

## BOOK REVIEW

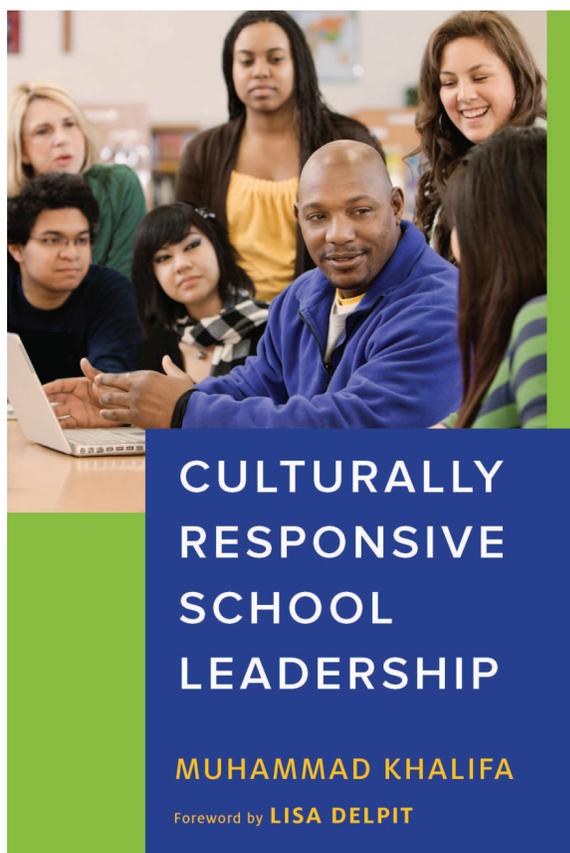
# Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Dr. Muhammad Khalifa

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Never did I imagine that more than thirty years after meeting Eazy-E at Sam Goody's Music store where I worked in Cerritos, California, I would be sitting in a lecture hall at a major national university hearing our guest speaker and celebrated author of his new book, Dr. Mohammad Khalifa, quote N.W.A., an American hip hop group from Compton. He provided research-based support for the emotional duress of our nation's minoritized youth as expressed in this genre of popular music. In his book, Dr. Khalifa uses the term "minoritized youth" to describe students who have been historically marginalized in our society.

Now, as a middle school educator, I wrestle with the topics Dr. Khalifa addresses in his book, *Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)*. Rap and hip hop culture continue to draw in our minoritized youth with quick-witted lyrics and messages of resistance and rebellion. Research has demonstrated we, as educators, can provide for the social and emotional learning of our students by providing them with culturally appropriate lessons with which they can relate. In order to do this, we have to understand their culture.

Along with my colleagues, I find myself asking my male students to pull up their sagging pants, yet we praise them when their swagger takes a more positive form. Which begs the question: whose positive persona is it I'm praising, theirs or mine? Yesterday I heard a White teacher at our school explaining to a Black child's mother why it is inappropriate for her son to call his second grade friend, his N\*\*\*\*. The scene, although brief, was painful to watch. This all-too-common exchange between a parent and teacher directly relates to themes Dr. Khalifa refers to in his book. How do this young child and his mother see the school? Does the school seek to support them in their understanding of the painful history of our nation, which was implicit in the theft, murder, rape, linguistic and cultural destruction of their African ancestors? Or does the school act to erase, cover up, and hide the painful past so as to reproduce the colonial, unequal, and oppressive culture outside its walls?

In Dr. Khalifa's book, he relates his interactions with a family of three generations of Black women who attended an unnamed and highly respected school and described their interactions with Principal "Joe." Although the school is no longer there, the author's interactions with the memorable principal are documented in brief vignettes throughout the later chapters along with examples of the principal's caring yet direct demeanor with faculty, parents, and students.

Additionally, the author and researcher describes Principal Joe's notable "Rap sessions" which form a critical part of the Culturally Responsive School Leadership, or CRSL, process. In these Rap Sessions, students and faculty were asked to come together regularly to openly discuss their feelings, observations, concerns, and criticisms. Although most faculty might immediately react in disbelief at the thought, or fear, they would have their students openly criticize them in front of the whole school, it appeared to have the opposite effect. The students observed the whole school coming together to listen to them, hear their concerns, and address them directly in an open forum. They were able to be honest about their own interactions, responsibility, and accountability to their peers, their teachers and their school. The rap sessions served to repair and strengthen the essential fibers which formed the heart, the soul, and the collective body of the school as a valued institution and cultural beacon in the community.

The premise of Dr. Khalifa's work in Culturally Responsive School Leadership can be summarized thus: School and cultural improvement initiatives require honest reflection on our own participation in the process of promulgating racism in our public institutions. According to Dr. Khalifa, if we don't address our own biases, our own prejudice, our own contributions to the inherent racism in our public schools, then we are allowing it to continue and are promoting its continued growth.

If we don't see race, and we don't see color, then we are being insensitive to the differences which should serve to bind us as a multicultural nation. Even a blind person can detect cultural nuances in the voices of people they meet. Rejecting our cultural heritage by claiming to ignore our cultural differences promotes a colonialist perspective, an air of one culture's superiority over their oppressed population. If I don't see you, then you are invisible, irrelevant, and unimportant. If I don't see your color, your race, your language, your heart, then it must be invisible, irrelevant, and unimportant. Understood; we have to recognize our cultural differences, but that can be very difficult.

During his book talk, Dr. Khalifa shared with us one of his greatest challenges: school district leaders acknowledge the need for a shift in cultural leadership but they want the skinny. They tell him, "I don't have a lot of time. Give it to me in a few minutes; how can you summarize what we need to do starting now?" He replies, "There is no quick fix." *Culturally Responsive School Leadership* is a guide for educational leaders to use at their sites. How long does it take for a leader to read the book? How long does it take for them to conduct a cultural equity survey? How long does it take to work with faculty and staff to examine their school's climate? The process is as continuous as the need arises.

How should educational leaders go about having their faculty and staff address cultural differences? Dr. Khalifa recommends starting with a cultural equity survey. By examining faculty, student, and community attitudes toward school and each other, communication can begin to shed light on what he refers to as the path toward redemption. By working together, faculty can improve their interactions with their students, the students' parents, and community members to reflect on how they are either contributing to the oppression or taking steps together with their minoritized youth toward a path of redemption.

Dr. Khalifa acknowledges his own mistakes as a minority educational leader working with minoritized youth. As a minority, and as an educational leader, I have the added responsibility to question why I feel the way I do and what effect that might have on my students and the community in which I serve. Dr. Khalifa's purpose reminds us to begin with a humble approach to recognizing our own part in the problem, our contributions to the minoritization of our youth, and our ability as leaders in the classroom, the main office, and in our board rooms to make significant strides to place value in each other and trust in the multicultural fiber of our nation. The skinny is: it's going to take work! But if we don't start now, we may never start and we'll continue to propagate the same inadequate system expecting different outcomes.

*Culturally Responsive School Leadership* can be used as a handbook. It includes useful information for school leaders who wish to implement an improvement plan and is supported by research at the end of every chapter. It is organized in a manner for leaders to learn, reflect, and then implement a plan at their site. If leaders are to lead, they must do so by example. Humility, an open mind, and the commitment to work through uncomfortable situations is a necessary requirement prior to engaging in a concerted effort to change the culture of an entire organization.

Dr. Khalifa is right – schools and districts have the data; it's in their reports of citations, referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. Those are the symptoms of the problem, not the problem itself. To understand the problem, we have to examine the situations that led to those events, and the role of the adults in how it played out. Minority educators are just as likely to offend if they are not aware of their thoughts, words, and actions in promoting a culturally responsive school environment.

Although rap music is an enormous genre, it has often been a vehicle of expression for the disenfranchised youth of our society. Mixing rebellious teen angst with the frustration, anger, and resentment of racism has often been a source of emotional inspiration musicians have drawn from to create artistic pieces which reflect the feelings of kids and young adults who are unhappy with their surroundings. Our children will learn from us, and they'll learn from their surroundings. Popular culture will continue to repeat these themes in an effort to profit from the sale of their merchandise.

CRSL begins by seeking to understand the nature of the problem. Dr. Khalifa's program requires educational leaders to examine whether the school is 1) projecting toward the community, or if 2) the community is projecting toward the school. If school leaders are not from the community, they need to bring in community leaders

to shed light on the community's needs and desires. If you care to know about the community, the community will know you care about them. Bringing all stakeholders together, especially the voices which are not often heard in our schools, is necessary to repair the fabric of our public schools which should serve as healthy centers of learning, sharing, and growing in the common celebration of our children's academic progress and future opportunities.

Some critics of the book may argue, "We don't have minority students in our school," or "Our school is almost entirely made up of minorities." In both cases, race and discrimination needs to be addressed in our public schools. Hospitals heal the pain in our community and promote physical and mental wellbeing. Schools heal the emotional pain of our history and promote a positive society capable of adapting and improving the human condition through the leaders of tomorrow, who are the students in our classrooms today. Emotional pain and suffering do not discriminate; every child is susceptible. Our White children are just as likely to benefit from the dialectic approaches Dr. Khalifa proposes in coming together to synthesize, combine, and respect each other for who we are. Providing children the understanding that education is the most important path toward achieving their potential is our common goal.

## Author Bio

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