

# Democracy's College Podcast

## Episode 33: Culturally Responsive School Leadership

**Announcer:**

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In this episode, Kristal Raheem interviews Dr. Muhammad Khalifa about culturally responsive school leadership. Dr. Khalifa is a professor and Beck Chair of Ideas in Education at the University of Minnesota.

**Kristal Raheem:**

Hello, Dr. Khalifa. Thank you for joining me today. On behalf of OCCRL, I'd like to welcome you to this podcast interview, and so I'd like to start off by just trying to get to know what inspired you to pursue a career in education, and how are you able to sustain yourself in this field.

**Dr. Khalifa:**

Well, thank you for the invitation. I'm happy to be in this space with you after having visited. I was drawn to education. Both my parents were first-generation students, but they did go to college and become educators, and so they were Detroit public school educators and I was too, so they both retired from Detroit Public [Schools]. Also, something else that kind of inspired me is that I volunteered when I was a high school student and then [as an] undergrad.

So I have three education degrees, and so, I kind of volunteered in spaces that had me gravitating toward these youthful, energetic space and they were all education-type spaces, either schools or educational programs or something like that. And then I recall some experiences that I had growing up, and my brothers had some life challenges that are quite typical of black men dealing with incarceration and police oversight and surveillance and harassment. And they kind of attribute the first experience with that kind of state criminalization and surveillance and harassment, that state-sponsored harassment, they attributed their first experience to that in schools and so we were in the same schools. I think I just dealt with it differently. So all of those things kind of drew me to education.

**Kristal Raheem:**

On that note, with your work that relates to culturally responsive school leadership, I'm curious to know how does that differ from other transformative approaches in education?

**Dr. Khalifa:**

Well, there are a lot of similarities. I think, though, there are several key differences. I think that many of the critical and transformative approaches that we talk about here in the States tend to gravitate and lean toward criticality and critiquing systems and practices and discourses that tend to be marginalizing

and minoritizing, oppressive toward students of color, African American, black, indigenous students and the like.

And I think that that's powerful and I think that that's needed and I think that that should be centered in the discourse. But I also think that we don't have the luxury of only doing that. White Europeans did have that luxury. I think that a lot of scholars here pull from white European critical traditions, and if that is true—which folks like Grosfugel and Mignolo and others argue that it is—if that is indeed true, then we have to understand that we're different from them.

Those societies that they were critiquing in essence still were made for people like them. They had access. So we can't just stay in that realm of critique, critique, critique, in my humble opinion. And I think that culturally responsive school leadership offers the critique as well as decolonial knowledges, opportunities for ancestral knowledge, for experiential, community-based, all of these other kind of things for co-constructed knowledge where people make sense of things that actually are powerful for them to work in their context and stuff like that. So I think that culturally responsive school leadership does that.

And another thing that I think it offers that's new and that's I think novel is that culturally responsive school leadership can talk about classrooms and instructional leadership, but it can also reach beyond that and look at overall systems, finances, distributive leadership, teacher leadership, school culture and climate, school culture, not classroom culture, school culture and climate, community engagement at a systems level.

Like what does it look like for principals to make that happen for their teachers, so that teachers are not teaching all day and then having to go on their own time, as I used to have to do, to visit folks in the community and search their resources, time for one, and financial resources that can aid them in their community engagement efforts. All of these kinds of questions are leadership questions. Many of the things that culturally responsive school curriculum and pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy, many of the things that these people complain about are leadership questions. They're not class-faced pedagogical curriculum question.

I don't think enough attention has really been paid to that, and then for people who have talked about race and leadership, I don't think that it's merely a question of having a courageous conversation. I don't think it's a question of getting people to talk about race. Those conversations, those frustrations did critique the decolonial knowledges. All of them have to enter *practice* at some point, *leadership* practice. All of those things have to begin to inform the ways that leaders promote a vision for school or the way that leaders allow community to access facilities. All of these things that are not going to happen merely if you just talk about race and leadership, which I, again, I'm a proponent of talking about race and leadership, but it has to enter systemic and leadership behaviors that are known to the profession because it's not going to happen by accident.

So that's why I kind of focus on leadership, because early on I recognized as a science teacher in Detroit, I'm a teacher burnout. I burned out because leaders that I was working with did not understand how they could be supportive of people like me who wanted to do transformative and culturally responsive work.

**Kristal Raheem:**

On that note, kind of circling back around to pedagogy, one of the questions that I did have was how does CRSL expand on culturally responsive pedagogy and do you think that schools should use both? So you kind of talked about the differences. Do you think that culturally responsive school leadership and cultural responsive pedagogy should be partnered together in educational spaces?

**Dr. Khalifa:**

Right. There's an assumption by some people out there who don't know leadership literature well that it's really the same thing or it's just taking a different spin, like this is no different from calling it culturally relevant to culturally responsive to culturally sustaining. No, this is something different. This is not an argument of trying to tweak. No. We're talking about different entire bodies of knowledge and how does it expand on it? I'm not sure that I would say that it does.

I would say that culturally responsive leadership allows for culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum to happen in schools. I shouldn't say allows, but you know there are those warrior teachers who are just pushed to a fight even if the leader's not on board, but I should say that it more freely allows it, it supports it, it creates space for it. For those teachers who were not well trained, it can provide instructional leadership for those people who were not trained in their programs, in their teacher education programs.

Also, you might have a very dynamic, like, let's say African American teacher, let's say that she's a black woman and she's from urban areas, and so she gets that and so she can really connect with students from that area. But when you have a school that shifts within a period of three to five years, it is still all black, but those blacks are Ethiopians and Somalians—they're not so culturally responsive anymore.

And so leaders, I would argue, have to kind of take the lead in allowing for those teachers to then catch up to speed with their populations and say, "Go to some dugsis or go to some Saturday or Sunday schools that these Ethiopians or these West Africans or the Somalis or Hmong are running," without exoticizing these places, but learn more about them so that they can better serve those kinds of students because culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies are not etched in stone. The teachers who imbue those, they don't have them permanently. You know, a population shift, any of these things can kind of put a person into a space where they need to kind of retool. There can be no assumptions that what has worked for black and indigenous youth can work for all youth.

**Kristal Raheem:** Are there some similarities or differences for implementing culturally responsive school leadership in a K through 12 setting versus a higher education setting?

**Dr. Khalifa:** I think there are some similarities, yeah, definitely. I don't study higher ed environments as much. I have a couple of articles about that, but it's mainly autoethnographic articles, but I can't imagine how anybody who studied this at higher education would say that leaders in higher ed don't need to be critically self-reflective, both individually and systemically. How are they as system leaders or programmatic leaders, how are they going to maintain that critical self-reflection? So, I can't imagine that somebody would not care about campus climate.

So, these are the things that are present in culturally responsive K-12 leaders and something that they respond to that's on their radar. I don't know if instructional leadership or distributive leadership are things talked about in higher ed. I just don't know the literature well enough. I do think that there are a lot of similarities and I run the risk of speaking about a field that I don't know much about.

**Kristal Raheem:** So it's still in relation to institutional type. In regard to the public and private sphere of K through 12 education, do these contextual factors make the implementation of culturally responsive leadership a little different depending on the school type, enrollment, other bureaucratic considerations?

**Dr. Khalifa:** I would argue no. I think K-12 private and public schools have many of the same problems. You may have a few more tools at your discretion. For example, administrators may have a little bit more power and not having to deal with unions in the way that public educators do. So they may have a little bit more power to actually encourage or promote culturally responsive leadership a little bit more than public school teachers who do have constraints of union and stuff like that, enrollment issues.

I think private school enrollments tend to be a bit more stable than the schools not in existence anymore. Also, who can afford it kind of stabilizes the kind of population it is: middle class, upper class. I mean, there are some scholarships available too. One thing that I think is true, though, is that depending on the *kind* of private school that it is, they can be a bit *less* friendly toward culturally responsive educational philosophies and practices.

And so I think that, for example, many religious institutions are just kind of behind on that. And I'm not talking about any particular religion. I'm talking about all of them. The ones that I've visited and that I've seen tend to be a little bit behind on that. And again, I don't know that literature very well, but just the places that I've visited, equity and things like that are not even on their radar. Maybe because there's not as much of an issue, I don't know. Because if middle-class families can afford to send their kids to private schools, maybe that's not as much of an issue, equity and things like that.

And in the spaces in which a lot of school leaders meet superintendents, just conferences, I don't see a lot of private religious schools. There are other types of schools. I have one student here who's studying independently owned Afrocentric schools and I think that they're way advanced on some of these issues. So those are a few reflections, but again, that's not my field, but I think that there's some similarities to be had.

**Kristal Raheem:**

And so, switching gears a little bit here: On particular educational sites, how does culturally responsive school leadership translate across different occupational roles in schools? So in regard to staff, faculty, student affairs, personnel, principals, superintendents. And so folks who are intending on implementing these things or adapting these practices personally, how might that change depending on their occupation?

**Dr. Khalifa:**

So in the book, I talk mainly about teacher leaders, principals, and superintendents. But there are, of course, roles for everyone. Everybody plays some sort of leadership role. I do think, though, that at the end of the day, the leader, the primary leader of the institution has to kind of be responsible for working with folks in multiple spaces, in multiple teams, in a distributed leadership type of fashion.

There are ways. So, for example, I did a study on cultural brokers, I think they called them. And so, their role is to really enhance the community engagement and to make sure that community-based knowledges and epistemologies can be brought to bear—this is what I argue and this is what I've seen—can be brought to bear and how policies [are] enacted in schools. So when policy discussions happen once or twice a year, they would say, “Well, people in our community would view that policy like this.”

Educators, they have a different world. Teacher leaders, for example, their role is to use that same knowledge and to bring that to bear in how teachers imagine curriculum. So, what I guess I'm saying, Kristal, is that whatever your role is, you have to kind of find out how you contribute to a broader promotion of culturally responsive school environments and bringing in indigenous, experiential, community-based knowledges, ancestral knowledges, decolonial knowledges. There are many terms with slight nuance between them and using this knowledge, again, in a non-exoticizing, non-exploitative way, but using this knowledge to shift how systems serve these kinds of students. And I'm not as familiar with the higher ed roles that you've named, but in terms of K-12 institutions, I do have a clearer picture of how that happens.

**Kristal Raheem:**

So in regards to one's social identities, how might that influence the ways that they adapt culturally responsive leadership approaches? So this can be the difference between certain marginalized groups versus non-marginalized groups. How does that self-reflection piece play a role for folks across different social identities?

Dr. Khalifa:

So with the critical self-reflection, the first thing is for everyone to kind of identify their own privileges and their own contributions to oppressive school environments, because everybody contributes to that and black and indigenous people are not exempted from that. I majored in sociology in undergrad and one of the first things that folks there taught us is that blacks cannot be racist and the indigenous people cannot be racist. And I don't agree with that.

I think that if you come and you enact systems of white supremacy, and you think that you're going to get a pass because you are a person of color, that you are enacting white supremacy, you are being racist against other people who are experiencing oppression at your hands. How can you be described as anything other than that. But I don't want to get into a semantic argument about that because I know people feel differently about that.

I guess what's more important is that we have to make sure that we *all* identify how we're contributing to oppressive systems. I reflect about how I did that in the book and even the lecture when I was with you all on campus. I don't think we can stop with that. I think that's actually been a fault of how self-reflection and critical self-reflection has been talked about because there are institutional data pieces, equity audit where disproportionality data that suggests that even if you are a *highly* critically self-reflective and you're anti-oppressive and you are talking about your personal subjectivities and positionalities and all of that, and then your data is looking the same way year in and year out. That's not suggesting to me that you're culturally responsive. And if the opposite is true, you know, you don't have those kinds of disproportionalities in your data but you're not critically self-reflective, I think that's problematic as well.

So, I think that the personal identities and the social constructs that people come in with have to be interrogated routinely, consistently. You know, oppression and oppressive structures shift and retool in the same way that liberators and liberation-oriented folks have to re-shift and retool constantly as well. What happens is that people drill down on what worked in the 1980s and 1990s or even in 2018, and then 10 years from now the conversation is looking different. So that's how people kind of slip into supporting oppressive opposition.

And sometimes it's beyond that, you know. Humans are just selfish people, all of us. Folks are just self-centered. So, I know some people that kind of know that they're complicit in some things, but they're making a calculated decision because they need a job or they need some sort of advancement or some sort of position that they believe that they need. And so, that's sort of beyond all of the culturally responsive, self-reflective talk that we're talking about. That's just existing in all of us as well. Folks' anxieties and their fears and their egos, the lack of humility and humbleness, which is something that has to be reaffirmed.

I remember listening to one religious scholar one time that said he had to renew his intention four or five times in a two-hour period because he felt his heart was sort of going in one direction or another, maybe egotistically or something

like that. So he had to constantly reaffirm his commitment to why he was doing what he was doing. So I think that there are all of these issues that kind of impact how we as culturally responsive educators have to remain critically self-reflective. It is real work.

**Kristal Raheem:**

And so, I guess that leads to a conversation about possible challenges or roadblocks that people and our educational institutions face when trying to use culturally responsive school leadership practices.

**Dr. Khalifa:**

Yeah, maybe it would be easier to talk about the *types* of, instead of individual ones because, for example, one of the main ones that leaders complained about is how their staff and the people that they lead resist conversations like this. Another one is communities that are being served, how they resist. There's a local district here in Minnesota. So this district took a stand. They said we're going to promote issues of race and equity and stuff like that.

A conservative group in that community printed some stuff out and left it at every house in the district and widely distributed a newsletter that critiqued the district for doing that. And that puts pressure on boards and that puts pressure on the superintendent, and superintendents then don't feel like they have the same freedoms. So this particular district, the superintendent was known for that work in another district, took the job to this district and maybe, I don't know, I haven't spoken with him about it, but his behaviors suggest that he may be feeling a little bit of resistance to doing this kind of work.

Well, institutions of higher education had the same challenges as well. Here at the university where I'm at, they're all kinds of things that one could use critical race theory or decolonial theory or any of these kinds of theories to critique some of the leadership behaviors at the highest level. For example, what white folks in higher ed often do, and many institutions, not only this one, is they would rather hire and promote people of color that have politics and histories that are more aligned with white supremacy and colonization than they would for people like you or me. They're very highly intimidated by people who look like you and me, and they don't like the kind of critique because white people cannot hide from their histories of racism and slavery that we've experienced. They hire somebody from another country, from East Asia or from Latin America or something like that that they have not directly oppressed.

It's true that both those people from some of those spaces, in some instances, there is some deep colleagues from these spaces who are carrying the work, not just doing it, they're carrying the work, but there's some people from those spaces who are aspiring to whiteness as well. It's no secret. People have written and theorized about this, and so it's a great marriage for people who have white supremacists thinking to find people like that to do equity work in institutions of higher education. I've seen it widespread and it's a real tragedy.

It reminds me of how black Americans are received in places like France or Germany or Belgium, whereas people who are from North Africa, they don't

receive the same kind of treatment and love because, again, those people have entangled histories. They have entanglements that *constantly* remind white Europeans of the oppressors that they are.

The same is true with black people here in institutions of higher education. In K-12, there are similar sort of trajectories and trends that are happening. So in K-12, I could speak to these more aptly because I'm familiar with that space and the resistance comes in multiple levels. There are policy issues, so we can start there. There are assumptions that policy can cure all issues, and that's a huge misunderstanding, but at the same time policy needs to change and be readjusted so that they can be more humanizing for the minoritized students in school.

So you have different kinds of systems. I just recently saw a system around innovation about how anybody in that particular system can come and recommend or suggest reforms to the system at any level. It's an open-forum system. There are some concerns with it because it's not private, but it's something that's catching on. And so something like that *could* kind of get around some of the policy concerns, because this whole notion of policy and mirroring and matching policy practice and making sure that the practice is serving the policy in the ways that it was intended, and making sure there's street-level enforcers of policy or not being subversive and just doing things in the ways that they want to do.

I started to talk about community-based challenges, but it's also true that teachers within institutions and educators in higher ed, I'm assuming, have all sorts of reasons that they push back and push back against this kind of work. I've noticed it among my colleagues in higher ed, in which they cling to terms like "urban"—I mean, these are scholars doing this kind of stuff—terms like urban, terms like minority. Just say anti-blackness. Don't just keep saying minority. Let's be very specific in the terms that we use.

You know, whenever I go out to talk to schools, I always spend at least 20 to 30 minutes talking about how we can recognize and deal with things like white fragility or white self-centeredness or ethnocentric thoughts that people come up with, because these are all kinds of the emotional things that people are dealing with that they really should speak to someone about. Maybe a therapist or maybe some colleagues who are white like them with whom they can seek counsel or something.

Then you have bureaucratic challenges like our babies are dying out here. Those are the things that people have said to me in some of the studies I've done, so black folks and indigenous people in communities and Latino communities are feeling real *dire* desperation. Yet anybody who studies organizational change knows that bureaucratic change is typically glacial. It's not quick and we don't feel like we have that kind of time. So you have this kind of tension and then you have people then in there grabbing for straws for immediate change, superficially implementing reform.

Every time I go into district, I always hear, "We know we have problems. Just give us solutions." And as I kind of mentioned when I was with you all down there, when you do that, it's just a begging for all the same, but just calling your typical traditional practices by names. Because if you don't have the critical consciousness along with the new reforms, you absolutely are just going to retrofit the same behaviors and practices and just call it something new. So this happens. It's been proven in the literature.

In my book from last year, "The School to Prison Pipeline," we have two chapters in there like that, one dealing with PBIS, one dealing with restorative justice. So that's a problem. And I think this space of colleagues who are willing to come along are not multifaceted. You know, we're so overwhelmed as professors and as teachers and instructors and K-12 as well, that we really don't have time to do the deep learning that's necessary in order for us to *unlearn* and begin a new practice.

One challenge is just *time*. People just don't have the time. You really do have to do some learning in order to understand how you have been a bigot for 40 years or 50 years. That doesn't come easy; it's an emotional task. You have emotions, you have time, you have all of these things that kind of prevent educators from becoming culturally responsive and resources; resources are stretched too.

So we talked about community, we talked about educators, we talked about policy, and there also is the problem of the individuals leading the change as well. Well, them not being able to get the support that they need. So for example, I'm working with a group of elementary school principals in a district right now. I've worked with cultural liaisons, I work with instructional leaders, and I've worked with principals, and I'm working with a group of principals now.

And just having that time once a month for a day to unpack, to learn, to share ideas about what's working with each other, to get on the same page and start a document is so powerful for them that I can't imagine what else might have worked aside from what they're doing. They need that time, probably with an outsider like myself to help them think they're reading the book along with it.

But they also just need the time with each other to deconstruct, to help each other. I'm working with another district, working with the principals in their district, and one of the things that they realized is that when one of them steps up and does something that's in the best interest of the community, and there's always community push back: Well, we don't need to do that, all our kids are equal.

Parents will call and say, "I don't want you talking about race at the school," something like that. And they go to the superintendent; the superintendent can much easier go to that principal and say, "Look, call them into the office." It's a sit down. But if all of them have adopted, all 20 or 25 of those principals have adopted this as the policy that they as a group of principals are going to move

together on, the superintendent can't really do that. So there are all kinds of strategies to do with too that I discuss in the book.

**Kristal Raheem:**

For our last question, I just want to know what advice would you give our listeners who are interested in adapting culturally responsive school leadership practices at their institutions?

**Dr. Khalifa:**

Well, that's what the entire book is about. So let me start with maybe some possible first steps. One thing is to get the right material, reading material, in front of you. Not just my book, there are many other resources out there that have ideas for how the journey can begin, and so one thing is to start with a group of people who you know are motivated and are interested and will definitely want to learn.

I can't imagine that educators are out there and saying, "Look, I know everything I need to know. I don't need to learn anything else." Even if you've been there two or three years, so you're fresh out of school, professional learning is something that is so demonstrated and rooted in our educational literature that it's difficult for me to imagine any educator who is really serious about being a good educator says, "No, I don't want to learn anything more."

Now we do have a complication, a hiccup here, because race is something different from almost every other topic. An agenda for discussion in public schools and higher ed, we can talk about social studies and language arts what we need to do. We can talk about how low the English scores are, how math, science and other STEM fields, the students are lacking. We can identify very narrowly what teacher is missing what based on the test data and what they need to emphasize in the years going forward and maybe get some mentoring. So to make sure that incremental equations or the life cycle or whatever is understood.

We can go to very, very lengthy in-depth discussions about that, about *every* topic in education except race. When it comes to race, people just step back, cross their arms, listen, worry about their own anxiety, their own guilt. Are they going to be blamed, and they won't look at the data. I know. I do equity audits for districts across the country, and I know that they don't want to talk about that data. And then some of them don't think that they need to, but that's not what it is for most of them. Most of them know they need to, but most of them have other fears and historic anxieties and emotional issues that prevent them from really embracing the language around race, diversity, oppression, culturally responsive education and stuff like that.

It's difficult to push an entire staff in that direction from the beginning. So find your group, find your people who are highly motivated to do it, find your learning materials that you all begin to read and try to deconstruct and unpack. Find your community-located experts. It could be an elder, it could be a social activist, it could be young folks who had been kicked out of the system that you

claimed that you are serving people in—bring those voices and those epistemologies and those knowledges.

And there are all kinds of other strategies in the book as well. I don't want to lay too much on, but there has to be a way, be a consistent way, of getting that knowledge. There are several things that can help us unlearn. There are several things that can help us *check* our biases and our epistemologies and stuff. Community-based epistemologies has to be one of those ways, and the data as well that you collect regularly yourselves as educators, higher ed, K-12.

That data have to also be used to check us because, again, I've gone into spaces where people have been *highly* sensitive around issues of equity and inclusion and diversity, yet they replicate oppressive context for students. It pains them, it tears them up that they're doing that too, by the way. They're not trying to do that, but they don't know how to unlearn. They don't know how to deconstruct. They don't know how to unpack. They don't know how to delink, if you want to go to decolonial literature. They don't know how to do that, so they just end up retrofitting new terms and new terminology in the same old practices.

So, I think that that's the first step is identifying the people who want to do this work and finding the right [types] of people who can help you push that along. And there are materials for higher ed, there are materials for K-12, materials for specific type of K-12 schools. My book is a start in that direction.

**Kristal Raheem:**

Thank you. Well, that concludes our interview and I'd like to thank you again on behalf of OCCRL for joining us.

**Dr. Khalifa:**

Thanks for the invitation. I've enjoyed connecting with you the second time in a month.

**Announcer:**

Tune in next month when Colvin T. Georges Jr., of OCCRL, interviews Dr. William A. Smith about racial battle fatigue. Dr. Smith is the head of the Department of Education, Culture & Society at the University of Utah.

Background music for this podcast was provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to equity, justice, and excellence in education for all students.