Book Review

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Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) is a six-chapter book by Muhammad Khalifa that aims at aiding school leaders in the instruction of indigenous, black, brown, and other minoritized students in urban schools. Instructional leadership and other traditional leadership models fail to adequately guide the treatment of urban youth. CRSL considers state policies like housing and unique community experiences such as settler colonialism and incarceration rates in the pedagogy of underrepresented groups. The book is an ethnographic study of the data of an African American school leader, Joe, whose persona and setting uses pseudonyms. Joe labored for over forty years at Urban Alternative High School (UAHS) in Davistown, Michigan exploring student experiences inside and outside the classroom. Khalifa articulates how school leaders can implement principles, curriculum, pedagogy, and programs that promote inclusion by critiquing assumptions, biases and stereotypes. The book recommends earnestly that school administrators and teachers should replace school-based epistemologies with community-based epistemologies. Khalifa stresses that complicity, neutrality and orthodoxy on the part of school administrators propagate and reproduce oppression. School leaders become accomplices of oppression when they remain passive and choose not to challenge the status quo.

The book is in the Race and Education Series edited by H. Richard Milner IV who also wrote the series foreword. Milner opines that "racial justice is arguably the most important educational imperative of our time" (Khalifa, 2018, p. viii) and proceeds by affirming that critiquing assumptions is an arduous endeavor. Lesa Delpit, a distinguished professor of education gives a foreword for the book. She proposes that schools fail students by being enemies of the communities they serve instead of embracing students' lived realities. Culturally responsive schools embody the values of respective communities of the students.

Khalifa, in chapter one uncovers disconnections that exist between schools and communities. Schools interpret student behavior using school-based epistemologies while students and parents use community-based epistemologies. Khalifa alludes to a case whereby a superintendent decided to close a school after consideration of low enrollment and low academic performance. Community members interpreted the school closure with the lens of community-based epistemologies after consideration of the central role of race and averted the closure. Such a case illustrates the deficiencies of school-based epistemologies to make a compelling argument for culturally responsive school leaders.

In chapter two, Khalifa explores critical self-reflection. The metrics at UAHS like graduation rate, standardized testing data, retention rate, referrals to special education, and suspension rate confirm oppression of underrepresented students. "For example, in recent data for the district, black students made up only 18 percent of students overall, but nearly 60 percent of out-of-school suspensions" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 62). Through critical self-reflection, culturally responsive school leaders identify oppression in the school by analyzing current practices and available data. Khalifa explains that Joe used rap sessions as a source of data. The data helped Joe to challenge and encourage students and confront teachers formally and informally. In addition to that, the data also informs administrative decisions pertaining to resource allocation and employment. The rap sessions revealed exclusionary practices such as making fun of a sleeping student in a classroom. A culturally responsive teacher instead works with other staff to help the student get enough rest at home. The objective of critical self-reflection in CRSL is to create an environment of fairness and a sense of belonging for students, parents and teachers. Khalifa recommends equity audits to lay bare oppressive practices. Equity audits include research-based surveys as well as data and policy analysis functions that help those in privileged positions to recognize stunning disparities in funding, race and opportunity gaps.

Chapter three postulates how CRSL promotes inclusionary school practices and policies by focusing on spaces. Spaces connote the physical space together with bodies and everything associated with space. Artifacts, languages, people and behavior must be inclusive. An example of this is, instead of removing an underage student smelling like marijuana from the school, a teacher can work with staff to ensure that the student accesses substance treatment programs. Here, Khalifa joins other educators like Shields (2016) in analyzing the complex dynamics of public education and prison in the infamous school to prison pipeline. Minoritized groups benefit when schools maintain high expectations, open discourses, mentor teachers, and apply modeling before challenging exclusionary practices.

Chapter four discusses ways that CRSL can embrace the expressions of student identities and voices through *identity confluence.* All student identities should be welcomed and protected in school to avoid the creation of a subhuman status of minoritized students. Embracing student identities and voices comports with the notion of humanization of learners, advocated by the great 20th century Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (2001). Khalifa underscores that nothing must inhibit a two-way accessibility between principals and communities. School leaders must establish social capital networks for minoritized families by encouraging activities like National African American Parent Involvement Day, parent breakfast, delivering report cards personally and introductory interviews before admission (Khalifa, 2018, pp 118-121). The aim is to open doors of communication to obtain nuances of what parents and communities want to see changed. At the same time, social capital networks strengthen trust, rapport, authentic care, and credibility which are essential elements of leadership.

In chapter five, the author looks at how leaders foster culturally responsive teachers and instruction through rethinking leadership structures and lesson plans in schools. Teacher evaluation tools must not necessarily be about state standards but about what improves teaching and supports learning. Teachers and administrators should take collective responsibility for student performance. Moreover, teachers should take individual responsibility too for how their students do in class. The lessons must reflect the activities happening in society e.g. an upcoming hip hop performance provides an occasion to talk about dynamics of sound travel. CRSL utilizes equity teams as learning groups of practice and fosters academic identity and high expectations. Khalifa introduces an idea of a school leader as a warm demander who establishes a deep caring and loving relationship with students first, then leverages this relationship to hold high expectations.

Chapter six delineates caveats of the centrality of communities in school leadership. School leaders should go deeper into respective communities on the community's own terms. This chapter gives a checklist for a three-year school improvement plan of creating a culturally responsive school. The chapter proceeds to specify ways of negotiating challenges while promoting culturally responsive school environments. It is worthy to note that being an all-black or all-white school does not render CRSL irrelevant. Even black principals can dehumanize black students.

What Khalifa does excellently, in Culturally Responsive School Leadership, is shifting cultural responsiveness from the teacher in the classroom to the administrator in the office and insisting that schools should go to the communities. He seems to thrive on the premise that excellent leaders transform schools, which is plausible but misleading. Having an excellent school leader may be necessary but not sufficient. Readers must be aware of limiting factors like excessive entanglement of politics, hopeless teachers, disastrous school funding, and abject poverty. The world of education is murky, subtle and messy. School administrators and teachers face complex ethical decisions regularly (Levinson & Fay, 2016). What Khalifa has contributed to the literature is not a readily available panacea to educational conundrums afflicting minoritized students. In any case, it is a timely and relevant intervention to school principals serving minoritized students, who wish to take their practice to another level by addressing and redressing systemic issues. Khalifa's Culturally Responsive School Leadership is a *magna carta* whose objective is to aid school leaders in the teaching and learning of urban youths.

References

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