices are included in order to understand the impact Tessa’s leadership has had on students, staff, parents, and Tessa herself.

Demographics of Mayfield Public School

Mayfield Public School is located in a middle-class neighbourhood, but the majority of students who attend this school are bused in from a few subsidized apartment buildings situated in a high-poverty area just outside the neighbourhood. Mayfield Public School has 220 students in kindergarten to Grade 8 inclusive. There are 20 teachers and 14 support personnel on staff. Sebastian described the student community:

There are a lot of students who come from the apartment buildings just down the street. There’s a lot of Somali, East Asians, South Asians and some from a Caribbean background. Very few come from the houses in the area— it’s mostly the students who come from the apartments. (Sebastian)

Students who attend Mayfield Public School are primarily from minoritized, racialized, or culturally diverse backgrounds. For the most part their families tend to struggle to make ends meet since they are predominately low-income earners or supported through government subsidies.

Participants’ Understanding of Marginalization within the School Community

Most students who attend Mayfield Public School are marginalized due to their economic status, race, or cultural background. In this vein, participants consistently discuss lack of opportunity, racial discrimination, poverty, and crime as the primary hardships these students
encounter in their daily lives. Tessa, the principal, articulates her understanding of marginalization in the community. She remarked:

I would say all of my students are marginalized. Just about all of them are living in Metro housing or low subsidy housing. Almost all of them represent a visible racialized minority grouping. And if you look at the community there are very few services in this community which, also continues to marginalize them. Things like a loaf of bread if you run out—there is not a large grocery store within walking distance, but you get a McDonalds and a KFC on the corner. I see a lot of our parents when they need just a little something have to go across the street to the gas station to get what they need. There are no grocery stores within walking distance. Services are extremely lacking in this neighbourhood. (Tessa)

According to Tessa, she considers the students in the school community to be marginalized because they live in subsidized housing, are visible minorities, and have few services available to them in the community where they live. She also mentions the lack of accessibility to larger grocery stores. The purchasing of groceries from fast food stores amongst those that live in impoverished neighbourhoods has been documented in the literature (D. Brown, 2009; Gorski, 2013). This means these parents pay higher prices to purchase basic groceries, which are normally more expensive at convenience stores than large grocery chain stores, leaving even less money for other necessities and little or no money for anything extra (Best Start Resource Centre, 2010).

Joshua’s account indicates his students are marginalized because they are not from the dominant culture and that this is further exacerbated by the environment of crime and poverty in which they live.

I have a class of predominately Black students and I do feel that they are marginalized a great deal just because they are not from the dominant society. A lot of the kids I teach would be considered to live in poverty. So I find the challenges you have as a teacher is just trying to get them to focus. They come with a lot of these challenges from the community itself, so I think before you can even teach you have to understand what they are coming to school with. That does put them at a great disadvantage because, not all of them of course, but the majority, they have different things on their mind. They could be reflecting about or thinking things such as, my brother got shot, or a bullet came through my window, or I’m too scared to go outside and play. The kids in my class have to deal
with these things on a regular basis; so even coming to school to learn might not be a priority. (Joshua)

According to Joshua, in order for educators to teach students effectively it is necessary for them to understand where students are coming from, as well as be aware of the challenges students encounter on a daily basis. For students to be engaged at school despite the obstacles they face in their daily lives, what they are being taught must be relevant and reflect their reality. When talking about marginalization Morris too mentions the hardships students in the school community face and acknowledges that the environment in which they live puts them at a distinct disadvantage.

Yeah I think the kids here in this community are economically disadvantaged for the most part and sometimes they are not accepted in the mainstream because of their culture or race. You have a lot of single-parent families. It’s a tough environment in which they live. There’s a lot of crime in the buildings they live. So definitely there is a lot of disadvantage there. (Morris)

Thus racism and poverty tend to marginalize students and exclude them from privileges available to their peers in more affluent neighbourhoods. Crime serves to marginalize them further since students who may have witnessed a crime or been directly or indirectly touched by violence may find it difficult to concentrate in school.

Monica’s definition of marginalization hones in more on the living conditions, family size, and the limited opportunity students have given the environment in which they live.

I think being from those buildings—they’re government housing and they come in and there are a few large families who have to live in an apartment, and I find that is a challenge. They are being marginalized. I think coming from large families and not having the opportunity to go on trips, go on vacations, and being exposed to different things is a challenge. They do tell us sometimes, I didn’t get to go outside much, and so I find that could hinder learning. (Monica)

Being cooped up in densely populated apartment buildings and not being able to go outside and play prevents these children from having experiences that would enhance their understanding of the world around them.
Through the narratives of the principal and teachers it is clear they consider students in their community to be marginalized because of either their, race, culture or low socioeconomic status. The poverty in which these families live also brings with it challenges such as a high crime rate and large size families living in overcrowded apartments. Mayfield’s students do not have access to resources or experiences readily available to their peers in more affluent communities, which further contributes to their social exclusion. For families living in poverty, lack of discretionary income restricts active participation in the community. This means limited opportunities for children to play sports or pursue music, drama, or other cultural activities (Children’s Aid Society of Toronto, 2008).

**Culturally Responsive Leadership at Mayfield**

Students are often marginalized within societal contexts based on identities of culture, race, language, and socioeconomic status. These identities serve to forge a personal bond with those who have the same identity while also excluding them from those who do not share these identities, further intensifying the oppression and marginality these students experience. In order for students to transcend this cycle, individuals need to be empowered to push for societal change and transformation (Dei, 2015). School leaders play a pivotal role in creating schools that promote and deliver social justice for these marginalized students. CRL is needed within Mayfield Public School because culturally diverse and minoritized students have more meaningful and worthwhile educational experiences when school programs, activities, and services are connected to their home cultures and cultural backgrounds. When principals are culturally responsive to the needs of students and families, they are able to shape the school environment in a way that enhances students’ experiences, performance, and academic achievement. Principals’ attitudes and perceptions towards marginalized students also have a direct impact on the choices, decisions, and practices they enact for delivering social justice in
their schools (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Wang, 2012). Thus, principals that are committed to pursue social justice for marginalized students are somewhat able to mitigate the inequities these children face (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Khazzaka, 1997; Shields, 2009; Siergrist, 2000).

Since most of the students who attend Mayfield Public School live in economically challenging circumstances and are predominately from racialized and culturally diverse groups, they need a strong culturally responsive leader who is willing to challenge school structures, policies, and procedures to meet their unique educational needs. This leader should also be aware of how to develop teacher capacity and equip these educators to work effectively within this community.

Tessa believes in CRL, which she demonstrates by influencing others to respond effectively to students and families from diverse cultural and low-income backgrounds. Her philosophy of CRL embraces the idea of teaching the whole child by creating a welcoming community and supporting educational programs that connect to students’ home culture and lived experiences. According to Tessa:

I think CRL means to provide an educational experience for all children in which they feel included and successful. Essentially, I believe all students can and must learn and what we need to do is ensure that we provide a program that enables all children to experience success. It is important to open wide the school’s doors and understand students’ lived experiences and cultural background and how these impact their learning. (Tessa)

Tessa’s definition reiterates the notion that a culturally responsive leader should ensure the school provides an inclusive educational experience for all students as well as put processes in place so that students are given the tools they need to thrive and flourish. In addition, the school must be receptive to the community and cognizant of how students’ cultural experiences affect their learning (Chamberlain, 2005). Most important to Tessa is the necessity for her to ensure the school environment is accepting and receptive to all those who enter in. In this vein, several themes emerge regarding the various strategies Tessa uses to practice CRL as well as the impact
her approach to leadership has had on various stakeholders in the school community. Four main themes that emerge from the data are: (a) building a welcoming, caring, and safe school environment; (b) advocating for marginalized groups; (c) promoting cultural responsiveness and, (d) practicing culturally responsive pedagogy. These themes and their related subthemes are described in the sections that follow.

**Building a Welcoming, Caring and Safe School Environment**

Tessa believed it was necessary for the school environment to be welcoming and inviting to all stakeholders. She stated that an ethic of care should prevail throughout the school community so that students, teachers, and visitors feel safe therein. Consequently, Tessa worked collaboratively with staff, students, and parents to develop a welcoming, caring, and safe school climate that invited parents, community members, students, and staff to become more involved in the life of the school. Within such an environment stakeholders in the school community experience a sense of belonging and inclusion. To foster such an environment, Tessa first focused on familiarizing herself with the community, then worked to improve the appearance of the physical plant and aesthetics of the school to create a more welcoming atmosphere. Finally she turned her attention to addressing the culture of the school, particularly with respect to student behavior and their academic achievement.

*Getting to know her community.* Tessa familiarized herself with the community by communicating with staff, students, parents, and community partners both formally and informally. She conversed with various individuals to find out their values, beliefs, and cultural traditions and sought to remain open and nonjudgmental as she listened to them explain their viewpoints:

> When I got here I did a lot of fireside chats. I met with all of the key stakeholders, such as parents, staff, outgoing staff and I did an appreciative inquiry. I asked them about the strengths of the school rather than focusing on the negative aspects and looked for all of
Thus, Tessa looked at the school community from multiple perspectives to develop an awareness of its most salient needs and gain some understanding as to the strengths of the school community and its demographic composition. She also utilized a variety of documents to further her understanding of the needs of the community, including the Early Development Instrument (EDI) and the Learning Opportunities Index (LOI). The EDI is a teacher-completed measure of children's school readiness at entry to grade 1, designed to provide communities with an informative tool to assess children’s level of development in their first year of schooling (Janus, 2007). The EDI assesses a child’s school readiness in five general domains of child development: physical health and well-being; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive development; and communication skills and general knowledge. Based on these measurements, Tessa worked with various stakeholders to introduce targeted programs in response to existing vulnerabilities identified in the data. For instance, under her leadership a nutrition programs as well as extracurricular sports have been introduced based on the low results shown in the “physical health and well-being” readiness domain.

Compiled by the school board, the LOI ranks each school based on measures of external challenges affecting student success. The components the of the LOI are: percentage of families receiving social assistance, median income, percentage of families whose income is below the low income measure, percentage of families receiving social assistance, adults with low education, adults with university degrees, and single-parent families. The school with the greatest level of external challenges is ranked number one. Based on Mayfield’s position on the LOI, it was indeed a school community with many external challenges and needs. Scrutiny of the LOI helped Tessa identify obstacles and barriers faced by families in the school community
given their economic status, level of education and the number of single-parent families. With information gleaned from various sources including informal conversations, the EDI, and LOI, Tessa commented that she was more readily able to respond to the needs of the community and intervene to support students and their families. This also put her in a better position to interact with families in the community as she strived to understand their cultural beliefs and develop authentic collaborative relationships with them.

When Tessa first arrived at Mayfield the building was run-down, dirty, and unkempt. She commented that it was as though the poverty stricken community did not deserve to have even basic facilities that functioned properly. Hence, her first priority was to make the physical plant aesthetically pleasing so that staff, students and parents would take pride in their school and be happy to be there. She expressed her feelings thus:

We can’t do anything about the lack of grocery stores and other services, but the goal at Mayfield Public School is to look at what we can control. We can control everything that happens in this building. What I wanted to do was to make this building a paradise. We created a Beautification Committee, that was our Safe and Caring schools team and working hand in hand with the caretaker, we just cleaned it up. It was just a concerted, focused, intentional effort to visually change the school and then from there to work on the culture of the school to maintain it and to emphasize with the kids and the teachers that this is within our control. (Tessa)

Working hand in hand with staff, Tessa made a concerted effort to transform the school building from its grungy state of disrepair. She obtained money from the Superintendent that enabled her to have Mayfield painted as well as hire additional staff to clean the building. She noted that the staff, students, and parents were very excited about the changes happening at the school. Prior to the repairs, however, students had not taken pride in keeping the school clean; rather they would add to the debris by throwing paper in the school hallways or scribbling more graffiti on the walls. While staff may not have contributed to the dilapidated state of the building, they also did not take an active role in keeping the school clean and tidy. Drawing on this newfound
enthusiasm, Tessa made the staff and students aware that they were now being held accountable to maintain their surroundings in a spotless condition. At the time this study was undertaken, the foyer and the hallways at Mayfield Public School were clean and beautifully decorated. There were plaques and artwork related to the students’ diverse cultural backgrounds that highlighted character traits such as responsibility, integrity, respect, and honesty. The 2013—2014 District Process Report stated, “The school is pristine with shining, clean, litter free corridors. The concept of a learning environment meets the visitor at the door and continues in hallways and corridors with visual depictions and photographs of Mayfield students learning and sharing social justice issues, as well as character traits” (p. 1).

According to Valerie, the school is a place in which all stakeholders feel a sense of belonging:

You come to a place where you know you are respected and valued and if you need any support—it’s like a family here and I think that makes a big, big difference. I think that’s how we were able to get a lot of this done. The day District Process team came to our school, the word family kept coming up with the kids too. Students that graduated and returned for that day kept on saying Mayfield is like a family. (Valerie)

Moreover, many stakeholders who would not have entered the school premises previously are now actively involved in the life of the school. Tessa worked in partnership with students, parents, and staff to create an aesthetically pleasing environment. This was very much a source of pride for Tessa and spoke to her determination in employing CRL to create a welcoming space for staff, students, parents, and visitors alike.

Creating a safe and caring school culture. While improving the appearance of the physical was important, so too was creating a school culture in which students flourished and thrived. To achieve this, Tessa first worked with staff to manage student behavior more effectively. Prior to her arrival, student behavior was a significant problem in the school, so much so that occasional teachers often refused to work at Mayfield because of the general
misbehaviour of students. In order for students to learn and be academically successful, they needed to learn self-regulation and self-discipline so that everyone would be able to function in a safe and caring environment. According to Tessa, when she arrived initially, the school was not a “safe” place to be. Yet, Tessa was confident that students would accomplish much academically if they had administrators and teachers who believed in them and held them accountable for their behaviour. Tessa’s first priority was to make staff and students aware that inappropriate or aggressive student behavior would no longer be overlooked or excused. Tessa understood that without a drastic change in student behaviour, it would be difficult for teachers to teach and students to learn. Consequently she met with staff to discuss the issue and subsequently spoke to students outlining expectations for their behaviour and consequences for misbehaviour. Tessa was extremely diligent and consistent about enforcing the school’s “Code of Conduct” and supporting teachers when they sent students down to the office. She also made sure she was visible in the hallways and classrooms, which enabled her to get to know the staff and students. She applied discipline in a fair and judicious manner, leaving no doubt that this was a new day.

She also introduced a Character Education Program in an effort to improve students’ performance and school experiences by giving them the skills they needed to think critically and reflectively about how their behavior affected the school environment and ultimately their learning. Scholars have critiqued Character Education Programs on the basis that these models tend to have a very narrow focus which denotes a particular style of moral training that views children as objects to be manipulated rather than learners to be engaged (Geren, 2001; Kohn; 1997; Liu, 2014). These authors argue that such programs usually seek to indoctrinate children through memorization of rules and right answers, the final goal being to create puppets that mindlessly comply, obey, and respect authority. Rather than teaching children to think critically about moral and ethical issues in order to arrive at deep understanding of these ideas, more often
than not these models tend to stifle critical thinking and reflection, leading students to acquire an uncritical acceptance of readymade truths (Geren, 2001; Kohn, 1997; Liu, 2014).

Tessa’s approach to implementing character education was somewhat different. She wanted to educate students to think for themselves about all ideas, including those of adults. According to Tessa students already interpreted the world and their actions in moral terms and were capable of principled moral reasoning. She concurred with Geren (2001), who argued that what children needed is guidance from adults to act as role models or pose challenges that promote moral growth and help students understand the effect of their actions on other people, thereby nurturing a concern for others and, when necessary, a willingness to change.

Students responded positively to the changes initiated under Tessa’s leadership by meeting her high expectations for their behaviour and applying themselves to learning. Morris describes how things have changed since Tessa’s arrival:

I think first of all there is much greater order to the school than when I first came in. Now we are able to teach, because the kids understand what the expectations are for their behavior. The bar is set very high so they are able to get down to the business of sitting and getting their work done. Before she (Tessa) came, even supply teachers—nobody wanted to come to Mayfield. Now it’s been such a change because she has come and fixed it all and improved it. (Morris)

Morris is impressed by the positive effect Tessa has had on student conduct. Not only is he now able to teach, but students are able to learn. Mayfield had become a desirable place to be.

Likewise, Monica commented on the change in student behaviour:

When you are dealing with just managing the behavior as you know, the curriculum and all those social justice and equity pieces, they’re way down on the list. You just want them to sit in their seat, do the work, and then from there all the other stuff is a luxury. You can teach if you can manage students. The behavior has improved dramatically so that we can start to do all those other pieces. I attribute that change to the principal. She has high expectations, both for the behavior and academic achievement of all students. (Monica)

Both Morris and Monica are very pleased with the change in student behavior, which they
attribute to Tessa’s leadership and high expectation she has for students. In particular, Monica’s remarks encapsulate the desire that every teacher has: to have students who are receptive and ready to learn. It is difficult if not impossible to teach when most of the time has to be spent on classroom management. Once student behaviour improved, Monica was able to turn her focus from managing student behavior to providing a more engaging instructional program based on the principles of equity and social justice. Under Tessa’s leadership, teachers were now able to focus on students’ academic achievement rather than their disruptive behaviours.

Tessa also realized it was important students understand the qualities and characteristics they need to acquire to become productive, contributing members of society. She also felt that it was necessary to teach children in a manner that would help them develop empathy and respect for diversity, which is the foundation of all positive human relationships (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). Hence, Tessa’s hope was not only that students would begin to self-manage and self-regulate their behaviour, but that within the classroom an atmosphere that fosters students’ intellectual, social, moral, and emotional development would prevail. Tessa believed that for the character education initiative to have the desired impact, it was essential that all members of the school community—students, staff, and parents, become involved in its school-wide implementation and development:

I really felt that we needed to focus more on character development traits like respect, responsibility, empathy, honesty, kindness and perseverance…. In having conversations with staff there was full buy-in to that; taking that to the parent council—more buy-in. And we began to look at shaping those traits directly into our curriculum. Okay throughout we’re talking about citizenship and community, it’s right there across the grades, how can we build in those character traits that we want to emphasize into the existing curriculum? (Tessa)

Tessa’s goal was to have these desirable attributes become a part of the school culture so that students would aspire to possess these character traits. This, however, could only be accomplished if parents and staff fully supported the program and weaved these goals into
everyday practice. By embedding these character traits directly into the curriculum, Tessa felt students would be able to have meaningful conversations about moral values and ethics and through this means apply what they were learning in their daily lives. Students would also learn to think for themselves rather than just parrot the ideas of others. Valerie gives an example of how the attribute of perseverance was weaved into the curriculum.

We did the unit on Yao Ming. He was part of the Asian unit. We thought about which character trait fits in with him. Perseverance—he never gave up. He had to move from China to Canada. What were his challenges? What were his fears? How did he overcome this? They learned about perseverance and how it takes a lot of encouragement and determination to do what you dream of. (Valerie)

Giving students the opportunity to examine individuals from various cultures and critically examine why and how these individuals exhibited certain attributes enabled students to connect their personal experiences to those of the characters they studied, further enhancing their critical analysis skills.

Once character education was entrenched in all aspects of school life—its policies, practices, procedures, and programs, students gradually began to behave in a manner which demonstrated they were internalizing the positive traits possessed by various heroes and characters they studied. They came to change the way they thought about the school and learning, as well the manner in which they behaved towards adults and peers. The infusion of character development in all subject areas, extracurricular, and school-wide programs contributed significantly to the creation of a far more harmonious, caring, and safe school environment. As Tessa notes, “When you look at the affective data, the census data, and what not, the kids are safe here. They feel welcome, nurtured, and happy to be here.”

*Developing relationships*. Tessa also concentrated on building authentic relationship with all stakeholders as she strived to work in partnership with them to change the school’s culture. Tessa believes that students’ success is greatly impacted by the relationships that exist amongst
various stakeholders in the school community. According to Tessa, “a culturally responsive leader must build authentic partnerships as well as affirm and empower others to work in the best interests of all students.” Hence, Tessa believed it was essential for her to establish and build strong relationship with students and their families as well have them work collaboratively with others in the educational community. To achieve this Tessa interacted extensively with the various stakeholders to establish and forge strong relationships. She then focused her energy on introducing various initiatives to increase parental engagement and equip parents with the tools they needed to partner with the school as advocates for social change and reform. Initially Tessa conversed with as many parents as possible to let them know she cared. She encouraged them to come in and speak to her about things which were important to them so she could help them obtain resources from various community agencies. She also strengthened her relationship with parents through her visibility in the school yard and the casual conversations that would ensue:

I go out to the bus stop you know where there are all the problems, and I roll up and say good morning and start getting kids in line. They also see me at recess. Every time you walk in this building you see me. So I’m out there. I’m visible. I’m engaging with them. (Tessa)

Through these means she commented that she has been able to build a strong and caring relationship with the parent community. Tessa went on to explain that she chose to come to Mayfield because she knew that the school community needed a leader who would be culturally responsive and committed to social justice in order to intervene and help the school overcome some of the challenges it faced. As a Black woman, she felt an affinity to the marginalized children and families in the school, having experienced exclusion herself: “I say to them, ‘We’re all Black people here. I could have gone to any school I wanted, but I came here for a reason.’” She knew it was not every leader who would be culturally responsive to the needs of the students
and their families. Her frequent interactions with parents enabled her to develop trusting relationships with these families who began to perceive her as helpful and caring.

Tessa also made a concerted effort to build a strong and caring relationship with students. Several teachers mentioned the bond that had developed between the principal and students. For instance, Sebastian noted, “They definitely respect her. There’s a lot of respect from the students towards her.” On a similar note, Valerie commented, “She is a person the children feel they can approach at any time.” Likewise, Monica expresses her perception of the relationship between the principal and students: “She knows all the kids—they are aware of that and they respect her. I think she has done a very good job as leader in terms of that. They know what Ms. Bowen (Tessa) expects, and they live up to her expectations.” For Monica then, Tessa’s (Ms. Bowen’s) relationship with the students is based upon her acknowledgement of them as individuals. She is not only aware of their names, but she knows and recognizes them on a personal basis. She also has high academic aspirations for them, and they do their best to live up to her expectations. Students are more inclined to make a greater effort in terms of their academics due to the positive relationship they have developed with the principal.

Tessa also felt it was necessary for the relationship between the older and younger students to improve. When she first arrived, a significant number of junior students tended to bully the primary children. She articulated some of the steps she has taken to build positive relationships between the older and younger students to lessen the intimidation and hostility that existed between the two groups.

We started with reading buddies so that the little ones wouldn’t be afraid of the older ones outside. Reading buddies evolved into learning buddies. Okay we are not just going to focus on reading, let’s also address the math, because it was peer helping—peer tutoring that was going on and it was powerful. You saw the transference of that relationship building outside in the playground. You know for the first couple of years every single recess there were three to four fights easily. Students rarely have a fight outside now. You have the learning buddies looking out for each other. You know I
always like to tell this story. We had freezie day and you could only buy one freezie and there was a little one in line and he said, “I’m getting two.” I said, “No you’re only allowed to buy one” He said, “No but the other one is for my buddy.” It’s just heart-warming. I think of all the things that we do here Friday mornings, learning buddy time, is the best time of the day. It truly is. (Tessa)

The reading buddy program served to reduce bullying in the school as older students started to develop positive relationships with their younger “buddies” and look out for their well-being. Older students also acted as peer tutors and this helped to improve the literacy skills of their buddies.

Overall, Tessa has built strong relationships with staff and students based on mutual respect. She has worked collaboratively with the educational community to bring order to the school and supported them with student discipline to enable them to work more effectively with students. She has developed a positive relationship with students such that they not only respect her, but also work hard to live up to her high expectation for them both academically and behaviourally. She has forged a solid and authentic partnership with parents by listening to their concerns and letting them know she is at the school because she cares and wants to make a difference for their children. Over time parents have grown to trust in her leadership capabilities and increasingly seek her out for advice and support. This has also made it possible for Tessa to encourage parents to become more involved and active in the life of the school.

**Fostering parental engagement.** According to Henderson and Mapp (2002), all students benefit from family involvement in education, but low-income and minority students benefit the most. Research results clearly show that parental involvement in home and school makes a significant difference to students’ academic achievement (Auerbach, 2012; Bower & Griffin, 2011; Hattie, 2009). However, until fairly recently, few researchers have specifically identified low-income families or families from diverse cultural backgrounds as potentially making positive contributions to their children’s education. Rather parents and families from these social
locations have often been viewed through a lens of disadvantage, deficiency, passivity, and even neglect (Cooper, Riehl & Hasan, 2010; Passow, 1963). More often than not reaching out to such families can be a daunting task for school leaders, since they often seem reluctant to participate in their children’s schooling in the traditional sense (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Olivos, 2012). Nonetheless, school leaders can do a lot to turn the tide both in terms of how these parents perceive and approach educational institutions as well as how educators view them, as demonstrated in this case. Traditionally, parental involvement in school entails parents being asked by educators to serve as audience, spectators, fundraisers, or organizers as well as carry out the schools’ agenda and do what educators determine is needed (Ferlazzo, 2011; Pushor, 2001; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). Within this framework, the knowledge voice and decision-making continues to rest with educators (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). Tessa’s philosophy of parental engagement, however, stands in marked contrast to this approach. Tessa believed it was essential for her to build meaningful relationships with the families in the school community, treating them as equal partners and important allies from whom the educational community can learn. She was aware however that this association would have to be based on mutual respect and that school personnel would have to be sincere in conveying that parents had something significant to contribute to their children’s education. Consequently Tessa has sought to have parents become critical partners involved in dialogue, reflection, and action within the school community. She commented,

The parents feel comfortable approaching the school and they feel that this is their school. Each year they are more engaged, well beyond the bake sale. They’re involved in staffing and in understanding how that all comes about and having input in determining the class size and the models. And it was the parents who lobbied for the school to be K-grade 8 and I think that speaks volumes for them to want us to keep their children for an additional three years because they feel they are doing well here and they want that to continue. They say that Mayfield is a family and this is their second home. (Tessa)
Tessa’s philosophy of parental engagement embraced the idea that parents should work alongside educators in the school community, sharing power and authority over the agenda being served (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). She ensured parents had a voice in staffing and the overall organization of the school and supported and guided parents as they took the action necessary for Mayfield to be extended from grade 6 to grade 8. Due to her culturally responsive approach to leadership, Tessa was able to bridge the cultural boundaries that so often separate administrators from engaging authentically with families from culturally diverse and low-income communities.

Tessa has also worked to build authentic partnerships with parents so that they are willing to be involved in school events and activities. Joshua confirmed this in his account of parental engagement in the school:

As a teacher I would say the administration has done a really good job of opening up the doors to the community by inviting the parents into the school for different types of activities. We had a patty day a couple of times, we had dress down days and different fundraisers and they are always a part of the actual organization of it and running of these events...they are involved in the Parenting Centre, the different fundraising activities when we do have them. I think they have much invested in the school and that kind of comes from them feeling very welcomed, respected, and valued within the school environment. (Joshua)

Joshua also noticed that parents participate in a significant number of workshops and programs made available to them since Tessa’s arrival. Moreover under Tessa’s leadership parents also played a pivotal role in organizing and running school events, which served to make them feel welcome, comfortable, and validated within the school. Monica shared similar sentiments of parental engagement in the school, pointing out that many events targeted the entire school community:

Our principal really encourages us to involve the community in activities and events in the school. We usually have literacy night, math night, and an open house. We had a celebration which was opened to the whole community and that just happened a few weeks ago. We usually have a fun fair at the end of year. That involves the whole community again. It’s a big event. (Monica)
Tessa encourages teachers to attend events such as literacy and math nights that enable parents to see what their children are learning. She has been instrumental in working with staff, parents, and community partners to organize celebratory events that include cultural music, cuisine food from various ethnic groups, games, dances, which also helps to build positive relationships with parents such that they view the school as an extension of their family unit rather than an intimidating institution.

Believing that parent engagement is strongly related to student engagement, Tessa explained how she capitalized on this notion:

When their kids go home having positive experiences and when they feel safe at school, then the parents start to approach the school. Then there’s more buy-in. I’ve always felt that parent engagement is about student engagement. Work with the students first, then your parents will buy in. Parents will come to the school if their children are happy. Happy kids are happy parents and so they want to get involved. So they come and they do things. We have a lot of parents at our Parent Council meetings now because they feel welcome here. It took time. I’ve been here for eight years. It didn’t happen overnight. (Tessa)

Focusing her energy on having students become engaged in learning helped Tessa build positive connections and links with the parental community. Tessa indicated, however, that the relationship she has developed with the community was built over a gradual period of time.

She also made a concerted effort to connect with community leaders and encouraged them to take an active role in the school:

I think it is what you do one-to-one when parents come in. I think it is getting a sense of who the leaders in the community are and finding opportunities to bring them in to ask them to volunteer and come out to parent council. (Tessa)

In these ways Tessa forged relationships with parents and let them know their input was valued. She invited them to collaborate in partnership with the educational community to benefit their children and worked with staff to foster a nurturing environment for students, realizing that when students are happy and engaged, their parents form a positive attitude towards the school. These
strategies to engage parents have paid off in dividends; thus, parents now readily participate in everyday activities within the school community.

Creating a collaborative climate in which administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community partners work together to build an effective and dynamic school community is as important as it is challenging for school leadership. Tessa realizes that as a culturally responsive leader it is also important that she is committed to the process of empowering parents from culturally diverse and low-income communities, not only by advocating for them but also by providing them with the tools they need to lobby for school reform and change.

**Advocacy for Her Community**

Affluent parents usually know how to navigate the educational system and will advocate for their children through recognized channels of intervention (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). On the other hand, parents from diverse cultural backgrounds and low-income families often feel intimidated by school authorities and are unsure how to advocate appropriately for their children, particularly when they perceive themselves to be outsiders who are powerless in the school (Auerbach, 2012; Olivos, 2006; Scribner, 1999).

Tessa, however, has worked to promote a school climate in which students and their families are regarded from a position of strength rather than a deficit perspective. As a culturally responsive leader Tessa has worked to change staffs’ deficit thinking about the school community, accessed programs to benefit students and families, advocated for equity in special education, and supported parents in lobbying for school reform and change.

*Changing deficit thinking.* When a group is perceived from a deficit view there is an implicit assumption that their community is broken or lacking in some essential quality or attribute. As the educational community fixates on their deficiencies, the tendency is to ignore the opportunity gaps experienced inside and outside schools by poor and culturally diverse
families (Auerbach, 2012; Combar & Kamler, 2004; Flessa, 2009; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Gorski, 2013). When asked if staff thought of the community from a deficit perspective when she arrived at Mayfield, Tessa responded, “Absolutely.” Thus, Tessa took care in staff meetings to discuss the importance of focusing on the resiliency and strengths of students and their families rather than falling into the trap of deficit thinking. The strength-based mindset now prevalent amongst staff members can be directly attributed to Tessa’s influence. This is illustrated by Joshua’s comment:

We realize where our kids come from and we do discuss the challenges they have because of that. Our principal always reminds us not to look at students from a deficit perspective, but more from what do they have to give? What are their strengths? But it comes from the principal. We no longer say to ourselves as teachers “They cannot do this; they cannot do that. We say instead, “What can they do? How can we help them get there?” So I think that comes from the top and that’s what we focus on a lot. (Joshua)

He elaborated that prior to Tessa’s arrival, students were considered to be low achievers who would amount to very little given the poverty prevalent in the community, the cultural diversity, and the low level of postsecondary education of parents. Tessa challenged this type of deficit thinking, encouraging teachers to focus on students’ strengths and to ensure they have high expectations for them. Monica also commented on the way she now looks at students and how Tessa has changed her perception of them.

We know our students have challenges because, like I said, the student population primarily comes from the buildings. I know there are challenges right, but we don’t really think of students from a deficit perspective. Our principal encourages us to have high expectations for students and to let them know they can reach for the top. (Monica)

No longer do educators dismiss students as hopeless, underachievers; instead they live up to Tessa’s expectations by working collaboratively in grade teams and discussing interventions they can implement to enhance student learning. For instance, if students are struggling with reading, teachers commented that they spend extra time tutoring them to help improve their literacy skills. They look at what each student does well and modify lessons so that each child’s specific
learning style and interests are accommodated. When instruction is differentiated in this manner, and teachers take such a caring approach with students, it is more likely that students will thrive as they begin to experience a feeling of belonging and inclusion. Tessa has also encouraged teachers to view parents from a strengths-based perspective and work in partnership with them for the benefit of their children, encouraging them to become involved in classroom activities and events. Teachers indicated that since Tessa’s arrival they have developed a more positive attitude towards students and the school community. Several participants mentioned that despite the challenging environment in which these students live, they are able to accomplish much when provided with the support they need to achieve success.

**Accessing resources and programs.** As a culturally responsive leader, Tessa also advocates on behalf of her community to ensure they receive services and programs to enrich children’s educational experiences. She specifically cultivates relationships with various community organizations and agencies that can provide students with access to opportunities and goods their families cannot afford (Gorski, 2013). She commented:

> When we need services or resources in this community I speak up on their behalf. I successfully lobbied to have a late bus assigned to the school for our kids to participate in extracurricular activities so they would have equity of access. We have a nutrition program that includes daily breakfast and snack for students as well as a Blessing in the Backpack program for weekends. I had to lobby for these as well as both an itinerant music program and the Beyond 3:30 Program. Every nickel and dime we’ve lobbied for. (Tessa)

In these ways Tessa has worked diligently to access resources and programs for her school community because she realizes that students in her school community often do not have the opportunity to participate in many of the activities available to children who reside in more affluent communities. As a result she goes out on a limb to obtain resources such as the Beyond 3:30 Program, which affords students the ability to participate in a wide range of organized activities including homework help, healthy living activities, life skills development, and
performing arts (Yau & Presley, 2012). Clearly, Tessa goes out of her way to access resources so that students are able to participate in sports and recreational activities as well as have the academic support they need.

As noted above, Tessa has also been instrumental in implementing a nutrition program at the school, which is organized and run by parents. This program ensures students start their day with a nutritious meal and also provides them with a healthy snack each day. Participation in the nutrition program sets students up for success by ensuring they do not have to struggle to make sense of their teacher’s instruction while battling hunger pangs and fatigue. Likewise the Blessings in a Backpack program, which was also started under Tessa’s leadership, is designed to support school children who simply do not have enough to eat on weekends. Students involved in this program take home a backpack filled with food every Friday and return the backpack empty on Monday. The backpacks are put together by staff and parents each week with the food provided by Blessings in a Backpack, which is a non-profit organization funded by donations from individuals as well as various corporate entities (Blessings in Backpack, 2015). According to the program coordinators, the benefits and impact of this program are immediate: attendance and productivity soar; students report greater attentiveness and improved energy; teachers see improvements in study habits and demeanour; parents feel relief and support for their own family. In addition, Tessa noted that she does not sit silent if she feels that students are not being given equitable access to resources. She talked about times during meetings with other administrators in her district when she did not feel that resources were allocated equitably. She was not afraid to speak up and voice her concern, although this may not have made her very popular:

Even at the district level there are issues that come out, and it is always important to be that voice speaking up and demanding equity for children even when you’re the only one articulating a concern. To speak up when there is an injustice—that’s essential. (Tessa)
Tessa was not concerned with how her advocacy for the students in her community made her appear to her colleagues. Her first and foremost commitment was to access resources for the community within her sphere of influence. This has not gone unnoticed by her staff, as indicated in the following comment from Monica.

She always advocates for the kids. She knows every single kid who needs something. If we think a child needs something we always go to her. So she is actively involved and she is always advocating for the kids and the parents. If a family can’t afford something she would say if that is the situation we will pay for it. Her door is always open to them. If there are any issues, they know where to go to talk to her. (Monica)

Monica sees Tessa as supporting students by providing subsidies for them to ensure they are never prevented from participating in activities and programs due to lack of financial resources.

Sebastian too articulates a similar perception of his principal’s advocacy endeavors.

I think she has been here a long time, she knows the students, and knows their families. So if you are talking to her about a student or if there is an issue, she knows the family and she is able to say we can help this person out by doing this. She provides opportunities for the students. For example, she understands because of the poverty in our community we should not have students pay for some activities. We’ll try to cover some of those costs. (Sebastian)

Sebastian also comments on how sensitive Tessa is to the financial hardship these families face as well as what she does to assist them. According to both Monica and Sebastian, Tessa has brought programs into the school for the benefit of students and their families. It is clear to teachers that it is important to Tessa that students feel included and have opportunities available to them that students in more affluent neighbourhoods take for granted.

Advocacy for equity in special education. Tessa has also advocated for students in the special education referral and placement process. It is well documented in the literature that culturally diverse students are overrepresented in special education, not because of a disability they have but because of a combination of poor instruction, deficit-based teachers who are culturally disconnected from them, and educators who are unable to see their potential or worth.
misdiagnosed and given special education designations because they act out when their needs are not met. She recalled a time when she took four Black boys to the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) to have their behavioral designation removed. She commented:

They came to Mayfield from other schools. Sure they may have had issues in their other schools, but when they come here to this sort of structure, these expectations, this level of caring and what we do with character development, from supporting them in the Intensive Support Program to the Home School Program and then integrating them, they usually do well . . . These kids are not behavioral. I believe what they were experiencing was unmet learning needs at that particular time in their schooling. I have had the behavior designation removed. So that’s one way of advocating for them. (Tessa)

Through Tessa’s intervention then, the behavioral designation was removed from these students’ records. While they may have been disruptive at their previous school, Tessa attributes their misbehavior to inappropriate supports and programming. Tessa’s experience is not uncommon. Without school leaders such as Tessa to protect these children’s interest and secure opportunities for them based on equity and appropriate diagnosis, it is not uncommon for them to fall through the cracks. It is often difficult for marginalized families to advocate for their children because they are usually undervalued and unrecognized by those within the educational system (Wilson Cooper, 2009). Consequently school leaders such as Tessa are needed both to help parents understand the Identification Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) process, as well as to support them in their effort to articulate concerns and questions to school authorities.

Moreover, through previous participation as a chair of the IPRC Tessa has actively sought to ensure students, from other schools who are already marginalized are not misdiagnosed or placed needlessly into special education programs. Realizing that educators’ biases can easily jeopardize the integrity of the special education referral process, as chair of the IPRC, Tessa ensures that she speaks up when she does not agree with the recommendations made by the committee. She expressed the displeasure she feels when marginalized students are identified
through the IPRC process with insufficient evidence and refuses to turn a blind eye to what may be an injustice perpetrated on these children:

When I’m the chair of a central committee I’ll send it back if I don’t agree. I’ll advocate for the provision of additional evidence and suggest we try other alternatives before conferring an inappropriate special educations designation on a child. If it doesn’t feel right and I know they are talking about Black kids I am not going to be the rubber stamp for that committee. (Tessa)

It is not surprising that Tessa feels this way since it is well documented in the literature that race, gender, cultural, and linguistic biases remain integral aspects of the special education process particularly for African American males (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Sullivan, et al., 2009). Educators often stereotype Black boys as unintelligent and disruptive in school (Chesley, 2009; Dei, 2010; M. Gordon & Zinga, 2012; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Solomon, 1992).

Advocacy with parents for school reform and change. Tessa also realized that, as a culturally responsive leader, it is important that she is committed to the process of empowering parents from culturally diverse and low-income communities, not only by advocating for them but also by providing them with the tools they need to lobby for school reform and change. To this end, Tessa has developed a relationship with parents built on trust and an ethic of care. She sees parents as partners in their children’s education and empowers them to participate in school reform and change. She actively helps them understand how to navigate the system to benefit their children by accessing resources and lobbying for supports. Thus, when the school needed a vice principal, it was Tessa who aided parents in understanding the process to follow to appeal to the board to have a vice principal assigned to the school even though the student population did not merit this allocation. Likewise, when parents wanted their children to remain at Mayfield until grade 8, Tessa helped parents organize and understand the necessary channel to follow to achieve the desired results. She commented:
They lobbied several years ago and we were able to get a vice principal attached to this school through profile allocation because of parental advocacy. And it was the parents who lobbied for the school to be extended from kindergarten to grade 5 to kindergarten to grade 8. (Tessa)

It was important to Tessa that parents realize their collective action could bring about political change. In this vein Tessa has equipped parents with the knowledge they need to directly disrupt the status and power dynamics that marginalize low-income and culturally diverse parents from involvement in important decisions about school policy and practice (Auerbach, 2012; Banks & McGee, 1999).

Tessa goes beyond traditional efforts to seek parental involvement in activities such as fundraising and volunteering in the classroom. Instead she strives to raise the critical consciousness of parents so that they realize they have a powerful voice to collectively lobby for resources and services for their children. By working in partnership with parents, Tessa has created the forum to achieve a more equitable educational system for these marginalized students and families. She has been instrumental in forging a strong partnership between parents and the educational community, such that, while each has different roles, they work together to see that students get the best out opportunities available to them. Ultimately this creates a better community for all.

**Promoting Cultural Responsiveness**

Cultural responsiveness involves highlighting the values and practices that enable individuals and schools to interact effectively across cultures that differ from theirs. It is a complex concept that includes the acceptance and acknowledgement of other people’s cultures and cultural values. Applied to school contexts, the principal’s role is to encourage educators to reflect on their own values in order to develop an appreciation for family customs as well as community culture. To that end, Tessa has worked with staff to develop their cultural
competence and cultural responsiveness so that students and their families can access the best the school has to offer as educators learn to communicate effectively with them, understand who they are, the cultural context from which they come, and perceive and treat them with respect (Nuri-Robins et al., 2005). Moreover, she has also utilized several strategies to promote cultural responsiveness on a school-wide level. These efforts are further described below.

Promoting cultural responsiveness amongst staff. One role of culturally responsive leaders is to provide the support, resources, and training teachers need to be able to develop cultural competence (M. Brown, 2007). Consequently, Tessa used staff meetings as an opportunity to discuss issues related to equity and inclusion as well as provide professional development for staff relevant to cultural responsiveness as well as cultural competence. Tessa put it this way:

Every time we had to come together as a staff, to work on curriculum that was out there. There were some focused discussions one year for which I did buy them, “Courageous Conversations,” and during the staff meeting we would look at different chapters. We also had looked at a book about culturally relevant pedagogy. So different resources were purchased and we had the literature circles and we had those discussions. I’d bring in or Video clips or Youtube clips and what not, and then say, “talk to your elbow partners.” All of these strategies, all of these discussions are part of every staff meeting. Then we branch out our Professional Learning Community (PLC) and continue the discussion. We take a look at what this meant for our teaching and interaction with student and parents.

(Tessa)

Tessa fostered staff’s cultural responsiveness both by exposing them to literature that embraced this philosophy as well as giving them time to engage in discussion and reflection so as to change the way they responded to students and their families.

During these staff meetings Tessa also explored sensitive issues such as racism, privilege, and deficit thinking. She commented:

One resource that I used was “Waiting for Superman.” It is documentary from the United States about chartered schools. It is about four kids who come from working class families. They want the best for their kids, but they live in a lousy school district. Through a lottery system they try to get their kids into better schools. I think three out of
the four kids don’t make it. They don’t get the lottery. My teachers took it really well and
they were all teary eyed. What I wanted them to see is that parents want the very best for
their children, and when you are the working poor, or marginalized and on assistance, the
only thing that you can offer your child is a good education—public education…. Parents
are putting all their hopes and their aspirations in our laps and we need to do something
with that. I said to them, “What’s our professional and moral obligation to other people’s
children? They’re all counting on us to give their kids that ladder up so that they can
improve their life chances. While we can’t control what happens after 4 o’clock, we can
control everything within the 6 hours they are here. What we do here, it’s magical, and
it’s so foundational and so important. They’re counting on us.” And they just bought into
that. (Tessa)

In this way Tessa garners staff support for her vision by appealing to their sense of fairness and
social justice advocacy. She challenges them to look beyond the poverty and barriers these
students face and to focus instead on the moral obligation they have as educators to provide an
equitable education for all students. She convinces teachers that through their pedagogical
practice they have the opportunity to give these children a fighting chance to become productive
and responsible citizens.

Tessa also worked with her staff to help them understand that when discussing
people from different cultures and racial backgrounds it was important to be conscious of which
aspects of these individuals’ experience became the focus of a lesson. For instance, she
commented:

We watched a video from Ted Talk entitled, “The Danger of a Single Story,” which again
was excellent in breaking down those walls—Yes we want to be inclusive and what not,
but let’s be careful whose story we are telling and the types of stories we are telling.
Because when we talk about African heritage, if we start at slavery we are doing a
disservice to people of African heritage. Our history does not start in slavery. It’s a
chapter in our history but it is not the beginning, so we really mean to be mindful of what
we are going to put out there. (Tessa)

Here Tessa brings attention to the danger of focusing on the negative aspects of diverse cultures
and races and stresses the importance of balancing this with the study of their accomplishments
and achievements. Tessa endeavors to promote teachers’ critical learning by encouraging them to
think carefully about what they read and hear as well as to challenge potential bias, distorted
views, and prejudice. She also makes staff aware it is important to reflect on and adapt their professional practice based on their developing insights. In this sense Tessa has sought to have educators develop an appreciation for the customs and practices of the students they teach as well as make a concerted effort to understand the underpinnings of their students’ culture which may differ from theirs.

Tessa also commented that she looks for cultural responsiveness when hiring school staff. Although it can be beneficial when there is a match between the ethnicity of the teacher and the child, culturally competent teachers, regardless of race, can learn enough of the child’s home culture to be able to properly interpret behaviour and structure curriculum to be an effective facilitator of the students’ learning (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Keeping this in mind Tessa made it a priority to hire teachers that have a culturally responsive philosophy of education and an understanding of diversity.

However, with the introduction of Ontario Regulation 274, principals have had to change their approach to hiring new teachers. This bill mandates that such teachers be hired on the basis of seniority. Consequently, it is sometimes difficult for principals who serve in challenging neighbourhoods to hire educators who are not only sensitive to the needs of culturally diverse students, but committed to working in marginalized school contexts.

**Fostering school-wide cultural responsiveness.** In addition to working directly with staff on their cultural responsiveness, Tessa has strived to foster culturally responsiveness by keeping students’ home cultures in mind when organizing assemblies, initiating school-wide celebrations, and in interactions with parents. Tessa believes that the school should not just celebrate and learn about students’ cultural traditions as an end in itself; rather, they should scaffold students’ academic learning using the cultural repertoires they bring with them (Sleeter,
In this vein, Joshua, Morris, and Valerie all discuss how students’ cultural experiences are incorporated into the life of the school. According to Joshua, “I know that we have a lot of initiatives through which our principal expects us to recognize the different cultures within the school. Teacher participants noted that the school hosts a number of programs and assemblies through which Tessa encourages them to ensure their students’ cultural strengths are reflected. For instance, students are given the opportunity to share their skills and knowledge during Character Education assemblies, activities in the steel pan club, and an Afro-Cuban drumming program. Moreover, Valerie articulates her perception of how cultural responsiveness has been embedded across the school:

I think the cultural responsiveness comes through our principal’s leadership during our PLC and staff meetings. We work collaboratively with our principal to look at our data and test scores and put these together to understand who our children are. There is dialogue between teachers as well. When we are planning we don’t just plan within our grades, we plan within our division team. So we have teachers on the team that might have had the child the year before, so we talk to each other to track students’ progress. Our principal wants to see that communication between teachers to ensure we are planning appropriately for students. (Valerie)

By looking at a child’s previous records and discussing this student with other teachers Valerie indicates that she is able to develop a well-rounded picture of the child which will enable her to program appropriately for this student. In essence, Valerie ensures she gets to know her students and then differentiates instruction for each child based what she has ascertained from her relationship with them and other sources of information accessed. She indicates that Tessa is involved in this process and likes to keep abreast of how teachers are working together to plan appropriately for student learning.

Another strategy Tessa uses to promote cultural responsiveness school-wide is to create a culture in which parents are not only involved in school activities, such as organizing patty days
and the nutrition program, but are also given the opportunity to participate in workshops tailored
to their culture, interests, and needs. Sebastian remarked:

> From time to time you see activities like yoga for the Somali moms which our principal
gets the Community Support Worker to organize for parents. This a woman-only group.
Sometimes you see announcements from the parents. The parents kind of organize that in
the school. (Sebastian)

In the Somali culture men and women do not attend exercise workshops together;
consequently Tessa has arranged a workshop for women only, since parents expressed this as a
need in their community. She demonstrated her cultural responsiveness by honoring their request
without questioning their cultural belief or values.

Tessa also ensures that important events in students’ home countries are acknowledged
and celebrated within the school community. Sebastian also commented on this:

> One thing our principal encouraged us to do last year—I guess because of the Caribbean
heritage of some of our students, was to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Jamaica’s
independence. That year we decided in collaboration with our principal that the school-
wide focus would be the Caribbean. (Sebastian)

It was Tessa’s expectation that teachers incorporate various activities within the school day in
order to demonstrate respect for and acknowledge the history, background, and heritage of
students whose families have ties to this country.

Tessa’s ultimate objective is to create a school environment in which students not only
feel a sense of belonging but also thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. For the most
part staff and parents share Tessa’s vision of creating a culturally responsive school system, thus,
they work in partnership with her to accomplish this goal.

**Cultural Responsive Pedagogy**

According to Gay (2010), culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) means teaching through
and to students’ personal and cultural strengths as well as their intellectual capabilities, prior
knowledge, and experiences. Students from culturally diverse backgrounds have already
mastered many cultural skills and ways of knowing. Building on students’ prior knowledge and skills acquired facilitates and enhances students’ learning, engagement, and achievement. When practicing CRP, high expectations must be set for students, support such as scaffolding offered and the curriculum shaped to reflect students’ home cultures and build on their prior knowledge and experiences (Durden, 2008; Sleeter, 2012). There is a considerable amount of research which supports the idea that teaching from a culturally responsive pedagogical frame of reference has a positive impact on the learning and achievement of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Au & Kawakami, 1994; M. Brown, 2007; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1990). Believing this to be true Tessa encourages teachers to teach from a culturally responsive perspective. The sections below explore the professional development and resources provided for staff and describes how CRP is practiced at Mayfield. The impact CRP has had on student engagement and achievement, as well as raising students’ critical consciousness is also explored.

**Professional development and resources for staff.** Tessa encourages teachers to use resources in the classroom that reflect the students they teach. She maintains that when the curriculum is relevant and connected to students’ lived experiences they will become engaged in the learning process. Hence, she ensures teachers receive professional development about CRP as evidenced in the following passage from Valerie:

> We have leadership meetings this year in which CRP was the focus. We went to a few. We weren’t able to go to all of them, but we connected and networked with other schools and we actually got to display some of the work we had done which reflected our students and highlighted social justice issues. The principal encouraged this. (Valerie)

According to Valerie, Tessa supports her attendance at professional development sessions as well as provides opportunities for teachers to share students’ work with other educators. Tessa also ensures that teachers receive the training they need to understand CRP. She releases staff to
attend professional development sessions about CRP run by the board’s equity instructional leaders. Tessa also provides professional development for staff during division meetings as well as gives teachers the opportunity to attend professional development workshops organized by the board. Tessa additionally utilizes the services of Spark School’s literacy coach to provide classroom mentoring and support for teachers in order to enhance their understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy and ensures resources that are culturally responsive are purchased to enable teachers to incorporate their students’ home cultures more readily into the curriculum.

Tessa refuses to accept the Eurocentricity of the curriculum as a reason for not teaching in a culturally responsive manner. Instead she provides resources for educators to make it easier for them to teach from this perspective. Nonetheless teachers still find it challenging to teach from a culturally responsive perspective given the Eurocentricity of the curriculum. Morris and Joshua recalled the difficulty they encountered in accessing culturally relevant resources and explained steps they have taken to counteract this. According to Morris:

The resources are the problem. There is so much you can do with colonialism in North American and the Caribbean as an important period to study, but the problem is the resources. It is hard to find resources tailored to that. You really have to create your own. That’s really time-consuming . . . She (our principal) definitely encourages us and some of it we do on our own. The textbooks that we have are very focused on the British experience or the French experience in North America. The last couple of years we’ve focused on studies of Africa, Asia, and different parts of the world making Canadian connection to those different continents and areas of the world to make it more meaningful for them. (Morris)

Morris evidently goes above and beyond to find resources that connect to his students. The driving force behind his commitment to CRP is his principal’s expectation that students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Likewise Joshua talked about the various sources he uses to obtain classroom resources:
What we do is—this all stems from our staff meeting so there are a couple of resources that are shared by the principal. We try to find books or resources that are geared towards what we are focusing on. We have collections of books that are reflective of our kids’ experience so we also use that as well, so our personal library and things like that. We share resources amongst the grade team members or among staff, so that is how we kind of pull it together. (Joshua)

Both Morris and Joshua articulate the need for more culturally responsive resources. The tendency for most educators would be to administer the curriculum as is, since this is easier and less time-consuming than trying to include materials that are relevant to students in the school community. However, Tessa supports teachers by providing release time for them to plan and funds for them to purchase relevant resources. Valerie, the literacy coordinator, reflected on this:

She (Tessa) provided us release time, planning time, and then again with money to buy resources. I was the literacy coordinator years ago and she said, “You know we need to make sure these books reflect our children and that they are inclusive and deal with social justice issues—things that are happening out there in the real world.” We have done that. We have purchased many books and created classroom libraries which are stored in bins. Teachers sign them out at the beginning of the year and then share them with the students. (Valerie)

Staff members are really appreciative of the support Tessa has given them to enable them to engage in culturally responsive teaching.

The use of CRP was also noted in the 2014 District Process Report, which stated:

“Diversity is honoured with culturally relevant, responsive pedagogical resources as well as diversity in staff complement. Throughout the school there is a conscious and caring approach to ensure that all resources are culturally relevant responsive pedagogically (CRRP) appropriate.”

Practicing culturally responsive pedagogy at Mayfield. Tessa strives to ensure teachers integrate the experiences of the children they teach into their classroom lessons. She articulates her notion of what CRP looks like at Mayfield:

So the way we approach the curriculum here is it is theme based, culturally responsive, and equitable. When we look at the curriculum across the grades we know that the focus in primary is awareness and contributions. In the junior division we look at heroes and sheroes [female heroes] and folks who have made a positive contribution to our society.
And then in grade 6 to 8, it’s more about social justice. In our PLC we decided the theme was going to be the Caribbean. The discussion was, take a good look around you. Sixty percent of our kids are of a Caribbean background. What’s in our curriculum for them? How are they included? How can they see themselves positively in what we are doing? I’m not seeing it when I walk around. So we are going to intentionally focus on the Caribbean, and from there we’re going to hit every group that is represented in the school. We’re going into Asian heritage, then we’re going into South American heritage, then African heritage, and then we will look at Native peoples. We are going to get so much buy-in from our kids because it’s relevant and it’s of interest to them. (Tessa)

Thus, at Mayfield teachers and the administration collaborate and decide which cultural group to focus on for a particular period of time. The curriculum is used to determine what will be studied at each grade level, but information from the focus cultural group is embedded in whatever is taught, the intent being to improve students’ academic learning by making the studies more relevant to their background. Tessa argues that when instruction is made relevant to students they will become engaged because they are interested in what they are learning.

In a culturally responsive school system it is necessary for teachers to bring to the classroom an awareness of the culturally diverse groups of students they teach so they can scaffold new learning in a way that builds on what is familiar to students (Sleeter, 2012). In essence, students’ home cultures are used as a resource to support their learning. Joshua for instance, explained how CRP was implemented within his teaching practice:

Kids learn best when they see themselves in the curriculum and the administration does a really good job in encouraging us to not always limiting ourselves to what is in the curriculum, but to go outside the curriculum and find what is going to connect to the kids. You can create things through the curriculum but make sure that it is rich enough that the kids can connect to it. It does come from on top—that encouragement, that freedom that allows you to do as you choose. With the grade 6, 7, and 8 students I am teaching now there is so much you can do as far of the social justice piece, and she (the principal) has really promoted that as well. (Joshua)

Here Joshua focuses on both his principal’s expectation as well as the freedom he has to incorporate issues into this teaching practice that are relevant to students even if they are not directly tied to the curriculum.
Valerie explained how Tessa’s leadership allowed her and other teachers to teach from a culturally responsive perspective so as to ensure students see themselves represented in the curriculum:

Without her leadership I don’t think we would be where we are today—culturally relevant and responsive and just making sure that all our children are recognized in what we teach them. We follow the curriculum document as a guideline, but we ensure that as a school and with her leadership that we provide the students with the opportunity to be reflected in what they are learning. (Valerie)

Clearly both Joshua and Valerie have great respect for Tessa and endeavor to work collaboratively with her and with other staff to ensure they practice a culturally responsive approach to teaching. Hence, Tessa’s commitment to CRP has become embedded throughout the school, additionally evidenced in the District Process Report which stated, “There is sensitivity to cultural connections—vibrant/robust within the school.” Participants noted that once a school-wide focus is chosen teachers integrate information about this culture into all subject areas. Extensive teamwork and collaboration is required, and teachers build a support network to share resources as well as decide how the cultural theme will be embedded in the curriculum. Educators team-teach and plan together to make the task of finding resources and relevant connections less onerous. As outlined in the sections below, there is a focus on raising critical consciousness, engaging students, and improving student achievement.

*Raising critical consciousness.* Culturally responsive pedagogy is also about raising critical consciousness regarding power relations with the purpose of igniting the desire for social change through political activism (Sleeter, 2012). Focused on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world, critical consciousness allows for the perception of and exposure to social and political contradictions and includes taking action against the oppressive elements in one's life that are illuminated by that understanding (Freire, 1973).
Mayfield’s curriculum overview outlined in Table 7 below clearly demonstrates that students are given the opportunity to explore the world through a critical lens.

Table 7

_Curriculum Overview_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum units</th>
<th>Primary (JK–3)</th>
<th>Junior (4–6)</th>
<th>Intermediate (7–8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Contributions</td>
<td>Social justice empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrations</td>
<td></td>
<td>Social justice awareness</td>
<td>Extending awareness of issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions (heroes and sheroes)</td>
<td>Local and global issues</td>
<td>Change agents/taking action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eco schools</td>
<td>Eco schools</td>
<td>Eco schools</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Students are taught to recognize injustice and encouraged to become change agents in order to create a more just and equitable society. In particular Tessa articulated her understanding of how essential it is for educators to provide students with the skills they need to become critical thinkers:

"Teaching has changed. We don’t have all the information. It’s about teaching the kids how to get the information and to critically analyze and think about what it is they are reading or viewing. That’s our job as 21st century educators. (Tessa)"

She believes that teaching involves fostering students’ critical thinking skills; students must be given the tools they need to find information, critically examine what they read, and then make up their own mind, about the interpretation of the text. In this sense critical pedagogy develops students’ voice, dialogue, and an awareness of social inequities and power structures (Sleeter, 2012), which, as demonstrated in the next section, is also linked to student engagement.
**Student engagement.** Students that feel accepted and see themselves reflected in the curriculum are more likely to succeed academically (Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007). Valerie’s, Morris’, and Joshua’s account, of students’ responses to CRP also substantiate the significant association between student engagement and CRP. For instance, Valerie talked about how she captured the interest of students by allowing them to suggest which sports figure the class should study:

So we took what they know their background, traditions, and celebrations, so we opened it up to them. Who do you want to study? Who do you want to learn about? Are there any athletes you know? All of a sudden the hands went up and one kid that never really does work in my class said Yow Mein, you know he’s an Asian basketball player. He’s retired. Can I go to the library? I know they have books? I said, “Go.” Three, four weeks of Yow Mein and the kids ate it up because now it was real to them. Basketball—he’s an Asian basketball player and we compared it to our traditions, our celebrations. We brought in fiction books as well as nonfiction books. It just opened up doors. We asked the children and they brought it to us. (Valerie)

Including students’ voice by allowing them to select which sports character to study resulted in their becoming more engrossed in learning. For instance, even a student who hitherto seemed uninterested in participating in classroom discussions and activities, became motivated to undertake research about the sports figure he chose to study.

Morris tried to connect what he was teaching in history to students’ home cultures by having them undertake research to find out why their families immigrated to Canada. He also focused on teaching students to look critically at the text to understand whose voice is included or excluded and how history changes depending on whose perspective it is written from.

According to Morris, CRP significantly impacts students’ experience:

I think it makes a big difference. I have seen even with the Asian studies. They were able to see from their own family background why their families came to Canada. What was happening in their country at the time? They had no idea, and it was quite powerful for them. There are a lot of those examples. The Canadian history can be pretty tedious just doing questions and answers from the text book and if you connect that to something whether it is Black Loyalists or different Canadian experience—talking about different voices—it becomes much more powerful. This is something students can relate and
connect to. We talk about point of view. What point of view is being reflected in the history book, and what is consistently missing? I think it is very important that they constantly see how they can rewrite a history textbook from a completely different point of view and how it would be a very different textbook. (Morris)

Morris also facilitates the development of students’ critical thinking skills by challenging them to look at the curriculum from different perspectives. He fosters awareness that history can be interpreted in many different ways depending on who is telling the story.

Joshua recalled how his culturally responsive approach to teaching served to generate enthusiastic responses from students.

It is known that the kids learn best when they can see themselves in the curriculum. I find yes, I do find it actually helps because the kids who are sometimes very tentative to get involved in a discussion will do so if you make it about an issue relevant to them…. Sometimes these experiences are based on discrimination or certain types of diversity issues. I find they are more inclined to join in discussions. Even though they were so young they still have a solid sense of equity and injustice. (Joshua)

For Valerie, Morris, and Joshua then, even students who are normally passive and uninvolved in the learning process become excited and motivated to participate when they are able to make a personal connection to what is taught in the classroom. It stands to reason then that if they are more interested in learning, then their overall performance and achievement will also improve.

**Student achievement.** Tessa does not accept anything but the best from students. She expects them to strive to behave in a way that models the character traits stressed in the school as well as work towards achieving their best academically. Tessa articulated that she is very pleased with the curriculum focus and academic achievement of students. According to Tessa,

When you look at our curriculum delivery, our outcomes, our quantitative data you’ll see that our all our students are achieving and the children are reflected positively in our curriculum. It’s also through just the whole emphasis on level 4, highest level on the Ministry achievement grid. We talk about being a level 4 school—not just in achievement but also in character development, that’s the expectation. The parents talk about level 4—it’s just buy-in. We show them the success criteria for being the very best, and that’s what we work towards. (Tessa)
The District Process Report indicates that Mayfield Public School’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) results are robust in all categories, a phenomenal achievement given the low-income status and cultural diversity of the school community. According to Sebastian, the greatest impact of Tessa’s culturally responsive leadership has been increasing student achievement:

We have seen our scores go up drastically and I just think it’s the leadership, the compassion. She (our principal) understands and listens to the teachers—to the students and knows who her children are at the school and who her teachers are that are teaching the children. And again it’s just the patience and the understanding, the love that she has for the community around here and her leadership. (Sebastian)

Here Sebastian underscores how Tessa consistently encourages students to strive to achieve a high standard of excellence. He attributes the improvement in students’ results to Tessa’s in-depth knowledge of teachers and students as well as her caring attitude towards the staff, students, and school community as a whole.

When asked how equitable EQAO is for students from her school community, Tessa responded:

There are a lot of flaws with the test, but essentially the test is the curriculum. So there are a lot of flaws with the curriculum. At the end of the day whether it is EQAO or the job application or getting into a job or university, these are all Eurocentric, and our kids still have to go through these. So first of all we need to give them the tools to be able to do so. Once they’re in, then they can work on making those changes. But so many other things have to change. The EQAO is just part of the larger structure. You have to be in the game in order to change it. (Tessa)

Tessa argues that our moral responsibility to students is to provide them with the tools they need to navigate the system so they can achieve success. She also holds that while changes to the system need to be made, this can only be accomplished from within the system. The score from this standardized test, however, is only one component of student achievement, which Tessa puts little emphasis on when she talks about success. Instead she focuses on students’ character, cultural capital, resiliency, voice, and engagement. According to Tessa, these attributes and
attitudes will significantly impact what students will accomplish in life and as a result are a far more accurate measure of students’ achievement than scores obtained on a standardized test. Clearly, student achievement has improved significantly since Tessa’s arrival because of various strategies she has implemented to change teaching practice, students’ behaviour, and students’ attitude towards learning.

**Summary of Impact of CRL at Mayfield**

Drawing on data from interviews, artifacts, and institutional documents, it is apparent that under Tessa’s leadership Mayfield Public School has experienced a transformation that has enabled the school to become a more culturally responsive system. Tessa’s CRL has had a tremendous impact on students, staff, parents, and Tessa herself. Students, staff, and parents experienced mostly favorable outcomes; however, the impact on Tessa has been both positive and negative.

**Impact on Students**

First, the physical plant at Mayfield Public School is now well maintained and inviting—a far cry from the run-down building Tessa entered upon her arrival. This transformation would not have been realized without Tessa’s drive to make Mayfield a welcoming place to be. As described earlier, Tessa has also accessed several resources and external programs like “Beyond 3:30” and “Blessings in a Backpack” which have been beneficial for students. The nutrition program, an initiative started under her leadership, has also had a significant impact on students’ readiness to learn.

Further to this, under Tessa’s culturally responsive leadership, there has been a decided improvement in behavior amongst the general student body at Mayfield. Tessa had high expectation for students academically, but students were unable to achieve such results until their misbehaviour and attitude changed. Morris put it this way:
The behavior has improved dramatically so that we can start to do all those pieces. I attribute this change to the principal. This allows the staff to get teaching done as well because kids understand the expectations are high for their behaviour and once you get that under control, then there is much more we can do as far as teaching. (Morris)

The improvement in student behavior meant that more time was spent on task in the classroom, enabling teachers to focus on instruction and students to concentrate on learning. Consequently students’ academic achievement improved substantially.

The suspension rate has decreased drastically with the introduction and consistent enforcement of progressive discipline and, over time, the relationship between the younger students and older students has become much more collaborative and fights have become primarily a thing of the past. This speaks strongly to Tessa’s approach to discipline and her effective leadership capabilities.

Impact on Parents

Tessa has built strong relationships with parents, worked to improve relationships between staff and parents, and as a result, parental engagement has increased significantly. Prior to Tessa’s arrival parents rarely came into the school; however, over the years Tessa has forged a strong relationship with parents based on mutual respect and she has strategically encouraged parents to become involved in the school community. Parents have also been encouraged to share various aspects of their cultural heritage and background within the school setting. Within this environment parents have begun to interact more with staff at Mayfield, which has enabled educators to become more culturally responsive to their needs.

Fostering positive parent–school relationships has ultimately led to improved communication between parents and educators. Through Tessa’s encouragement, teachers connected regularly with parents, creating a collaborative climate, such that teacher participants agreed that parents have become more involved in their children’s schooling. As a result of the
regular interaction between parents and teachers, cultural bridges that often develop between staff and parents in low-income or culturally diverse school communities were broken down and caring relationships forged instead. Valerie remarked that the parents made a presentation to the District Process team in which they referred to Mayfield as a family: “When we drop off our children it is like our children are at home with their second set of parents. It’s a home away from home.” Tessa noted, however, that building relationships with parents took time, effort, and perseverance. Gradually Tessa’s patience and persistence paid off as parents came to regard her as someone they could trust and entrust with the care of their children.

**Impact on Staff**

Tessa has consistently worked with staff to build positive relations based on mutual respect and in doing so has been largely successful in fostering a culturally responsive school culture and promoting culturally responsive pedagogy across the school. When Tessa first arrived at Mayfield she spent time getting to know the staff and build a positive relationship with them. Over time they have grown to respect and admire her as well as follow her leadership.

Monica commented:

> She had done a great job with the staff. We know what she expects of us and she expects the same high expectations and if we don’t follow them she will address it with us. So it’s kind of like she doesn’t micromanage us, but we know what is expected of us. (Monica)

Hence, Tessa has built a relationship with staff such that they follow her leadership. Tessa solicits staff’s opinion, thoughts, and suggestions and collaboratively makes decision in terms of school governance and organizational procedures, and teachers are willing to follow Tessa’s lead because they respect her and realize she has the best interests of the students at heart.

Tessa’s CRL has also challenged teachers at Mayfield to reexamine their views around student achievement and set high expectations for them. For instance, Valerie articulated how
her own view of students and her aspiration for their achievement has changed under Tessa’s leadership:

    Again it’s just having the patience and the understanding and then the drive and just knowing that our children can do it—that all children can achieve level 4. All children can do it, and keep that in mind. When I am in my classroom teaching, that’s what I think now. You know these children, they can all do it no matter where they come from—what their background is or what issues or what might, you know, distract or prevent them from giving their full potential, if we give them our full attention and everything they need, they can succeed. I’ve seen it. (Valerie)

In essence, Valerie acknowledges the perception educators have of students directly impacts their learning and achievement. She has changed the way she views students in the school community because of Tessa’s leadership and now focuses on students’ strengths, resilience, and potential, realizing that with appropriate supports, these marginalized students can achieve much. This being the case, it is not surprising that students rise to the occasion and do well within the school system.

    Tessa’s CRL practice has had the additional impact of challenging the way teachers approach the curriculum, significantly influencing the methodology they use to engage and capture students’ interest. More specifically, Tessa worked extensively with teachers to help them embrace the philosophy of CRP and convinced them that this approach to teaching was an effective way to reach these marginalized students. Throughout the interviews there was evidence that teachers used CRP within their classrooms. Moreover, looking at the School Improvement Plan, teacher lesson plans, and completed units displayed in classrooms, it was evident that educators used a variety of teaching strategies that were consistent with Tessa’s concept of CRP. Such strategies included student-created books about various social justice issues, inviting specialists and experts from various cultures to talk to students, allowing students to bring in artifacts from home to share with each other, and encouraging students to share personal experiences of their own culture and life.
Teachers consistently mentioned that due to Tessa’s influence they now intentionally modify the existing curriculum by incorporating information connected to students’ home culture to facilitate their understanding of the lesson. Several teachers commented that they go out of their way to find resources connected to the students’ cultural background to enhance student achievement and engage them in the learning process. Teachers frequently mentioned that Tessa provided culturally responsive teaching resources to make it easier for them to practice culturally responsive teaching.

**Impact on Tessa**

From the data presented in this chapter it is evident that Tessa enacts a culturally responsive approach to leadership by working with staff to create a safe and welcoming school environment, developing relationships within her community, advocating on behalf of parents, promoting cultural responsiveness within the school environment, and encouraging educators to use a culturally responsive approach to teaching. Tessa is very proud to be the principal of a school that is not only thriving academically but also promotes the well-being of students and the parental community. She commented:

> It is just very gratifying to have a school where this is where people want to come and teach and this is place where children want to learn. We’ve done well, and all our data supports that. But I am more taken with the students’ census data and the parents’ census data that they feel the school is approachable: both staff and students. The parents feel that their kids are learning. I’m sure if staff were to do the survey it would come out in the same way. They see the school very favorably. All of our data supports the fact that this is a successful school. (Tessa)

Although the school is doing well, the monumental task of leading for social justice has had a detrimental impact on Tessa. When asked how her leadership style has impacted her personally, she responded, “Well you can see that with my health. I am physically and emotionally exhausted. The job has certainly taken its toll.” Recently she has had to take a few days off work to recover from a fainting spell she attributed to burnout and fatigue. Due to the extensive needs
of the community and the pressure put on her to be all things to all people, her own well-being has suffered. Other leaders who undertake a social justice approach to leadership have had similar experiences (Theoharis, 2009). Despite this, Tessa continues to work with all stakeholders to create a culturally responsive school in which all feel included and experience a sense of belonging.
CHAPTER SIX: BARRIERS AND SUPPORTS

This chapter explores both principals’ perceptions of the barriers and obstacles they face in practicing culturally responsive leadership as well as the supports that would enhance their leadership practice. Barriers or obstacles hamper administrators’ efforts at promoting CRL; supports, however, facilitate this approach to leadership. In this section the barriers to CRL are discussed first and the supports second.

Principals’ Perceptions of Barriers to the Promotion of CRL

Tessa and Hailey indicated that they encountered several barriers when trying to enact their culturally responsive approach to leadership. From their narratives, the following barriers emerged: demands of the principalship, staff resistance to change and administrative structures and policies.

Demands of the Principalship

Both Tessa and Hailey mentioned that the many tasks they were responsible for exerted significant pressure against the fulfillment of their social justice leadership. Tessa talked about how the endless paperwork obstructed her ability to be an effective instructional leader and monitor classroom practice:

I wish my role could be more focused on curriculum rather than managerial tasks. As you know, whenever cuts are made they still expect the same amount of work to be done so it’s downloaded onto the principals, so our plate is overflowing. They want you to be a curriculum leader, but there are only so many hours in the day. So having some of those managerial tasks removed, those paper tasks—would help me to be a better instructional leader because I’d have more time for it. I could do the monitoring. The monitoring is key . . . we do the staffing and lead the PLC, but where I fall short which is the monitoring—getting into the classrooms more often, talking to teachers and students, being more engaged in the process; making sure teaching is happening from a culturally responsive perspective. (Tessa)

According to Tessa, the endless paperwork and managerial aspect of the job leave little time for her to engage in instructional leadership. In a similar vein, Hailey discussed the myriad tasks that
often distracted her from her social justice focus.

Finding a balance can be really challenging when there is so much to do. It’s difficult to keep my eye on what I am really passionate about, which is advocating for students and their families, when I am faced with tasks such as, dealing with difficult teachers, responding to emails, responding to grievances, handling union issues, and just managing the day-to-day operations of the school. Attending to these matters drastically reduces the time I have to spend achieving equitable outcomes for students and their parents. (Hailey)

According to Hailey responsibilities such as mediating conflict between staff members, dealing with union issues, responding to emails, while important, are so time-consuming they affect her ability to purposefully serve the students and families in the school community. Moreover, these duties have consumed time which would have been better spent on changing structures and improving the school culture to benefit marginalized students and their families. Both Hailey’s and Tessa’s experience are consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Pollock, Wang, and Hauseman (2014) in which principals indicated a desire to spend less time on management-related tasks and more on instructional leadership. The principals in this study overwhelming agreed they spend more time on managing the school plant, incompetent teachers, and answering emails than they do on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and program delivery.

**Staff Resistance to Change**

Both Tessa and Hailey cited staffs’ resistance to change as a significant obstacle to the promotion of CRL. Staff resistance is manifested in various ways, including noncompliance or momentum of the status quo as the school moves towards becoming a more culturally responsive school system. Tessa recollected the resistance she encountered from educators because she required them to use resources that were reflective of the cultural background of their students.

I have had staff members who took a very long time to buy in. For example, I have been very unhappy over the years with my kindergarten program. I feel that everything that you do starts in kindergarten, from the materials that you present to the images that you have on worksheets. They were just not looking at things through an equity lens. The pictures, the images, always Eurocentric, and they felt if they got skin tone colour crayons that was sufficient. I said you know, “Now where are the children with the
hijabs? Look at your class. You have 25 kids and 15 of them are wearing hijabs. In all of
the images that you are projecting, where are they? You have to make a conscious effort
to find resources that are relevant.” One teacher said, “Oh we can’t find any.” I went to
the Learning Resource teacher and told her, “I don’t want to hear any teacher in this
building tell me we don’t have the resources. So I want you to find them appropriate
resources for them to use in the classroom. (Tessa)

Although Tessa ensured the library and classrooms were well furnished with culturally relevant
resources, some teachers were reluctant to make use of these materials. While Tessa found this
subversive behavior frustrating, she did not turn a blind eye to it; instead she confronted teachers
directly and challenged them to use culturally relevant resources. She also asked the Learning
Resource teacher to support them in finding more appropriate resources. When teachers were
asked if the staff was supportive of their principal’s vision Joshua said:

There is some pushback at times, but I would say the staff overall sees what she is trying to
do and we are pretty much on board so we kind of go along with the plans. Again because
with me personally as a teacher once I can see what the direction is and why and how we
plan to get there, if I can understand it as a continuum, then I’m fine. There is not a lot of
pushback because I think it makes sense based on what she presents to us. It’s all guided by
what the students need. (Joshua)

Similarly, Sebastian remarked, “There is some pushback, but it’s mostly good natured. Most
people go along with it and really work to achieve the goal,” while Morris said, “I think we are
fairly supportive and many of us have been here a long time. So yeah, I think the staff is
responsive to her vision.” Thus, although Tessa has encountered some resistance from staff,
over the years she has established a solid relationship with many staff members who respect her
and look to her for guidance and support. That being said, staff resistance can be challenging and
have adverse effects on leaders who have to combat the force of such negativity or
noncompliance.

Like Tessa, Hailey found that not all teachers were receptive to CRP even when provided
with the culturally responsive Spark Schools units. She stated:
Unfortunately we don’t have full compliance or buy-in at this point with the units. Staff didn’t embrace them fully, so there were those teachers that did try them out and those that struggled and didn’t use the units and said they were just fine doing what they have always done. So I’ve asked that every teaching team, every grade team embrace the unit for one professional learning community for the school year so that they work as a grade team on at least one theme using the Spark Schools units. (Hailey)

In response to the trepidation and unwillingness staff has exhibited towards using the culturally responsive Spark Schools units, Hailey has given them time to acclimate themselves by requiring that they use only one unit during the school year. She remarked that her hope is that over time teachers will voluntarily use the Spark Schools units once they realize the positive impact CRP has on student engagement and achievement.

Both principals additionally noted that the Eurocentricity of the curriculum does little to support a more equity-minded teaching perspective. Although Hailey and Tessa provide educators with professional development about CRP and relevant resources, there is still the necessity for teachers to seek out other sources of information to supplement the curriculum if they are to do an effective job of teaching in a culturally responsive manner. However, the additional research to find material to supplement teaching lessons cannot be mandated, as CRP is not a Ministry requirement. In other words, school-wide compliance with CRP must be realized through “buy-in” of staff since the curriculum is primarily Eurocentric, ignoring the values, experiences, and perspectives of culturally diverse or marginalized groups.

Furthermore, the momentum of the status quo has also created considerable resistance for Hailey and Tessa as they strived to change inequitable school norms and structures. Theoharis (2008) best describes this phenomenon referring to it as a formidable force exerted against a change agent that seeks to dismantle inequitable school norms and structures that have been in place for many years. For instance, realizing that students had not previously had the opportunity to attend art classes in Bangladesh, Hailey made it a priority to adjust the structure of the
timetable to accommodate this program. Hailey encountered considerable resistance from some staff as a result of this change: She commented:

> During our staffing committee there were voting processes and input around arts and bringing programs to the students in visual arts, drama, and dance. We had a person coming back from an instructional lead job to the school and it meant that one of our physical education specialists would have to give up half of his role in order to have more visual arts for the children, and there was complete resistance around that. It had to do with this particular teacher, and it meant that he was going to teach less physical education. They wrote petitions. It got really unpleasant. I cannot tolerate the selfishness because I can see what needs to be done and I want to go guns blazing, but I know through experience that if you go that route you don’t get any support. They put up so much resistance, dig their heels in, and then the kids pay. Change happens so painstakingly slow. (Hailey)

Thus, Hailey encountered an onslaught of resistance when she adjusted the timetable to accommodate students because staff wanted things to remain status quo regardless of whether or not this was beneficial for students. Hailey also found that teachers who had been at the school for a long time and were very involved in the union tended to resist change and prefer the status quo. The combination of staff being allowed to do what they wanted over an extensive period of time, coupled with their strong union connection, created considerable momentum against Hailey’s social justice agenda (Theoharis, 2008). Hailey further elaborated on the oppositional forces she has had to withstand because she championed various causes for the community:

> So I basically, I say yes to all kinds of programs. The teachers had a union meeting where they discussed putting forward a grievance. Apparently one of them made claim that they don’t feel that the school is theirs anymore. So Lottie very courageously explained in a meeting that the school isn’t theirs and it belongs to the community and we are agents of the community and we need to be supportive of programming that is relevant to students. You know it’s really not about us. It is a mind-shift. I can’t say what it was like before because I wasn’t here, but from what I am told is that it was sort of a culture of what was good for teachers, and now I’m trying to shift it to being the focus on the community and the kids. (Hailey)

Hailey feels she has encountered strong resistance to various initiatives she has tried to implement due to her determination to change the culture of the school from being teacher
focused to one that is student and community centered. Lottie shared Hailey’s assessment of the situation:

   I am going to be very honest and say that the teachers in the school have been here for quite a while and the community has changed in that time and it has been a challenge to work with the teachers to change their practices, ideologies, and to adapt to the changes in the community and the needs in the community. So what was working before may not be working now, and to look inside their practices and accept that has been a challenge for leadership. (Lottie)

Nonetheless Hailey continues to challenge school norms and structures in order to promote a culturally responsive and equitable school environment. For change to be successful, though, there must be a shared vision among participants and an effective leader who understands it, supports it, explains it, and is able to move the organization to commit to it (Gesme & Wiseman, 2010; MacRae Campbell, 2002). Hailey is a strong administrator who continues to fight for what she believes in despite the opposition she faces. Hence, her most challenging task is to identify a core group of the staff that not only share the same vision but also are willing to influence those around them accordingly.

   Although teachers may eventually come around to Hailey’s way of thinking, the energy and effort it takes to get them to do so can be draining and exhausting. When practices are entrenched, changing them often brings on formidable resistance. This is borne out in Hailey’s comments below:

   So I have had to go forward with questioning practices that have been in place for years and, in doing that, you know people don’t like it because it brings about discomfort because it is change, but I don’t know any other way to bring teaching practices along other than encouraging teacher development and school improvement efforts through involving them in collaboration, involving them in coaching, and supporting them through providing release time. (Hailey)

Hailey has fought many a battle as she has endeavored to move the school to become a more culturally responsive system. It has not been an easy task, and she commented that it sometimes seems as though she is climbing uphill. Nonetheless she continues to press on because she knows
that the students and parents in the school community will benefit from her social justice advocacy.

Despite the opposition she has faced, Hailey feels it has been worth it all and considers the strong resistance she has encountered as evidence that she is on the right path. Lottie noted, however, that she has seen a gradual shift in the school culture:

What I have to say is that it is a journey. There has been resistance. Out of that resistance and the difficulties I think that change is coming, and I feel it is key change. Hailey made changes everywhere and how people are responding to those changes is different. I have definitely seen a change even in the resistors to their mindset and the moving along. There has been movement even within that resistance, so we are still on the journey. (Lottie)

Thus according to Lottie, even those who oppose various changes Hailey made are slowly beginning to come on board. She recognizes though that this is a process that will take time.

Tessa too found the momentum of the status quo to be a strong location of resistance at Mayfield. For many years some teachers had been behaving in a manner that did not meet the standards of the teaching profession including inadequate lessons preparation, habitual late arrival for work, and treating students in an unprofessional manner. When Tessa confronted these teachers, she met with considerable resistance. Sometimes it was necessary to involve the union so these individuals would realize that their behavior was unprofessional and needed to change:

When people work against you it can be taxing. I have had a few staff issues for which I have had to involve the union and do some disciplinary action because I refuse to accept mediocrity. I refuse to have anyone rob the kids of their right to a good education. Sure, I encountered resistance from staff. But I’m the principal and I expect staff to work with me. I tell them, you have made a choice to be in this school. If you choose to stay knowing what’s expected, then this is what I expect to see. (Tessa)

Having student achievement at the forefront of her equity agenda, it was important to Tessa that educators teach and interact with students appropriately to ensure they receive a rich and inclusive program that would provide them with the skills they need to flourish and succeed.
When teachers clearly demonstrated a lack of commitment to the well-being and development of students, Tessa called on the union for discipline. According to Tessa, as long as she provided sufficient evidence to support her concerns, union representatives advised the teacher to change his/her behavior to avoid disciplinary action. Both Hailey and Tessa described the frustration and sometimes inadequacy they felt as they struggled against the momentum of the status quo that had built up over the years. Disrupting entrenched practices, changing structures, and shifting norms have proven to be a tremendously difficult task for these principals. Not surprisingly, social justice leadership often takes a toll on the human spirit.

**Administrative Structure and Policies**

Another area that presented barriers to the social justice leadership of these principals came in the form of unsupportive central office administrators, with both Tessa and Hailey noting that forces external to the school and community played a significant role in creating obstacles as they enacted their culturally responsive leadership practice.

For Hailey the practice of the superintendent transferring teachers from one school to another worked against her social justice agenda. More specifically she indicated that she has encountered obstructive staff attitudes and beliefs from teachers who have been placed at Oregon Bray via the administrative transfer process. She explained:

> We have about 15 teachers that have been administratively placed at the school, which makes it also a challenge because they are not necessarily open in their mindset to change and they come with preconceived notions about certain groups of people. I shouldn’t generalize, but it has been my experience the teachers I am struggling with are the ones, that have been parachuted in. They did not necessarily choose the school, but were placed here. (Hailey)

Hailey found that more often than not teachers who have been administratively placed in the school tend to resist changing their teaching practices, which are usually outdated and do little to support student achievement. In addition, in her experience, they tend to perceive the community
from a deficit rather than a strength-based perspective. According to Hailey, schools that are in low-income areas and have culturally diverse and marginalized groups of students should have the best teaching staff, rather than substandard teachers arbitrarily “parachuted” into the school. She commented, “I think these teachers are sent to schools like ours because our parents are largely disenfranchised and won’t fight to get rid of them. We have a complacent and kind group of parents in this community. They are so appreciative of anything and they elevate the teacher.” This is consistent with the finding of McKenzie and Scheurich (2004), for they noted that in low-income schools teachers often found that parents rarely question them “Thus, these teachers chose this low-income school to avoid the gaze or surveillance of parents, other teachers, and the administration like they had experienced in their White middle-class schools” (p. 619).

Similarly Tessa mentioned that she would appreciate receiving support from the central office administration to deal with incompetent teachers. She talked about how difficult it is to have staff removed from the school even when they are teaching in a substandard manner. Instead of receiving encouragement from central office to deal with incompetent staff by going through the process to declare them unsatisfactory, she has been told to back off and leave the staff member alone. For instance Tessa relayed how she was thwarted in her attempt to deal with teacher incompetence:

People for years they hide out in these schools. When they’re found out the process to deal with them is so cumbersome that it’s a negative and a roadblock…. Once you identify barely marginal to unsatisfactory staff members, the process that you have to go through to have that addressed is unbelievable. Central office is often not supportive and you are left holding the bag. And needless to say they’re all still gainfully employed, and some of them are still in this building. We expect the kids to be level 4, but when as for staff members all they have to do is eke out level 1 and they’re still employable. We can hire but we can’t fire. I have started the process. Then it got turned around on me and the staff member started filing workplace harassment grievances and I was told to back off. I’m just doing my job. It derails you. (Tessa)
Hence, Tessa expressed the frustration she sometimes feels when she tries to go through the process to ensure that teachers who are incompetent either improve their practice or resign. For her it is important that teachers be held to the same high standard to which students are held—they must give their best. Yet, she feels her efforts to hold staff accountable for their teaching practice has been stymied by the central office. It is not uncommon for incompetent staff to remain in schools situated in low-income areas of the city, as teachers at these schools are often not scrutinized as closely by administration and parents as they would be in more affluent areas. Yet the presence of these ineffectual educators adversely impacts the learning experiences of students under their tutelage.

Moreover, Tessa commented that she has encountered resistance at the district level. Her efforts were not always supported:

I have an equity focus and I am vocal, and if I see something wrong, I question it. I do it respectfully, but I do challenge it. Whenever I raise a concern, the support often isn’t there. The first superintendent was supportive. That’s how I accessed the funds to clean this place up. For 4 years after he left there was a drought during which I was marginalized. I was not supported. The next superintendent did not come into my building for 3 years. I’d get all sorts of emails. I have been audited four times. Because if the superintendent was bringing something forward I might say, “Okay but how is that equitable?” I wouldn’t pretend to know less or be less than who I am to boost anyone’s ego. I wasn’t playing that game. There were a couple of us Black women who he gave a hard time—a real hard time. (Tessa)

Tessa found that because she voiced how she felt about certain decisions the superintendent made, he would not support her efforts at the school level. Tessa felt the way she was treated was in some measure due to racial discrimination. This did not deter her from continuing to work for her community, however, or to push for change on their behalf.

**Principals’ Perception of Supports that Facilitate CRL**

Tessa and Hailey also identified supports they felt would advance their work toward culturally responsive leadership. These included developing a supportive administrator network,
a culturally responsive curriculum, staff that facilitates the promotion of CRL, and receiving support from the district school board.

**Supportive Administrator Network**

When asked what supports would assist as she enacts her culturally responsive leadership, Hailey specifically responded that the monthly meetings she attends with other principals from the Spark Schools Program has been a source of support. In these sessions she is able to converse with other administrators to discuss issues, share ideas, and listen to strategies they use to deal with various situations that have arisen in their schools. She is sometimes able to extrapolate information from these conversations to deal with issues which arise at Oregon Bray.

Likewise Tessa noted she has a network of colleagues with whom she shares ideas and from whom she receives encouragement, emotional support, and problem-solving strategies to overcome barriers and resistance encountered in her social justice work. In other words, both these principals have formed strong, trusting relationships with colleagues that they count on to bolster their spirits as they strive to overcome challenges they face.

**Culturally Responsive Curriculum**

Since Tessa encourages teachers to use a culturally responsive approach to teaching, she noted that a culturally responsive curriculum would make it more likely that teachers would use this approach to teaching. In addition, she commented that if this teaching methodology were supported at the district level, then school leaders would find it easier to require that teachers use this approach to teaching. In a similar vein, Hailey commented:

> I think that in our school district there needs to be a greater emphasis placed on great teaching practices such as CRP. I think all schools need to be teaching that way. I just think that the level of questioning of thinking is so much richer. The Spark Schools Program units are a great example of this. (Hailey)

Hailey noted here that it would assist her if CRP were a board-wide focus, as this would make this teaching methodology an expectation. Presumably then the curriculum itself would be
culturally responsive. According to Hailey, a culturally responsive curriculum has far more depth than the existing Eurocentric one, as it contains diverse perspectives and ways of learning. She commented:

> We had a District Process Report in January which was a blessing. It revealed that there was a Eurocentric delivery model and that teachers needed to focus more on teaching in a culturally responsive manner and use the Spark Schools units in a consistent way. We have the recommendations from the District Process Report undertaken by an external body of educators who came in to assess the school. It is essential to raise the consciousness of staff so that they realize they are delivering the curriculum in a Eurocentric way. They think they are being equitable, doing justice to the curriculum covering things the way they do, but they are not. I don’t mean all of them, but there is a core group of teachers that need to awaken to the fact that there are different ways to teach and help students access the curriculum. (Hailey)

Hailey indicated that the District Process Report stated: “Many classroom resources represent a Eurocentric focus” thereby highlighting the paucity of culturally responsive material in the school. This has served to support her thrust to implement CRP school-wide. Since the District Process Report revealed the need for a school-wide focus on culturally responsive teaching, Hailey is hoping this recommendation will help take the pressure off her as she strives to obtain greater compliance for this teaching methodology. Hailey mentioned that some teachers believe that the curriculum is fine the way it is and see no reason to change its content or their instructional methods. She found that these educators continued to resist teaching from a culturally responsive perspective. In the upcoming school year, she intends to use the results of the District Process Report as a reason to focus on CRP during professional development sessions. Hailey mentioned that she will also work closely with the equity department to integrate the Spark Schools units into the School Improvement Plan.

**Staff that Facilitate the Promotion of CRL**

Both Hailey and Tessa spoke about how vital it was to work hand in hand with staff to develop and sustain the vision, commitment, and energy needed to foster a thriving, yet
culturally responsive school environment. Both principals realized they couldn’t accomplish their vision without a supportive staff that is also committed to the creation of a culturally responsive school system. For instance, at Oregon Bray, key educators who have leadership roles within the school influence others to become more culturally responsive:

So they are the four Lead Learning Teachers. They are completely on board, and I would say each of them impact three or more teachers. Perhaps 16 are totally on board which is certainly less than where we should be. There are more teachers on board than when I first came. It is improving, but it is just not fast enough for me. The Lead Learning Teachers also share their knowledge with grade teams, at division meetings, and with parent council. (Hailey)

Hailey appreciated the support of these teachers as it made it easier for her to gain compliance from those the core group was able to influence to use a culturally responsive approach to teaching. That being said, Hailey has found the process painstakingly slow. Nonetheless, without their support, it would be almost an impossible task to accomplish.

Likewise Tessa noted that she has worked collaboratively with staff to promote her social justice agenda. Without their support it would not have been possible to accomplish what she has since she came to Mayfield. According to the teachers interviewed at her school, Tessa is a strong leader who has worked with and through staff to build a shared vision and translated the vision into agreed objectives and plans that promote and sustain school improvement and student achievement. Marie put it this way: “We all work together under Tessa’s leadership, because she is the one who guides us. Ultimately though, it’s the teacher who uses various strategies to motivate the kids.” According to Marie, although staff members follow Tessa’s lead, it is teachers who have the ability to impact students the most. It is through the various strategies they use in the class that students are able to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to flourish and succeed. Tessa is well aware of this, so she ensures she establishes the conditions that enable
educators to be effective, thereby allowing her to fulfill her social justice agenda. In a similar vein, Sandy commented:

We work with Ms. Bowen (Tessa) to come up with a direction for the school. We may look at data or surveys to determine where we want to get to and what we need to do for us to get there. She does a good job of using our various strengths to ensure that we accomplish the goal we set, but she doesn’t micromanage. (Sandy)

Sandy explains how staff members work with Tessa to accomplish the goals they set collaboratively. Hence, teachers embrace Tessa’s vision and so they work cooperatively to ensure that her culturally responsive agenda is fulfilled. Tessa allows teachers to use their leadership skills in the best interest of students, and this has also helped with “buy-in”:

Now the grade teams are responsible for the monthly character educations assemblies. They organize a performance using the arts to demonstrate various character traits. They realized the benefit of this initiative and it sort of snowballed from there. After this got started they became very excited and willingly organized these assemblies each month. What came out of this was really powerful. (Tessa)

Without staff’s willingness to organize this initiative, it would not have been as successful nor had so positive an impact on students, and parents. In effect, although Tessa and Hailey provide direction and exert influence to achieve their social justice agenda, this would not have been realized without various individuals functioning in a variety of leadership capacities.

**District School Board Support**

When the principal works with staff members to create a shared vision, it makes it more likely that the goal set will be realized; however, it is also important to receive support from district school board/central office, as it is here that the power to make significant changes lies. It is very encouraging and helpful to administrators when they receive support from central office. On the contrary, when crises arise and there is no support from central office, a principal is left feeling alienated and alone. Hailey articulated the isolation and loneliness she has felt when required to deal with difficult situations without intervention or backing at the board level.
You feel very much like you are on an island and alone with a lot of decisions to make. You do what’s right and hope you use your moral compass to guide you, that said, you take it home with you. But you have to take these issues on. (Hailey)

Consequently, it is necessary for school boards to establish the conditions and supports to enable principals to do their jobs effectively. According to the principals in this study, however, school boards are often divorced from the school and personnel are not available to assist principals when they run into situations in which they need support at the district level. Often, by the time they receive a response, the crisis has passed and the administrator has been left to deal with the issue without the necessary support. Without this support, it makes it much more difficult for school leaders to lead their schools effectively.

**Summary**

From the data presented in this chapter, it is evident that although Tessa and Hailey have encountered barriers to their social justice agenda, this has not deterred them from forging ahead to implement changes to benefit the marginalized students and families in their school community. The demands of the job, staff resistance, and administrative structures are obstacles that have made it challenging to enact their culturally responsive leadership. Supports these principals indicate would enhance their social justice leadership practice are a network of supportive colleagues, a culturally responsive curriculum, staff that share their vision, and support from the district school board/central office. As advocates for marginalized students, Hailey’s and Tessa’s accounts of their experiences reveal not only the strategies they have used to enact a culturally responsive approach to leadership but also the struggles and challenges that figure prominently in their attempts to make issues surrounding equity central to their social justice agenda. It is essential that systems are in place to provide school leaders who are equity-minded and culturally responsive the support they need to effectively lead schools within culturally diverse and marginalized school communities.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

For many years, researchers and educators have expressed increasing concern over the inequitable outcomes experienced by students who have been marginalized within the educational system (Bazron et al., 2005; Dei, 1997, 2008). This study presents detailed cases of two principals in urban Canadian elementary schools whose culturally responsive leadership practices serve to improve the performance and school experiences of marginalized students within their school community. Both Tessa and Hailey used a variety of strategies to transform their schools to benefit students and families from marginalized communities. They strive to implement processes and pedagogical methodologies according to their understanding of CRL to create a more culturally responsive school system. While there are many similarities in the way they enacted their social justice leadership, there are also notable differences, which I propose may be attributed to disparity in the contexts of their respective school communities. Drawing on the data presented in the cases and the literature relevant to social justice leadership, this chapter presents a cross-case analysis of the significant findings, which are organized around five main themes: (a) instructional leadership/pedagogy; (b) critical learning on the part of teachers; (c) focus on students learning; (d) school community relationships; and (e) advocacy.

Instructional Leadership/Pedagogy

Instruction leadership, which is conceptualized by Mugisha (2013) as purposeful and intentional actions a principal takes to improve the academic achievement of students, is critical to the realization of equitable and inclusive schools. Jenkins (2009) argues that instructional leadership reflects those actions a principal takes to promote growth in student learning such as setting clear goals, allocating resources to instruction, managing the curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, and evaluating teachers. More recently, the definition of instructional leadership has been expanded to include a deeper involvement in teaching and learning through
professional learning communities in which teachers meet regularly to discuss their work and take responsibility for students’ learning (Jenkins, 2009). Moreover, according to Jenkins, the principal as instructional leader makes instructional quality the top priority of the school, but realizing he or she cannot attain this vision alone, works in collaboration with teachers to foster a climate such that instructional leadership flourishes and emerges spontaneously from teachers themselves.

In this vein, Hailey and Tessa both encourage teacher growth and professionalism by striving to develop reflective and collaborative problem-solving contexts that promote dialogue about instruction (Blase & Blase, 1998; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Each leader had her own distinct way of integrating such practices into the school. Hailey’s approach was focused on building a strong leadership team, ensuring they received professional development about CRP so they could influence others to use the culturally responsive Spark Schools units. Moreover, the school received funding from the Spark Schools Program to provide professional development about CRP for four teachers on staff. These educators were called the Lead Learning Teachers and became an integral part of the school’s leadership team. The Lead Learning Teachers were given the opportunity to share what they had learned at professional development sessions about CRP during staff and division meetings. They discussed the beneficial aspects of these units with respect to student engagement and shared their success stories when teaching from this perspective in an effort to persuade others to embrace this teaching methodology. However, not all teachers were receptive to using the Spark Schools units or adapting the curricula to make it more culturally responsive. Some educators chose instead to use the Eurocentric curriculum without any modification to its content. Participants mentioned that while a core group of teachers used a culturally responsive approach to teaching, CRP was not widely embraced throughout the school.
In marked contrast, although the Spark Schools units were accessible to teachers at Mayfield, Tessa focused on providing teachers with other culturally responsive resources and further encouraged them to visit websites and other sources to find culturally responsive resources to supplement their teaching. Through these means educators were able to choose resources that were reflective of the student community. Moreover, while the curriculum was used to determine what would be studied at each grade level, Tessa and the staff collaboratively chose the specific cultural group that would become the focal point within the school for a given period of time. For instance, if the West Indies were chosen as the focal point, then information about this country and its people would be embedded into every subject area and aspect of the curricula. It was Tessa’s expectation that all staff would use CRP as a way of teaching to engage and capture students’ interest and, for the most part, participants at Mayfield embraced CRP and discussed how they went about finding and using culturally responsive resources to scaffold new learning in ways that built on what was familiar to students (Sleeter, 2012).

It is well documented in the literature that culturally diverse and marginalized students find lessons more engaging and meaningful when the curriculum is reshaped to build on distinctive “funds of knowledge” they have gained from their home, community, and school and that knowledge is used to design instructional activities (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Gay, 2010; Sleeter, 2012). Educators at Mayfield realized that children from their community arrived in the school setting with legitimate funds of knowledge that provided them with ways of knowing that were cognitively, linguistically, and behaviorally different from those of their middle class peers. Consequently, teachers at Mayfield capitalized on the funds of knowledge that their students brought from their family and community by providing opportunities from them to share information about cultural background and then used that knowledge to contextualize their instruction and the curriculum.
Overall then, teachers at Mayfield were far more receptive to using a culturally responsive approach to teaching, than those at Oregon Bray. While no specific reason can be firmly established, it is possible that teachers’ receptiveness or resistance to changing their teaching practice may be related to the relationship they had with their principal, the established school norms and structures, the size of the staff, and opportunities for professional development. For instance, Tessa had been at Mayfield for 8 years and, as such, has had time to develop and establish solid relationships with staff, which has enabled her to work collaboratively and effectively with them. As noted by Ryan (2012), developing and establishing relationships with others is an effective way to help school leaders to move their equity agenda along. Furthermore he argues it is unlikely staff will listen to an administrator’s ideas about equity unless that school leader has established some credibility with them. Prior to Tessa’s arrival, teachers were frustrated with the dysfunctional manner in which the school operated, including the lack of order, the disrespectfulness of students, low parent engagement, and underachieving students. Consequently, staff cautiously but readily embraced the changes Tessa introduced, as they did not want things to remain status quo. They wanted the school culture, structures, and norms to change, and Tessa brought calm and order to what had been previously been a tumultuous time in the school’s history. As a result, educators were receptive to learning about CRP and open to working with Tessa to come up with ideas of how to change the school from low performing to high functioning. Over the years, as student behavior and performance improved, staff developed a great respect for Tessa and willingly followed her leadership. Furthermore, Mayfield had only 20 teachers and 14 support staff, so it was possible for Tessa to release all teachers to attend professional development, which meant they received direct exposure to concepts about equity, cultural competence, and cultural responsiveness from trained instructional leaders and speakers.
This approach facilitated a deep experiential understanding of CRP and further entrenched the relevance of this approach amongst the staff as a whole.

On the other hand, Hailey had only been at Oregon Bray for 2 years when this study was conducted and had not had an abundance of time to solidify her relationship with most of the staff. School norms and structures had been firmly entrenched at Oregon Bray, so the changes Hailey attempted to make to benefit students and parents were typically met with a formidable amount of resistance. For instance, Hailey encountered a significant amount of backlash when she moved teachers’ classrooms to make room for the Parenting and Family Literacy Centre. She also encountered opposition when she changed the timetable to accommodate art classes for students and requested educators use the culturally responsive Spark Schools units. The mindset of many teachers was that they were satisfied with the way things were and they didn’t want anything to change. They felt that Hailey was not honouring their way of doing things when she initiated changes in the school. Gesme and Wiseman (2010) argue that, “although full schedules, distracting events, fear of change, and apathy are obstacles to change, the real enemy of change is complacency; having the will to change is critical” (p. 258). Clearly Hailey had encountered a complacent attitude amongst some educators who were not willing to look critically at their practice or adjust the way they had been doing things. This has certainly been a significant barrier to the implementation of her social justice leadership.

Furthermore, Oregon Bray has 60 teachers and 32 support staff, which has made implementing CRP even more challenging given the monumental cost of providing release time for such a large group of educators to attend professional development sessions. Instead, Hailey has focused on working with a leadership team upon which she has relied to persuade others on staff to embrace her social justice agenda. Each of these educators, however, has only been able to influence a couple of teachers on staff which, as Hailey herself lamented, has made moving
her equity agenda forward painstakingly slow. Hence, the onus is on Hailey to creatively come up with ways for teachers to receive the training they need to help them develop a more equity-minded frame of reference. For instance, Hailey noted that she intends to structure the timetable in the upcoming school year so as to ensure each grade team will be freed up for 40 minutes once per month so that they can participate in a PLC during the instructional day to discuss issues around equity, cultural responsiveness, and cultural responsive pedagogy.

Thus, while both Hailey and Tessa sought to change teaching practices by conversing with teachers, supporting teachers’ professional growth, and fostering teacher reflection (Blase & Blase, 1998), the difference between the way the staff responded to their principal’s instructional leadership appears to have been influenced by their relationship with their principal, coupled with the distinct culture of each school with respect to their receptiveness towards professional learning and change.

**Critical Learning on the Part of Teachers**

Principals are held responsible for what transpires in the classroom. According to Leithwood and Riehl (2003), “in these times of heightened concern for student learning, school leaders are being held accountable for how well teachers teach and how much students learn” (p. 1). Likewise, numerous studies have suggested that neither parents nor socioeconomic status of the family were as powerful as good instruction in shaping the academic futures of students (Arlington, 2006). In this vein, both Hailey and Tessa were well aware that in order for the marginalized students in their school communities to strive and succeed, it was essential that teachers be given the tools necessary to work effectively with culturally diverse and marginalized students. This meant providing direction and influencing learning primarily by galvanizing efforts around ambitious goals and providing ongoing staff development focused on building equity by discussing issues such as race, culture, privilege, and class.
However, while Tessa and Hailey had a similar goal, the methods they used to help move staff beyond tolerance and deficit thinking were slightly different. For instance, Tessa ensured all educators were exposed to issues relevant to race, cultural competence, cultural responsiveness, and cultural responsive pedagogy by providing them with articles around these topics. Furthermore, a portion of staff meetings was dedicated to either discussing a chapter in a book, such as *Courageous Conversations about Race* (Singleton & Linton, 2006) or watching videos about understanding cultural differences, for instance, *The Danger of a Single Story*. According to Tessa, the open discussions about race and privilege that followed were often uncomfortable and messy, but very necessary for educators to develop a new level of racial and cultural understanding. According to Ryan (2012), this strategy can be effective for school leaders to use when persuading others to go along with their equity agenda. In his study of several school principals, for instance, he noted that “not only did they supply academic articles; they also employed stories, videos, and people’s experiences to get their teachers . . . to buy into their ideas about equity” (p. 126). Theoharis (2009) concurs with this idea, for he remarked that in an effort to build a more inclusive and equitable school environment, all seven principals involved in the study fostered formal and informal learning and conversations about race. Similarly, R. Lindsey et al. (2003) highlight the necessity of creating forums for educators to discuss ideas such as privilege and entitlement and for culturally proficient leaders to facilitate the process by guiding the members of the school community through the stages of denial and shock, anger and hostility.

Tessa noted that participation in courageous conversations about race, class, and privilege, coupled with the professional development teachers received about CRP, gradually changed the way staff thought about students as well the way they treated them and worked with them to scaffold their learning and differentiate instruction. According to teacher participants,
this new approach to teaching and interacting with students ultimately led to improved student performance. Theoharis (2009) notes that more than anything the climate of the school prevents or promotes access to learning. At Mayfield, educators began to view students from a strength-based, rather than a deficit perspective and build on their ways of knowing, demonstrating respect for the cultures and experiences of students by using these as resources for teaching and learning. Tessa also restructured the school to create division teams that met regularly to discuss the needs of the students and the supports they could offer to meet these needs. Teachers began to set high expectations for students, realizing that as long as these children were given the support they needed, there was nothing to stop them from achieving.

Hailey also indicated that in order to enact her social justice leadership it was necessary to increase the staff’s capacity to carry out a comprehensive school-wide agenda focused on equity and social justice. One strategy Hailey employed was to provide professional development for the Lead Learning Teachers who would then bring back what they had learned in order to effect changes in the school, using an equity lens. She also initiated “equity audits/walks’ through the school using certain identified indicators as a basis for determining equitable practices. For instance, those involved in the equity walk would note what was visible on the bulletin boards, which books and resources were available in the library or classrooms, which cultures were recognized, which ones weren’t. These equity walks served to provide important clues about inclusive and exclusive policies and practices in the school. Hailey would engage in discussion with teachers about what they had noted on their “walks” though the school. Bustamante et al. (2009) notes that equity audits are a valuable tool for assessing inclusive practices in schools.

Another area of critical learning for teachers was acquiring the skills to effectively teach students from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds. As noted in the literature review, Gay
defines culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). Both Tessa and Hailey introduced CRP to their teachers and encouraged them to use this method of teaching to reach their culturally diverse communities. As noted earlier, however, teachers at each school responded very differently to their principal’s request to adopt this approach to teaching; teachers at Mayfield were more receptive to changing their teaching practice. While variable relations between the principals and their staff may account for some of this discrepancy, it is also possible that the difference in educators’ responses may be related to how teachers perceived the existing state of student achievement. For instance, when Tessa first arrived at Mayfield, students were unengaged in the learning process and underachieving. She exposed staff to information about CRP and demonstrated through literature, videos, and professional development sessions that students from diverse cultural communities respond more positively when a culturally responsive approach to teaching is implemented. As teachers bought in to Tessa’s idea of changing the way they taught to improve the core learning content, they began to see an increase in student engagement and achievement. Students, who hitherto had been performing well below grade level, now either attained or exceeded the provincial standard, providing credence to the CRP approach and further encouragement for teachers to continue to explore and implement such practices. Hence at Mayfield, teachers learned to work in teams to plan, develop, and implement culturally responsive curricula. Teachers supported each other in both formal and informal settings, especially in terms of sharing information about students, good teaching practices, and resources.

At Oregon Bray, however, students were already performing reasonably well academically, which may be part of the reason why some teachers were reluctant to change their teaching methodology and adopt CRP. This is not surprising for as noted by Fullan (2001)
change agents often experience difficulties trying to move people away from entrenched conventions to embrace new and unfamiliar practices. However, Gay (2010) notes that culturally diverse students come to school having already mastered many cultural skills and ways of knowing and, to the extent that teaching builds on these capabilities, academic success will result. In other words, deliberately incorporating specific aspects of the cultural systems of different ethnic groups into the instructional processes has positive impacts on student achievement, so although students at Oregon Bray were performing well, using a culturally responsive approach to teaching would potentially enable them to do even better. At Oregon Bray teachers were not allocated planning time within the school day because of the size of the staff; thus, they were also less inclined to share resources about CRP, as this necessitated they meet on their own time.

Ultimately both these principals worked to improve the teaching practices of their staff by providing ongoing staff development which allowed educators to acquire greater skills to improve the curriculum and instruction for all students and, in particular, for traditionally marginalized students, albeit with varying levels of success.

**Focus on Student Learning**

In order to improve student learning and create greater equity in their schools, it was necessary for the principals in this study to improve the core learning context. As described in previous sections, Hailey and Tessa believed it was essential that educators understand the cultural contexts from which their students come, perceive and treat them with respect, and use their knowledge about students’ lives to design instruction that builds on what they already know while stretching them beyond the familiar (M. Brown, 2007). In particular they attempted to improve core learning by building staff capacity, centering staff learning on equity issues, adopting a culturally responsive curriculum, and creating a climate such that teachers regarded
students from a strength base rather than deficit perspective (Arlington, 2006; Theoharis, 2009). Moreover, both Tessa and Hailey utilized strategies that focused on students’ learning; however, there were also some differences given the needs of the students in their respective school communities.

Tessa and Hailey used some similar strategies to promote student learning. At both Mayfield and Oregon Bray, for instance, they communicated high expectation for students, provided professional development around culturally responsive pedagogy, and monitored its implementation. These principals also ensured social justice issues were incorporated into the curricula and used as vehicles to raise the critical consciousness of students and foster critical thinking skills. However, each principal also applied some unique approaches to student learning at their respective schools.

More specifically, Tessa focused on increasing time on task, believing an important aspect of a socially just school was to ensure each child received the maximum amount of instructional time. When she first arrived at Mayfield, Tessa noticed that a significant amount of each period was wasted on managing student misbehaviour in the classroom, which negatively impacted dedicated learning time. Once students’ behavior improved, they were rarely sent to the office or disrupted learning in the classroom, which meant more time was spent on instruction and learning. In addition Tessa ensured that transitions during the school day were reduced, thereby increasing the learning time for these marginalized students. Although the literature on social justice leadership does not focus specifically on increasing the amount of learning time, literature on literacy (Cunningham & Allington, 1994) demonstrates the need for sufficient time during the school day for students to learn and apply skills taught. Furthermore, in his study of several school principals, Theoharis (2009) noted that a strategy they used to change school structures to advance access and opportunity for all was increasing students’ learning time.
Tessa also ensured teachers had high expectations for students as well as increased the academic rigor of their programming. Prior to Tessa’s arrival, teachers had very low expectations for students as they did not perceive them as being capable of achieving much in life. Under Tessa’s leadership, the attitude towards student learning and achievement changed and teachers began not only to expect students to reach the highest level of academic achievement but also provided students with the supports they needed to accomplish this. Students, in turn, lived up to teachers’ expectations.

Hailey on the other hand, especially sought to utilize the skills of the highly educated parent community at Oregon Bray to have them contribute to their children’s educational programming in meaningful ways. In addition, through the Home Oral Language Activities (HOLA) program, an initiative Hailey implemented, parents were given resources to enable them to read with their children in their first language as well as use translated versions of the text to help improve the literacy skills of their children. Parents were also encouraged to volunteer in the classroom so that they would be able to reinforce what their children learned at school within the home environment. Hailey has indicated that she also intends to restructure the school schedule in the upcoming school year so all students have access to art classes. Many students in the school community have had exposure to arts programs neither outside of school nor in their home countries. Consequently, Hailey examined the broader school schedule and used the lens of equity to modify how the schedule would be constructed in the coming school year so that art would be incorporated into the students’ schedule. In his study of several school principals, Theoharis (2009) noted that one school leader found that restructuring the schedule in this manner was an effective way to create more access to arts for all students and thus a more equitable and balanced school program.
Both Tessa and Hailey focused on changing unjust structures by requiring teachers to collect and analyze data to understand the academic performance of each student. Teachers were held accountable for student achievement and were not allowed to blame the child or the lack of family support for poor academic results. Rather, the administrators in this study required teachers to gather data such as work samples and formal assessments to drive planning and look at how they were teaching each child to ensure they were differentiating instruction to meet their individual needs. At Mayfield teachers regularly met in grade level teams to discuss student progress and devise interventions to improve their learning. Tessa firmly believed that all students had the ability to achieve excellent results provided they were given sufficient supports to do so. Similarly, teachers at Oregon Bray engaged in moderated marking to understand the needs of each student as well as their strengths. They compiled data gathered during these sessions and used these to drive instruction and devise interventions for students. In essence, both Hailey and Tessa increased the level of monitoring relevant to student achievement, which made teachers more accountable for how they were delivering instruction in the classroom and planning around the specific needs of their students. According to Theoharis (2009), such accountability helps principals increase the level of monitoring of student achievement and demonstrates these principals’ commitment to understanding the realities of their school and use data to help build that understanding for teachers as well as themselves. This is consistent with the literature relevant to social justice leadership in which Scheurich and Skrla (2003), for instance, argue that data are “highly useful for developing excellent and equitable schools” (p. 64). They further note:

We need a way to mark the student learning that we either are or are not accomplishing. In addition, when we have the kind of inequities by specific student groups, like racial groups, that we currently have, we need a way to mark those differences and the erasure of those differences. (pp. 64–65).
Consequently, Tessa and Hailey shared a commitment to collect and use data to help improve learning, drive instruction, and create a more equitable learning environment for all students.

Further to this, research shows that deliberately incorporating specific aspects of the cultural systems of different ethnic groups into the instructional processes has positive impacts on student achievement (Au, 2007; Bazron et al., 2005; Gay, 2000; Hill, 2009; Howard, 2001; Howard & Terry, 2011; Johnson, 2006). To this end, Hailey and Tessa believed that while CRL must be concerned about advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity, these factors alone would not change outcomes for marginalized students unless the curriculum is culturally relevant and teachers have the desire and the skills to reach each student. According to Theoharis (2009), placing teachers in the classroom who are uninterested or unskilled at teaching culturally diverse and marginalized communities is a form of injustice perpetrated against these students. Moreover, Saifer and Barton (2007) suggest one of the most powerful—but least used—ways to strengthen family and community partnerships for successful student learning is to change instructional and curricular practices so that they are more culturally responsive. Hence, Tessa and Hailey believed that using a culturally responsive approach to teaching would send a strong signal to parents that the school valued who they were and, as a result, they would be more inclined to support their children’s engagement with school—helping with homework, promoting good attendance, and imparting high aspirations for their success upon their children.

Using CRP meant that students’ lives, interests, families, communities, and cultures were the basis for what was taught; students would become involved in planning what they learned and how they learned it (Saifer & Barton, 2007). CRP also fosters critical thinking, in that, students are taught to examine what they read and determine whose perspective the narrative is from, whose voice is included, and whose is missing.
At Mayfield, students were taught to recognize injustice and encouraged to become change agents in order to create a more just and equitable society. This was evident from the curriculum units focused around social justice issues at different grade levels (See Table 7). Similarly, at Oregon Bray, students were encouraged to question inequitable practices and advocate for change. This was particularly evident in their action around confronting “the powers that be” to lobby for a more functional and safe playground structure, recognizing their play structure was far inferior to those in more affluent schools nearby that had significantly smaller student populations.

Taken as whole, participants noted that student achievement at both schools improved as a result of the high expectations set for students at each school, increase in academic rigor and instructional time at Mayfield, and extensive parental involvement at Oregon Bray. Student learning was also affected at both schools by the way data were analyzed and subsequently used to identify students’ needs and devise intervention strategies to improve student achievement. Teachers learned more effective strategies to build on the knowledge students already possessed, using their funds of knowledge as a vehicle to inform curricula. Most important, students learned to critically examine what they read in order to reach their own conclusion as to the meaning of the text.

**School Community Relationships**

Instructional strategies, while important, are of little benefit if educators do not build strong, positive relationships with students and their families. Both school leaders initially faced challenges in ensuring the effective involvement of parents in the school community. According to Auerbach (2012), the most fundamental element in forming strong relationships is a foundation of respect. Tessa and Hailey realized this and sought, in their own distinct fashion, to
embrace their school community by building authentic partnerships and encouraging educators to welcome families and honour their cultural experiences and ways of knowing.

In particular, Tessa worked with staff to create a more welcoming culture within the school by conversing with parents in the schoolyard and hallways in addition to inviting parents to participate in school activities and workshops, attend parent council meetings, and take an active role in school governance. Furthermore she affirmed families’ cultures and allowed student and parent life experiences and culture to inform school activities and the curricula. Hailey, on the other hand, forged strong relationships with parents by interacting with them in the Parenting and Family Literacy centre, inviting them to volunteer in the classrooms, employing parents in the nutrition program, and creating a forum for them to obtain help with their resume and job search.

Moreover, low-income parents and parents of color are very sensitive to signs of disrespect and rebuff (Auerbach, 2012). Thus it was important to both these administrators that parents realize that they valued their contribution to the school. Hailey demonstrated her support for students and their families by listening to their voice and, when necessary, allowing their needs to supersede those of staff. For instance, she opened the Parenting and Family Literacy Centre and implemented the new art program even though not all educators were on board with these initiatives. Hailey believed that the school belonged to the community and that it was up to the educators in the school to do what was in the best interest of the community. In the process of relationship building, both Tessa and Hailey enhanced social capital for the marginalized families in their respective school communities by increasing student and parental access to information and opportunity, something that both Auerbach (2012) and Gorski (2013) note is of great significance.
Tessa and Hailey also worked with the educators in the school community to change the deficit manner in which they viewed the school community, encouraging them to look at the resiliency and strengths of students and their families rather than their struggle and areas of weaknesses. Tessa especially focused on working with staff to engender high expectations for students because when she first arrived at Mayfield educators did not expect students to amount to anything. As noted by Gorski (2013), when a deficit view of a student is adopted, school performance and engagement decrease. In this vein, several participants indicated that after the professional development received under Tessa’s leadership, they began to regard students from a strength-based perspective and scaffold students’ learning by building on their funds of knowledge.

On a similar note, Hailey strived to change the deficit mindset of the educators in her school by reaching out to the school community and encouraging them to become involved in the classrooms and other activities in the school so that educators would begin to develop a better understanding of the community. She reached out to parents, validating their knowledge and encouraging them to work in partnership with teachers for the benefit of their children. She also worked with teachers to reflect on their beliefs and assumptions about the students and parents in the school community and encouraged them to treat parents respectfully and utilize the many skills they had to enhance the classroom programming. Further to this, Hailey sought to ensure the principles of equity and inclusion were prevalent in the school by educating parents about the curriculum and having them take an active role in its creation. She also introduced the HOLA program in an attempt to provide parents with books in their first language so that they could read to their children at home. Aligning with the work of Westernoff (2014), Hailey used this program as a way to encourage parents of young children to use the home language in authentic communication to help develop language concepts related to numbers and numeracy as a way to
support their children’s school success. With this type of capacity building, parents’ level of trust and confidence in the school increased and they became more comfortable about being involved with both educators and Hailey herself. Several participants commented on how much more visible and active parents were in the school since Hailey’s arrival.

As Theoharis (2009) notes, establishing and sustaining meaningful relationships is a key strategy social justice leaders use to further their agenda and counteract the pressures they face daily. Moreover, the climate of the school, perhaps more than anything, prevents or promotes access to learning; thus, the existence of a welcoming school climate is central to the creation of equitable and just schools (Theoharis, 2009). In this vein, both Tessa and Hailey found that various stakeholders with whom they had developed a positive relationship were more likely to be receptive to new initiatives, ideas, and requests.

**Advocacy**

Educators cannot be held responsible for the indicators of economic injustice such as food insecurity, low-income status of families, unequal access to health-care, and the scars of racial and cultural bias. The change required to address such societal disparities will only come from the “powers that be” through a series of interventions on a long-term basis (Gorski, 2013). However, school leaders cannot wait for big-level societal change to address the inequities that marginalized students are experiencing right now. Families and communities are diverse, and while there is no magic formula that will alleviate or neutralize the consequences of disadvantage, equity-minded school leaders must draw on the expertise of people within culturally diverse, marginalized, and low-income communities and partner with them in order to identify and implement community-specific strategies for educational equality (Gorski, 2013; R. Lindsey et al. 2010).
As noted in each case, despite the many challenges which served to constrain and limit community access to equitable resources, both Tessa and Hailey purposefully advocated on behalf of students and their parents, not only to obtain resources for them but also to impart the skills they needed to navigate the educational system on their own to further secure their advantage. The advocacy efforts of these principals were centred on different things, however, because the salient needs in each community varied somewhat. At Oregon Bray parents were primarily newcomers to Canada and so their immediate need was to obtain adequate health-care and employment. As a result, Hailey focused on helping parents access medical care at a clinic affiliated with the school, and she provided employment for parents through the school’s nutrition program and had staff work with parents to revise and update their resumes to support them through the job search process. Furthermore, as newcomers, these families also had settlement issues; consequently Hailey was instrumental in linking them with various agencies and people in the community that could support them as they adjusted to their new environment. For instance, she connected families with representatives from the Settlement and Education Partnerships in Toronto (SEPT) program that was based at the school. Tessa on the other hand provided workshops for parents in areas where they expressed a need, such as yoga classes for Somali moms. Through her advocacy efforts she also obtained access to resources for students parents could not afford, including, extracurricular sports, homework help, remedial support and field trips.

Due to the widespread poverty in both school communities, Hailey and Tessa initiated nutrition programs in their respective schools. In addition, both worked with the families to teach them how to negotiate the educational system to obtain resources to benefit their children. For instance, Hailey worked with the students and parents to lobby for a new and more safe and functional play structure for the school yard, while Tessa provided parents with the information
they needed to lobby for a vice principal allocation and for the school to be extended from grade 6 to grade 8.

In these ways, both Hailey and Tessa passionately advocated to obtain resources and support from various community partners to benefit their communities. However, the types of resources they sought out were somewhat different based on the specific needs of their respective school communities. Notwithstanding, it can safely be said that Hailey and Tessa both possessed an inner drive to do what was most beneficial for the students and families in their communities.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have illustrated how these principals employed culturally responsive leadership to shape the school experiences of marginalized students through instructional leadership, support of teachers’ critical learning, focus on student learning, building community relations, and advocacy for their community. They have both encountered opposition and resistance to their social justice agenda; nonetheless they continue to work with various stakeholders in the school community to create an inclusive and equitable school environment that supports students’ learning and achievement. These principals have encouraged teachers and parents to respect each other’s differences, recognize each other’s strengths, and work in partnership with each other for the benefit of children.

Moreover, Tessa and Hailey both realize that schools are directly involved in the larger political context, and so they must of necessity be well versed in how to understand and traverse this terrain. Tessa and Hailey have played a large role in developing coalitions and relationships with agencies and organizations so as to benefit and advocate for the marginalized communities they serve. Through this means they have been able to access resources from various community organizations within their respective school neighbourhoods to benefit students and buffer them from the negative impact of situations they may encounter in their daily lives (Riehl, 2000).
Through their CRL they have positioned their schools to take advantage of positive resources offered by institutions, thereby providing services that meet students’ needs while forging strong links between these organizations and the school (Riehl, 2000).

Hailey and Tessa have employed culturally responsive leadership to shape the school experiences of the students within their school communities. They have interacted with various stakeholders to create a welcoming and caring school environment, developed relationships, advocated for their community, promoted cultural responsiveness, as well as ensured teachers received professional development to enable them to teach from a culturally responsive perspective. While they have encountered barriers such as the demands of the principalship, staff resistance, and obstructive administrative structures and policies, this has not deterred them from implementing policies, changing structures, and initiating programs to benefit their culturally diverse and racialized school communities. Both Hailey and Tessa have sought to understand the social realities of the students and families in their school community and access links to community resources and partnerships in order to create a more equitable school environment and level the playing field for these marginalized students. Ultimately, when schools provide what students need and teach families how to better access all that schools offer, students have more positive school experiences and their achievement increases (Nuri-Robins et al., 2005). These school leaders have worked with staff and parents to create a school culture focused on learning and achievement characterized by high expectation for students. The social justice endeavours of these courageous leaders have led to the creation of a more culturally responsive school system, from which students have benefited greatly.
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

Without question, education is the key to progress and prosperity . . . Whether fair or not, educational opportunity and academic achievement are directly tied to social divisions associated with race, ethnicity, gender, first language and social class. The level and quality of educational attainment either opens doors to opportunity or closes them. (E. Gordon, 2006, p. 25)

In this final chapter I commence with an overview of how principals employ culturally responsive leadership to shape the school experiences of students who have been marginalized within the educational system. I discuss implications for practice relevant to various levels of the educational system, contributions of the study, and implications for future research.

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore how two elementary school principals employ culturally responsive leadership to shape the school experiences of marginalized students. In doing so, this study not only provides insights into the strategies they use to enact CRL as well as the impact CRL had various stakeholders, but it also taps into the resistance and obstacles they encounter in pursuit of this goal and the supports they need to help move their social justice agenda forward. To this end, the study was guided by the following research question and subquestions:

- How do principals employ CRL to shape the school experiences of students who have been marginalized within the educational system?
  - What strategies do principals use to practice culturally responsive leadership?
  - What barriers and challenges do principals encounter in pursuing their goal?
  - What supports do principals need to enact such leadership?
  - What impact does CRL have on students, staff, parents, the school environment, and the principals themselves
To investigate these queries, the study explored principals’ understanding of their culturally responsive leadership practices as well as teachers’ perception of how their principals employed CRL to enhance the school experiences of marginalized students. These educators were also in an ideal position to articulate the impact CRL had on their pedagogical practice, cultural responsiveness, and the school environment. The resulting case studies highlight the narratives of principals and teachers as they work in partnership with a variety of stakeholders to create a more equitable school system for marginalized students. Students have no control over factors such as their socioeconomic status, cultural background, race, or language. However, such factors continue to affect students’ ability to reach their full potential within the educational system given the inequitable opportunities and systemic barriers inherent therein. Consequently strong, courageous leaders who are committed to doing what they can to level the playing field for these students are needed to prevent their continual marginalization. More specifically, however, these cases provide new insights into effective strategies culturally responsive leaders use to shape school experiences for these students.

**Implications for Practice**

It is my hope that examining the culturally responsive leadership practices principals employ to shape the school experiences of students will create a heightened awareness that school leaders passionately committed to fostering a culturally responsive school environment can serve school communities in socially just ways. Such school leaders demonstrate their conviction to foster meaningful change through the actions they undertake to create equitable experiences for marginalized students. This study serves to shed some light on the notion that some principals who work within marginalized communities do what they can to create a more equitable system within the context of their schools. However, to be effective, these school leaders must possess the attitude, skills, and knowledge needed to work effectively in
marginalized school communities. While the number of participants in this study is relatively small, the findings emerging enable me to discuss implications for practice at various levels of the system, namely the Ministry of Education, district school boards, and universities.

**Ministry of Education**

This section focuses on what the Ministry of Education can do to make it more likely that principals will employ CRL practices in culturally diverse and marginalized communities. The areas that need to be addressed are as follows: (a) staffing model; (b) EQAO assessments; and (c) curriculum.

**Staffing Model**

The findings of this study suggest it is necessary to provide support for school leaders who strive to level the playing field for marginalized students by ensuring they are able to hire staff members that are culturally responsive and committed to working within these school communities. At the present time, hiring is undertaken in accordance with Ontario Regulation 274—a regulation which mandates that new teachers be hired for permanent jobs based on seniority. This has forced principals to interview and hire educators who may not be suitable for their school community or understand the learning needs of their students. Also embedded in the hiring process should be the opportunity for principals to hire staff who are reflective of the students in their school. It is important for culturally diverse and marginalized students to have some role models to whom they can relate and identify with on an ethnic and cultural basis. Unfortunately the current staffing model gives principals little say about who they can hire to work in their schools.

**Education Quality and Accountability Office**

Another finding of the study suggests that undue pressure is placed on principals to improve their Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) assessments since these test
scores are used as a measurement of student achievement. The same EQAO assessments are administered in all schools whether they have many students with learning needs, a large component of English language learners, those who are culturally diverse, special needs students or students who are primarily middle class and normally do well on such assessments. This “one size fits all” model is neither a true measure of student achievement nor an equitable way to assess the learning of all students. Mansfield (2014) argues that these assessments do not value the cultural capital students within marginalized communities possess, as these are not recognized by the dominant society as a valid form of currency. Furthermore when schools EQAO test scores are low, this serves to stigmatize the school community as it is perceived as underperforming and underachieving. This has placed an inordinate amount of pressure on principals in many marginalized communities to put strategies in place to increase students’ test scores. When Tessa first arrived at Mayfield, students’ EQAO scores were well below the provincial standards. After the implementation of many culturally responsive processes and ongoing support from administration and staff, students from Mayfield began to meet provincial standards on EQAO assessments. However, Tessa found sustaining the scores at the provincial level very taxing. She commented:

It’s harder to maintain and go beyond than it is to get there. Keeping teachers motivated to continue to go deeper and to tease out what it meant to be a level 4 in terms of the critical thinking and the independent learning was very difficult. It was very stressful for me because teachers couldn’t understand why what they were doing wasn’t good enough. I kept asking for more. We had met the provincial standard. Seventy-five percent of our students were at level 3 and they wanted to know why they needed to keep working hard. It was challenging to keep staff morale up, teacher efficacy up, and the bar high. It was very stressful indeed. (Tessa)

Tessa felt pressured by the expectations of the Ministry and school board to push her staff to work with students on an intensive basis so as to improve their EQAO scores. In the final
analysis though, when asked whether EQAO was a fair assessment for students in her school community, she responded:

Of course it is. It is a standard that those kids can meet. It just requires some different strategies. Those kids aren’t coming with as much social capital, but there is nothing wrong with the way their brains work. Certainly their parents have the same expectations of their children as parents from more affluent communities. They want their kids to do better than what they have done, and they know that education is their ticket out of poverty. (Tessa)

Here Tessa reinforces the idea that in order to be successful in this society it is essential to do well on standardized assessments such as EQAO because this is often the benchmark by which “success” is measured. Students at Mayfield were an exception because very often students from marginalized communities do not do well on these assessments. More often than not, EQAO assessment results are not indicative of what students in culturally diverse and marginalized communities could accomplish academically were they able to connect more readily with the language, ideas, and stories contained in these assessments. Test construction assumes a Eurocentric context, and a one-size fits all approach to assessment. Consequently at times, particular practices may fail to represent or account for the beliefs and core understandings or values of students who differ from the dominant culture (Sullivan & A’Vant, 2009). Schooling should be built around the multifaceted nature of students and their culture taking into account all incoming cultures and modifying formal and informal learning to suit the cultural composition in schools and classrooms (Vassallo, 2009). This would enable students to learn in the way that bests suits them and educational leaders to reshape policies, assessments and pedagogical practices to meet the needs of all students.

Curriculum

The findings of this study clearly indicate that the curriculum needs to be more culturally responsive and reflective of the perspectives of students from ethnically and culturally diverse
student communities. Perhaps it is time the Ministry redefine what factors they measure when they refer to “success” and “student achievement.” According to Vassallo (2009):

Culturally responsive pedagogy advocated for the use of academic skills both outside and inside the classroom and extends success to include vaster conceptual understanding of what is termed to be “successful” i.e. social, emotional, economic, political, humanitarian, and others without disregarding the importance of reading, writing and arithmetic as essential prerequisites for academic and social functions. (p. 113)

A culturally responsive pedagogy advocates for a process that involves the dominant and minority cultures constructing a new reality rather than one culture being subservient to, or absorbed into another (Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 2012).

Both principals and teachers lamented the scarcity of readily available culturally responsive resources. If the curriculum is more inclusive and designed to incorporate the experiences and voices of marginalized communities, it would be easier for administrators to require that educators teach from a culturally responsive perspective. Teachers have little time to research and develop curriculum that students can relate to when they are pressured towards standardization rather than responsiveness to their diverse students (Sleeter, 2012). As things stand, many teachers would not choose to teach from a culturally relevant perspective because this pedagogical approach involves more research and planning due to the Eurocentricity of the curriculum. Both the principals and teachers in this study indicate that students are more engaged in the learning process when what they are taught in school is connected to their lived experiences and cultural background.

**District School Boards**

This section highlights issues district school boards need to address in order to support principals as they seek to employ CRL practices. The main areas of concern are as follows:
(a) staffing; (b) professional development; (c) equity training; and (d) resources

**Staffing**

The findings of this study indicate that school leaders are sometimes hampered in their efforts to create a culturally responsive school system by the resistance they encounter from incompetent or uncaring staff who do not particularly want to be in the school community. Both Hailey and Tessa found these individuals were either “permanent fixtures” on staff or had been administratively placed in the school. Given the strength of the union, their tendency to protect teachers regardless of their caliber and district school board’s unwillingness to challenge the union, it is difficult indeed to remove incompetent educators from the educational system. In addition, incompetent and uncaring teachers tend to hide out in culturally diverse and marginalized communities because it is not likely their teaching practice will be subjected to as close scrutiny as it would in a more affluent community. Unfortunately it is the students who suffer when substandard teachers are parachuted in or remain in the school year after year. Principals should be given the opportunity to select teachers who care about the students in the community, are culturally responsive, committed to implementing culturally responsive pedagogy, and willing to work in marginalized communities. School districts must ensure that principals and teachers who work in culturally diverse and marginalized communities are there willingly and committed to doing what they can to benefit the communities they serve. Schools in marginalized communities must have excellent teachers whose primary focus is equity and social justice.

**Professional Development**

The findings of this study indicate that sufficient funding needs to be allocated to schools to enable principals to provide professional development for all staff. It is difficult for schools with a large staff to provide adequate professional development for everyone, as it is costly to
release teachers to attend workshops and training sessions. Yet if teachers are expected to implement a culturally responsive pedagogy, it is necessary for them to be provided with the training they need to do so. Hailey, for instance, found that since her staff was so large it was not possible to release them all to receive the desired training. Consequently teachers had to attend workshops and then return to the school to share their insights about the workshop with their colleagues. The downside of this approach to professional development is that teachers who receive the information second hand usually don’t obtain as in-depth an understanding of the information relayed in the workshop.

**Equity Training**

The findings of this study indicate that equity training is needed for district leaders, principals, and teachers.

**District leaders.** It is necessary for district leaders to receive training in equity, cultural responsiveness, diversity, and critical pedagogy to enable them to understand the need for social justice leadership within marginalized school communities. This will also help senior managers and district leaders to be more willing to create structures to support those who lead for social justice. Most important Gooden and Dantley (2012) argue that school leaders must identify culturally diverse communities that experience disadvantage as well as ground their work in a more critical and progressive conceptual framework that seriously questions these disparities and creates strategies to do something about them.

**Principals.** It is also essential that district school boards develop leadership training programs as well as ongoing professional development for school leaders to ensure they are adequately prepared to work successfully within culturally diverse and marginalized school communities. It is unreasonable to expect school leaders to promote culturally responsive practices and challenge norms that reinforce inequitable practices in schools when they are not
provided with the practical skills or systematic knowledge of leadership strategies to enable them to function successfully within these school communities. Moreover, it is also essential for practitioners in the field to be provided with ongoing learning so that they are able to engage in courageous conversations with staff, students, and parents in order to foster a culturally responsive environment (R. Lindsey et al., 2003; Singleton, 2013). Horsford et al. (2011) also note a disconnect remains between the type of leader that is needed in schools and those that are recruited and trained to become educational leaders. Furthermore, Davila (2009) argues those who prepare school leaders should place emphasis on the necessity to lead for equity, acquire cultural responsiveness, and support a culturally relevant pedagogical approach in order to meet the needs of children from an increasingly diverse student population.

**Teachers.** District school boards also need to ensure ongoing training for teachers about equity, cultural responsiveness, privilege, and racism is the focus of professional development, especially for those who work within marginalized communities. Training courses are also needed to combat deficit thinking or blame the victim mentality. How educators view culturally and ethnically diverse student populations can be problematic in that those who do not perceive students from an inclusive lens are sometimes insensitive to the issues and concerns of marginalized students. When schools are unresponsive to the needs of marginalized students, they suffer as a result. Moreover unless educators are given appropriate training to enable them to interpret the social, racial, and political problems that often plague marginalized communities, they tend to blame these students and their families for not effectively adjusting to the norms and expectations of the educational system. Larson and Ovando (2001) postulate that quite unconsciously many teachers and administrators discriminate and act on assumptions about marginalized students in ways that put them at a distinct disadvantage. Teachers need to be made aware through equity and sensitivity training that White middle class cultures are
overrepresented in schools both because it is the dominant culture represented in social media (Vassallo, 2015) and because the majority of educators are White. As a dominant group, White teachers often do not perceive themselves as holding perspectives; instead they hold “universal truths” and the message they deliver to students of other cultures is that of dominance and authoritativeness (Vassallo, 2015).

Training for district leaders, principals, and teachers must be ongoing and evolving, allowing courageous conversation to emerge in the process in order to move them from a position that supports the status quo to one that advocates for social justice and change.

**Central Office Support**

The findings of this study indicate that district school boards need to be cognizant that when principals serve in challenging schools their work is made more demanding and taxing if they do not receive support from central office when difficult issues arise. Hailey commented on how alone she felt when various crises arose because senior personnel were strangely silent when they were needed most. Principals have many issues and problems to juggle on a daily basis; hence, when a crisis arises they need immediate, not delayed or ineffective support.

Both Tessa and Hailey indicated that their health suffered significantly under the strain of enacting CRL. It behooves the district school boards to provide more support for school leaders who are committed to social justice, for if this work comes at such a high cost, it is not likely that school leaders will choose to take it on. Unfortunately as Marshall and Ward (2004) noted, educational leaders and the general public are more comfortable with a view of school administrators as managers and bureaucrats instead of leaders who address issues of equity and marginalization. In the same vein, Vibert and Portelli (2000) concurred that innovative and critical leadership is not valued, sought after, or wanted by many local communities and district
officials, even though this form of leadership is very much needed within marginalized communities.

There needs to be some recognition of the effort and commitment these school leaders expend and supports put in place to alleviate the stress and barriers they face daily. Both principals indicated that networking with colleagues of like mind was beneficial for them. Opportunities to form and sustain networks of support must be provided for principals working in challenging school communities. This will enable school leaders to strengthen supportive relationships they make as well as meet, converse, and consult with their colleagues about situations they encounter within the context of their respective school communities. District leaders also need to support principals who challenge inequities they encounter in their daily work by listening to the concerns these leaders articulate and doing what they can to intervene on their behalf.

Universities

The theoretical knowledge provided in principals’ qualification programs should be linked to practicum programs that enable new administrators to gain experience working with culturally diverse student populations during their internship (Herrity & Glasman, 2010; Young, 2010). Moreover, Gooden and Dantley (2012) note that too often leadership training programs have not done an adequate job of preparing school leaders to engage the multiple layers of social and cultural realities within which students and communities live. Traditional administrative preparation programs have focused on management skills rather than on preparing school leaders to mediate the new diversity that characterizes many urban schools today (Contreras, 1992). Research indicates that it is essential for university-based programs to provide school leaders with the skills and knowledge needed to work effectively with culturally diverse and racialized communities (Herrity & Glasman, 2010; Young, 2010).
In response to this dilemma, some leadership preparation programs now include social justice as a stream that runs systematically throughout the course work and extracurricular experience in their preparatory curriculum (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). It is also widely documented in the literature that school leadership programs need to address issues of cultural responsiveness and social justice if any inroad with regards to the achievement of students from diverse cultural and marginalized school populations is to be realized (K. Brown, 2004; Furman, 2012; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Potts & Schlichting, 2011). Consequently, it is necessary to ensure that principal training programs prepare school leaders to lead for social justice so that when they assume administrative positions they are able to function effectively in culturally diverse and marginalized communities (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). According to Santamaria and Santamaria (2015), the field of educational leadership has been slow to respond to the realities of increased racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity and their intersectional implications on social justice at various levels of education. This has left critical theorists with the responsibility of raising classroom teachers’ and practitioners’ awareness of cultural responsiveness. That being said, several researchers suggest that culturally responsive leadership may result in socially just and equitable outcomes for all learners in contexts where disparities are present (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2015).

**Contributions of the Study**

Fullan (2001) argues that exemplary school leadership helps both to create the necessity for change and to make change happen. More specifically, Theoharis (2009) notes, there are schools where traditionally marginalized students are thriving because of their principals’ commitment to focus their leadership on issues of justice and equity. However, Theoharis also says that what is missing from the growing body of literature about social justice leadership is a discussion and details of concrete models and real school leaders who live out a call to do social
justice work in public schools. This study served such a purpose by providing some empirical evidence of ways leaders committed to social justice employ CRL to fulfil their vision of creating a more equitable school environment for marginalized students. Furthermore, this study also explores the barriers and resistance these school leaders face that place their social justice agenda in jeopardy and describes how these principals overcome the obstacles they encounter, which can serve as a model for other practitioners.

This case study sought to contribute to the literature about how principals enact instructional leadership to shape the curriculum and impact teachers’ pedagogical practice to meet the learning needs of their culturally diverse and marginalized student populations. From a thorough search in a number of databases, it was ascertained that no study of this kind has ever been conducted in the Canadian context. In light of the scarcity of research in this area, this study has begun to address the gap in the literature around CRL by highlighting the various strategies these principals enact to shape students’ experiences. Within this context, this study will expand the limited body of research about CRL, thereby providing principals with strategies they can use to work within marginalized communities to support students and their families.

Principals in this study clearly endeavor to create a welcoming school climate in which all stakeholders feel a sense of belonging and inclusion. Specific strategies the principals in this study used to create a welcoming school environment can serve to inform other school leaders as to what they can do to develop a more inclusive environment. According to Auerbach (2012), leaders need specific training on how to work with students and families from marginalized communities to advocate for their needs and facilitate their navigation of the Canadian educational system. Yet there is a paucity of information in this area. How these leaders go about building caring and lasting relationships with their culturally diverse parent communities as well as the strategies they employ to increase parental engagement within the school will provide
other principals with ideas they can emulate and implement in this area. This study contributes to the existing literature through its exploration of various strategies principal participants use to function effectively within the context of their respective school communities.

Most case studies look at CRL from the leaders’ perspective only, whereas this study incorporated teachers’ discourses into the narrative to create a more robust and objective interpretation of CRL and provide a new lens for conceptualizing this approach to leadership. This study also explores what principals do within the context of their school community to provide support, resources, and training for teachers to develop cultural responsiveness and acquire the skills needed to embrace CRP. While these principals achieved varying degrees of success in doing so, their experiences should serve to raise the awareness of other practitioners that, regardless of the resistance they face when enacting social just practices, this should not deter them from endeavoring to create a more equitable and responsive school system.

Scrutinizing the literature relevant to CRL, the findings in this study are similar in some respects and different in others. Similar to the literature relevant to CRL the principals in this study held high expectations for student achievement (Johnson, 2006, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994), incorporated the cultural knowledge of students’ home communities into the school curriculum (Johnson, 2006; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012), created a welcoming environment for parents and community partners (Johnson et al., 2008; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012), sought to raise the sociopolitical consciousness of students and parents to challenge inequities in the greater society (Johnson, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994) and advocated on behalf of the parent community (Johnson, 2007; Riehl, 2000).

This study differs from most of the literature about CRL in that it discusses specific strategies these principals use to make the curriculum more culturally responsive, an aspect of CRL that has received little attention in previous published case studies. Unlike other studies,
this one explores how the principals work with their staff to implement CRP and discusses the impact this had on teachers and students. Another area of this study that has not been tackled to any great extent in existing CRL literature is the overwhelming resistance school leaders’ face in unionized school environments when they seek to implement culturally responsive practices. Strategies these leaders use to counteract these oppositional forces are presented. Finally this study also highlights the lack of support culturally responsive leaders receive from their district school board and the coping strategies they use to overcome this obstacle, another area that has not been addressed to at any great extent in previous studies.

Implications for Future Research

The focus of this study is on looking at what strategies principals employ to enact CRL to shape the school experiences of marginalized students. During the research analysis, other ideas evolved that are of interest to investigate more thoroughly. This study did not include the voices of students or parents directly. It would be interesting to include the perspective of students in the study to determine their perceptions of the culturally responsive interventions implemented. In literature that addresses culturally responsive “best practices” for shaping the school experiences of students, there is a need to notice, acknowledge, and explore the silences and bring the voices of students and their families—voices hidden—to the forefront. Studies are needed that explore the perspective of culturally diverse and marginalized students and their families to ascertain how strategies, programs, and initiative are understood by these stakeholders. Many times solution to problems experienced by culturally diverse and marginalized populations emanates from the dominant group, since more often than not it is within the latter group that power resides. However, for actions to be truly just, individuals on whose behalf the action is taken should have a say in what is to be done and legitimize its implementation.
Since a significant amount of the research about culturally responsive leadership is based on studies undertaken in the United States, which differs somewhat from Canadian contexts (e.g., degree of centralization/decentralization, variation in funding methods, etc), more research pertaining to CRL needs to be undertaken from a Canadian perspective to create an understanding of its impact on student performance and achievement within the Canadian educational system. Although the principals and teachers alluded to the improvement and increased engagement through CRP, a stronger research base is needed to determine the impact CRL has on student achievement. Future research should explore the successful implementation of culturally responsive practices as a whole school reform and causal relationships between specific CRL interventions and increased student achievement. There is clearly a need for much more systematic research that links CRL with its impact on students, and as noted in Sleeter (2012) also research that links teacher professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy with improved student learning.

One of the findings in this study is the many obstacles principals encounter that impede and impinge on their social justice agenda. For instance, Hailey encountered formidable resistance to several of the initiatives she implemented to benefit students and their families. It would be interesting to investigate whether over time she continues her social justice work or she becomes discouraged and either moves on to another school or stops advocating on behalf of students and their families. In essence, does formidable resistance prevent social justice leaders from pushing their agenda forward?

Finally, another central and important issue for further study is whether the gains these principals have made within their respective schools are sustainable such that when they leave, the school still remains a culturally responsive system.
**Concluding Thoughts**

Ontario schools need courageous leaders who are willing to advocate on behalf of students to create a more inclusive and culturally responsive school system. This dissertation raises awareness of the necessity for all school leaders to function in a culturally responsive manner, regardless of their student population. School leaders need to continue to identify culturally responsive leadership practices and behaviors that will make it possible for students from diverse backgrounds to gain an equal footing with students from the dominant culture. Often people from the dominant culture believe that when cultural differences exist, the onus is on the person from the nondominant culture to assimilate (R. Lindsey et al., 2005). Wiping out a person’s culture and forcing him/her to accept an alternative one will not help to close the achievement gap. Rather, principals need to develop positive relationships with staff, students, and parents in order to influence student learning by promoting culturally responsive teaching within the classroom and school-wide cultural responsiveness. Ultimately, when schools provide what students need and educators teach students and their families how to better access all that school offers, students’ achievement increases (R. Lindsey et al., 2005).

To bring about a true transformation of the current educational system, there is a need to develop a better understanding of culturally responsive leadership and culturally responsive teaching practices and their potential for improving student achievement. New practices must replace old, outdated ones. Culturally responsive leaders must strive to create a positive school environment in which all members of the community work together to promote students’ achievement. We have one hard reality to face in our schools—diversity. Administrators need to realize that the change in demographics is here to stay, and so leadership strategies need to be adjusted to reflect this reality. School leaders will become more culturally responsive if their ultimate goal is truly to see students from all backgrounds strive and succeed. Only time will tell.
REFERENCES


Fears., A. (2004). A study of school-based leadership and the school improvement process for elementary schools that have demonstrated high and low achievement (Dissertation) Abstracts International, 60(7a), 2569.


Appendix A

Principal’s Letter of Invitation

OISE
ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Dear, May 2014

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study:
What Principals Do to Improve the Performance and School Experiences of Marginalized Students

I am a doctoral student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (working under the supervision of Dr. James Ryan) and a principal in TDSB. I am conducting a study to explore the phenomenon of what culturally responsive principals do to improve the performance and school experiences of marginalized students. As part of my study, I will be interviewing two principals and ten teachers. You have received a recruitment letter because several of your colleagues have identified you as a culturally responsive school leader. You are in an ideal position to articulate what supportive strategies you put in place to enhance these students’ school experiences. Your culturally responsive approach to leadership will also enable you to shed light on the nature of discourses relevant to this leadership perspective.

You are invited to participate in a face-to-face interview of about one hour about issues related to the focus of the study. During the interview you will be asked questions about your school community, how you assessed their needs, which students you feel are marginalized, the culturally responsive strategies you use to support students and the community, the barriers you encounter, the supports you need, and the impact your leadership has had on your school and community. As the interview proceeds, I may ask questions for clarification or further understanding, but my part will be mainly to listen to you speak about your views, experiences, and the reasons you believe and do the things you do.

Should you agree to participate, I will also request that you ask teachers from your school to be a part of this study as is important to capture their insights as to how your approach to leadership impacts their pedagogical practice, understanding of cultural responsiveness, and the school environment. I am attaching a letter which I will ask you to distribute to all teaching staff on my behalf, should you decide to participate in this study. The letter asks teachers to contact me directly if they are interested in participating. The data are being collected for the purposes of writing an EdD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles.

It is the intention that each interview will be audiotaped and later transcribed to paper; you have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. You will be assigned a number that will
correspond to your interviews and transcriptions. Your transcript will be sent to you to read in order for you to add any further information or to correct or delete any information to avoid any misinterpretations that could result. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored in a locked cabinet at my home. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, schools, school districts, and communities cannot be identified. Nonetheless there is a slight possibility that one of the participants will be able to identify another participant in the final product. All raw data (i.e., transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. You may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project. At no time will value judgments will be placed on your responses, nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness as a principal. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it. A copy of the study will be made available to all participants upon request.

My hope is that participating in this study will be worthwhile professional development because this will allow you to reflect on your practice and views and provide you with the opportunity to talk about issues of social justice and equity. Involvement in this project will also enable you to contribute to the limited body of knowledge about how culturally responsive principals improve the performance and school experiences of marginalized students. Furthermore, given that education is supposed to promote an equitable and just society, this study will offer crucial insights for gaining perspective about shaping the school experiences of marginalized students and challenging those discourses that continue to privilege certain communities and cultures while marginalizing others.

I am hoping you are willing to participate in this study. If so, please contact me at (416) 395-3030 ext 20010 or at lyn.davy@utoronto.ca. to set up an interview time and date. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. James Ryan, at (416) 978-1152. Finally, you may also contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics for questions about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, contact ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Your consideration is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Lyn Davy
Ed.D. Candidate
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Appendix B

Teacher’s Letter of Invitation

OISE
ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Dear,

May 2014

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study:

What Principals Do to Improve the Performance and School Experiences of Marginalized Students

I am a doctoral student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (working under the supervision of Dr. James Ryan) and a principal in TDSB. I am conducting a study to explore the phenomenon of what culturally responsive principals do to improve the performance and school experiences of marginalized students. I will be interviewing your principal as she had been identified by her colleagues as practicing a culturally responsive approach to leadership. You have received a recruitment letter because it is my intention to interview five teachers from your school to capture their insights as to how the principal’s approach to leadership impacts their pedagogical practice, understanding of cultural responsiveness and the school environment. You are in an ideal position to articulate what supportive strategies your principal has put in place to enhance the school experiences of marginalized students.

You are invited to participate in a face-to-face interview of about one hour about issues related to the focus of the study. During the interview you will be asked questions about your school community, which students you feel are marginalized, and the culturally responsive strategies your principal uses to support marginalized students. As the interview proceeds, I may ask questions for clarification or further understanding, but my part will be mainly to listen to you speak about your views and perception of how your principal interacts with the students and community. The data are being collected for the purposes of an EdD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles.

It is the intention that each interview will be audiotaped and later transcribed to paper; you have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. You will be assigned a number that will correspond to your interviews and transcriptions. Your transcript will be sent to you to read in order for you to add any further information or to correct or delete any information to avoid any misinterpretations that could result. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored in a locked cabinet in my home. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, schools, school districts, and communities cannot be identified. Nonetheless there is a slight possibility that one of the participants will be able to
identify another participant in the final product. I will do my best not to report any quotes that could potentially identify participants. All raw data (i.e., transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. You may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project. At no time will value judgments be placed on your responses, nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness as a teacher. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it. A copy of the study will be made available to all participants upon request.

My hope is that participating in this study will be worthwhile professional development because this will allow you to reflect on your teaching practice and provide you with the opportunity to talk about issues of social justice and equity. Involvement in this project will also enable you to contribute to the limited body of knowledge about how culturally responsive principals improve the performance and school experiences of marginalized students. Furthermore, given that education is supposed to promote an equitable and just society, this study will offer crucial insights for gaining perspective about shaping the school experiences of marginalized students and challenging those discourses that continue to privilege certain communities and cultures while marginalizing others.

I am hoping you are willing to participate in this study. If so, please contact me at (416) 395-3030 ext 20010 or at lyn.davy@utoronto.ca, to set up an interview time and date, at a location you find convenient. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. James Ryan, at (416) 978-1152. Finally, you may also contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics for questions about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant contact ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Your consideration is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Lyn Davy
Ed.D. Candidate
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Appendix C

Interview Questions (Principal)

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

1. Describe the community this school serves, including different cultural groups within the community.

2. How did your familiarize yourself with your school community? How did you come know and understand what the community needed?

3. Which students in the community you serve are marginalized or underserved within the school system? Is it possible for an administrator to enact practices that help to mitigate the inequities these students face?

4. Strategies:
   a) How do you work with staff, students, and parents to promote cultural awareness and the necessity for all stakeholders to respect each other?
   b) How do you ensure that teaching practices align with the best interests of the students you serve?
   c) How do you ensure social justice issues such as antiracism, and anticlassism are central to the classroom curriculum?
   d) What have you done to foster relationships between the school, families, and community?
   e) Do you find it necessary to advocate for your students, parents, or community? In what way(s)?

5. Identify any barriers or resistance you have faced with the following stakeholders because of your culturally responsive style of leadership.
   a) Staff members  b) Students  c) Parents  d) School structures

6. What supports would assist you in practicing leadership in the way you do?

7. What impact has your approach to leadership had on the following: How do you know this?
   a) Staff members  b) Students  c) Parents  d) School culture  e) Community

8. What are the consequences (both positive and negative) for you in practicing a culturally responsive approach to leadership?
Appendix D

Interview Questions (Teacher)

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ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

1. Describe the community this school serves, including different cultural groups within the community.

2. Which students in the community you serve are marginalized or underserved within the school system?

3. What does your principal do to respond to the needs of the various cultural groups within the school and community?

4. In what ways does your principal demonstrate respect for cultural diversity?

5. What has the principals done to raise the cultural awareness of staff?

6. In what ways has the principal worked to ensure the history, values, and cultural knowledge of students is incorporated within the school curriculum?

7. In what ways has the principal worked to develop a critical consciousness among both students and staff to enable them to challenge inequities in the larger society?

8. In what ways has the principal worked to empower the parent community?

9. What has the principal done to make the school more responsive to diverse groups?
   a) Professional development
   b) Curriculum changes
   c) Changes in school instructional program
   d) School-parent or school-community programs
   e) Other school–wide events or activities

10. Has your principal encouraged you to do any of the following:
    a) Celebrate multicultural events with students
    b) Include the histories of various cultural groups in the curriculum
    c) Incorporate students’ experiences and cultures into the curriculum
    d) Raise the critical consciousness of students
    e) Attend professional development sessions relevant to culturally responsive pedagogy/teaching
    f) Develop positive relationships with parents
Appendix E

Principal’s Letter of Informed Consent

OISE
ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Dear,  

May 2014

I am a doctoral student from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (working under the supervision of Dr. James Ryan). I am conducting a study to explore what culturally responsive leaders do to improve the performance and school experiences of marginalized students. In order to begin the study, I require your written consent. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may at any time refuse to answer specific questions or withdraw from the interview process without any judgment or consequence. You may request that any information, whether in written or audiotaped form be eliminated from the project. If you choose to withdraw, any identifiable information (i.e., your name or school name) will not be retained. The purpose of this interview is strictly research based. At no time will judgment be placed on your responses, nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness as a principal. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study.

It is the intention that each interview will be audiotaped and later transcribed to paper. You have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. **If you do not wish the interview to be taped, the researcher will gather data by means of relying on field notes taken during the interview.** You will be assigned a number that will correspond to your interview and transcriptions. Your transcript will be sent to you to read in order for you to add any further information or correct any misinterpretations that could result. **The taped interviews will be transcribed as soon as possible, and all audio files destroyed once transcription, cleaning, and verification processes are completed.** The information gathered during the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored in a secure location in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, schools, school districts, or specific quotes cannot be identified. All data collected will be used for the purposes of an EdD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles. During the research, the information that you give will be kept secure on an encrypted memory stick. All raw data (field notes, documents) will be destroyed five years after the completion of this study.

The time commitment for participating in this study is approximately one hour for the interview. You will be able to access a final copy of the dissertation which will be located in the OISE/UT thesis collection or by advising the researcher below that you would like to receive a copy.

The researcher does not foresee any risks to you as a result of your participation in this study, nor does she expect you will experience discomfort or distress. Nonetheless there is a slight possibility that one of the participants will be able to identify another participant in the final product. I will, however, do my best not to use quotes that could identify participants.
If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics, ethics@review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Your support is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Researcher Supervisor
Lyn Davy James Ryan
425 Patricia Avenue, Toronto, ON., M2R 2N1 OISE: Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
416-395-3030 (ext 20010); lyn.davy@utoronto.ca 252 Bloor Street West, 6th floor, M5S 1V6
416-978-1152; jim.ryan@utoronto.ca

______________________________________________________________________________

By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above.

________________________________________  ______________________________  ________________
Participant’s printed name                  Participant’s signature          Date

Participant’s email address ________________________________

Please initial if you would like to receive a copy of the dissertation upon completion: ________

Please initial if you agree to have your interview audiotaped: ________

Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.
Appendix F

Teacher’s Letter of Informed Consent

OISE

ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Dear,

May 2014

I am a doctoral student from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (working under the supervision of Dr. James Ryan). I am conducting a study to explore what culturally responsive leaders do to improve the performance and school experiences of marginalized students. As a teacher you are in an ideal position to articulate what strategies your principal has put in place to enhance the school experiences of marginalized students. In order to begin the study, I require your written consent. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may at any time refuse to answer specific questions or withdraw from the interview process without any judgment or consequence. You may request that any information, whether in written or audiotaped form, be eliminated from the project. If you choose to withdraw, any identifiable information (i.e. your name or school name) will not be retained. The purpose of this interview is strictly research based. At no time will judgment be placed on your responses, nor will any evaluation be made of your effectiveness as a teacher. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study. The interview will be conducted at a location of your choosing.

It is the intention that each interview will be audiotaped and later transcribed to paper. You have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. **If you do not wish the interview to be taped, the researcher will gather data by means of relying on field notes taken during the interview.** You will be assigned a number that will correspond to your interview and transcriptions. Your transcript will be sent to you to read in order for you to add any further information or correct any misinterpretations that could result. **The taped interviews will be transcribed as soon as possible and all audio files destroyed once transcription, cleaning, and verification processes are completed.** The information gathered during the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored in a secure location in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, schools, school districts, or specific quotes cannot be identified. All data collected will be used for the purposes of an EdD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles. During the research, the information that you give will be kept secure on an encrypted memory stick. All raw data (field notes, documents) will be destroyed five years after the completion of this study.

The time commitment for participating in this study is approximately one hour for the interview. You will be able to access a final copy of the dissertation which will be located in the OISE/UT thesis collection or by advising the researcher below that you would like to receive a copy.
The researcher does not foresee any risks to you as a result of your participation in this study, nor does she expect you will experience discomfort or distress. Nonetheless there is a slight possibility that one of the participants will be able to identify another participant in the final product. I will, however, do my best not to use quotes that could identify participants.

If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics, ethics@review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Your support is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

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By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above.

________________________________  ___________________________________  _______________________
Participant’s printed name                  Participant’s signature                  Date

Participant’s email address ________________________________

Please initial if you would like to receive a copy of the dissertation upon completion: _________

Please initial if you agree to have your interview audiotaped: _________

Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.