KALEIDOSCOPIC SUPPORT: ENHANCING FOSTER YOUTH SUCCESS IN

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION THROUGH CULTURALLY RELEVANT LEADERSHIP

AND ACTION RESEARCH

by

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(Under the Direction of Laura L. Bierema and Diann O. Jones)

ABSTRACT

This action research dissertation explores the multifaceted and dynamic approaches necessary to support foster youth in higher education through culturally relevant leadership and retention strategies. Utilizing a kaleidoscope metaphor, this study examines how individual practitioners' intrapersonal development and ecological conditions within postsecondary institutions collectively shape the support systems available to foster youth.

The research aims to integrate the culturally relevant leadership learning model with established retention theories to develop comprehensive support frameworks that recognize and address foster youths' unique experiences, strengths, and challenges. By focusing on the reflective and ever-changing nature of these support systems, the study seeks to provide actionable insights for campus administrators, policymakers, and support staff.

Methodologically, the study employs action research cycles to iteratively refine and enhance support strategies, ensuring that they are responsive to the evolving needs of foster youth. Data collection includes qualitative interviews, focus groups, and participant observations

with staff and administrators at Emerson College. The findings highlight the critical role of culturally relevant leadership in creating inclusive and empowering educational environments.

This dissertation underscores the importance of holistic and timely support for foster youth, advocating for policies and practices that foster academic success, personal growth, and leadership development. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on foster youth in higher education and provides a practical framework for enhancing their educational outcomes and overall well-being.

INDEX WORDS: foster youth, foster care, postsecondary education, access, risk factors, barriers, support structures, culturally relevant leadership learning, retention, action research

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Framing the Problem: A Historical Legacy of Inclusion and Exclusion of Foster Youth in

Higher Education

Education is one of the most transformative tools available for both personal and societal

change. However, for students in foster care, the journey through education is often fraught with

numerous obstacles that significantly impede their progress. Research consistently shows that

foster youth experience significantly higher rates of poverty, homelessness, and unemployment

compared to their peers who are not in foster care (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). This disparity

underscores the urgent need for a multifaceted approach to support these students—an approach

that can be likened to viewing a problem through the lens of a kaleidoscope.

A growing body of literature highlights the various educational barriers that foster youth

face, including limited access to college and inadequate support programs. These students often

lack the social and financial capital that many young adults take for granted, making their

transition to adulthood and postsecondary education particularly challenging. Beyond these

financial and social deficits, foster youth must navigate complex and often fragmented support

systems (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010a). Yet, despite these barriers, access to higher education

has been identified as a powerful protective factor that can significantly improve long-term

outcomes for foster youth (Courtney et al., 2011).

The kaleidoscope metaphor captures this intricate journey well. Just as a kaleidoscope,

composed of broken fragments, transforms scattered pieces into beautiful, cohesive patterns, the

support systems for foster youth must come together to create a holistic, practical framework that empowers these young adults. Foster youth transitioning to postsecondary education have access to various supportive systems, such as the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services' Independent Living Program (ILP), high school counselors, college and university foster youth liaisons, and nonprofit organizations. Each of these entities provides unique, complementary programs and benefits, but even collectively, they do not eliminate the complexity and challenges inherent in this transition.

The journey from foster care to higher education is complex but filled with potential. By viewing the problem through a kaleidoscopic lens—recognizing the need for a cohesive and comprehensive support system, we can work towards creating solutions that address the immediate challenges and empower foster youth to achieve their educational and life goals. In this way, the fragmented pieces of their experiences can form a pattern of success and opportunity, just as the kaleidoscope creates beauty from chaos.

Early History

Foster care foundations in the U.S. trace back to the English "poor laws" of the 1500s. Initially, children were placed due to parental death rather than abuse or neglect (Administration for Children & Families, 2020; Gish 1999). Dependent children were often treated alongside adults through methods like outdoor relief and indentureship (McGowan, 2005, 2010). English poor laws placed children in almshouses until they were old enough to be farmed out or indentured and they would remain in those placements until they reached the age of majority (McGowan, 2005, 2010). This system improved, moving away from almshouses to more structured care arrangements.

19ᵗʰ Century Developments

The 1800s saw organized care for dependent children, influenced by significant social changes like the abolition of slavery and the Industrial Revolution (McGowan, 2010). The case of Mary Ellen Wilson in 1874 raised public awareness of child abuse, leading to the formation of child protection agencies like the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (Jalongo, 200; Watkins, 1990). The Orphan Train Movement, initiated by Charles Loring Brace in 1853, emphasized family life for abandoned children, although experiences varied widely (Gish, 1999; McGowan, 2010; O'Connor, 2004; Staller, 2020).

20ᵗʰ Century Advances

The early 1900s marked a shift towards child-focused laws and the establishment of the U.S. Children's Bureau in 1912 (Lathrop, 1921; McGowan, 2010). The Social Security Act of 1935 had several provisions that indirectly benefited foster youth through its broader public assistance programs. While the Act was not explicitly targeted at foster youth, certain aspects of the legislation helped support vulnerable children and their families, including those in foster care (McGowan, 2010; Voices for Children, 2020). The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974 established federal guidelines for child abuse response and prevention. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (1980) and the Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997) prioritized child safety and permanency planning.

21ˢᵗ Century Focus

The 21st-century policies, such as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018, and the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, have significantly impacted foster youth by extending support, improving outcomes, and providing additional resources during critical times. The Fostering

Connections Act of 2008 allowed states to extend foster care services and support to youth until age 21, providing older foster youth with extra time to transition to adulthood, access education and training, and secure stable housing. This Act also emphasized maintaining educational stability for foster youth by ensuring children in foster care could remain in their current school or receive prompt enrollment in a new school with all educational records transferred quickly. Additionally, it required states to develop plans for the ongoing oversight and coordination of health care services for children in foster care, including regular medical and mental health assessments. The Act also provided federal funding for kinship guardianship assistance payments, supporting relatives who take legal guardianship of children in foster care, thereby promoting family connections and reducing reliance on non-relative foster homes.

The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 furthered this progress by allowing federal funding to be used for prevention services, such as mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and in-home parenting skills, aimed at preventing children from entering foster care in the first place. It emphasized placing children in family-like settings, rather than institutional care, and provided funding to support kinship navigator programs that help relative caregivers navigate the system and access services. The Act also limited the use of congregate or group care settings, ensuring that children placed in such settings are only there when necessary and for a limited time, with a focus on ensuring high-quality, trauma-informed care.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 provided additional funding to support foster youth, addressing the increased needs and challenges faced by this vulnerable population during the crisis. It increased funding for the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood, which helps older youth in foster care with education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support, and

connections to caring adults. The Act also included provisions to prevent youth from aging out of foster care during the pandemic, ensuring they continue to receive support and services even after reaching the age limit.

These policies reflect a continued federal commitment to improving outcomes for foster youth and alumni. Extending foster care support to age 21 and beyond has provided foster youth with additional time and resources to prepare for independent living, higher education, and employment. Emphasizing educational stability, health care coordination, and kinship placements has improved the overall well-being and stability of foster youth. Focusing on prevention services and family placements has helped reduce the number of children entering foster care and improved outcomes for those who do enter the system. The additional funding and provisions during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated a responsive approach to the unique challenges faced by foster youth during crises, ensuring continued support and stability. These measures have collectively provided a more comprehensive and supportive framework for foster youth transitioning to adulthood.

Impact of Increased Federal Support on Foster Youth Over Time

Federal support for foster youth has steadily increased, significantly impacting the quality and scope of services available to these individuals. This support has evolved through various legislative acts and policies to improve foster youth's care, safety, and opportunities, especially in higher education – see Table 1.1. These policies reflect a continued federal commitment to improving foster youth and alumni outcomes. Extending foster care support to age 21 and beyond has provided foster youth additional time and resources to prepare for independent living, higher education, and employment. Research shows that extended support into early adulthood significantly improves foster youth's chances of continuing their education and

successfully transitioning to independent living. Emphasizing educational stability, health care coordination, and kinship placements has improved foster youth's overall well-being and stability.

Focusing on prevention services and family placements has helped reduce the number of children entering foster care and improved outcomes for those who do. The additional funding and provisions during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated a responsive approach to the unique challenges faced by foster youth during crises, ensuring continued support and stability. Collectively, these measures have provided a more comprehensive and supportive framework for foster youth transitioning to adulthood.

By providing a stable environment and access to necessary resources, federal support has helped reduce the rates of poverty, homelessness, and unemployment among foster youth. This ongoing commitment to improving the foster care system reflects an understanding of the unique challenges faced by these individuals and the critical role that education and support play in their successful transition to adulthood. Although many improvements have been made, foster youth still need help entering and completing a postsecondary degree.

Table 1.1

Timeline: Evolving Federal Role in Family and Children Services

Year	Legislation/action
1909	First White House Conference on Children
1912	Creation of the U.S. Children's Bureau
1935	Social Security Act (P.L. 74-271), Title IV, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC); and Title V, Part 3 Child Welfare Services Program
1961	Social Security Amendments (P.L. 87-31), Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Expanded federal AFDC payments to include foster care.
1962	Public Welfare Amendments (P.L. 87-543) to Social Security
1967	Social Security Amendments (P.L. 90-248):

	Child Welfare Services Program, originally authorized under Title V, moved to Title IV-B. Authorized use of federal funds for purchase of service from voluntary agencies.
1974	Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (P.L. 93-247) enacted. Amended in 1978, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2003, and 2010.
1975	Title XX of the Social Security Act (P.L. 93-647)
1978	Indian Child Welfare Act (P.L. 95-608)
1980	Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (P.L. 96-272, Title IV-E)
1993	Family Preservation and Support Services Program (enacted as part of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, P.L. 103-66, and amended Title IV-B)
1994	Multiethnic Placement Act (P.L. 103-382)
1996	Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Act (P.L. 104-193). Eliminated financial assistance entitlement under AFDC and replaced this with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program.
1997	Adoption and Safe Families Act ([ASFA] P.L. 105-89). Amended Title IV-E.
1999	Foster Care Independence Act (P.L. 106-109)
2000	Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (P.L. 106-177)
	Intercounty Adoption Act (P.L. 106-279)
2001	Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendment (P.L. 107-133). Amended Title IV-B.
2003	Adoption Promotion Act (P.L. 108-145)
	Keeping Children and Families Safe Act (P.L.108-36)
2005	Fair Access Foster Care Act (P.L. 109-113)
2006	Tax Relief and Health Care Act (P.L. 109-432)
	Child and Family Services Improvement Act (P.L. 109-288)
	Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (P.L. 109-248)
	Safe and Timely Interstate Placement of Foster Children Act (P.L. 109-239)
	Deficit Reduction Act (P.L. 109-171)
2008	Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351)
2010	Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (P.L. 111-148)
2011	Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act (P.L. 112-34)
2014	Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (P.L. 113-138)
2015	Justice for Victims of Trafficking (P.L. 114-22)
2016	Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act (P.L. 114-198)
2018	Family First Prevention Services Act (P.L. 115-123)
	Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities Act, or the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act (P.L. 115-271)

Current Trends and Patterns

Current child welfare policies and resources impact approximately 400,000 children and

youth in foster care at any given time. Nearly 20,000 of these youth emancipate (i.e., age out)

from foster care each year (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Foster youth who have aged

out of the foster care system risk experiencing adverse outcomes across several life domains.

including education, employment, and economic self-sufficiency, physical and mental health,

substance abuse, housing, and family formation (Bruskas, 2008; Courtney, 2009; Day et al.,

2011; Dworsky, 2008; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010a, 2010b; McMillen & Tucker, 1999). Foster

youth who choose to exit care lose the support and services provided through child welfare,

extended foster care services, and federal funding opportunities designed to support their

transition to adulthood independence and postsecondary education. The following two

subsections examine the problem at the national and local levels.

National Trends and Patterns

Increased federal support provides policy, structure, and funding, which are valuable

resources that can help foster youth financially as they enroll in postsecondary institutions.

However, as studies have proven, these youth are still less likely than their peers to complete

high school (Bruskas, 2008; Morton, 2015; Wolanin, 2005), and even fewer pursue a

postsecondary degree (Barth, 1990). Low percentages of high school completion and college

enrollment rates among foster youth leave a significant gap between federally funded support for

postsecondary education and educational attainment.

Pursuing a college degree is a vital step and gateway toward the middle class. The U.S.

Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey offers evidence that workers with higher

degree attainment earn more and have lower unemployment rates (see Figure 1.1) (Torpey,

2021). Young people of all backgrounds can have difficulty getting to college and navigating the

transition to postsecondary education. However, foster youth and foster youth alumni face

particularly daunting challenges. Life in the foster care system puts foster youth at risk of

missing out on the academic, social, and familial support networks that help students prepare for

college. Despite the promise of educational attainment and increased earnings, foster care youth are less likely to graduate from high school than their peers (Courtney et al., 2011). Foster-care youth and alumni are also less likely to enroll in college after high school completion and less likely to graduate from college when they do enroll (Barrat & Berliner, 2013).

As evidenced in Figure 1.1, a youth's ability to access and obtain a postsecondary education has long-term implications for earning a family-sustaining wage. For some individuals, a college degree and higher salary will afford them the life-changing opportunity to break the cycle of poverty for themselves and their families.

Figure 1.1

Earnings and Unemployment Rate by Educational Attainment (Torpey, 2021)
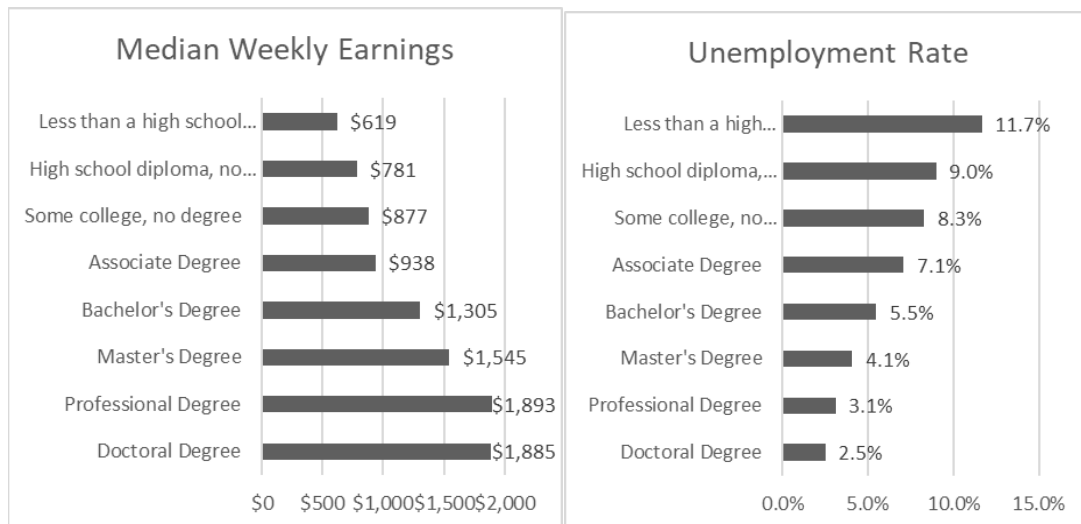
National and state data exemplify the economic and societal impact that is increasing the educational attainment of foster youth and alumni. The Children's Bureau and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services use the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) to collect case-level information. Information is collected on all

children in foster care and those who have been adopted. Figure 1.2 visualizes the 5-year

comparative data provided in the FY 2020 AFCARS Report regarding the number of youths

entering and exiting the foster care system. As shown in Figure 1.2, there is considerable

consistency in the number of youths experiencing foster care over the 5 years. The U.S.

Children's Bureau 2022 AFCARS Report showed 391,098 youth in foster care nationwide on

September 30, 2021. Approximately 157,525 of these youth were adolescents and young adults

aged 10–20, accounting for 40.27% of foster youth nationwide (Children's Bureau, 2021). Since

youth who experience foster care are less likely to graduate from high school, it is pertinent to

focus on this adolescent demographic. Adolescence is when youth are expected and encouraged

to begin thinking about and preparing for college.

Figure 1.2

Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) FY 2022 Data
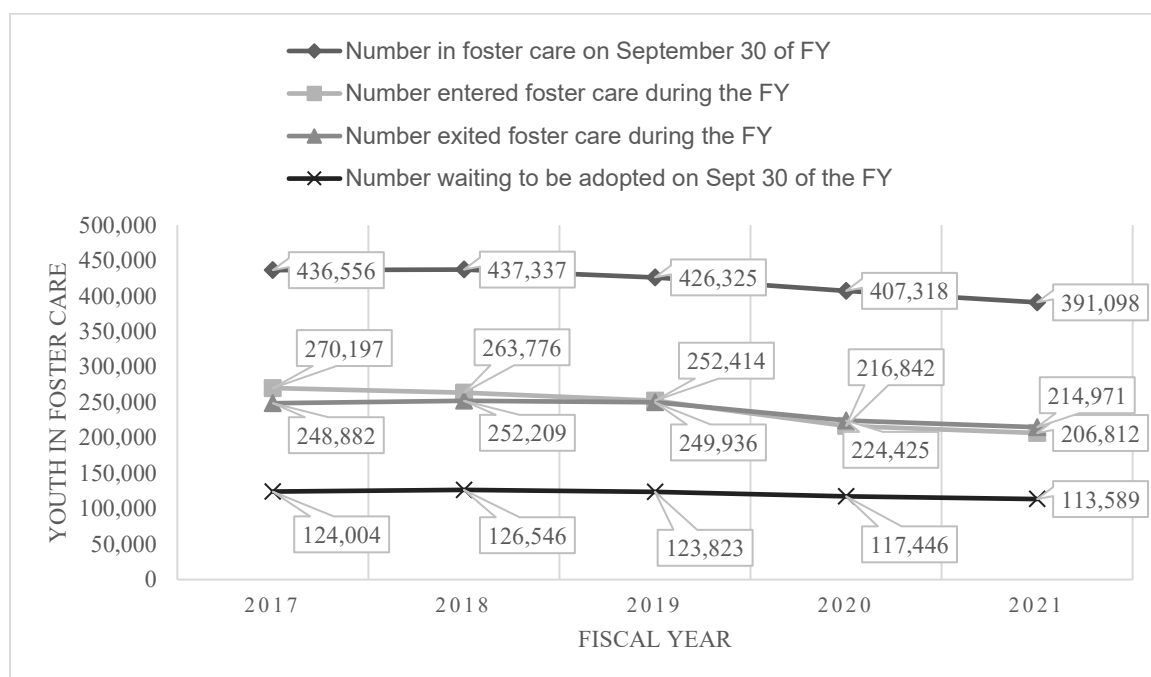
Note. Data from the FY 2021 AFCARS Report (Children's Bureau, 2022a).

Although the statement is 17 years old, the sentiments and foundations of Wolanin's (2005) claims are still relevant:

> If foster youth completed high school and attended postsecondary education at the same rate as their peers, nearly 100,000 additional foster youth in the 18 to 25-year-old age group would be attending higher education. This is the size of the gap in opportunity for higher education between foster youth and their peers, and it is the magnitude of the policy problem to equalize opportunities for foster youth. (p. 7)

To increase postsecondary enrollment and completion for foster youth, practitioners and scholars need to target foster youth early enough to make meaningful connections, provide mentorship, and develop the critical skills needed for foster youth to navigate to and through postsecondary education. Utilizing best practices to create targeted interventions has the potential to create a positive and lasting impact for a significant number of foster youth and alumni.

Statewide Trends and Patterns

Embark Georgia is a statewide network that aids higher education professionals and institutions in supporting foster youth and alumni. Embark Georgia offers resources, education, and information exchange across various stakeholders, including foster youth, community-based stakeholders, and K–12 educators. The Embark Georgia program was built and designed based on the evidence of success from other state programs, including the Guardian Scholars Program at California State University–Fullerton (Guardian Scholars, n.d.), Fostering Success Michigan (Fostering Success Michigan, n.d.), and Ohio Reach (Ohio Reach, n.d.). The 2012 University System of Georgia College Access Grant supported the development of Embark Georgia to help increase college access for foster youth and alumni, who are underrepresented in Georgia and across the United States. The Embark Georgia (n.d., paragraph 2) mission states:

The Embark Georgia statewide network serves postsecondary professionals and institutions to ensure connectivity, share best practices, and provide information exchange among youth, community-based stakeholders, and K-12 educators in support of former foster and homeless youth. Working in partnership is crucial to achieving our goals. Embark works collaboratively with a number of agencies and organizations to improve the educational options for young people who have experienced foster care or homelessness.

The support network created through Embark Georgia creates a space for professionals to connect, learn, and strategize how to serve better and support youth who have experienced foster care as a collective. The organization's goals include improving the understanding of enrollment and graduation rates for these student groups, supporting campus-based program leaders, and supporting efforts to expand these students' opportunities to pursue secondary education (Embark Georgia, n.d.). Embark Georgia has been instrumental in building the foundations of a statewide professional network to support foster youth and alumni. Such advances notwithstanding, Embark Georgia is limited in its ability to build capacity and keep up with the constantly changing scope of this work and dissemination of best practices due to its small staffing size. Examples of initiatives implemented by Embark Georgia to aid postsecondary professionals and other stakeholders in supporting foster youth and alumni include the semiannual Embark Leadership Conference, a statewide email-based list serve, and a regional coalition pilot program.

The Embark Leadership Conference provides continuing education for statewide and national leaders in higher education, child welfare, and K–12, along with young people with lived experience in the foster care system. The email listserv provides a way for professionals

within the network to stay connected, share resources, promote funding opportunities, and seek feedback. The Embark Georgia Regional Coalition was a pilot program designed to build relationships among regional partners who serve students experiencing foster care and homelessness. The desired outcome of the pilot program was to build adequate relational support to help youth experiencing foster care and homelessness transition into successful postsecondary educational opportunities.

When considering the existing literature on understanding the needs of foster youth and alumni in postsecondary education, it is important to remember how the historical exclusion and societal barriers that impact foster youth have also impacted the ability of postsecondary institutions to provide relevant and timely support services to foster youth and alumni as they transition from state care to college and university campuses around the nation.

Literature Review: Understanding the Needs of Foster Youth and Alumni in Higher Education

The literature review for this study used various research methods to gather relevant information, including a thorough search of academic databases such as Academic Search Complete, ProQuest Central, EBSCO Ebooks Academic Collection, and Google Scholar. Combinations of the keywords foster youth, foster care, foster youth alumni, foster care alumni, higher education, college, undergraduate, postsecondary education, achievement, success, transition, risk factors, barriers, access, and persistence were used to identify relevant studies. Search results were filtered to include full-text scholarly peer-reviewed journals.

The interdisciplinary nature of the topic yielded articles published in various journals originating from multiple fields of study, including higher education, student affairs, social work, and beyond. Additional articles were sourced by reviewing the reference pages of identified

studies. The search yielded two systematic literature reviews conducted within the last 5 years that served as contextual building blocks offering a plethora of compiled knowledge and vetted sources to supplement initial findings (Geiger & Beltran, 2017; Johnson, 2021). Geiger and Beltran (2017) divided their findings into three themes: (a) college readiness, access, and support; (b) postsecondary preparation and support programs; and (c) outcomes and experiences. The first two thematic results were shared in the publication, while the third was reserved for presentation elsewhere. Johnson (2021) adapted Rendon's (2006) interactive model of student success for underserved students as the conceptual framework for creating and organizing his literature review. Another finding from the search results was a literature review completed by Horton (2015) identifying at-risk factors that affect college student success. This publication provided detailed insight into risk factors and behaviors that impact college success.

To analyze and synthesize the findings of the literature review, the results have been divided into three overarching themes: (a) risk factors or barriers; (b) college readiness, access, and postsecondary support; and (c) campus-based support programs impacting the educational paths for foster youth and alumni. This study aims to provide a comprehensive and up-to-date review of the current literature on the experiences of foster care students pursuing postsecondary education and the impact of culturally relevant leadership principles on supporting their educational success.

The concept of a kaleidoscope also mirrors the complex and dynamic nature of the issues faced by foster youth in higher education. Each piece of research and each stakeholder's perspective adds a unique element to the overall picture, helping us to see the intricate patterns and underlying structures that need to be addressed. This collaborative approach is essential for

transforming fragmented support systems into holistic solutions that address the diverse needs of foster youth.

Risk Factors and Barriers for Foster Youth and Alumni

The *Glossary of Education Reform* defines at-risk as "often used to describe students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school" (Great Schools Partnership, 2013, para 1). The glossary further clarifies that risk factors are "situational rather than innate," supporting Harden's (2004) assertion that the adverse academic outcomes of foster youth and alumni are a result of the circumstances that led them to the foster care system (Great Schools Partnership, 2013, para 3). Scholars have documented that foster youth and alumni are less likely than their peers to complete high school (Courtney et al., 2005; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Pecora et al., 2005; Scannapieco et al., 1995). Estimates vary depending on the study, but as few as one-third (McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Scannapieco et al., 1995) or as many as two-thirds (Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, et al., 2007; Pecora et al., 2005) of youth in foster care graduate from high school. Reilly (2003) found that 75% of Nevada youth aging out of foster care wanted to complete a postsecondary degree, but most did not have a high school degree.

Existing empirical studies have shown that youth in foster care face several barriers, when attempting to complete a high-school diploma, access postsecondary education, or obtain a college degree. For example, high mobility and changing schools trigger enrollment delays that cause foster youth to fall behind their peers, lose hope, and drop out of high school at higher rates than their peers (Hearing on the Implementation of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, 2009). Youth in foster care also have disproportionately high rates of incarceration, mental illness, poverty, substance abuse, and low levels of educational

attainment (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022b; Blome, 1997; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2011; Davis, 2006; Day et al., 2013; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010a, 2010b; Graham et al., 2015; Harris et al., 2009; Kahne & Bailey, 1999; Pecora et al., 2005; Rassen et al., 2010; Wolanin, 2005). Horton (2015) created a table highlighting the significant risk factors for dropping out of high school as identified in research and practice (see Table 1.2). These risk factors are categorized by individual and family domains. Generally, students at risk of failure or dropping out experience multiple risk factors. Asterisks have been added to identify experiences and circumstances common to foster youth and alumni, e.g., high mobility, family instability, and maltreatment, as evidenced through literature.

Table 1.2

Risk Factors for Dropping Out of High School

Individual domain	
Individual background characteristics	School performance
Learning disability or emotional disturbance*	Low achievement*
	Retention/over-age for grade
Mental health or trauma*	
Early adult responsibilities	School behavior
High number of work hours*	Misbehavior
Parenthood*	Early aggression
Social attitudes, values, and behaviors	School engagement
High-risk peer group	Poor attendance
High-risk social behavior	Low educational expectations
Highly social behavior	Lack of effort
Highly socially active outside of school	Low commitment to school
	No extracurricular participation
Family domain	
Family background characteristics	School behavior
Low socioeconomic status	Misbehavior
High family mobility*	Early aggression
Low educational level of parents	Low educational expectations
Large number of siblings	Sibling has dropped out
Not living with both natural parents*	No contact with school
Family disruption*	Lack of conversations about school

Note. Adapted from "Identifying At-Risk Factors That Affect College Student Success," by J. Horton, 2015, *International Journal of Process Education*, *7*(1), p. 84. Copyright 2015 by the International Association of Editors. * An asterisk identifies experiences and circumstances common to foster youth and alumni.

       Trauma experienced in foster care is often the root cause of mental health challenges. The connections among mental health, trauma, and experience as a former foster youth has been evidenced by many studies indicating that mental health issues create a common barrier to postsecondary education access and success (Arria et al., 2013; Day et al., 2012; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Gray et al., 2018; Lovitt & Emerson, 2009; Merdinger et al., 2005; Morton, 2015,

2018; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Salazar et al., 2016; Wolanin, 2005). Many studies have noted participants' inability to access or afford adequate mental health services (Day et al., 2012; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hines et al., 2005; Lovitt & Emerson, 2009; Salazar, 2012). Stories shared by participants in the Day et al. (2012) study evidenced the effects of depression, emotional disturbance, and other mental health illness symptoms on their ability to focus and complete academic tasks. Morton's (2018) longitudinal study also indicated that mental health challenges pose one of the most significant barriers to participants' academic achievement. Unrau et al. (2012) identified trauma experienced in foster care as impacting numerous success factors, including the motivation, relationships, and behaviors needed to succeed in a higher education setting.

The rate of persistence and retention to college completion for former foster youth is a critical concern for higher education practitioners. Existing studies estimate that 70% to 84% of youth in foster care aspire to attend college (Courtney et al., 2004; McMillen et al., 2003; Reilly, 2003; Wolanin, 2005). However, adolescents in foster care enter and complete college at lower rates than their peers (Geiger & Beltran, 2017). Furthermore, only 10% percent of foster youth complete a college degree by their mid-20s (Pecora et al., 2006; Rios & Rocco, 2014). Poor performance on standardized tests is also evidence that foster youths struggle to access college due to low levels of academic preparation (Frerer et al., 2013). Foster youth who successfully enroll in college need additional institutional knowledge to matriculate and persist through college (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

College Readiness, Access, and Postsecondary Support

Former foster youth must navigate multiple complex systems to access and leverage the resources needed to enroll and transition to a postsecondary institution. The high transiency rate

and lack of communication among systems, e.g., education, caregivers, and child welfare, establish barriers that stifle academic potential (Kirk et al., 2011; Morton, 2015; Rios & Rocco, 2014). Many foster youth and alumni report needing more preparation for the collegiate enrollment process and reported difficulties with aspects such as missing deadlines, documentation, and missed prerequisites (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009).

Relationships can make or break the decision for former foster youth to enroll in and persist through college. Many studies have shown that former foster youth who lack consistent, long-term, and supportive relationships with adults face barriers to their educational aspirations and access (Day et al., 2012; Kirk et al., 2011; Morton, 2015; Rios & Rocco, 2014). To counteract the barriers posed by these complex relationships with adults, providers, and educators, many studies have emphasized the importance of supportive relationships as a contributing factor for former foster youths' collegiate success (Amechi, 2016; Batsche et al., 2014; Hass et al., 2014; Hass & Graydon, 2009; Hines et al., 2005; Jones, 2011; Lovitt & Emerson, 2009; Neal, 2017; Rassen et al., 2010; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Salazar et al., 2016; Sim et al., 2008). The supportive relationships outlined in these studies include a variety of individuals, including but not limited to faculty, staff, social workers, and peers.

Salazar et al. (2016) described the importance of having a variety of beneficial supportive relationships "from on-campus connections with and dorm mates to continued support from previous healthy connections" for foster youth in higher education (p. 270). The study by Day et al. (2012) revealed the pertinence of permanent relationships outside the school setting to assist with leveraging resources, finding opportunities, and providing ongoing motivation and encouragement. Additional studies have highlighted the importance of caring and supportive adults who can assist youth in navigating complex systems, emphasizing the

importance of these adults' ability to connect youth with educational resources and provide empowerment (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009; Day et al., 2012; Morton, 2015; Rios & Rocco, 2014). Broader community connections often become the most prevalent type for former foster youth, who have difficulty building relationships with individuals on whom they can rely. Such difficulty in creating and maintaining relationships often stems from the transient nature of the foster care system (Rassen et al., 2010; Tobolowsky et al., 2017).

Independent Living Program

The Independent Living Program (ILP) is a federally funded program providing support and resources to foster youth aged 14–21 preparing to transition out of the foster care system. At age 18, youth must opt into extended foster care and meet participation conditions to continue in ILP programs. The Georgia Resilient, Youth-Centered, and Empowered Services (GA RYSE) program is the ILP equivalent in Georgia's Division of Family & Children Services (DFCS). These ILPs provide eligible youth with training and resources to help successfully prepare them for adulthood, including life skills training, education, employment assistance, and help to find and maintain housing. The program's services are offered through appropriate referral resources via public, private, and community partnerships. Participation in an ILP is voluntary (GA RYSE, 2023).

Educational Training Vouchers

Education and training voucher (ETV) funds are available to help foster youth and alumni enroll in qualified postsecondary education programs. In Georgia, ETV funds are administered by the J. W. Fanning Institute (JWFI) for Leadership Development at the University of Georgia as a part of their contract with the DFCS (Georgia Division of Family and Children Services, 2023; J.W. Fanning Institute, 2022). Until 2015, the state's DFCS office

managed the ETV program through regional offices. Unfortunately, "these regional offices had limited bandwidth to manage the process, resulting in numerous challenges for enrolled students from semester to semester, including dropped course schedules, students struggling to enroll in classes, and difficulty ascertaining where payments came from" (J. Bedgood, personal communication, January 27, 2024). Additionally, the DFCS did not have effective tracking mechanisms and struggled to generate accurate reports on elements such as how many students were receiving ETV support and their progress in school. "The DFCS recognized that many other states outsourced their ETV programs to third-party groups with the resources and capacity to better track and process these payments in alignment with state and federal policy" (J. Bedgood, personal communication, January 27, 2024). Given the working relationship between David Meyers at JWFI and the Independent Living Program at the time, it was determined by the DFCS that JWFI could manage the statewide program (D. Meyers, personal communication, January 29, 2024). Program administration was transferred to JWFI in July of 2015, where it has remained to date. The data and evaluations generated by JWFI are submitted in an annual report to DFCS outlining their partnership and providing information related to JWFI's process for managing the contract, training, data collection and analysis, time trends, and recommendations for program improvements (Georgia Division of Family and Children Services, 2023; J.W. Fanning Institute, 2022).

To receive funds, youth must have been in foster care for at least 6 months (nonconsecutive) and in care at age 14 or older. The ETV funds are intended to cover unmet needs and can only be used after all other sources of financial aid are applied; in addition, these funds can only be received for 5 years and max out at $5,000 annually. Youth participating in the GA RYSE ILP may be eligible to receive a Chaffee stipend of $300 or $600 a month while

participating in the ETV program. Foster youth and alumni register to confirm eligibility and to participate through the ILP regional specialist (Embark Georgia, n.d.).

Extended Foster Care

Extended foster care provides financial and other support to eligible foster youth aged 19–21 who choose to remain in foster care beyond age 18. Georgia's program is Connected By 21, also referred to as the Connections Program. This program can provide youth with a stable living situation while they continue to pursue their education or career goals. Youth who meet the criteria for this program may receive financial assistance, healthcare coverage, and other supportive services (Georgia Division of Family & Children Services, n.d.)

Postsecondary Support Services

Zetlin et al. (2010) highlighted the historical social work focus on education as a protective factor in foster youth's lives. However, social work has only begun to focus on the importance of postsecondary education in recent decades (Day et al., 2011; Watt et al., 2013). Social work and higher education researchers have emphasized the need for supportive faculty, staff, and administrators who offer focused attention to marginalized and underrepresented students. The need for supportive faculty, staff, and administrators has been evidenced in the areas of mentoring (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Nora & Crisp, 2007; Watt et al., 2013) and coaching (Sloan, 2013) to mitigate the stress associated with college and promote increased academic goal progress. Bennett Klefeker (2009) has argued that foster youth and alumni are an often-overlooked student subgroup within the first-generation student population. However, the literature on supporting first-generation students does not account for the history of complex trauma that foster youth and alumni bring to higher education.

Postsecondary institutions have begun using multiple approaches to improve the quality of support for foster youth and alumni. These approaches, which include building campus support programs and assigning foster care liaisons, aim to increase foster youth and alumni's sense of belonging and ultimately graduate them with the skills needed to be successful in their career and/or graduate school (Casey Family Programs, 2010). Campus support programs are typically led by one office or professional on each college campus. However, the entire campus (student and academic affairs) collaborates to facilitate success for foster youth and alumni (Watt et al., 2013). Alternatively, a foster care liaison is one person who is responsible for facilitating success for foster youth and alumni on their campus (Bustillos et al., 2023).

Campus-Based Support Programs

Campus-based support programs designed to support foster youth and alumni are being developed at colleges and universities across the United States. Each campus-based support program is unique, but collectively, they provide services and programs addressing financial, academic, housing, and social/emotional needs through intentional support structures to counterbalance a variety of academic and student support challenges (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Geiger et al., 2018; Smithgall et al., 2010). Examples of challenges include the need for extended and comprehensive student support services, e.g., year-round housing, campus-based employment, mental health services, academic advising, tutoring, and remedial courses (Day et al., 2011, 2013; Salazar et al., 2016). Ultimately, campus-based support programs aim to help foster youth and alumni persist through their higher education journey.

There are no agreed-upon standards for assessment or program outcomes for campus-based support programs (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Schelbe et al., 2019). Many scholars have acknowledged and advocated for building the evidence base for campus-based support programs

through program evaluations (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Geiger et al., 2016; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). The lack of agreed-upon standards makes it difficult to identify accurately the number of existing campus-based support programs through a means other than self-reporting. Ten recommendations offered by Geiger et al. (2016) for creating campus-based support programs are (a) securing financial support; (b) knowing campus resources; (c) developing relationships with relevant community partners; (d) establishing an advisory council; (e) creating a team; (f) identifying and involving stakeholders; (g) planning and taking action (e.g., program planning, programming, and content development); (h) evaluating action; (i) marketing and communicating; and (j) offering an early start program.

Postsecondary Foster Care Liaisons. There has been a growing movement to mandate homeless and foster care liaisons for postsecondary education nationwide in the United States. Each state currently mandating this role requires colleges and universities to designate a higher education liaison to support youth experiencing homelessness or foster care. Some programs are mandated at the state level through legislation, as in Texas, Virginia, and California; others are mandated at the university system level, as in Georgia. The idea to bring these campus support programs together under statewide umbrellas began a little over a decade ago when Texas, Virginia, and California adopted statewide strategic approaches and professional development initiatives. Bustillos et al. (2023) conducted a pragmatic, problem-driven content analysis of such programs and used the results of their document review to propose a foster care liaison conceptual framework outlining major aspects of the role. The data reveals three ways in which foster care liaisons perform their tasks: *relational*, *functional*, and *transformational* (see Figure 1.3)*.* Through these tasks, the liaisons help foster youth and alumni increase their social capital. This framework can guide the foster care liaison role in higher education.

Figure 1.3

Foster Care Liaison Conceptual Framework (Bustillos et al., 2023)
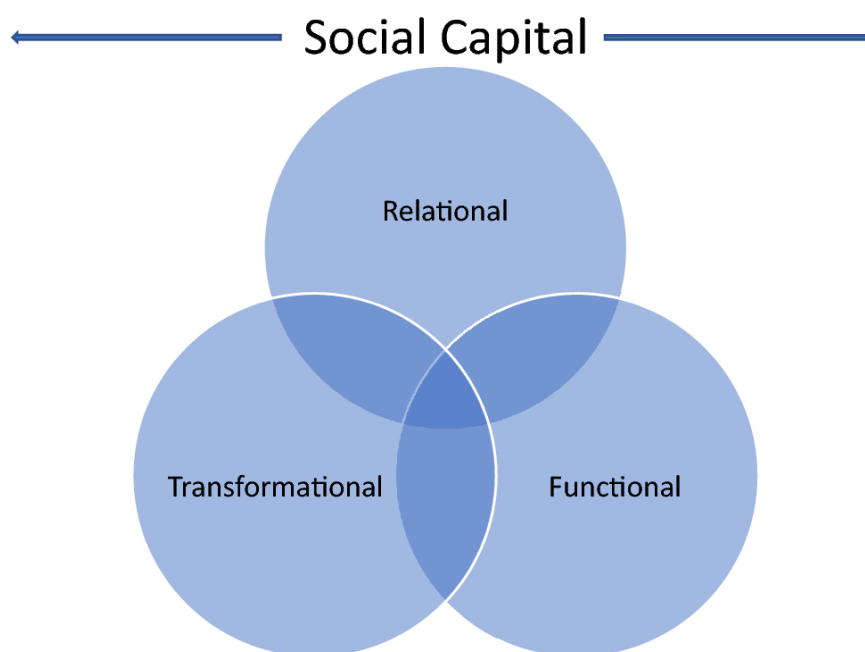
Note. From "Foster Care Liaisons in Higher Education: A Conceptual Framework for Supporting Post-Secondary Success Among College Students with Experience in Foster Care," by S. Bustillos, C. L. Norton, and E. Tamplin, *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *40*, p. 182. Copyright 2023 by S. Bustillos, C. L. Norton, and E. Tamplin, under exclusive license to Springer.

National and Statewide Networks. Casey Family Programs (https://www.casey.org/) is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on reducing the need for foster care in the United States. The Casey Family Programs offer free consulting to child welfare systems, provide direct services to youth and families, inform public policy, and conduct ongoing research and analysis. Fostering Academic Achievement Nationwide (https://faannetwork.com/) boasts 19 states with statewide networks of support: Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia,

Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. John Emerson and Maddy Day initiated the national sharing of best practices by creating the Fostering Academic Achievement Nationwide (FAAN) network, which aims to

> bring together leaders of statewide foster care and higher education backbone
>
> organizations to share learning and best practices in policy and programming across the
>
> field. Since that time FAAN has grown from 9 states represented to 18 represented today.
>
> The FAAN network is uniquely poised to fill the void in the field of foster care and
>
> higher education by leveraging the collective expertise of their members, the campuses
>
> they represent, and the students they serve while also influencing the national
>
> postsecondary improvement and attainment agendas. (FAAN, 2021, paras. 2–3)

Statewide networks can benefit campus administrators supporting foster youth, including access to resources, collaboration opportunities, finding opportunities, professional development, and advocacy support. Many of these statewide networks host annual or semiannual conferences for campus administrators, nonprofit organizations, agencies, and other stakeholders who support foster youth and alumni to convene and learn from each other. Examples of statewide network conferences include Education REACH (http://www.educationreachfortexans.org/) for Texans, Embark Georgia (https://embarkgeorgia.org/) for Georgians, and the Washington Passport Network (https://www.washingtonpassportnetwork.org/) for Washingtonians.

This literature review has highlighted the importance of these youth developing social capital through beneficial supportive relationships with caring adults who can help them leverage available resources while navigating complex systems. Additionally, the literature review explored best practices of campus-based support programs at postsecondary institutions and

yielded a conceptual framework for postsecondary foster care liaisons. Comparing these best practices and the foster care liaisons conceptual framework with how Emerson College[1] (EC) operationalizes the Embark designated point of contact and provides support services to foster youth and alumni both signals and validates the need for organizational change. Further context regarding the organizational context and actions leading to the development of this AR dissertation and project are detailed in Chapter 3.

The various literature and the foster care liaison conceptual framework provide a solid foundation for examining current practices. The existing literature also provides a platform for formulating a shared vision for the desired future state of student support services for foster youth at EC. However, before additional support services can be offered, EC must address the need for more staffing knowledge, capacity, and structure to support foster youth effectively. In addition to the foster care liaison conceptual framework, this study uses the concepts of culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) to search for opportunities to guide campus administrators and stakeholders in holistically understanding and navigating the complexities of supporting foster youth through postsecondary systems. Although CRLL has traditionally been used to explore and inform how the capacity, identity, and efficacy of student leaders interact with the dimensions of campus climate, I propose using the CRLL model to examine and inform how professional staff perform in their leadership positions while supporting foster youth and alumni in postsecondary education. Additionally, I propose using the five domains of CRLL to examine and evaluate how the current campus climate and organizational structure impact the organization's ability to support foster youth in postsecondary education.

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[1] Emerson College is a pseudonym used to preserve confidentiality and identity of this action research dissertation.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual frameworks serve as the backbone of research, providing a validated tool to navigate and conceptualize the nature of the research problem. The use and integration of theoretical frameworks continuously evolve and strengthen as the research progresses. Continuous reading, learning, and synthesizing allow for discovering potential implications and applications relevant to supporting foster youth and alumni in postsecondary education. This AR study will employ the CRLL model and various models of student retention/attrition as conceptual frameworks to inform interventions to create culturally relevant leadership practices responsive to the cultural backgrounds and experiences of underrepresented students.

The kaleidoscope metaphor also aligns with the conceptual framework of CRLL, which is central to this study. Just as the patterns in a kaleidoscope are formed by the interplay of multiple pieces, the CRLL framework integrates various dimensions of leadership, identity, and cultural context to create a comprehensive approach to supporting foster youth. This study explores how these elements can come together to form effective strategies and interventions.

Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning

The CRLL model is a conceptual framework emphasizing cultural awareness, competence, and responsiveness in leadership development (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021). At its core, CRLL recognizes that leaders must understand and respond to the diverse cultural contexts in which they operate to lead and manage individuals and groups from different backgrounds effectively. The CRLL framework draws from multiple disciplines, including leadership studies, cultural studies, social justice, and education. By integrating these principles into leadership development, the CRLL framework aims to create leaders capable of effectively engaging with diverse groups and promoting positive change in their communities and organizations (Ladson-

Billings & Tate, 1995). In my proposed application, the CRLL model suggests that effective leaders must be culturally competent and able to recognize and address the unique needs and challenges faced by foster youth and other underrepresented groups in higher education.

The CRLL model (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016; Guthrie et al., 2017) is grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and understandings of campus climate (Hurtado et al., 1999; Milem et al., 2005). Each of these theoretical underpinnings has its historical contexts that provide context and insight into the evolution, application, and interpretations of CRLL.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Although many definitions of *pedagogy* exist, the term refers, in general, to the approaches to and practices of teaching, especially as an academic subject or theoretical concept, and involves developing habits of "responding, reflecting, and acting" in learners (Friesen & Su, 2023). It can be used both inside and outside the classroom. Increasingly, theories of pedagogy have argued that pedagogy has an essential ethical component that must not be ignored (Friesen & Su, 2023). One theory of pedagogy addressing the ethics of teaching and learning is *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP), which is defined as:

> A pedagogy of oppression not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the current status quo of their social order. (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160)

CRP has consistently evolved to reflect the continued expansion, intersections, and increased knowledge of cultural diversity in the United States. Scholars have offered a variety of alternative phrases over the years, including culturally responsive pedagogy (Cazden & Leggett, 1976; Gay, 2010) and culturally sustainable pedagogy (Paris, 2012). Each iteration has a consistent focus and commitment to increasing academic success for students from diverse cultures and backgrounds. The differences between them are subtle and reflective of increased knowledge, understanding, and context over time.

Early works contributing to the evolution of CRP leaned on a broader concept of culture rather than a more defined concept of race. These early works were pertinent in laying the foundations for culturally relevant teaching and learning practices in the academic classroom (Au & Jordan, 1981; Cazden & Legget, 1981; Macias, 1987; Mohatt & Erickson, 1981, 1982; Jordan, 1985). The CRLL model (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016; Guthrie et al., 2017) specifically centers around the CRP described and defined by Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995, 2014), who is the primary scholar cited in recent literature and research expanding upon the CRP foundations and practices (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Bertrand Jones et al., 2016; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Guthrie et al., 2017; Paris, 2012).

Ladson-Billings (1995) coined the term *culturally relevant pedagogy* and proposed three criteria that would merit the designation of being a culturally relevant teacher: (a) the ability to develop students academically, (b) a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and (c) the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness. Ladson-Billings (1995) further proposed conceptions of self and other, social relations, and knowledge as three distinguishable traits of culturally relevant pedagogy. This study was widely cited after its publication, and many scholars and practitioners adopted and used the theory to inform their practices and research.

Paris (2012) provided the critical perspective that the terms "relevant" and "responsive" did not accurately reflect the teaching and research founded upon them, offering *culturally sustaining pedagogy* as an alternative. Culturally sustaining pedagogy affirms critical components of the asset-based pedagogical research that preceded it (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). Almost 20 years later, Ladson-Billings (2014) reflected on her theory of culturally relevant pedagogy alongside other scholars' scholarly contributions and critiques, acknowledging and suggesting culturally sustaining pedagogy as a more dynamic method for embracing the fluidity of scholarship, culture, and their intersections. Ladson-Billings (2014) identified the underlying approach of culturally relevant pedagogy as the "ability to link principles of learning with deep understanding (and appreciation) for culture" (p. 77).

Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) produced a new conceptual framework of CRP teaching behaviors, expanding on the principles of culturally relevant teaching (Gay, 1994, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Neito, 1999) and infusing the concepts of critical race theory (CRT) to highlight the importance of race and racism in teaching. They compiled and organized a list of 35 broad themes within CRP, identifying five significant themes to guide their discussion: (a) identity and achievement, (b) equity and excellence, (c) developmental appropriateness, (d) teaching the whole child, and (e) student-teacher relationships (see Figure 1.4). These themes identified by Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) align with and support the multiple components encompassed in the Bertrand Jones et al. (2016) CRLL model.

Figure 1.4

Principles of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
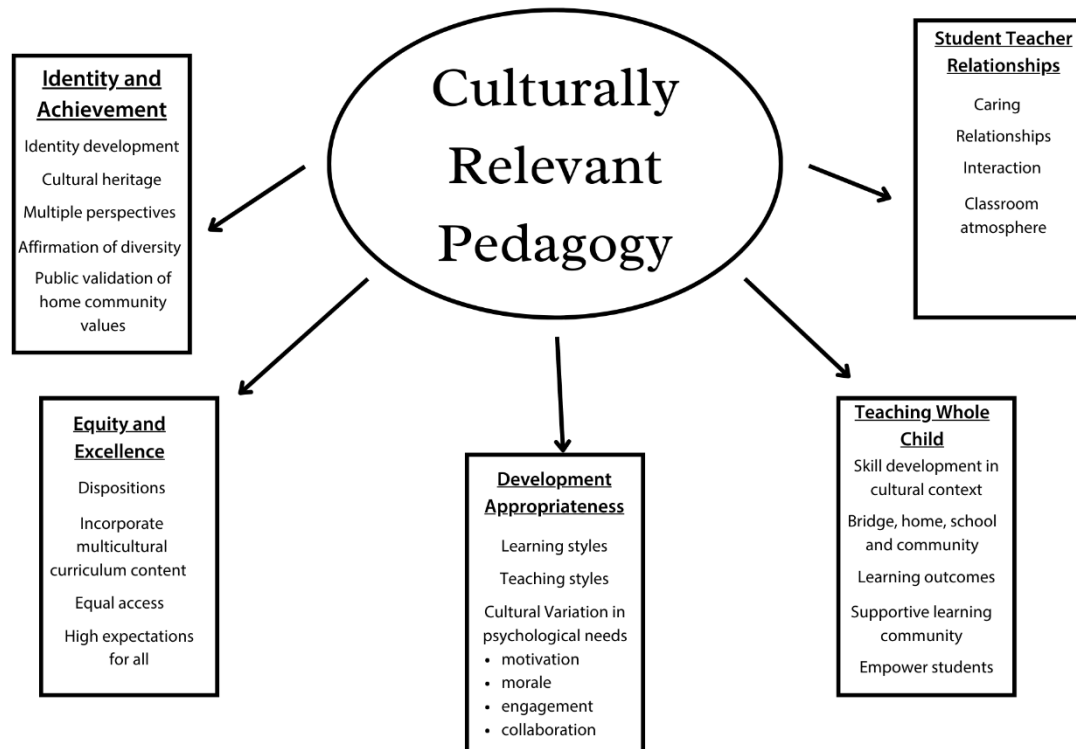
Note. From "Toward a Conceptual Framework of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: An Overview of the Conceptual and Theoretical Literature," by S. Brown-Jeffy and J. E. Cooper, 2011, *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *38*(1), p. 72. Copyright 2011 by S. Brown-Jeffy and J. E. Cooper.

Campus Climate

For pedagogy to propel academic success, however, students need to feel comfortable and welcomed as members of their college environment. The concept of campus climate considers students' and employees' current attitudes, behaviors, and standards on a college campus. Building a healthy campus climate requires respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential. Many scholars have contributed to the evolving understanding, definition, and concept of campus climate (Hellriegel & Slocum, 1974; Hurtado et al., 1998; Peterson & Spencer, 1990; Woodard & Sims, 2002). However, there is no consensus among scholars and practitioners on best practices or a conceptual or theoretical framework.

Hellriegel and Slocum (1974) defined climate through a management-oriented perspective as "a set of attributes which can be perceived about a particular organization and its subsystems, and that may be induced from the way the standard organization subsystems deal with their members and the environment" (p. 256). Peterson and Spencer (1990) applied this definition to higher education, defining climate as "the current common patterns of important dimensions of organizational life or its members' perceptions of and attitudes toward those dimensions" (p. 7). They noted that "Climate, compared with culture, is more concerned with current perspectives and attitudes rather than deeply held meanings, beliefs, and values" (p. 7). According to Peterson and Spencer (1990):

> The major features of climate are (1) its primary emphasis on common participant views of a wide array of organizational phenomena that allow for comparison among groups over time, (2) its focus on current patterns of beliefs and behaviors, and (3) its often ephemeral or malleable character. Climate is pervasive, potentially inclusive of a broad

array of organizational phenomena, yet easily focused on fitting the researcher's role or the administrator's interest. (p. 8)

Hurtado et al. (1998) offered four dimensions of campus climate designed to assess, in particular, the racial and ethnic climate: (a) history, (b) structural diversity, (c) psychological climate, and (d) and behavioral climate. Hurtado et al. (1998) noted that "these dimensions are connected, not discrete" and articulated the importance for institutions to include and consider their history when assessing campus climate (p. 282). They further argued that transparency about the history of exclusion and its impact may garner broader stakeholder support when coupled with a vision for a more inclusive future (Hurtado et al., 1998). This concept of campus climate supports the characteristics outlined by Peterson and Spencer (1990).

Hart and Fellabaum (2008) explored the distinction between campus climate and culture as they conducted a content analysis of 118 campus climate studies. They used the distinctions made by Peterson and Spencer (1990), with Hellriegel and Slocum (1974) in mind, to inform their understanding and recommendations to advance campus climate studies. Hart and Fellabaum explained that the term campus climate may refer to "quality of life" issues on a campus and/or to the diversity-related campus climate. This definition provides clarity to the content addressed in climate studies and differentiates the content addressed in organizational climate studies. Hart and Fellabaum (2008) recommend that the ideal campus climate model should include "the historical legacy of diversity; the social structural or demographic diversity of the campus; the perceptions of campus climate by all campus constituencies; and the lived experiences and behaviors of the members of the campus community" (p. 233).

Evolution of the CRLL Model

When the concepts of culturally relevant pedagogy and campus climate combine, these theoretical underpinnings center around leader identity, capacity, and efficacy within the cultural contexts and climate of environmental influences. The evolution of the CRLL model has been mapped out by Beatty and Guthrie (2021) in their book *Operationalizing Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning*, which provided insights and references for the constructs of the CRLL model. Guthrie et al. (2017) situated identity at the heart of leadership learning, emphasizing the need for social and leadership identities to be at the core of leadership education. These authors utilized the input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model (Astin, 1993) to connect precollege inputs and the college environment to a student's ability to lead after college. Scholars have acknowledged the difficulty of encompassing all identities in leadership education but remind us that it is a goal worth pursuing (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Guthrie et al., 2017).

The CRLL model was outlined and named in an issue of *New Directions for Student Leadership* issue titled *Developing Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning* (Guthrie et al., 2017). The publication offered eight chapters from diverse authors about CRLL and how it could be used. *The Journal of Leadership Studies Symposium* (2017) offered four articles advancing the culturally relevant pedagogical perspective, providing innovative methods of teaching and learning that align with the CRLL model.

The CRLL model considers five critical environmental dimensions of the leadership learning process: (a) the historical legacy of inclusion and exclusion, (b) compositional diversity, (c) psychological climate, (d) behavioral climate, and (e) organizational or structural aspects (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016). Beatty and Guthrie (2021) identified the intention of the five CRLL environmental dimensions as providing leadership educators with intentional considerations,

thereby situating individual experiences as a critical component of the leadership learning context.

Culturally Responsive, Relevant, and Pedagogical Leadership

Leadership is a collective and purposeful pursuit reliant on the responsibility of many rather than the privilege of few (By, 2021; Raelin, 2011; Raelin, 2016). Fundamentally, *leadership* guides, influences, and directs individuals or groups toward a common purpose. It involves setting a vision, communicating it to others, and providing the necessary resources and support to realize it. Recent definitions have also emphasized the importance of "an inter-dependent relationship between the leader and the led" (Macneill et al., 2005, p. 1). As defined above, pedagogy concerns teaching approaches, theories, and practices and how they facilitate learning (Friesen & Su, 2023). Combining important aspects of these two concepts, *pedagogical leadership* is a broad term that encompasses many roles and functions in learning organizations and includes *instructional leadership*—the process of supporting classroom teachers in their key role of implementing curriculum (Abel, M., 2016); Macneill et al., 2005).

Culturally responsive, relevant, and pedagogical leadership involves leadership philosophies, practices, and policies that create inclusive schooling environments for students and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds (Johnson & Fuller, 2020; Mensah, 2021). Key aspects of culturally responsive leadership include (a) critical self-awareness, (b) developing culturally responsive curricula and educators, (c) creating inclusive school environments, and (d) engaging students and stakeholders in community contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally responsive leadership is crucial in today's diverse educational landscape because it works toward mitigating, disrupting, and dismantling systemic oppression

(Mensah, 2021). By embodying this leadership style, education leaders can advocate for positive and equitable learning environments for all students.

Existing empirical literature from the intersecting concepts of culturally responsive, relevant, and pedagogical leadership provides foundational knowledge, systematic observation, and an objective way to approach continued research and ongoing contributions to the field of leadership development across system contexts. Table 1.3 provides an overview of empirical literature on culturally relevant, responsive, or pedagogical leadership.

Table 1.3

Empirical Literature on Culturally Relevant, Responsive, or Pedagogical Leadership

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience
Brown, M., Altrichter, H., Shiyan, I., Rodríguez Conde, M. J., McNamara, G., Herzog-Punzenberger, B., Vorobyeva, I., Vangrando, V., Gardezi, S., O'Hara, J., Postlbauer, A., Milyaeva, D., Sergeevna, N., Fulterer, S., Gamazo García, A., & Sánchez, L. (2022). Challenges and opportunities for culturally responsive leadership in schools: Evidence from Four European countries. *Policy Futures in Education*, *20*(5), 580–607.	The study aims to investigate the challenges and facilitators of culturally responsive school leadership in four European countries (Austria, Ireland, Russia, and Spain) within the context of increasing diversity in education systems due to migration. It explores factors and actors that hinder or support culturally responsive practices in schools, focusing on promoting academic and psychosocial well-being for students from diverse cultural backgrounds.	Support and practice indicators outlined in the study serve as tools for evaluating culturally responsive leadership in education systems, not only within the four project countries but also for other nations facing similar diversity and inclusion challenges.
Campos-Moreira, L. D., Cummings, M. I., Grumbach, G., Williams, H. E., & Hooks, K. (2020). Making a case for culturally humble leadership practices through a culturally responsive leadership framework. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, *44*(5), 407–414.	The study aims to develop a culturally responsive leadership framework (CRLF) to foster inclusive environments amidst increasing stakeholder diversity. Drawing on theories of organizational change, cultural humility, and cultural competence, the CRLF seeks to enhance organizational outcomes such as workforce retention, productivity, treatment innovation, and mobilization for change.	A framework for culturally responsive leadership for public sector and human service leaders.
Cooper, J. N., Newton, A. C., Klein, M., & Jolly, S. (2020). A call for culturally responsive transformational leadership in college sport: An anti-ism approach for	This study explores innovative transformational leadership approaches within college sports that incorporate anti-racism and anti-sexism stances. The aim is to advance genuine equity and	It emphasizes the importance of college sports organizations incorporating diversity policies and practices that address gender-biased language, racial discrimination, and

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience
achieving equity and inclusion. *Frontiers in Sociology*, *5*, Article 65.	inclusion within collegiate sports programs by implementing more substantial culturally responsive efforts.	culturally responsive leadership strategies.
Genao, S. (2021). Doing it for culturally responsive school leadership: Utilizing reflexivity from preparation to practice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 16*(2), 158–170.	The study explores the understanding of culturally responsive teaching and leading (CRTL) among future school leaders and its impact on promoting social justice for underrepresented students, families, and communities.	The paper highlights six recurring themes from discussions on culturally responsive teaching and leading with social justice perspectives for education practitioners and school leaders.
Ham, S. H., Kim, J., & Lee, S. (2020). Which schools are in greater need of culturally responsive leaders? A pedagogical uncertainty management perspective. *Multicultural Education Review*, *12*(4), 250–266.	This study addresses the gap in the literature regarding the mechanisms through which culturally responsive teaching is initiated and implemented, particularly focusing on the role of principals' culturally responsive leadership by exploring the concept of "pedagogical uncertainty" in relation to culturally responsive teaching methods, emphasizing the importance of support systems for teachers, including principals, colleague teachers, and community members	The intended audience for this study includes educators, school administrators, policymakers, and researchers interested in understanding the dynamics of culturally responsive leadership in multicultural educational settings.
Hayes, C., & Juárez, B. (2011). There is no culturally responsive teaching spoken here: A critical race perspective. *Democracy and Education, 20*(1), 1.	Examines and brings attention to instances within the systems of White racial dominance where individuals and groups consciously choose to uphold White supremacy rather than challenge it. Specifically, the focus is on exploring the failure of U.S. teacher preparation programs to adequately equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively educate all students,	The lessons derived from critical race theory (CRT) and Malik's counternarrative highlight the need for teacher education programs to confront and address issues of racism, White supremacy, and inequity within American society and educational institutions. By integrating the provided five key insights into teacher preparation programs, educators can

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience
	particularly those from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds.	better equip future teachers to navigate and challenge systems of oppression, ultimately promoting educational equity and social justice in classrooms.
Hines, M. T. (2022). The development of Culturally Responsive Leadership Scale. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, *26*(5), 1–10.	The study aimed to create and validate an observation instrument, the Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL) Scale, to assess how principals use cultural responsiveness in school leadership. The CRL instrument had high content validity. However, this instrument needed a higher construct validity level.	Observation instrument to measure CRL of school principals.
Hook, J. N., Davis, D. E., Owen, J., Worthington Jr, E. L., & Utsey, S. O. (2013). Cultural humility: Measuring openness to culturally diverse clients. *Journal of counseling psychology*, *60*(3), 353.	The study aims to explore and validate the concept of cultural humility as a critical component of multicultural competencies (MCCs) in therapeutic settings.	Developed a client-rated measure of cultural humility as a component of multicultural orientation (MCO) of MCCs.
Khalifa, M., Gooden, M. A., & Davis, J. E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, *86*(4), 1272–1311.	Examines culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL), to explore characteristics of effective leaders, strategies for responding to diverse school contexts, and the impact of leadership on student learning and achievement.	Synthesizes existing literature around the four primary strands of CRSL to identify behaviors of culturally responsive school leaders.
Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, *32*(3), 465–491.	The study aims to challenge existing pedagogical paradigms, encourage critical reflection on teaching practices, and provide examples of culturally relevant teaching both in theory and practice.	The article proposes a framework that integrates students' cultural backgrounds and experiences into the educational process to promote engagement, understanding, and academic success.

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience
Madhlangobe, L., & Gordon, S. P. (2012). Culturally responsive leadership in a diverse school: A case study of a high school leader. *NASSP Bulletin*, *96*(3), 177–202.	A qualitative case study that critically examines and describes the leadership roles and practices of a culturally responsive school leader in a culturally and linguistically diverse high school in central Texas.	Key findings illustrate that practices such as fostering caring relationships, consistent communication, and modeling culturally responsive behaviors are effective in engaging diverse student populations. The research advocates for incorporating culturally responsive leadership into educational training programs, suggesting it as a crucial element for advancing equity and academic achievement in multicultural classrooms.
Mun, R. U., Ezzani, M. D., & Lee, L. E. (2020). Culturally relevant leadership in gifted education: A systematic literature review. Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 43(2), 108-142.	The researchers aim to address the persistent issues of teacher deficit views, inequitable identification policies and practices, and differential access to resources that contribute to the underrepresentation of traditionally underserved learners in gifted programs nationwide.	Provides a systematic review of the literature concerning leadership, systemic reform, and the identification and provision of services in gifted education for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) K–12 students in the United States.
Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational researcher*, *41*(3), 93–97.	Aims to challenge deficit perspectives and advocate for pedagogies that honor and sustain students' cultural and linguistic practices while also providing access to dominant cultural norms. The article provides theoretical insights and practical examples to guide educators in implementing culturally sustaining pedagogies in their classrooms and schools. It introduces the concept of "culturally sustaining pedagogy."	Informs educators, policymakers, researchers, and other stakeholders in education about the evolution of pedagogical approaches for supporting students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience
Sleeter, C. E. (2012). Confronting the marginalization of culturally responsive pedagogy. *Urban Education*, *47*(3), 562–584.	Critiques the neoliberal approach to education reform in the United States and globally, highlighting its emphasis on standardization, high-stakes testing, and privatization, which neglects the importance of teacher professional development, context, culture, and systemic racism. It argues that such reforms undermine the potential of culturally responsive pedagogy, a method that values students' cultural backgrounds and experiences to enhance learning and engagement. The goal is to foster an educational environment that acknowledges and leverages the cultural strengths and knowledge of all students to promote academic success and social equity.	Advocates for a shift away from neoliberal policies towards an educational model that embraces culturally responsive pedagogy, emphasizing the need for political action, robust research, and public education to support and implement this pedagogical approach effectively.
Srisarajivakul, E. N., McPhee, K., Choe, E. J. Y., Rice, K. G., Varjas, K., Meyers, J., ... & Graybill, E. (2023). The Cultural Humility Scale for Students: Development and initial validation among adolescents. *Journal of School Psychology*, *99*, 101-224.	The article focuses on the development, validation, and potential applications of the Cultural Humility Scale for Students (CHS-S) adapted from the CHS developed by Hook et al. (2013) for psychotherapy.	Adapted a tool to measure the cultural humility of teachers as perceived by middle and high school students.
Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: Rethinking the curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *53*(1), 20–32.	Focuses on developing culturally responsive teachers to address the diversity in U.S. classrooms. It advocates for integrating multicultural education throughout teacher training programs.	Proposes a vision of culturally responsive teaching characterized by teachers who are socioculturally conscious, view diversity affirmatively, see themselves as agents of change, understand the constructivist approach to learning,

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience
		know their students well, and use culturally responsive teaching practices. This vision serves as a guide for transforming teacher education to produce educators capable of fostering equitable and inclusive learning environments that respect and build upon the diverse backgrounds of students.

Benefits of Using Culturally Responsive and Relevant Leadership Learning Principles

Campus support staff play a pivotal role in fostering the success of former foster youth pursuing higher education. Staff advocate for tailored support services, financial aid, and mental health resources. They work to create a holistic support network that addresses systemic barriers and promotes a sense of belonging. Thus, their leadership practices need to be responsive and relevant to addressing the unique needs of this population. Culturally responsive leadership in this setting involves recognizing the challenges faced by foster youth. These students often experience the shared challenges of housing instability, financial constraints, and emotional stress, as well as diverse individual challenges that may be associated with other aspects of their lives. Moreover, this type of leadership in this setting extends beyond individual interactions and encompasses collaboration with faculty, administrators, and community partners. Seeking to understand these students' backgrounds and experiences will help campus staff create an inclusive environment that supports their educational journey.

The benefits of using culturally relevant leadership learning principles in designing and operating programs for supporting foster youth and alumni include increased cultural competency among campus administrators and stakeholders, greater community engagement, and more equity and inclusion for underrepresented student populations (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021). Increased cultural competency among campus administrators and program stakeholders can help these people better understand the unique challenges and needs of foster care students in postsecondary education and enable them to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments that improve student outcomes such as academic performance and retention.

Challenges of Using Culturally Responsive and Relevant Leadership Learning Principles

The perceived challenges of using culturally responsive and relevant leadership learning practices in this higher education setting include a lack of awareness about the unique needs and experiences of foster youth. Without this understanding, it becomes challenging to tailor support effectively. Student support staff must also address stigma and stereotypes related to foster youth, actively combat negative assumptions by themselves and others, and create an affirming environment. Another barrier to implementing culturally relevant and responsive leadership practices is the lack of readily available training and resources for support services staff and stakeholders. In particular, given the traumatizing personal histories of many foster youth, staff training in trauma-informed practices is essential so that staff can recognize signs of trauma and respond appropriately. Khalifa et al. (2016) are also of the view that school leaders should be provided with the professional development and skillset needed to become culturally relevant leaders and to build culturally responsive practices. Beyond initial training, culturally responsive school leaders need to be dedicated to ongoing learning (Walker & Shuangye, 2007).

Additionally, some student support services staff may be hesitant or resistant to adopt new approaches or practices, which can impede the implementation of culturally relevant leadership practices. Brown et al., (2022) identify bias, fear, lack of cultural awareness, the absence of professional strategies and adequate support structures as factors that impede the ability of some educators to develop culturally responsive learning environments. In addition to individual hesitations, institutional and systematic barriers and resource constraints—both financial and personnel—may also make it difficult to implement and sustain comprehensive efforts.

Student Retention and Attrition Theories

Student retention and completion are major ongoing strategic concerns for higher education administrators (Adelman, 1999; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Marsh, 2014; Seidman, 2005). Despite decades of research, student retention, persistence, and attrition remain consistent struggles for colleges and universities attempting to implement effective interventions (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Swail, 2004). Existing research has confirmed that students drop out for many reasons, including academic challenges and social issues (Bean, 1980; Berger & Lyon, 2005; Spady, 1970). This topic has been examined through multiple perspectives, including traditional and nontraditional students (Aud et al., 2013; Bean, 1985), online learners (Rovai, 2003), 2-year college students (Bryant, 2001), 4-year college and university students (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004), and minority student populations (Seidman, 2005). As indicated by the literature review presented earlier in this chapter on understanding the needs of foster youth and alumni, many of these youths face overlapping barriers that necessitate more robust, targeted interventions for student retention among this population.

Various scholars have proposed retention models and frameworks to explain student retention rates in postsecondary education. Berger et al. (2012) pointed to studies published in the 1960s and beyond as evidencing a commitment to more systematic and theoretical retention research. Examples of student retention models and studies include Tinto's (1975, 1993) institutional departure model, Bean's (1980, 1982) student attrition model, Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition model, Astin's (1984) student involvement model, and the student retention integration model (Cabrera et al., 1993). Among the numerous variables of student attrition examined in these models, the quality of the student's institutional experience and the level of his or her integration into the academic and social system of the academic

institution were the most influential variables reported in prominent retention models (Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Spady's (1970, 1971) was the first student retention model to link the process of student attrition to Durkheim's (1951) suicide theory concept of social integration, which has since been widely adopted in student retention studies and models (Berger et al., 2012; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Bringing Durkheim's work and student drop-out research together, Spady moved towards developing a more sociological model of the dropout process shifting future attention on the interaction between student attributes and the influences, expectations, and demands imposed by various sources in a campus environment. Building on Spady's (1970, 1971) theoretical views, Tinto (1975) published the first version of his institutional departure model, also known as the student integration model, in the mid-1970s. Between 1975 and 1993, the institutional departure model was widely examined and revised by Tinto and others (Cabrera et al., 1992; Cabrera et al., 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979, 1980, 1983; Tinto, 1993). In 1993, Tinto presented an updated version of the institutional departure model, claiming that colleges consist of both academic and social systems and that students much be integrated into both systems to achieve persistence. Tinto asserted that students were more likely to remain in an institution and persist if they connected socially and academically while at that institution. Tito argued that the application of Durkheim's egotistical suicide type to student dropout would yield a deeper understanding of the student dropout process. Tinto (1993) uses suicide as an analogy for student dropout claiming that most suicides, as well as student drop-outs represent a form of voluntary withdrawal from a community.

Bean's (1980) student attrition model critiqued Tinto and Spady's use of Durkheim's suicide theory. In contrast, Bean (1980, 1982) used studies of turnover in work organizations to

inform his theoretical views on retention, building on the work of Price (1977). Bean argued that the reasons why students leave institutions are similar to why employees leave organizations. To adjust the employee turnover model to higher education, Bean adjusted the pay variable with educational indicators. The original student attrition model (Bean, 1980) contained four categories of variables: dropout, satisfaction, institutional commitment, and the organizational determinants. Bean (1982) later revised these categories to include background, organizational, environmental, and attitudinal variables. Bean's (1982) revised student attrition model incorporated the work of multiple theorists (Bean, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975) to generate a general attrition model that can be adjusted across different types of institutions.

Expanding on previous models, which emphasized the importance of social integration within academic institutions (Bean, 1980, 1982; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975), Bean and Metzner (1985) produced a model of attrition for the nontraditional commuter student. Despite its differences from earlier models, the nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model noted the importance of environmental factors, including family connections and other responsibilities (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This model shifted the focus from institutional socialization factors to external or environmental factors such as finance, working hours, outside encouragement, family responsibility, and opportunity to transfer.

Astin's (1984, 1985) theory of student involvement argued that increasing students' level of involvement in an institution is directly linked to student development and success. Astin defined involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 297). Astin (1984) viewed the phenomenon of student persistence from a behavioral perspective.

Infusing the Concepts of CRLL and Retention (or Persistence)

Postsecondary campus student support staff can use the CRLL model to understand and support students with foster care experience by taking a holistic approach that recognizes this population's unique experiences, strengths, and challenges. This approach involves creating a supportive and inclusive environment, developing relationships built on trust and respect, and providing culturally relevant programs and services that promote academic success, personal growth, and leadership development. Incorporating the concepts and key ideas of retention theories into the CRLL model can help guide the development and improvement of support systems and campus leaders supporting foster youth and alumni. Examining the problem through these conceptual frameworks provides the opportunity for a more holistic understanding of the factors that influence the success of foster youth in higher education. Additionally, this exploration may help administrators create more effective support structures, programs, and policies to support foster youth in postsecondary education.

A Kaleidoscope of Support for Foster Youth in Higher Education

Imagine a kaleidoscope, a tube of mirrors containing loose, colored objects such as beads or pebbles and bits of glass. As you turn the tube, the reflections create an endless array of intricate patterns. Each slight twist reveals a unique, beautiful, and complex configuration. This kaleidoscope can serve as a metaphor for the multifaceted and dynamic approach needed to support foster youth in higher education (See Figure 1.5).

Figure 1.5

The Kaleidoscope Metaphor

INTRAPERSONAL

Characteristics of the individual staff such as knowledge, attitudes, behavior, self-concept, skills, and developmental history that impact and affect their leadership process.

ECOLOGICAL CONDITIONS

Departmental and campus conditions that create a supportive ecological environment that not only meets the immediate needs of current and former youth in care but also fosters their long-term success and well-being.

HOLISTIC SUPPORT

Increased awareness of foster youth needs, intentional alignment of ecological resources, and continued staff development will provide more holistic and timely support to youth in care at EC.

Organizational and Structural Supports

Psychological Climate

Historical Legacy of Inclusion or Exclusion

Compositional Diversity

Behavioral Climate

IDENTITY CAPACITY EFFICACY

- Interpersonal Process & Primary Groups: Formal and informal social networks and social support systems, including family, work group, and friendship networks.
- Public Policy: Local, State, and Global Laws and Policies.
- Institutional Factors: Social institutions with organizational characteristics and formal (and informal) rules and regulations for operations.
- Community Factors: Relationships among organizations, institutions, and informational networks within defined boundaries.

Culturally relevant support, resources, and opportunities for foster youth and alums that lead to improved outcomes in postsecondary education.

Intrapersonal: The Practitioner's Lens

At the heart of this kaleidoscope is the practitioner: the staff member looking through the lens. Their intrapersonal development, which includes their knowledge, attitudes, behavior, self-concept, skills, and developmental history, significantly impacts their view, perspective, and interpretation of the patterns they see. The clarity and richness of the patterns depend on how well the practitioner understands and integrates these personal attributes. When staff members are well-trained and self-aware, they perceive more vibrant and intricate patterns. Their understanding of identity, capacity, and efficacy enhances their ability to support foster youth

effectively. They become keen practitioners, capable of recognizing and fostering the potential within each student.

Ecological Conditions: The Reflective Mirrors

Surrounding the practitioner's lens are the mirrors, representing the ecological conditions of the campus environment. These mirrors reflect and amplify the colors and patterns seen through the kaleidoscope, shaping the overall image. In our metaphor, these mirrors symbolize the broader departmental and campus conditions that create a supportive environment for foster youth.

The historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion is like the angle of the mirrors, influencing how light and color are reflected. A history of inclusion provides a welcoming environment, while a legacy of exclusion requires adjustments to support foster youth better. The psychological climate, organizational and structural supports, and behavioral climate are the reflective surfaces that shape the experience of foster youth. When these elements are aligned and supportive, they create a harmonious pattern that fosters a sense of belonging and safety. Compositional diversity ensures a rich variety of perspectives and experiences, enhancing the overall image.

Holistic Support: The Ever-Changing Patterns

The final element of our kaleidoscope is the ever-changing pattern created by the interaction of beads and mirrors. This pattern symbolizes the holistic support system that evolves to meet the needs of foster youth. Each twist of the kaleidoscope represents the dynamic and continuous process of aligning resources, raising awareness, and developing staff.

Culturally relevant support, resources, and opportunities are vibrant colors in the pattern, reflecting foster youth's diverse backgrounds and experiences. Interpersonal processes and

primary groups, such as family, workgroups, and friendship networks, provide the intricate connections that hold the pattern together. Public policy, institutional factors, and community factors are the guiding principles that shape the kaleidoscope's structure. These elements ensure that the patterns are beautiful but also stable and supportive.

Integrating CRLL and Retention Theories: A More Beautiful Pattern

By integrating the CRLL model and retention theories, we can create even more intricate and supportive patterns in our kaleidoscope. This holistic approach recognizes foster youths' unique experiences, strengths, and challenges to guide the development of comprehensive support systems. Examining the issues through these conceptual frameworks allows for a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the success of foster youth in higher education. It helps administrators and staff create more effective programs, policies, and support structures, ensuring that each twist of the kaleidoscope reveals a pattern that is ever more beautiful and supportive.

In this kaleidoscope of support, the practitioner's perspective is crucial. Every shift in their understanding, every new insight, and every enhancement in their ability to support foster youth can transform the patterns they see. By continuously adjusting and aligning these elements, we can ensure that the patterns we create are beautiful and meaningful, fostering the success and well-being of foster youth in higher education.

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Significance of Study

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Foster youth and alumni in postsecondary institutions face serious challenges that continually impede their academic and personal success. Although some succeed despite these challenges, many college students with foster care experience continue to face significant obstacles in their pursuit of higher education, including financial instability, lack of a support

system, and the emotional toll of past experiences. Moreover, young adults with foster care experience often have identities with multiple forms of difference that can create multiple experiences of disadvantage. Each of the challenges, barriers, and disparities hinder the *life chances* of these individuals compared to their peers, who experience fewer disparities and more family privileges (Seita, 2001). Byrd and Scott (2018) defined life chances as "the chances throughout one's life cycle to live and experience the good things in life" (p. 155). Moreover, high poverty rates are a known factor in placement that can trigger disproportionate needs or treatment for minorities in foster care. Susan Vivian Mangold (2022) drew a direct link between poverty and child welfare, explaining that

> The overrepresentation of poor children is often explained due to greater surveillance of low-income families, greater stress for families living at the economic margin, and "neglect" being a code word for poor or unstable housing. There is another reason hidden in plain view: an economic incentive to place poor children—federal reimbursement for over half the cost in every state. (para. 7)

Accordingly, most young adults exiting foster care with aspirations of attending postsecondary education are likely situated within the lower social class, where individuals tend to believe in the American Dream and seek advancement within the social class structure (Byrd & Scott, 2018).

A positive educational experience can effectively counter the many barriers often experienced by foster youth, such as abuse, neglect, and separation. Positive PK–12 educational experiences also set students on the pathway to successfully accessing and enrolling in postsecondary education. Participation and persistence in postsecondary degrees are vital in preparing and supporting foster youth and alumni to increase their chances for personal

fulfillment and economic self-sufficiency (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Foster youth

and alumni who achieve higher educational attainment are more likely to be employed in stable

and meaningful jobs (Day et al., 2011; Leone & Weinberg, 2010).

Despite the many resources and growing literature helping researchers and practitioners

better understand and support foster youth, there remains a gap nationwide between the rates of

high school graduation, college enrollment, and college graduation for youths with foster care

experience and those of their peers. Narrowing this gap will allow foster youth and alumni to

increase their social status and, for some, break the cycle of poverty for themselves and their

families.

It is imperative for institutions and communities to provide additional resources and

support to help these students achieve their educational goals. This study investigates the

following research question: What can be learned at the individual, group, and system levels by

using the culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) model to examine organizational

capacity to support foster youth and alumni holistically and effectively in postsecondary

education?

At the institutional level, this study works to resolve the need for more staffing

knowledge, capacity, and organizational structure to effectively support foster youth at EC. By

creating culturally relevant leadership practices and infusing the key ideas of retention into their

approaches, EC staff can provide culturally relevant support, resources, and opportunities for

foster youth and alumni that lead to improved outcomes in postsecondary education for this

population. Moreover, culturally relevant leadership can equip campus administrators and

stakeholders with the tools to navigate complex cultural dynamics in academic and professional

settings. The primary significance of this study lies in its potential to inform the development of

effective leadership practices and support service strategies for supporting foster care students in pursuing and completing postsecondary education.

More broadly, the use of culturally relevant leadership principles and practices to increase the knowledge, leadership capacity, and efficacy of the campus administrators, stakeholders, and systems supporting foster youth and alumni can also inform the development of effective leadership practices, interventions, policies, and strategies for supporting all underrepresented and diverse student populations in higher education. It is in this arena that the study's relevance and significance to learning, leadership, and organizational development is most clearly demonstrated. The study's focus on implementing culturally relevant leadership principles can provide insights into how leadership can be leveraged to create more equitable and inclusive educational environments. Research has suggested that leadership is critical in creating and sustaining organizational cultures that support diversity, equity, and inclusion (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Moreover, leadership development programs incorporating cultural competence and responsiveness principles effectively promote inclusive practices and reduce bias among leaders.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

The idea behind a kaleidoscope is that it's a structure that's filled with broken bits and

pieces, and somehow if you can look through them, you still see something beautiful.

—Sara Bareilles, *We Are All Broken and Beautiful*

In the world of research and problem-solving, the concept of a kaleidoscope offers a

powerful metaphor. The imagery in Sara Bareilles's quote resonates deeply with the principles of

action research (AR). Imagine stepping into a community or an organization facing complex,

multifaceted challenges. At first glance, these issues might seem like nothing more than a

collection of fragmented, broken pieces. The beauty of a kaleidoscope lies in its ability to turn

brokenness into something extraordinary. Just as a kaleidoscope transforms random fragments

into stunning patterns, AR transforms these seemingly disjointed elements into coherent,

beautiful solutions.

Action research begins by acknowledging the complexity and fragmentation inherent in

any system. It thrives on the idea that imperfection and challenges are not obstacles but

opportunities for growth and innovation. Researchers and stakeholders come together, like

individual pieces within a kaleidoscope, each bringing unique perspectives and experiences. This

collaborative approach is essential. Like turning the barrel of a kaleidoscope, AR follows a

cyclical path of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, a continuous loop that evokes the

ever-changing patterns seen through a kaleidoscope. Each turn reveals new insights, and each

cycle brings researchers closer to understanding and addressing the root causes of the issues at

hand. Looking through the collective lens of diverse viewpoints allows the intricate and often hidden patterns within the chaos to emerge. Ultimately, AR finds beauty and potential amid complexity. Just as a kaleidoscope shows that broken pieces can form beautiful patterns, AR embraces the notion that we are "all broken and beautiful," recognizing that within every problem lies the potential for positive change, which can be accomplished through collective effort and ongoing reflection.

This AR study was submitted to and approved by the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (IRB) on April 17, 2024 (see Appendix A). The study was granted exempt status under the Exempt Flex 7 category, allowing the research to proceed immediately without requiring additional IRB review for most future modifications. The approval confirms that all research activities involve voluntary participation, with informed consent obtained under conditions designed to minimize coercion. All research procedures were conducted under the ethical standards and guidelines set forth by the IRB to ensure the protection and confidentiality of all participants involved.

Two Complementary Perspectives

Action research is a systematic and reflective inquiry process for knowledge acquisition and organizational change. This AR study consisted of two parallel AR cycles: the core and thesis projects (Coghlan, 2019). The core change project focused on AR and organizational development interventions to facilitate and manage organizational change. As described by Coghlan (2019), the thesis project was the "inquiry in action into how the core action research project was designed, implemented, and evaluated and how you enacted your role in it, how you reflected on it and offered a contribution to the theory as well as the practice" (p. 168). These two projects were interconnected, but each had its unique purpose and research questions that

could inform and critique the other. Each cycle required equal attention to reflectiveness and relevance (Pasmore et al., 2008).

The thesis project investigated the culturally relevant leadership learning model (CRLL) as a guiding framework for the developed interventions (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021). The CRLL model connected leader identity, capacity, and efficacy within the cultural contexts and climate of environmental influences (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016; Guthrie et al., 2017). The thesis project was motivated by the following research question: What can be learned at the individual, group, and system levels by using the culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) model to examine organizational capacity to support foster youth and alumni holistically and effectively in postsecondary education?

The core project included a series of interventions designed to address the research questions of the thesis project within our organization to provide more culturally relevant leadership practices for underrepresented students—specifically, foster youth and alumni. These interventions also examined and implemented best practices for preparing postsecondary staff and stakeholders to help foster care youth develop the skills and access the resources needed to pursue postsecondary education with confidence. The objectives of the AR team at Emerson College (EC) were to (a) utilize theoretical frameworks to guide and frame interventions throughout the change process, (b) create meaningful connections with regional and state agencies to develop a collaborative and robust support program, and (c) identify and connect foster youth and alumni to the critical skills and resources needed for them to prepare for and enroll in postsecondary education successfully.

Overview of Action Research Methodology

Action research is a complex cyclical process that requires the researcher to construct, plan, take action, and evaluate constantly and simultaneously (Coghlan, 2019). Imagine the intricate patterns formed within a kaleidoscope, each turn creating a new mosaic of colors and shapes. The mirrors inside a kaleidoscope are a fitting metaphor for the three voices and audiences in AR: the first-, second-, and third-person perspectives (Bradbury, 2015; Reason & Torbert, 2001). With its unique angle, each reflective surface contributes to the overall picture, much like the different perspectives in AR.

As Newton and Burgess (2008) indicated, AR in education must be emancipatory, practical, and knowledge-generating. To generate knowledge and change, researchers need to understand and operate in a state of practical knowing (Coghlan, 2016, 2019). Practical knowing requires skillful action and mindfulness, which aid researchers in drawing connections and observations from past and present experiences, theories, or visual encounters to tackle and meet the demands of everyday life (Coghlan, 2019). According to Coghlan (2016), AR has four characteristics: it is (a) "focused on the everyday concerns of human living," (b) "socially derived and constructed," (c) "necessitates attentiveness to the uniqueness of each situation," and (d) results in "practical action," which is "driven by values and fundamentally ethical" (p. 92). In addition, AR is participative, democratic, and relies on knowledge-in-action (Bradbury, 2015; Coghlan, 2019). It aims to address practical issues and solve pertinent problems. The participative and democratic nature of AR invites multiple voices and viewpoints that can be better integrated to serve the problem or issue (Bradbury, 2015). The problem-owners and engaged researchers learn together and reflect in the same cogenerative process (Levin, 2012;

Newton & Burgess, 2008). Myers (2013) suggested that participants should also be involved in selecting the problem and sanctioning the search for solutions.

Implementing Action Research: A Cyclical System of Inquiry

The AR team used AR methodology as a systemic and cyclical approach to investigation that enabled our team to find effective solutions to our organizational problem: the lack of staffing knowledge, capacity, and structure to effectively support foster youth entering EC (Stringer, 2014). The team used Ruona's (personal communication, November 13, 2020) model for leading change, building upon Coghlan and Brannick (2010). The Ruona model for leading change through AR comprises five phases: (1) context and purpose, (2) constructing, (3) planning action, (4) taking action, and (5) evaluating action. These phases are illustrated in Figure 2.1, which depicts both a single rotation in the AR process as well as a series of concurrent AR cycles.
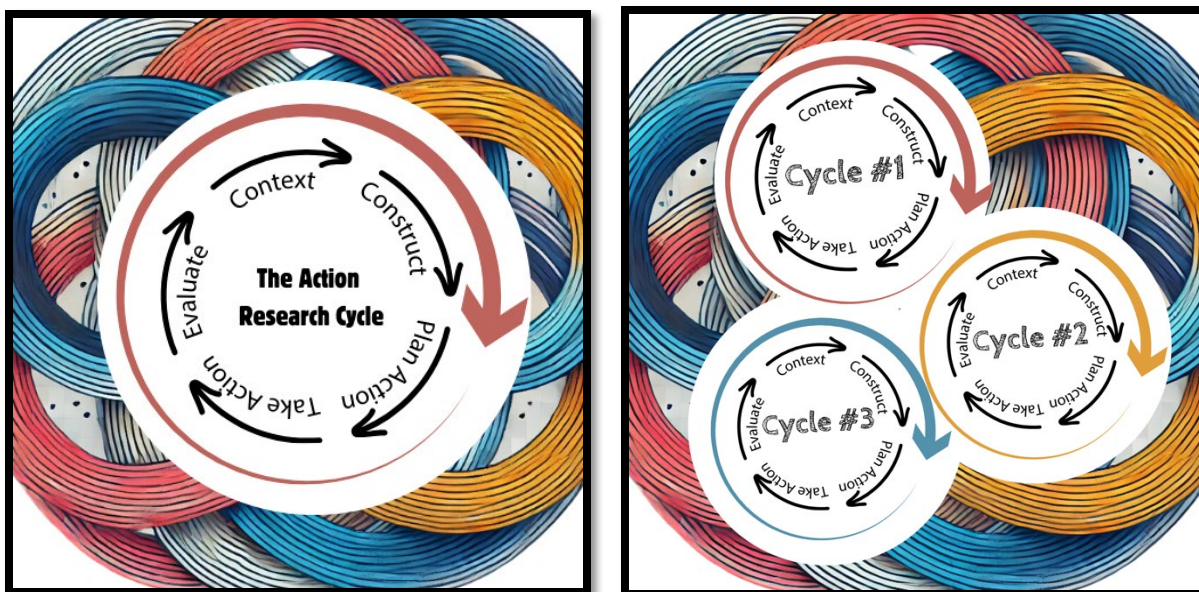
Figure 2.1. *Action Research: A Cyclical System of Inquiry. Note.* Concept is expanded from works by Ruona (2020) and Coghlan and Brannick (2010, 2014).

Any AR project operates multiple AR cycles concurrently spanning different periods of time (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). The concurrent AR cycles illustrate each intervention's complex and interweaving nature. This AR study included three AR cycles, each of which was envisioned and constructed using the theory of change model that the core leadership team developed, which will be described in more detail in Chapter 3. Our theory of change centered on leveraging culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) to build an infrastructure that effectively supports foster youth in postsecondary education. This approach aims to proactively connect students with resources and opportunities, addressing the challenges of reactive interventions and promoting equity and inclusion within the institution. As I engaged with AR within my organization, I examined my own biases, pinpointed issues, collaborated with the AR team to develop interventions, and implemented strategies. We then reflected on these strategies and refined them into best practices. Each cycle informed the next, fostering growth and

improvement. Throughout these five phases, the AR team collected data from multiple sources to build a repository of evidence to support the thesis and core projects.

Prismatic Perspectives: Integrating First-, Second-, and Third-Person Voices in AR

Action research is a powerful tool for change due to its ability to "build on the past, take place in the present, and shape the future" of our work (Coghlan, 2019, p. 6). In AR, the choice of perspective plays a pivotal role in shaping the research journey. In this AR project, these three perspectives—first, second, and third person—acted as lenses through which we as researchers viewed and engaged with our subjects.

First Person: Self Reflection

The first-person perspective in AR resembles looking directly into a mirror. This mirror reflects the researcher's own image, representing self-reflection and personal involvement in the research process. Just as a mirror shows the observer their own face, the first-person perspective involves the researcher's introspection, revealing personal insights and subjective experiences. This internal view helped me, as the researcher, understand my own biases, assumptions, and the impact they have on the research.

From the first-person perspective, I actively engaged in the research process as a participant directly involved in the studied context or situation. First-person research allowed for a deep understanding of the subject matter from an insider's perspective, leading to the rich and contextually relevant findings in chapters 3 and 4.

Second Person: Collaborative Reflection

Moving to the second-person perspective, imagine a mirror that reflects the interaction between two or more people. This metaphor captures the essence of collaborative and dialogical AR, in which researchers and participants engage in mutual reflection and dialogue. Just as a

mirror can show multiple people interacting, the second-person perspective involves shared experiences and the co-creation of knowledge. It emphasizes the importance of communication, collaboration, and building relationships among researchers and participants.

The second-person perspective involved me as the researcher collaborating closely with individuals and groups directly affected by this research topic, often including stakeholders, participants, or community members. Second-person research emphasized the co-creation of knowledge with these parties and sought to involve those impacted by the research in decision-making and analysis.

Third Person: Observational Reflection

For the third-person perspective, consider how multiple mirrors in a kaleidoscope create a complex, multifaceted reflection of objects. This perspective represents the broader, more detached view of the research context and its implications. Like the intricate patterns formed by a kaleidoscope's mirrors, the third-person perspective involves an objective, analytical view of the research context. It synthesizes data, patterns, and findings from the collective experiences and interactions, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomena.

As an insider researcher, my deep connection to the organization provided valuable first-hand insights, allowing me to understand the intricacies of the context and engage closely with stakeholders. However, to ensure a balanced and comprehensive perspective, I also intentionally incorporated second- and third-person perspectives into the research process. The second-person perspective was achieved through collaborative reflection and dialogue with participants, stakeholders, and external partners, facilitating knowledge co-creation. This collaboration allowed me to step outside of my immediate insider role and consider perspectives that might not be as evident from within the organization.

The third-person perspective was also crucial in attaining an external or outsider viewpoint. By deliberately adopting a more detached and analytical stance, I could synthesize data and patterns in a way that transcended my immediate experience within the organization. This included engaging with broader literature, consulting external experts, and comparing our findings with those from other contexts. As a doctoral student at UGA, I further enhanced this external perspective by leveraging academic resources, peer feedback, and engagement with the broader academic community. This multifaceted approach ensured that while I was deeply embedded within the organization, I maintained a critical and reflective stance that allowed me to see beyond the insider's view.

Integrated Perspectives

A kaleidoscope's true beauty lies in its mirrors' interplay, creating dynamic and ever-changing patterns. This mirrors the integration of first, second, and third-person perspectives in AR. Each mirror's angle and position contribute to the overall pattern seen through the kaleidoscope, just as integrating personal (first-person), collaborative (second-person), and observational (third-person) perspectives creates a rich, multifaceted understanding of the research problem. The combined perspectives form a holistic view, capturing the complexity and dynamics of the real-world context. The collaborative and integrative nature of AR also allows for critical inquiry and an appreciation of people's shared and divergent goals and their unique passion points (Bradbury, 2015).

Sample and Participants

Given the importance of participation and collaboration to any AR study, the sample for this study was selected using both purposive and theory-driven methods (Miles et al., 2014). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), purposive sampling operates under the assumption

that the researcher aims to "discover, understand, and gain insights," necessitating the selection

of a sample from which the most valuable information can be obtained (p. 96). Specifically, this

study focused on one student support department at a public 4-year state institution and how that

department can build its staffing development and capacity to support foster youth at their

institution more effectively. This department offers various student support services, including

nonclinical case management, basic needs support, student activities, academic support, and

career development. This department is the workplace for 11 full-time professional staff

members, one part-time staff member, and approximately 60 campus or federal work-study

students responsible for offering support services to approximately 4,000 EC undergraduate

students.

Therefore, the choice of participants was purposive to ensure their association with this

specific department at EC or other campus stakeholders who were collaboratively integrated into

the designed interventions. The sample includes both professional staff and student workers. As

a small institution, our interventions were only possible with the support and buy-in of our

student staff, who play an integral role in the daily operations of our department. Table 2.1

summarizes the research participants and their involvement in this AR project.

Table 2.1

Research Participants

Participants	Total	Description
Core leadership team	4	A small group of key stakeholders within the department collaboratively focused on the co-exploration and co-creation of a problem statement and theory of change model to guide the project. This team also monitored progress and actively served on both intervention teams.
Staff development intervention team	6	A collaborative working group tasked with implementing, observing, and assessing interventions related to the department's intrapersonal growth and staff development through a culturally relevant lens.
Campus resource intervention team	13	A collaborative working group tasked with implementing, observing, and assessing interventions related to campus resources and direct support of foster youth at EC.

The AR Plan

The AR team sought to answer the following research question: What can be learned at the individual, group, and system levels by using the culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) model to examine organizational capacity to support foster youth and alumni holistically and effectively in postsecondary education?

To address this question, we needed to ensure a systematic data collection and interpretation process (Myers, 2013). Table 2.2 outlines the AR plan, developed collaboratively with the AR team to ensure buy-in and support, and maps each strategy to the relevant research element, data collection method, sample, and timeline. These were subject to modification and change as the project continued to progress based on our insights and observations. We also used this plan as an audit trail to ensure that we tracked the steps taken and the decisions made

throughout the project. By systematically recording each step, the AR team ensured that the

research was conducted methodically, with a focus on transparency and accountability. This

approach also provided a mechanism for reflecting on the effectiveness of the interventions,

facilitating continuous improvement and adaptation.

Table 2.2

The AR Plan

Research cycle / TOC strategy	Research question element	Anticipated data to be collected	Sample	Timeline
#1 Ecological conditions audit: exploring campus and community resources to support foster youth and alums at EC.	Individual	Journal prompt responses, reflection on the resource mapping process from each intervention team member.	Core leadership & intervention team	February 2024, April 2024 & June 2024
		Exit interview	AR core leadership & intervention team	July 2024
	Group	Organizational data and documents	Core leadership team	Ongoing
		Resource mapping	AR team, campus stakeholders, & consultants	Ongoing
	System	Benchmarking	AR team, campus stakeholders, & consultants	Ongoing
#2 Offer education, training, and development to staff responsible for supporting foster youth and alums at EC.	Individual	Culturally relevant leadership self-assessment (pre and post)	AR team	Reflectively, Spring 2024, & Summer 2024
		Journal prompt responses, reflection	AR team	Ongoing after each training milestone.

Research cycle / TOC strategy	Research question element	Anticipated data to be collected	Sample	Timeline
	Group & system	Focus group	AR team & intervention teams	Summer 2024
	System	Complete the adapted culturally relevant leadership learning self-study to assess the application of the theoretical CRLL framework	AR team	Reflectively Spring 2024 Summer 2024
#3 Observe Change Interventions	System	Interview	Foster youth currently enrolled or graduated from EC.	Spring 2024 – Summer 2024

Data Collection

This study was meant to affect meaningful change within my organization and contribute to the body of knowledge on how student support services staff can use culturally relevant leadership practices to support foster youth more effectively in higher education. The AR methodology provided a systematic exploration leveraging qualitative data collected to help the AR team document and understand detailed descriptions of lived experiences, cultural norms, and individual perspectives. These qualitative descriptions provided vivid details that enhanced the AR team's understanding of the contextual problem and the evolution of our overall project as it progressed. The qualitative data collection methods included a review of existing organizational documents and data, guided researcher self-study, interviews, focus groups, reflective journaling (guided by prompts), and researcher observations that arose during team meetings, interventions, and other AR activities. Qualitative data collection occurred throughout the three AR cycles and encompassed (a) an ecological conditions audit, (b) intrapersonal and staff development, and (c) the implemented change interventions. The data collection methods employed in these processes are described in this chapter.

Document Review

Document review and analysis is a systematic procedure to help gain context, generate questions, supplement other research data, and track changes over time (Bowen, 2009). These methods can also help researchers and organizations maintain accurate, compliant, high-quality documentation for effective operations, decision-making, and risk management (Bretschneider et al., 2017). The document review required a critical approach to address its limitations, such as incomplete or inaccurate information, time-consuming processes, subjectivity, lack of context, and limited access to protected information (Creswell, 2014). The AR team addressed these

challenges by purposively sampling relevant documents and critically assessing their quality, relevance, and reliability, considering biases and potential inaccuracies (Flick, 2018; H. Morgan, 2022). The purposive sample of organizational documents included reviewing case files saved in our organization's case-management database for seven EC students with foster care experience. The core leadership team collaboratively discussed and chose these seven files based on the criteria that each individual self-disclosed their experience in foster care to their case manager or and willingly utilized or supported services provided by our department at some point in their collegiate journey. Due to the limited information and context saved in each case file, case managers were asked to make additional notes for everyone based on their interactions and observations to help share a more compelling picture of the sample students' collegiate experiences. To protect anonymity, each file was assigned a profile number and pseudonym. Any personally identifying information was redacted before the files were shared for coding and analysis.

Resource Mapping and Assessment

As part of the document review process, the core leadership and campus resource intervention teams collaboratively conducted community resource mapping to identify resources within our campus and surrounding community that serve foster youth in their transition and persistence through EC. Data for community resource mapping was collected by reviewing internal documents, online searches, and in-person communications (Crane & Mooney, 2005; Flannagan & Bumble, 2022). This data was then organized and categorized, cleaned, and cross-checked before being mapped.

Guided Researcher Self-Study

Two instruments were used to conduct collaborative, guided researcher self-study. These tools were used recursively both prior to and after implementing our interventions.

The Culturally Relevant Leadership Scale (CRLS)

The CRLS, designed by Hines (2022), assesses principals' use of cultural responsiveness in school leadership and is based on theoretical concepts from various scholars (Gay, 2010; Hayes & Juarez, 2011; Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Merchant et al., 2013; Paris, 2012; Sleeter, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Young et al., 2010). The AR team collaboratively adapted the CRLS to suit our specific population and organizational needs to allow us to measure and compare EC staff's performance, processes, and practices in supporting foster youth within a collegiate setting. The CRLS was administered to the AR team before the intervention to establish a baseline and again after the interventions as a follow-up. Data from the CRLS administrations were uploaded to Dedoose, where it was qualitatively coded and categorized, then reviewed by the AR team for accuracy and consistency before synthesis. Table 2.3 provides an observation checklist based on the CRLS, comparing the original and modified versions used by our core leadership team in 2022 and 2024.

Table 2.3

Observation Checklist Adapted from Hines's (2022) Culturally Responsive Leadership Scale

Domain		CRLS Leadership Behavior	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no and notes
Inclusiveness	1	Ensuring that curriculum and instruction materials and resources reflect the cultural makeup of the students in the school.	Ensuring that programs, curricula, and instructional materials/resources reflect foster youth's cultural backgrounds and experiences.	
	2	Connecting students, faculty, and staff to external organizations and resources that are responsive to their cultural backgrounds.	Connecting foster youth and faculty/staff to external organizations and resources that understand and cater to the unique needs of foster youth, considering their cultural backgrounds.	
	3	Ensuring that culturally diverse groups of faculty and staff members serve as interview panels for hiring new faculty/staff members.	Ensuring that a culturally diverse group of faculty or staff serves as interview panelists for hiring new members.	
	13	Ensuring that extracurricular activities are inclusive of community members from different cultures.	Ensuring that extracurricular activities within the institution are inclusive and welcoming to foster youth and community members from diverse cultural backgrounds.	
	20	Creating academic and social programs that are responsive to the diverse needs of culturally diverse groups of students.	Creating academic support and social programs tailored to meet the diverse needs of foster youth from various cultural backgrounds, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility.	
Development	4	Encouraging faculty and staff to become formally and informally educated on matters related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.	Encouraging faculty and staff to pursue formal and informal education on matters related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and the specific challenges faced by foster youth.	

	5	Providing faculty and staff with ongoing support for addressing the needs of culturally diverse student populations.	Providing ongoing support to faculty and staff in addressing the complex needs and challenges faced by foster youth from diverse cultural backgrounds.
	6	Providing faculty and staff with information that enhances their awareness of the relevance of diversity, equity, and inclusion to the school.	Providing faculty and staff with information that highlights the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion, and the unique needs of foster youth in higher education.
	7	Making provisions for teachers to receive training on topics and issues about the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students.	Making provisions for staff to receive training on topics and issues related to the cultural, social, and emotional needs of foster youth.
	8	Ensuring that faculty, staff, and administrators are aware of how their own cultural norms and behaviors influence the culture and climate of the school.	Ensuring that student support staff recognize and understand how their own cultural biases and behaviors impact the experiences of foster youth within the institution.
	22	Evaluating faculty and staff members' ability to incorporate cultural responsiveness into their roles and positions.	Evaluating staff members' proficiency in integrating cultural responsiveness into their roles and positions, particularly concerning their support for foster youth from diverse backgrounds.
Validation	9	Creating schoolwide instructional practices that address the characteristics and lived experiences of culturally diverse students.	Creating departmental practices that acknowledge and address the unique characteristics and lived experiences of foster youth from culturally diverse backgrounds.
	11	Ensuring that school policies and procedures are sensitive to the culturally diverse makeup and perspectives within the school.	Ensuring that departmental policies and procedures demonstrate sensitivity and responsiveness to the culturally diverse

			perspectives and makeup of the foster youth population within the institution.
	15	Creating opportunities for families and communities to add their lived experiences to the development of specific policies and programs.	Creating opportunities for families and communities, including those of foster youth, to contribute their lived experiences to the development of specific policies and programs, fostering inclusivity and collaboration.
	16	Cultivating a school environment that allows members to validate other cultures while embracing the cultural uniqueness of their identities.	Cultivating a school environment that fosters the validation of various cultures while celebrating the unique cultural identities of foster youth and their communities.
	17	Using language in documents and statements that validate the cultural characteristics and backgrounds of students and families.	Using language in documents and statements that acknowledges and validates the cultural characteristics and backgrounds of foster youth, promoting a sense of belonging and respect within the institution.
Cultivation	10	Ensuring that school policies emphasize high expectations for cultural responsiveness throughout the school.	Ensuring that school policies underscore high expectations for cultural responsiveness throughout the department, specifically addressing the unique needs and experiences of foster youth from diverse cultural backgrounds.
	12	Creating policies and guidelines for addressing cross cultural conflict in sensitive ways.	Developing policies and guidelines for addressing cross-cultural conflicts involving foster youth in compassionate and culturally sensitive ways.
	14	Enacting formalities and procedures for welcoming families and community members to the school in culturally responsive ways.	Implementing formalities and procedures to warmly welcome foster youth to the school in culturally sensitive ways, recognizing and

		respecting the diverse backgrounds and experiences of foster youth and their support networks.
18	Creating a climate that integrates equity into schoolwide expectations for students.	Fostering a climate ensuring that all students with a history of foster care have equitable access to resources, opportunities, and support services.
19	Allocating funding and human resources towards promoting ideas about diversity, equity, and inclusion	Directing funding and human resources towards initiatives that promote ideas about diversity, equity, and inclusion, with a particular focus on addressing the needs and challenges faced by foster youth from diverse cultural backgrounds.
21	Developing events that emphasize cross-cultural collaboration and communication in cross-cultural situations.	Organizing events and activities that highlight cross-cultural collaboration and communication, providing opportunities for foster youth and other students from diverse backgrounds to engage in meaningful interactions and build understanding across cultural differences.

The Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning Self-Study Guide (CRSG)

The CRSG, adapted from work by Kansas State University's Staley School of Leadership Studies (2020), encourages educators to critically engage with their practices, promote inclusivity, and empower leaders to challenge inequity. This reflective tool was adapted for assessing cultural responsiveness among student support staff working with foster youth in this study (see Table 4.5 for the adapted guide).

Critical Incident Interviews (CIIs)

The critical incident technique is a research method used to collect direct observations from significant or critical experiences (Flanagan, 1954). The interview questions were grounded in this methodology and designed to capture detailed, firsthand accounts from participants (Flanagan, 1954). This technique is particularly useful for understanding complex, real-world challenges, like those faced by foster youth in transitioning to and persisting in college. Each of the open-ended interview prompts was aimed at encouraging participants to recall specific incidents where they played a key role in supporting foster youth, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their actions, decisions, and reflections.

The follow-up questions helped deepen the narrative by breaking down each incident into its components: what happened, who was involved, the participant's response, and why it felt significant. This structure aligns with CIT's goal of gathering comprehensive insights into behaviors, decisions, and their outcomes in critical situations. I conducted CIIs with three stakeholders who assist foster youth in their transition and persistence at EC. The following open-ended interview prompts were used in conducting the CIIs:

1. Think about a time when you assisted a current or former foster youth with their transition to college.

2. Think about a time when a current or former foster youth approached you for support after college acceptance.

3. Think about a time when you were able to provide current or former foster youth with a resource that helped them to persist (to or) through college.

Follow-up questions for each of the interview prompts were:

1. Describe what happened.

2. Who was involved, and what was their role?

3. How did you handle it?

4. How did it turn out?

5. What about this incident made it seem significant to you?

The audio recordings of these interviews were transcribed. When possible, participant data (e.g., names, addresses, other personal identifiers) was anonymized to protect confidentiality. Sensitive information that could not be anonymized was redacted. These transcribed interviews were then coded based on recommendations by Miles et al. (2014) in alignment with the CRLL model. Both inductive and deductive coding approaches were employed using Dedoose software. The AR team members then reviewed coding categories for consistency and accuracy and resolved any discrepancies through team discussion.

Individual Interviews and Focus Group

Individual interviews and a focus group offered supplementary context and interpretive frameworks for the other data sources. These qualitative methods involved one-on-one and group interactions to capture participants' experiences, insights, and perspectives, providing a deeper understanding of the data. The researcher and AR team used semistructured interviews and a focus group with open-ended questions, allowing for adaptability and follow-up questions based

on participants' responses (Kallio et al., 2016; Krueger & Casey, 2014). Interviews and the focus group were audio recorded and then transcribed using Otter.ai. The core leadership team interacted with these transcripts in real time to add comments, highlight key points, and assign action items. Transcripts were checked for accuracy and then uploaded to Dedoose for collaborative qualitative data coding.

Question Development and Refinement

The questions used in both the individual interviews and focus group sessions were derived from a combination of established qualitative research frameworks and the specific objectives of the AR project. The questions were developed based on best practices recommended for AR and qualitative research (Miles et al., 2014; Kallio et al., 2016; Krueger & Casey, 2014) and informed by a thorough literature review on the challenges foster youth face in postsecondary education. The core leadership and AR teams then collaboratively refined and vetted the questions in an iterative process that included brainstorming sessions and feedback loops, which ensured that diverse perspectives were integrated into the design. The questions were adjusted for relevance and clarity after the preliminary interviews and during focus groups to fine-tune the questions to better capture meaningful insights. In addition, phrasing was carefully chosen to encourage open dialogue while being respectful of participants' emotional boundaries.

Individual Interviews

As lead researcher, I conducted individual interviews with AR team members (a) if they departed prior to the end of the project or (b) at the end of all AR project cycles. These interviews provided valuable insights and feedback based on team members' experiences throughout the AR project, helping the organization learn, improve, and enhance future

endeavors (Miles et al., 2014). The following questions were explored in each individual interview:

1. Tell me about your overall experience during the intervention project. What aspects did you find most rewarding or challenging?

2. What specific challenges or improvements did you observe from your involvement with the intervention project?

3. How effectively did the intervention team collaborate during the project?

4. What suggestions do you have for enhancing future initiatives related to this intervention project

5. Did you feel adequately supported during the project? If not, what additional support would have been helpful in hindsight?

6. How did the project's placement in our department impact the intervention project?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with the project or lessons you learned due to your participation?

Focus Groups

At the conclusion of the AR project, I conducted a focus group with members of the AR team who were willing and available to participate. In this end-of-project focus group, we explored the following questions:

Personal Insights and Growth:

a. How has your understanding of the challenges faced by foster youth in postsecondary education evolved through this research process?

b. What new skills or knowledge have you gained that will be most impactful in your work supporting foster youth?

Group Reflections:

c. What were the key insights or learnings emerged from our team's collective efforts?

d. How did the diverse perspectives within our team contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the issues we researched?

System Reflections:

e. How has our research influenced the organizational policies and practices related to supporting foster youth at Emerson College?

f. How effective were the identified resources in meeting the needs of foster youth?

g. What gaps in resources or support systems were discovered, and what recommendations can be made to address them?

Guided Reflective Journaling

Reflective journaling is essential for learning in action during the AR process (Carr & Kemmis, 1990; Kemmis, 1985; Kemmis et al., 2014). It allows practitioners to investigate their own practices within organizational contexts, encouraging deep reflection on experiences, outcomes, and decision-making (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Journaling helped the AR team identify patterns, challenges, and areas for improvement, and adapt their approaches based on real-time observations (Schön, 1983).

I generated multiple prompts, which I provided to the AR team. These prompts were intended to guide their regular journaling process and help them capture deep reflections as well as real-time thoughts and observations on the research process, particularly after significant events or interventions. After completion, team members submitted their journal reflections to me. I assigned each a pseudonym and removed personally identifying information before uploading the reflections into Dedoose. I performed initial qualitative data coding to identify

recurring themes and insights. Subsequently, the AR team also examined the data to categorize the reflections into common themes.

Data Analysis

In this section, I describe the tools and approaches employed for data analysis. The AR team employed the READ approach for qualitative data analysis: (1) ready your materials, (2) extract data, (3) analyze data, and (4) distill the findings (Dalglish et al., 2020). This chapter focuses on the first three steps of the READ approach for all qualitative documents utilized in this study. Chapter 3 will provide readers with insight into the processes used to distill the findings, and Chapter 4 will discuss insights and findings based on the distilled materials.

Readying Materials

Readying your materials refers to preparing all necessary documents, tools, and data for analysis (Dalglish et al., 2020). The AR team employed the web-based qualitative data coding and analysis application Dedoose to enable collaborative coding and analysis in real time and independently. I created a Dedoose account and set up a new project specifically for this research study. I then defined the project settings to ensure proper organization and easy navigation by all team members. Next, I collected and organized all qualitative data, including interview transcripts, focus group recordings, journal entries, and survey responses. I ensured that all documents were in digital formats compatible with Dedoose, such as PDFs, Word, and audio files. I then uploaded the collected data into Dedoose, organizing it into relevant categories or folders for easy access and management.

To prepare the data for coding, I ensured that all segments were adequately formatted and that any necessary anonymization or redaction was completed. At this point, members of the

change leadership team were able to begin familiarizing themselves with the collected data and setup of files within Dedoose.

Extracting Data

Extracting data refers to systematically identifying, coding, and categorizing specific pieces of information from the prepared materials (Dalglish et al., 2020). During this phase, the AR team worked to develop an initial set of codes based on preliminary reviews of the data, the literature review, and the research question. These codes were input into Dedoose's code system. These coding schemes are provided in Appendix B.

Analyzing Data

Analyzing data involves examining and interpreting collected data to uncover patterns, themes, and insights that address the research questions (Dalglish et al., 2020). The AR team used inductive and deductive coding techniques to label information segments reflecting specific ideas or themes. This iterative process involved continuous reflection on the findings, informing subsequent steps such as refining action plans or implementing interventions, and ensuring analysis was integrated with the participatory and iterative nature of AR (Coghlan, 2019). The data analysis process in Dedoose involved five key steps:

(1) coding and theme development

(2) data exploration and visualization

(3) interpretation and synthesis

(4) triangulation and validation

(5) writing and reporting

Inductive Coding

Inductive coding develops codes directly from the data without preconceived categories or theoretical frameworks (Saldaña, 2021). The AR team immersed ourselves in the data, identifying patterns, themes, and concepts that emerged naturally. This approach was used to analyze journal reflections and CRLL self-study results, where codes and themes emerged directly from the data. The process included reading journal entries, tagging noteworthy elements with descriptive labels, and grouping related codes into broader themes. This collaborative and iterative approach ensured reliability and deepened collective insights into leadership practices.

Deductive Coding

Deductive coding allowed us to apply pre-existing categories, concepts, or theoretical frameworks across the data types (Saldaña, 2021). We began with predetermined codes derived from existing theories, literature, or research questions, looking for evidence that confirmed or refined theoretical constructs or hypotheses (see Table 2.4). This structured approach ensured consistency and alignment with established theories or research objectives (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021).

Table 2.4

Deductive Coding Based on CRLL Model

CRLL domain	Subcategory	Code description
Historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion	Historical context	Investigate historical events, policies, and practices related to inclusion and exclusion within the organization or community.
	Legacy narratives	Analyze stories, myths, and narratives that shape perceptions of inclusion and exclusion over time.
	Power dynamics	Examine power structures and how they have influenced who is included or excluded historically.
Compositional diversity	Demographic representation	Explore the presence and distribution of diverse identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, age) within leadership roles.
	Intersectionality	Consider how multiple dimensions of diversity intersect and impact leadership dynamics.
	Representation equity	Assess whether diverse groups are proportionally represented in leadership positions.
Psychological dimension	Cultural intelligence	Investigate leaders' awareness, understanding, and adaptability to cultural differences.
	Implicit bias	Examine unconscious biases that may affect decision-making and interactions.
	Emotional intelligence	Analyze leaders' ability to manage emotions and empathize across cultural contexts.

Behavioral dimension	Inclusive practices	Identify specific behaviors that promote inclusivity, such as active listening, collaboration, and valuing diverse perspectives.
	Microaggressions	Recognize subtle actions or comments that unintentionally marginalize others.
	Advocacy and allyship	Assess leaders' actions in supporting marginalized individuals and advocating for equity.
Organizational/structural dimension	Policies and procedures	Analyze organizational policies related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
	Resource allocation	Investigate how resources (e.g., funding, staffing) are distributed across diverse groups.
	Leadership accountability	Assess whether leaders are held accountable for fostering an inclusive environment.
Leadership process	Complex problem solving	Develop the capacity to deconstruct intricate problems and address them effectively.
	Vulnerability and authenticity	Encourage leaders to embrace vulnerability, authenticity, and self-awareness in their interactions.
	Activism and advocacy	Equip leaders with skills to advocate for social justice and challenge systemic barriers.

Throughout the coding process, the AR team scrutinized each piece of data, identifying and tagging text segments corresponding to predefined codes. This systematic application allowed for efficient categorization, enabling quick identification and organization of responses related to specific themes or concepts. The team remained attentive to the context and nuances of participants' responses, ensuring that the codes accurately reflected participants' perspectives and experiences. Although the coding scheme was established in advance, flexibility was maintained to adjust codes if new, relevant themes emerged unexpectedly. Examples of emerging themes identified during the coding process included empathy, trauma, and partnerships/collaborations.

After completing the coding, the team aggregated the data associated with each code to facilitate analysis. This aggregation helped identify patterns, similarities, and differences in participants' experiences and perspectives. The deductive coding process concluded with the AR team synthesizing the coded data to draw conclusions and insights related to the research objectives. This synthesis involved interpreting the significance of the identified patterns and considering their implications for the AR project, including any actions or changes to be implemented based on the findings. The team ensured that our interpretations remained grounded in the data and accurately reflected participants' voices and experiences.

By employing these methods, the AR team ensured the quality and rigor of the study, aiming for meaningful and actionable outcomes that directly addressed the research questions. Using a combination of inductive and deductive coding techniques enabled the researchers to leverage the strengths of both approaches, leading to a more robust and insightful analysis of qualitative data. The researchers produced innovative and theoretically grounded findings by balancing openness to new insights with adherence to established theories.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

The quality of an AR study is measured by the generation of knowledge and practice that are actionable for both academic and practitioner communities and can be used to implement something new (Newton & Burgess, 2008). We implemented multiple steps to ensure the quality and rigor of the study, addressing the four key qualities of trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Creswell, 2002). Each of these qualities ensures the rigor and applicability of the research findings.

Credibility

Credibility refers to confidence in the truth of the data and its interpretations (Creswell, 2002). In this study, credibility was enhanced through member checking, where participants verified the accuracy of transcribed documents, ensuring alignment with their experiences (Johnson et al., 2020). Triangulation was also employed by comparing data from various sources, which helped identify convergences and further validated our findings (Johnson et al., 2020). Additionally, the diverse backgrounds of team members and external validation from subject experts contributed to the study's credibility (Dalglish et al, 2020).

Dependability

Dependability involves the stability of data over time (Creswell, 2002). Detailed documentation of the research process, including an audit trail that recorded each step and decision made throughout the study, established a clear chronological sequence for this research and ensured dependability in this project (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993). Regular collaborative reviews and refinements of our coding and data categorization maintained consistency and reliability, which further enhanced data stability and dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that the findings are shaped by the respondents and not influenced by researcher bias (Creswell, 2002). This was promoted through member checking and maintaining reflexivity, engaging in reflective critique, and acknowledging personal biases (Johnson et al., 2020). Moreover, team members continuously monitored and evaluated the impact of our actions to ensure that we were aware of any potential influence on our findings. Creating an audit trail and ensuring transparent recordkeeping further supported the objectivity and confirmability of the research (Johnson et al., 2020).

Transferability

Transferability refers to how our findings can be applied to other contexts (Creswell, 2002). We enhanced transferability by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and processes, allowing others to evaluate the applicability of our findings to their settings.

Subjectivity Statement

As the primary researcher, my positionality and how my background has shaped how I view the world and this research project. Demographically, I identify as a married white heterosexual cisgender woman who is college-educated and employed while seeking a terminal degree. Professionally, I have over a decade of experience as a student affairs practitioner. My extensive experience in student affairs has given me an understanding of the complexities of the higher education system, particularly as it pertains to students who have experienced foster care. I approach this research project as an organization insider with 7 years of organizational context and experience. Over the past 7 years, I have intentionally worked to increase my knowledge and capacity for supporting foster youth in higher education. I entered this work as the assistant

director of student life, where one of my responsibilities included overseeing and coordinating

basic needs support services for students. Since then, my position has evolved to oversee all

aspects of student life and campus activities as the associate director (acting director) for student

life. In the associate director role, I am responsible for overseeing basic needs support services

and seeking and implementing grant opportunities to increase the capacity and reach of support

services. I am thus an insider action researcher in my organization and occupy a position of

relative authority and status at my institution.

In addition to the demographics shared above, my background and life experiences,

which include family privilege, have significantly shaped my perspective and approach to this

critical work. My upbringing was marked by family divorce and the extended support of

grandparents from both sides. These family dynamics and family privileges have provided me

with stability and a network of emotional and financial support throughout my life. I

acknowledge that these advantages have profoundly influenced my worldview and the lens

through which I perceive the experiences of others. I am acutely aware that the foster youth and

alums I work with often face unique challenges and vulnerabilities, and my background,

including my family privilege, be acknowledged in this context.

I approach my research with a commitment to cultural humility and a deep appreciation

for the individual stories and lived experiences of the students I aim to support. My background

may introduce certain preconceptions, but I am determined to engage in ongoing self-reflection,

continuous education, and an unwavering commitment to equity and social justice.

In my research, I strive to create a more inclusive, responsive, and supportive higher

education environment for foster youth and alumni, acknowledging that every individual's

journey is unique. I pledge to approach my work with empathy, an open heart, and a

commitment to dismantling barriers that hinder these students' academic and personal success. This positionality statement is a testament to my dedication to advancing the welfare of foster youth and alums in higher education while actively acknowledging my background and privileges. It underscores my commitment to a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape for all students.

CHAPTER 3

THE ACTION RESEARCH NARRATIVE

Exploring an Action Research Case Study Through a Kaleidoscopic Lens

Life is like an ever-shifting kaleidoscope – a slight change, and all the patterns alter.

—Sharon Salzberg, *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience* (p. 138)

Action research (AR), much like a kaleidoscope, is a process of continuous reflection and examination. This cyclical process, as described by Coghlan (2019), involves planning, acting, observing the outcomes, and reflecting on them, followed by making adjustments to the plan. This iterative nature allows the AR team to explore new possibilities, view problems or situations from different perspectives, and create more effective and efficient action patterns. The complexity and multidimensionality of AR mirror the intricate patterns produced by a kaleidoscope, encompassing multiple layers of data, perspectives, and experiences that are carefully analyzed and synthesized to develop meaningful insights and conclusions.

My doctoral journey started in May 2020. I entered this journey as an established student affairs staff member with over five years of experience in higher education, including three years at Emerson College (EC). My responsibilities included leadership development, managing the student food pantry, and fostering community engagement. However, I initially struggled to shift my mindset from focusing solely on student development to embracing organizational change management. It took multiple iterations of meetings with advisors, discussing my observations with future AR team members, and countless conceptual drafts of literature reviews before I

could shift from merely viewing the issues to truly gazing at them with a more profound and intentional focus.

This shift would not have been possible without the guidance of my doctoral committee and the development of a strong AR team. The collaborative efforts and diverse perspectives within the team enriched the experience, allowing us to incorporate multiple interpretations, share insights, enhance creativity, foster emotional connections, and engage in reflective dialogue. This collective approach mirrored the kaleidoscopic process of AR, where each turn brings new perspectives and patterns into view, leading to deeper understanding and more impactful actions.

In this chapter, I illustrate the evolution of my AR narrative as a kaleidoscopic exploration of the broad and complex task of supporting foster youth and alumni in their collegiate persistence. The kaleidoscope serves as both a metaphor and a guiding tool, inspiring a sense of wonder and creativity. It invites us to view the world in new ways, explore endless possibilities, and embrace the beauty of complexity. This AR study addressed the following research question: What can be learned at the individual, group, and system levels by using the culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) model to examine organizational capacity to support foster youth and alumni holistically and effectively in postsecondary education?

The AR study described in this chapter took place at Emerson College (EC), a public 4-year baccalaureate degree-granting institution with approximately 4,000 students. EC is an access point for many first-generation and low-income students entering the state's university system. Understanding this context is essential for readers, as the work of supporting foster youth and alumni at EC does not begin or end with this narrative. Several preliminary events laid the groundwork for this formalized AR project, creating the necessary organizational preconditions

for the research to be conducted smoothly and ethically. Table 3.1 outlines these preliminary

events and their significance in setting the foundation for this project.

Table 3.1

Preliminary Events: Gaining Context and the Foundation for an Action Research Narrative

Date	Task	Significance
02/22/2019	Embark DPOC changed	The task of supporting foster youth at EC was transitioned to the Dean of Students Office allowing more direct and holistic student support.
10/03/2019	Embark Georgia leadership conference	The future researcher and project sponsor realized and acknowledged that the DPOC role and support services were not meeting the needs of foster youth at EC.
12/16/2019	Informational interview & campus tour	Three members of the future core leadership team conducted an informational interview with a nearby campus to learn about their support services.
09/01/2019	Embark Georgia special project grant request	The future sponsor and researcher created and submitted a capacity-building grant to support foster youth and alumni at EC.
09/30/2019	Embark Georgia special project grant approved	EC received a capacity-building grant totaling $42,000 to extend support services to foster youth.
02/28/2020	The Fostering Success Coaches training: Level I	The future researcher and project sponsor completed a certification designed for professionals working with postsecondary students who have experienced foster care or adverse childhood experiences.
03/01/2020	College application revision	Three future core leadership team members advocated and revised the EC application to allow disclosure if students have received any services in the past 5 years that would qualify them for additional support services, including a case worker and/or ILP with DFCS or awarded foster care ETV funds.

Date	Task	Significance
05/01/2020	Facility renovation for the student center	The future researcher managed a student center renovation to create a more inclusive, one-stop resource center for students that houses a food pantry and professional clothing closet.
10/01/2020	Embark Georgia special project grant closed	The grant was successfully executed and closed.

Reflecting on these events, I recall a pivotal moment when I received a call from a local high school counselor inquiring about the Embark Program and our campus's Designated Point of Contact (DPOC). At the time, I was unfamiliar with Embark and had no idea where to begin. However, after gathering information and contacting various campus administrators, I connected with an administrative specialist serving as EC's Embark DPOC. This interaction marked the beginning of a deeper understanding of the support structures required for foster youth at EC. As the DPOC role was passed to me, and eventually to our Dean of Students—who was better positioned to serve at-risk students seeking holistic development and ongoing support—it became clear that collaboration with local, state, and regional agencies was critical to fully understanding the needs of foster youth.

Our increased collaboration with agencies like Embark allowed us to participate in EMBARK regional coalition meetings, where we engaged with stakeholders across the state. These interactions gave us a wealth of knowledge about best practices for supporting foster youth and helped us realize the pressing need for more comprehensive support services on our campus. The insights we gained during these meetings and our participation in the Fostering Success Coaches I Certification enabled us to better advocate for the institutional changes necessary to support these students.

One key outcome of these preliminary events and professional development opportunities was recognizing that additional funding was essential to expand our support services. The knowledge gained from these events helped us make a strong case for external funding to enhance foster youth support on our campus, including external training and development for the core leadership team members. Our participation in these preliminary training programs laid the groundwork for securing funding for further external development opportunities, including the Fostering Success Coaches Level I and II certification programs for core leadership team members. Additionally, it provided a baseline for us to advocate for additional capacity-building grants to launch critical interventions, such as Camp Kaleidoscope (Camp K), that enabled us to gain expanded exposure and practice to foster youth in the higher education setting.

As we moved forward with the project, the team recognized several challenges and concerns that needed careful consideration to ensure the long-term success of our initiatives as the project was preparing to formally launch. At the outset, there was a risk that key stakeholders within the college, including other departments and administrators, might not fully understand the importance of these efforts to support foster youth. We knew that it would be difficult to secure the internal resources and cooperation necessary for successful implementation without their support and a shared commitment to the project's goals.

Finally, there was a persistent concern about the sustainability of these efforts. While the initial capacity-building grants provided a necessary boost to get these programs off the ground, we knew that maintaining and expanding them would require ongoing funding and institutional support. The team had to think strategically about ensuring these programs would continue to grow and serve foster youth beyond the initial grant period. These experiences taught us that advocacy for foster youth support services was most effective when backed by data and best

practices obtained through professional development. The capacity-building grant we secured

not only funded preliminary events but also set the stage for continued growth, providing the

necessary foundation for future initiatives to support foster youth as they navigate higher

education.

This chapter takes readers through the intricate systems, groups, and individuals

dedicated to supporting foster youth and alumni in their pursuit of postsecondary education. The

AR project is guided by a carefully developed theory of change, which frames the progression

through three AR cycles, each representing key themes that emerge in this work. To help readers

navigate this narrative, the chapter is organized into three main sections: the theory of change

and the transition from viewing to gazing; practicing through the practitioner's lens; and

narrative and outcomes. Together, these sections reflect the kaleidoscopic nature of the AR

process, where observation, reflection, and action converge to form a dynamic, evolving support

system for foster youth.

The AR Team: Observers Collaborating for Change

This complex research project involved various systems, barriers, and perspectives. A

team of passionate and dedicated individuals had to work collaboratively towards a shared goal

to tackle this project successfully. The AR team aimed to understand the experiences of young

adults transitioning from foster care to college while also seeking to become more

knowledgeable about existing resources and infrastructures. Examples of the resources and

infrastructures that needed further exploration included the child welfare system, K–12 support

and guidance, and the higher education system to identify the intersections and gaps in support

services. Before the official start of the AR project, I and the project sponsor were allowed to

attend a Designated Point of Contact (DPOC) Meeting and the Embark Georgia Leadership

Conference. These events were pivotal in broadening our understanding of the existing

challenges and gaps in support for foster youth at EC. The interactions and knowledge gained at

these events highlighted the limitations of the DPOC role at EC and the inadequacies in the

support services provided to foster youth. This realization was crucial in refining our approach as

we launched the AR project and expanded the AR team.

Fall 2020 formally marked the launch of our AR team and collaborative efforts to

construct and formulate a vision of the future state. The AR team evolved throughout the AR

process. Initially, the project sponsor and I (as the lead researcher) worked closely to explore the

problem. The project sponsor was pivotal in guiding, supporting, and overseeing the AR project.

Their involvement was crucial for securing resources, setting direction, making decisions,

supporting the team, monitoring progress, and ensuring accountability. This comprehensive

support ensured the project's completion and alignment with organizational objectives. As the

lead researcher, I was responsible for identifying literature and best practices, designing

methodology, ensuring an ethical research process, analyzing data, and communicating findings

in this AR dissertation.

During this time, the project sponsor and I met with various organizational personnel to

establish areas of inquiry and interests surrounding the project. Following our initial

consultations and solidification of sponsorship for the project, we identified and pulled in two

additional campus stakeholders to serve as core leadership team members to explore the current

scope and organizational context. This *core leadership team* focused on the co-exploration and

co-creation of a problem statement and theory of change. This collaborative process allowed the

core leadership team to increase our understanding of the organizational problem: the lack of

staffing knowledge, capacity, and structure to effectively support foster youth entering Emerson

College. Additionally, the core leadership team collaboratively identified three overarching strategies that were organizationally supported and held preconditions, such as human capital and financial resource allocations, that made this project realistic and mutually beneficial to the organization and my doctoral studies. Table 3.2 summarizes each core leadership team member's pseudonym, role on the AR team, and roles and responsibilities at EC.

Table 3.2

Core Leadership Team Profiles

Pseudonym	AR team role	EC role	Responsibilities
Emily	Project sponsor and core leadership team	Associate vice president of student affairs (VPSA) and dean of students (DOS), Embark DPOC	Campus administrator responsible for overseeing student life, student support services, and on-campus activities. Directly oversees Campus Assessment, Response, and Evaluation (CARE) team, which responds to and supports students at risk or in distress.
Isabella	Core leadership team	Nonclinical case manager	Focuses on assessing EC students' needs, referring them to services, coordinating care, and supporting them. Works with students to reduce barriers and connect them to supportive resources related to housing insecurity, food insecurity, elevated academic concerns, mental health, limited financial resources impeding access to supplies needed for academic success, etc.
Olivia	Core leadership team	Director of disability access and students support services	Responsible for enhancing and supporting students' learning experience and academic success by providing access to various academic support services, including disability accommodations, individual or group tutoring, and supplemental instruction. Students with

			documented disabilities may request reasonable accommodations, which will afford them equal access to all educational programs and activities of the college.
Heather	Lead researcher and core leadership team	Director for Student Engagement & Belonging	Manages the AR process and oversees campus services directly benefiting foster youth.

As the project continued to evolve, the core leadership team recruited additional AR team members, stakeholders, and consultants to help develop interventions for each identified strategy. As a lean organization, it was important to the core leadership team that we divide the designed interventions into two *intervention teams* so that those participating in the AR process could manage these tasks on top of their existing workloads without too much additional burden. The core leadership team participated in both intervention teams. The *staff development intervention team* recruited three additional AR team members. The *campus resource intervention team* recruited nine additional AR team members. Tables 3.3 and 3.4 summarize each intervention team member's pseudonym, their role on the AR team, and their roles and responsibilities at EC. At the peak of the project, the AR team comprised a total of 17 members. Each team member contributed unique perspectives, values, and knowledge to the collective group.

Importantly, the core leadership team also held multiple conversations with other department leaders and stakeholders across campus to help gain organizational buy-in beyond our small AR team. This external engagement helped bridge the gaps among departments by incorporating insights from individuals who might not be directly involved but had a vested interest in the success of initiatives to support foster youth. These conversations provided

valuable context about the campus environment, existing resources, and institutional challenges, which were essential in shaping the questions used in our research.

By inviting input from a wider network of campus stakeholders, we ensured that the questions addressed concerns relevant to different departments and perspectives. This approach also fostered organizational buy-in, as stakeholders felt that their feedback and expertise were being integrated into the project. Additionally, this collaboration helped position the project as a campus-wide initiative rather than one confined to the small AR team, thereby increasing the likelihood of sustained support and successful implementation of any findings.

Table 3.3

Staff Development Intervention Team

Pseudonym	AR team role	EC role	Responsibilities
Alejandra	Staff Development Intervention Team	AmeriCorps VISTA Member	Build capacity to support vulnerable student populations at EC.
Mariana	Staff Development Intervention Team	AmeriCorps VISTA Member	Build capacity to support vulnerable student populations at EC.

Table 3.4

Campus Resource Intervention Team

Pseudonym	EC role	Responsibilities
Ryan	Associate director of student conduct and case management	Oversees the student code of conduct and adjudication of alleged code violations. Also supervises the nonclinical case manager and serves as a member of the CARE team.
John	Residential Student	A white male student majoring in nursing with one year of homelessness experience during their last year of high school. Served in multiple student leadership positions.
Ashley	Residential Student	A white female majoring in nursing who has served in at least two student leadership positions on campus.

Andrew	Commuter Student	A white male majoring in computer sciences with vast experience serving as a youth camp counselor.
David	Residential Student	A white male majoring in respiratory therapy with one year of homelessness experienced during their last year of high school. Served in various student leadership positions on campus. Has utilized several resources offered by the CARE team.
Sofia	Commuter Student	A Hispanic female is majoring in biology with work-study experience on campus.
Michael	Commuter Student	A white male majoring in business holding various student leadership positions across campus.
James	Commuter Student	A white male majoring in engineering technology holding various student leadership positions across campus.
Marcus	Residential Student	An African American male majoring in communications at EC with lived experience in the foster care system and who has utilized the CARE team and other services designed for at-risk students.

Due to the narrow organizational structure and heavy workload at EC, many had expressed interest in supporting the project as needed and relevant to their positions but could not, for various reasons, commit to serving as a formal member of the AR team. The core leadership team regularly consulted with external stakeholders, including Embark Georgia, Georgia ETV, independent living program (ILP) specialists(s), high school counselors, and Gear UP Georgia. These external individuals and agencies have been invaluable consultants to help us learn.

The core leadership team was also approved to reassign one of our AmeriCorps VISTA positions to serve as the Foster Care Liaison VISTA to help build capacity related to interventions and the data collection process. The VISTA position was slated to be recruited in fall 2023 and to begin its role in January 2024. However, due to statewide budget cuts for the VISTA program, this position lost funding and needed approval. Therefore, after both AmeriCorps VISTA members serving on the staff development intervention team exited their year of service, their positions remained vacant on the AR team.

Shaping Pieces Into Patterns: Using the Theory of Change as a Guiding Framework

A theory of change is a fundamental component of any large-scale social change effort.

—The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2022a)

The historical roots and origins of the theory of change (TOC) come from a rich body of theoretical and applied development in the evaluation field, with significant contributions from theorists like Huey Chen, Peter Rossi, Michael Patton, and Carol Weiss. Weiss and Connell (1995) popularized the term through their work with the Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Community, where they highlighted the importance of clearly articulating the assumptions that drive complex programs. They argued that many programs fail in their evaluations because these underlying assumptions are poorly defined. An effective TOC, therefore, must describe the assumptions and the connections between program activities and outcomes at each step, leading to the long-term goals (Weiss & Connell, 1995).

Developing Our Theory of Change

Building on this foundation, our AR team developed a TOC that employed culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) as a powerful tool to examine and increase organizational capacity at EC, with the overarching goal of providing holistic, effective support for foster youth in higher education. As described in more detail in Chapter 1, CRLL emphasizes addressing the advantages and disadvantages created by cultural differences through the consideration of five environmental dimensions: (a) the historical legacy of inclusion and exclusion, (b) compositional diversity, (c) psychological climate, (d) behavioral climate, and (e) organizational or structural aspects (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016). Our theoretical mindset, reflected in our TOC (see Figure 3.1), asserted that higher education practitioners can extend the CRLL principles beyond

leadership programs, using these principles to enhance the infrastructure and resources needed to provide culturally relevant support to foster youth and alumni at EC.

As the facilitator of the AR team, I led the development of this TOC and used it as a tool for consensus-building among team members and stakeholders. This approach aligned with the recommendations by Reinholz and Andrews (2020), who advocated for using the development of a TOC as a group development process to ensure a shared understanding of the project's goals and challenges. The TOC also helped us identify preconditions within our organization—such as existing relationships, human capital, and access to knowledge—that were crucial for implementing our strategies and achieving the desired outcomes.

This TOC guided the AR team in developing an infrastructure that appropriately scaffolds culturally relevant resources and opportunities for foster youth and alumni. Key components included inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. The inputs identified by our team included the commitment of EC to equity and inclusion, financial resources for staff training and support programs, and the potential for partnerships with foster care agencies and community organizations. Activities involved resource mapping, staff training, and direct engagement with foster youth to tailor support strategies. Outputs included enhanced staff capacity, better resource accessibility, and stronger institutional support systems, all aimed at improving the academic and personal success of foster youth and alumni.

Role in the Research Process

As the framework that aligned our research activities with the overarching goal of supporting foster youth at EC, the TOC played a critical role in guiding each stage of the research process. From the initial phase of viewing—where we gathered and analyzed data—to the reflective phase of gazing—where we strategically focused our efforts—the TOC ensured

that every step was purposeful and directed towards our long-term objectives. In the context of our kaleidoscopic metaphor, the TOC functions like the mechanism that orchestrates the movement of pieces within a kaleidoscope, shaping the patterns that emerge. Just as a kaleidoscope transforms fragmented pieces into coherent, dynamic patterns, our TOC guided the AR team in turning insights into actionable strategies.

Identifying Key Strategies

To visualize how our AR team could meet our goals, we employed a backward mapping process. Starting with the desired outcomes, we worked backward to identify three key strategies: resource mapping, training and development, and beneficiary engagement. These strategies were crucial in realizing the overarching goal of equipping EC's staff to provide culturally relevant support to foster youth and alumni.
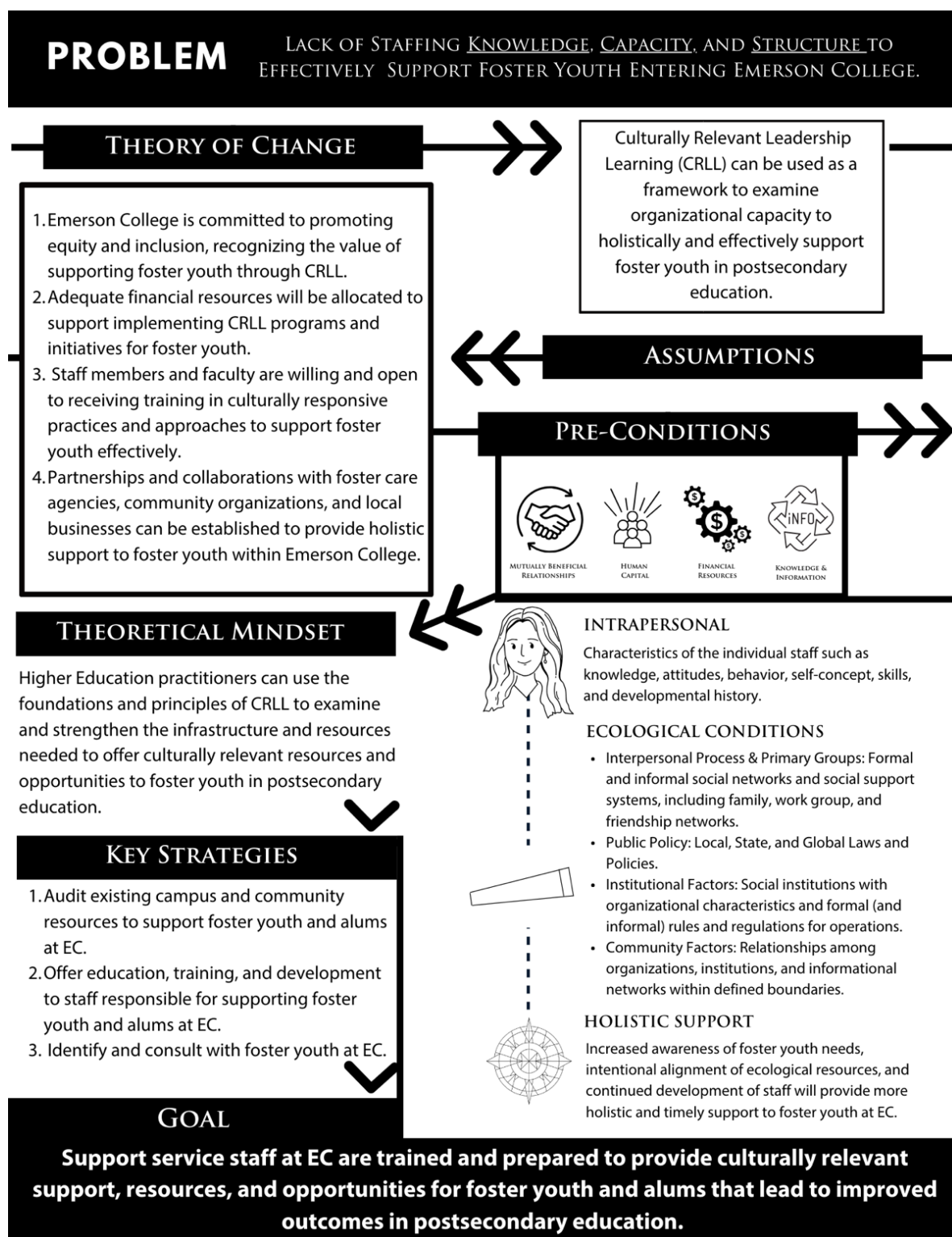
PROBLEM — LACK OF STAFFING KNOWLEDGE, CAPACITY, AND STRUCTURE TO EFFECTIVELY SUPPORT FOSTER YOUTH ENTERING EMERSON COLLEGE.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning (CRLL) can be used as a framework to examine organizational capacity to holistically and effectively support foster youth in postsecondary education.

1. Emerson College is committed to promoting equity and inclusion, recognizing the value of supporting foster youth through CRLL.
2. Adequate financial resources will be allocated to support implementing CRLL programs and initiatives for foster youth.
3. Staff members and faculty are willing and open to receiving training in culturally responsive practices and approaches to support foster youth effectively.
4. Partnerships and collaborations with foster care agencies, community organizations, and local businesses can be established to provide holistic support to foster youth within Emerson College.

ASSUMPTIONS

PRE-CONDITIONS

MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS · HUMAN CAPITAL · FINANCIAL RESOURCES · KNOWLEDGE & INFORMATION

THEORETICAL MINDSET

Higher Education practitioners can use the foundations and principles of CRLL to examine and strengthen the infrastructure and resources needed to offer culturally relevant resources and opportunities to foster youth in postsecondary education.

INTRAPERSONAL

Characteristics of the individual staff such as knowledge, attitudes, behavior, self-concept, skills, and developmental history.

ECOLOGICAL CONDITIONS

- Interpersonal Process & Primary Groups: Formal and informal social networks and social support systems, including family, work group, and friendship networks.
- Public Policy: Local, State, and Global Laws and Policies.
- Institutional Factors: Social institutions with organizational characteristics and formal (and informal) rules and regulations for operations.
- Community Factors: Relationships among organizations, institutions, and informational networks within defined boundaries.

KEY STRATEGIES

1. Audit existing campus and community resources to support foster youth and alums at EC.
2. Offer education, training, and development to staff responsible for supporting foster youth and alums at EC.
3. Identify and consult with foster youth at EC.

HOLISTIC SUPPORT

Increased awareness of foster youth needs, intentional alignment of ecological resources, and continued development of staff will provide more holistic and timely support to foster youth at EC.

GOAL

Support service staff at EC are trained and prepared to provide culturally relevant support, resources, and opportunities for foster youth and alums that lead to improved outcomes in postsecondary education.

Figure 3.1. *Theory of Change.*

Importantly, the TOC was not static; it evolved throughout this project as we gained more insights and adjusted our approach. This flexibility ensured that the emerging patterns—our strategies and interventions—were not only innovative but also tailored to the specific needs of foster youth and alumni. By continuously aligning our actions with the TOC, we were able to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment in which the unique challenges faced by foster youth are addressed in a holistic and culturally relevant manner. Through this kaleidoscopic process, the TOC became more than just a planning tool; it was a dynamic guide that helped us navigate the complexities of supporting foster youth in higher education, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

Turns of the Kaleidoscope: The Cyclical Process of Action Research

Figure 3.2 illustrates the cyclical nature of the AR process, highlighting the iterative steps of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. This continuous cycle ensures that the insights gained at each stage inform the subsequent actions, allowing the research team to refine strategies and interventions progressively. As the AR process unfolded, the transition from viewing to gazing became ever more crucial. The team moved from *observers* of the initial, broader context to *gazers* conducting a focused and intentional examination of the underlying issues, guided by the TOC. This deeper level of engagement allowed for a more strategic alignment of actions with the project's goals, ensuring that each step contributed to the development of a comprehensive support framework for foster youth. Each turn of the kaleidoscope—each cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting—allowed us to see the problem from different perspectives, experiment with new approaches, and refine our strategies to better serve foster youth.
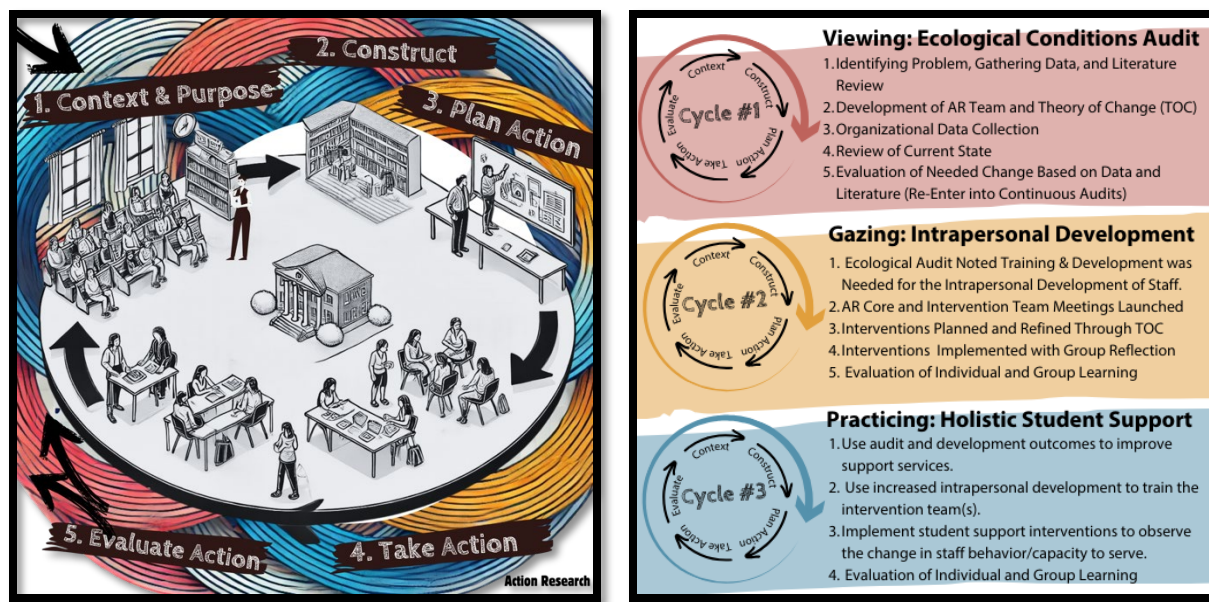
Figure 3.2. *Action Research: A Cyclical Process.*

As reflected in Figure 3.2, this AR project was conducted across three cycles, which I conceptualize in this chapter as three turns of the kaleidoscope, each focusing on a different action and pattern: *viewing* (cycle 1), *gazing* (cycle 2)*, and *practicing* (cycle 3)*. To help readers visualize these AR cycles, I utilize the four stages of reflection, planning, action, and observation, as outlined by Dickens and Watkins (1999), throughout this narrative. Here is the role of each stage in the AR process:

1. *Reflection*: This stage involves critically examining the current situation or problem to gain a deep understanding of the context. It is a time for team members to think about their experiences, assumptions, and the issues at hand, enabling them to develop insights that will inform the next steps.

2. *Planning:* Based on the insights gained from reflection, the planning stage involves designing actions that address the identified issues. This includes setting objectives, determining strategies, and organizing resources to implement the actions effectively.

3. *Action:* In this stage, the planned actions are carried out. This is where the team engages in practical activities aimed at creating change or improvement. The actions are experimental and are conducted with the intent to observe their impact.

4. *Observation:* After the action stage, the observation phase involves gathering data and feedback on the outcomes of the actions taken. The team closely monitors the effects, noting what worked and what did not, which then feeds back into the reflection stage for further cycles.

These stages are iterative, meaning that the team moved through them multiple times, refining our approach with each cycle to better address the problem and achieve the desired outcomes.

Viewing: An Ecological Conditions Audit (Cycle 1)

Viewing formed the initial phase of the AR process, in which we focused on gathering information and developing a broad understanding of the context in which the research was situated. In this phase, the AR team observed the existing conditions, identified key stakeholders, and recognized the challenges and opportunities that need to be addressed.

Reflection

In the viewing reflection stage, the AR team purposefully began by observing the diverse and intricate pieces that made up the current environment at EC. Much like a kaleidoscope, where individual fragments shift to reveal new patterns, this phase allowed the team to gather data from multiple sources and perspectives, forming a more comprehensive understanding of the context in which the research unfolded. The decision to start with this broad observation approach stemmed from our recognition that foster youth, as an underrepresented and often marginalized group in higher education, faced complex challenges that were not fully addressed by EC's existing support structures.

As we began assessing the role of the Designated Point of Contact (DPOC) for the Embark Program, it became clear that the role's initial lack of clarity and underutilization needed to be addressed before we could fully understand how the college could better support these students. This realization prompted a shift in our focus: instead of merely mapping existing resources; we began exploring how institutional roles and partnerships with external agencies could be redefined to enhance the impact on foster youth. Through ongoing reflection and discussions with stakeholders, we reexamined our assumptions and refined our approach, eventually elevating the importance of integrating the Embark DPOC into the Dean of Students Office. This change reflected our growing understanding of the need for dedicated institutional leadership in coordinating services for foster youth.

Each iteration of the reflection process also highlighted new insights, influencing how we viewed stakeholder roles and organizational structures. For instance, our initial conversations with campus leaders revealed gaps in communication and coordination between departments. This led us to reevaluate how key stakeholders could be more actively involved in the process. This continual reassessment was crucial, allowing the team to adapt our approach based on emerging data and feedback.

The reflection phase ultimately served as a foundational element of the AR cycle, helping us identify the unique experiences and needs of foster youth and guiding the evolution of our strategies as new information emerged. By embracing an iterative process, we adjusted our focus and methods, ensuring that the evolving picture we developed of foster youth support at EC was as accurate and actionable as possible.

The team identified key stakeholders, examined the organizational structures, and recognized the multifaceted challenges that foster youth faced, laying the groundwork for a

deeper exploration of how these elements interacted. The objective of this reflection stage was to establish a foundational understanding of the current situation, viewing the unique experiences and needs of foster youth as integral parts of a larger, complex mosaic.

Planning

The planning phase of this AR cycle was a strategic effort to establish a comprehensive foundation for action. During this phase, the AR team focused on gathering and analyzing critical information to inform future interventions to improve support for foster youth at EC. Several key actions were undertaken to ensure a thorough understanding of the institutional landscape. As the lead researcher, I began by reviewing scholarly literature and internal documents to assess the broader context of foster youth support and understand how institutional structures at EC influenced their experiences. In a journal entry from March 2023, I reflected on these insights, noting, *"As I reviewed literature on foster youth support, it became clear that institutional structures often unintentionally create barriers. EC is making strides, but we need to ensure long-term sustainability of our efforts… Our team is ready, but questions of sustainability loom large."* This phase also included meeting scheduling and preparation for resource mapping exercises.

During the planning phase, the core leadership team also discussed and considered organizational readiness to proceed with the project. Throughout the discussion, we emphasized building on EC's recent accomplishments, such as securing capacity-building grants, obtaining the Embark DPOC into our department, and renovating our campus food pantry and clothing closet to increase the capacity of serving foster youth and other underrepresented students at EC. These initiatives demonstrated EC's readiness to advance its support structures for foster youth, providing a strong foundation for the AR project to build upon. Although the team was filled

with hope and potential, the planning phase did include discussions on concerns and limitations to consider as we prepared to move into action. During an AR team meeting in April 2023, one team member emphasized, "*how do we ensure these aren't short lived successes? It's vital that we consider reallocating funds internally.*" While the team acknowledged EC's readiness, concerns around sustained funding emerged. Although capacity-building grants had been secured, questions about long-term financial support for the initiatives, such as the campus food pantry, clothing closet, and the Embark DPOC, were raised. The team needed to consider whether additional external funding or internal budget reallocations would be necessary to maintain and expand these support services beyond the grant period.

The AR team and core leadership were working with a small staff, which raised concerns about the feasibility of scaling up the planned initiatives. With limited human resources, questions surfaced about how to balance the workload of current staff while taking on new responsibilities, such as managing the expanded support services for foster youth. There were also concerns about staff burnout and the capacity to provide the individualized support that foster youth requires, especially as more students become aware of these resources. One AR team member expressed this sentiment during a January 2024 reflection, "*Our team has been stretched thin, and with new responsibilities coming, it's crucial that we figure out how to manage burnout. We're excited about the potential impact, but we need to ensure we have the human resources to follow through.*"

The planning phase of this AR cycle laid a critical foundation for the project by gathering key insights into the institutional landscape at EC and identifying opportunities and challenges related to supporting foster youth. Through a comprehensive review of literature, internal documents, and resource mapping, the AR team pinpointed structural barriers and assessed the

readiness of the institution to move forward. As the project prepared to transition into the action phase, the strategic planning and candid discussions about potential limitations equipped the AR team with a well-rounded understanding of the challenges ahead.

Action

The activities completed during this action stage were deliberately chosen to build a comprehensive understanding of the current conditions affecting foster youth at EC and to inform actionable interventions. The process began with a collaborative review of scholarly literature and internal documents, recognizing that a thorough understanding of both external research and EC's internal structures was critical for contextualizing the challenges foster youth faced. This review was essential for identifying structural barriers limiting the effective delivery of support services and pinpointing areas where changes were needed. Based on the internal data collected and findings from the literature review, the AR team identified several areas requiring immediate change, including improving communication and referral processes, increasing awareness of available resources, and redefining institutional roles, such as the Designated Point of Contact (DPOC), to ensure a more cohesive support system. These priorities guided the preliminary events, refined as the process moved forward, to create short-term improvements and lay the groundwork for sustained systemic change.

Analyzing Lived Experiences Through Case Management Data. The theory of change (TOC) originally envisioned direct interviews with foster youth to gather firsthand insights into their experiences. However, as the project progressed, the team pivoted due to the sensitive nature of engaging this population directly and the need to maintain confidentiality. To address the need to understand the real challenges and successes of foster youth at EC without directly conducting interviews, the AR team used existing data from the institution's case management

system. This alternative approach involved the core leadership team collaboratively reviewing CARE Team Case data over time, focusing on de-identified records of foster youth. The team systematically analyzed these cases, removed identifying information, and created detailed student profiles by assigning pseudonyms. This process allowed the team to develop a comprehensive, anonymized narrative that reflected the lived experiences of foster youth, highlighting their academic, emotional, and social challenges and the successes they achieved at EC. As one AR team member reflected in July 2024, *"While we initially hoped to engage foster youth directly, we quickly realized the need for sensitivity and confidentiality. Reviewing the case management data gave us the depth we needed while protecting the students' identities. It felt like a safe, yet powerful, way to honor their stories."* This pivot allowed us to proceed without breaching confidentiality and provided rich, contextual data that guided future interventions.

Completing these student profiles for EC students (see Table 3.5) with lived experience in foster care exemplifies that the journey of foster youth through higher education is complex, shaped by fragmented systems, economic instability, and personal challenges. At EC, the experiences of several students with foster care backgrounds illuminated these struggles while also highlighting the ways support systems and leadership opportunities can transform their outcomes.

Table 3.5

Foster Youth Student Profiles

Pseudonym	Referral cause	Support needs & interventions	Barriers to success	Outcomes
Sarah Matthews	Excessive absences due to mental health	CARE Team, Food Pantry, financial support	Job loss during COVID, financial instability	Graduated, now in law school
Ethan Rogers	Self-applied for leadership position	Leadership opportunities, mentorship	Negative experience as Camp Mentor, disengaged from campus	Still enrolled, engaged in foster youth advocacy
Alex Jordan	Pre-entry assistance from social worker for campus transition	CARE Team, Food Pantry, emotional support animals	Mental health, transportation issues, stop-outs	Multiple stop-outs, uncertain re-enrollment
Jordan Smith	GPA issues and lack of motivation	Vocational rehab, campus job, food pantry	Transportation, social stigma, loss of campus job	Academic improvement, received learner's permit
Taylor Brown	Referred for mental health accommodations	Housing support, Summer Bridge, financial assistance	No transportation, financial insecurity	Did not follow up
Chris Daniels	Referred for financial and learning disability assistance	Housing support, Summer Bridge, financial assistance	No transportation, financial insecurity	Unclear outcomes

The student profiles developed for EC students with foster care experience exemplify the complexity of navigating higher education. These students face numerous challenges, including fragmented systems, economic instability, and personal hardships. Their stories highlight both the difficulties they encounter and the ways support systems and leadership opportunities can transform their academic journeys.

For instance, Sarah Matthews struggled with mental health and financial instability, yet through targeted interventions like the CARE Team and food pantry, she graduated and continued her education in law school. Similarly, Ethan Rogers found empowerment through leadership opportunities, advocating for foster youth even after a difficult mentoring experience. These stories reflect the powerful impact of support systems in helping foster youth persist. However, not all students experienced straightforward progress. Alex Jordan and Taylor Brown both dealt with mental health challenges and financial insecurity, resulting in multiple stop-outs and uncertain academic outcomes. Their reliance on-campus resources such as emotional support animals and food pantries underscores the need for ongoing, adaptable support. Jordan Smith faced social stigma, but through vocational rehabilitation and patience, he showed academic improvement.

These profiles illustrate the kaleidoscope-like complexity of foster youth's experiences—where financial instability, mental health struggles, and social isolation intersect to create fragmented challenges. Yet, just as a kaleidoscope transforms broken pieces into patterns of beauty, EC's observation and interactions with foster youth reveal the potential to turn these challenges into cohesive success stories.

Focus Group. The internal focus group consisted of AR team members and other departmental stakeholders as a way to explore practitioner experiences with working with EC foster youth and alumni. As the AR team gathered to discuss their experiences working with foster youth at EC, a troubling pattern emerged. Time and time again, students were coming to the CARE Team when it was already too late—only after they had fallen into crisis.

One team member shared their frustration: *"We often don't see these students until they're in the middle of a crisis, and by then, their challenges have snowballed. We need to find*

ways to reach them earlier before things spiral out of control." Everyone knew this was not just a singular case, but a systemic issue—one that called for a shift in how the college approached support for foster youth.

The focus group revealed an important point: Reactive services were not enough. Waiting for foster youth to reach out in moments of crisis was putting students at risk. *"This student's crisis could have been averted if they had connected with our resources sooner,"* another team member reflected. *"Instead, the issue escalated severely and is negatively impacting their experience."*

Resource Mapping and Systemic Improvements. Building on these insights, the next AR phase focused on resource mapping. The initial goal was to audit available campus and community resources for foster youth at EC. However, as the process unfolded, it became clear that a static catalog would not sufficiently address the fragmented nature of the support systems. This realization led to a more dynamic approach.

During the resource mapping, the AR team discovered that the counseling center had already developed a community resource document, which significantly expedited the process. This resource highlighted a critical issue—limited communication between departments, leading to inefficiencies and duplication of efforts. To address this, the team created a listserv of campus representatives, ensuring that updated resource guides would be shared each semester. This improvement in communication helped streamline referrals and ensured that staff across departments remained informed about available resources, allowing for more effective support for foster youth. These resource guides are now linked on multiple institutional platforms, ensuring consistent updates and distribution each summer, fall, and spring. By improving access

to information, the team laid the groundwork for sustained improvements in the support system for foster youth.

Expanding the Approach through Collaboration. The AR plan also incorporated a benchmarking exercise to compare support practices across institutions. Initially, this process seemed overwhelming for a small team, but in early 2021, the team joined the Embark Georgia Regional Coalition Pilot Program. This collaborative platform provided a space for professionals from various sectors—including college administrators, state foster care liaisons, and the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS)—to share best practices for supporting foster youth.

Through a series of virtual meetings, the coalition fostered valuable relationships, enabling participants to exchange insights and address common barriers to student success. As one team member, Olivia, reflected, *"It was eye-opening to hear how other institutions were tackling similar challenges. The shared strategies gave us tangible actions to apply at EC, and it was reassuring to know we weren't alone in addressing these complex issues."* The lessons learned from the regional coalition meetings proved to be a valuable alternative to traditional benchmarking, offering real-time, context-specific insights that enriched the team's understanding of how to improve foster youth support at EC (see Table 3.6 for a summary).

Table 3.6

Conversations and Key Takeaways from Regional Coalition Meetings

Regional coalition meetings	Discussion topics	Takeaways
April 13, 2021: Regional Coalition Virtual Meeting #1	• Welcome & Introductions • Regional Coalition Concept Overview • Community Agreement • Challenges to Alignment & Promising Practices • Visioning Activity	Key takeaways included the importance of relationship-building, the value of shared knowledge, and the collective commitment to addressing systemic challenges in supporting foster youth.
April 27, 2021: Regional Coalition Virtual Meeting #2	• Cross-Sector Partnership Discussions	The regional coalition meeting's breakout sessions fostered cross-sector partnerships by connecting participants within their GA DFCS regions, allowing them to discuss how each sector supports foster youth and address challenges in communication and collaboration across sectors. These discussions highlighted the need for stronger, more coordinated efforts to enhance support systems for foster youth.
May 11, 2021: Regional Coalition Virtual Meeting #3	• Georgia Department of Education Presentation	This session emphasized the need for continued collaboration and the use of updated federal policies and funding streams, highlighting barriers that aligned with the existing literature and organizational observations, and discussed the importance of cross-training to ensure everyone understands the impact of trauma on foster youth and the importance of educational stability.
May 24-25, 2021: Embark Georgia 2021 Virtual Conference + Regional Coalition Meeting #4	• Emily and I shared our experiences as panelists, discussing our campus's initiatives and successes in supporting foster youth and	This opportunity, coupled with the conference debrief with regional coalition members, allowed for valuable knowledge exchange and strengthened collaboration around best practices in fostering support

Regional coalition meetings	Discussion topics	Takeaways
	students experiencing homelessness through our capacity-building grant. • Conference debriefs with regional coalition members	services. If was powerful to see how our short journey to this point inspired others.
June 8, 2021: Regional Coalition Virtual Meeting #5	• Coalition pilot wrap-up and discussion on next steps for further implementation	The coalition pilot wrap-up highlighted both the benefits of strengthened cross-sector collaboration and shared resources, while also addressing challenges such as sustaining engagement and overcoming communication barriers. The discussion on the next steps emphasized refining these partnerships for broader implementation and ensuring long-term impact.

Participation in the Regional Coalition Pilot Program allowed the AR team to engage in cross-sector collaboration, fostering relationships with key stakeholders from education, child welfare, and community organizations. This provided valuable insights into best practices for supporting foster youth, which were highlighted during discussions on resource coordination and communication improvements. Key benefits included increased access to resources, the sharing of national trends, and collective problem-solving. In addition, challenges such as sustaining ongoing engagement across sectors, navigating communication barriers, and aligning strategies to meet diverse regional needs were identified. Overall, participation in the program significantly enhanced the team's ability to address foster youth support through a more integrated, collaborative approach. Reflecting on the experience, Emily noted, "*One of the most impactful aspects was hearing how different sectors approached similar issues. It made us realize how*

much more we could accomplish by working together—this is about more than just our campus;

it's about building a network of support for these students" (June 2021).

The primary outcome of this action stage was a clear, multifaceted picture of the current

state of support for foster youth at EC. Each action taken—whether reviewing documents,

mapping resources, or benchmarking—provided new insights that refined our understanding and

informed subsequent steps. This iterative process ensured that our interventions were data-driven

and responsive to the evolving needs and challenges identified through ongoing reflection and

engagement with stakeholders. By adapting our approach, such as pivoting from direct

interviews to case data analysis and streamlining resource mapping, we created a more integrated

and sustainable support system for foster youth at EC.

Observation

During the initial observation phase of the AR process, the team conducted what can be

understood as an Ecological Conditions Audit, systematically gathering data from institutional

sources, reviewing available resources, and mapping the existing support structures for foster

youth at EC. This audit was critical for laying the groundwork, identifying key stakeholders, and

offering a broad perspective of the institutional landscape. The audit helped the AR team explore

how institutional policies, resources, and roles supported or hindered foster youth success.

However, it soon became evident that there was a significant gap in directly understanding the

lived experiences and specific needs of foster youth at EC.

Reflecting on the limitations of relying solely on institutional data, Olivia remarked in a

journal entry,

> *"We thought we had a complete picture, but the more we mapped out the support*
>
> *structures, the more we realized we were missing the deeper, lived experiences of these*

students. It was clear that the institutional view didn't capture their unique challenges"

(July 2024).

The ecological conditions audit highlighted that while support systems existed, they were

fragmented and lacked the depth needed to create impactful interventions. To bridge this gap, the

AR team decided to leverage case management data from the institution's CARE Team to better

understand the challenges foster youth face. While the initial plan involved gathering insights

directly from students, the team pivoted during the observation phase to use existing case data.

This shift allowed for the creation of anonymized student profiles built with pseudonyms, which

preserved confidentiality while still providing rich, detailed narratives.

Emily reflected on the significance of this approach, saying, "*Using case data allowed us*

to piece together real stories without jeopardizing confidentiality. It gave us the context we

needed to make informed decisions about how to improve our support system" (June 2024). By

utilizing this data to create student profiles, the AR team gained real-time insights into the foster

youth experience at EC. These profiles illuminated critical systemic issues such as gaps in

academic support, mental health services, and housing stability, while also highlighting the

support structures that contributed to student success.

This data-driven approach proved pivotal during the observation phase, as it enabled the

AR team to identify specific barriers and opportunities without the complexities of direct

interviews. The case management data and student profiles not only shaped the AR team's

understanding but also informed the development of tailored interventions designed to address

the unique needs of foster youth at EC. Through this process, the team was able to maintain

student confidentiality while still capturing meaningful insights that guided future action.

Through ongoing reflection on the profiles, the team gained a clearer understanding of how institutional policies and services could be improved, particularly regarding cross-departmental communication and resource integration. The ecological conditions audit revealed that many of the challenges identified stemmed from fragmented communication between departments and poorly coordinated support systems. Isabella reflected on this discovery, noting, "*What stood out most was how disconnected our departments were. We had all the pieces, but they weren't working together. This audit made it clear that we had to improve communication across campus*" (June 2024). This realization led to actionable changes, such as improving referral processes, increasing resource visibility, and advocating for better cross-departmental collaboration.

The ecological conditions audit also revealed a critical need for more intentional direction and a deeper, more personal understanding of foster youth experiences. While the audit provided valuable institutional insights, it became clear that future cycles of the AR process would require direct engagement with foster youth and alumni to gain firsthand perspectives on their challenges, needs, and successes. Without this direct input, future interventions risked being disconnected from the realities faced by the foster youth population.

Additionally, the audit highlighted that while staff members were dedicated to supporting foster youth, they lacked the specialized knowledge and skills necessary to address the nuanced needs of this population effectively. This realization led to the conclusion that professional development activities were essential to building staff capacity, ensuring that everyone involved in supporting foster youth was informed, empathetic, and prepared to provide tailored assistance. Thus, Cycle 2 focused on enhancing our capacities in these areas based on the data and insights we had gathered during Cycle 1.

From *Viewing* to *Gazing*: Intrapersonal Development (Cycle 2)

As we reflected on the insights gained during the ecological conditions audit, it became clear that while we had gathered valuable information about the structural barriers and institutional context at EC, our understanding of the more profound and nuanced challenges facing foster youth remained incomplete. The initial observations provided a foundational overview, but it was in the reflective analysis that we began to recognize the complexity and intricacy of the issues at hand. We realized that, to move forward effectively, we needed to transition from surface-level observation to a more intentional, focused exploration—what we termed *gazing*.

Reflection

The viewing phase helped us map resources, identify institutional gaps, and highlight the structural and resource-based challenges we faced. However, as we examined this data more critically, it became evident that a deeper exploration of intrapersonal development for EC staff was necessary to create meaningful, sustainable change. This reflective process revealed a crucial gap between the students we aimed to support and the staff tasked with providing that support, who lacked a thorough understanding of the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of foster youth in college and the complexity of their situations. Olivia commented during one reflective session, "*We had been so focused on what we could build structurally that we missed how important it was to develop our emotional awareness and empathy.*" Technical skills were also important for staff to develop, but without addressing the personal growth, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and empathy required to effectively engage with foster youth, even the best structural improvements would fall short. At this stage, I reflected, "*We need to be better prepared emotionally to work with students who've experienced trauma. It's about heart, not just*

head." Isabella shared similar thoughts: "*This isn't about just learning skills; it's about reflecting on us as people. If we can't understand our own reactions and biases, how can we expect to help students with such unique challenges?*"

This realization marked a turning point, as we shifted from viewing the institutional landscape to gazing inward, focusing on how individual development could enhance the effectiveness of our interventions. Emily remarked, "*We've realized that the real work begins with us—how we grow, how we become more aware, and how we engage with these students on a deeper level.*" This reflective period reinforced the importance of capacity-building and intrapersonal growth, laying the groundwork for the rest of Cycle 2, where we would engage in strategic staff development and deeper personal exploration. The patterns that emerged during the reflection phase became clearer, guiding us toward more thoughtful, intentional actions as we iterated on our findings.

Planning

The planning phase of Cycle 2 was strategically designed to prioritize intrapersonal and interpersonal development for the AR core leadership team, building on the insights from earlier cycles and leveraging the theory of change (TOC) to ensure that interventions were aligned with our long-term goals. This phase emphasized structured interventions to deepen the team's understanding of culturally relevant leadership while equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary to support foster youth effectively. In one of my personal journal reflections, I noted, "*if we didn't grow as leaders—both personally and as a team—we couldn't create the change we wanted.*"

One of the key interventions planned was the Culturally Relevant Leadership Self-Assessment (organization-focused), which the AR core leadership team completed at three

different intervals throughout the project. By administering this self-assessment at multiple points, the team aimed to track changes in our leadership practices over time, ensuring that our growth was measurable and reflective of the ongoing training and development we were receiving. This iterative assessment process was designed to observe shifts in practice and inform future actions, allowing the team to make data-driven adjustments to our approach as the project progressed. During our last assessment gathering, Olivia reflected on how *"each assessment gave us a new perspective on how far we had come and where we still needed to grow. It kept us accountable and focused"* (June 2024).

In addition to the self-assessment, the AR team used capacity-building grant funds to support a range of professional development opportunities for its members. The planning phase included organizing and preparing for these opportunities, which were critical to building the team's capacity to support foster youth effectively. Key events included attending Embark regional coalition meetings, Embark Georgia Regional Conferences, Fostering Success Coaches Training Levels I & II, and a facilitator certification to administer the Intercultural Development Inventory. These training sessions were selected for their relevance to the specific needs of foster youth and their focus on enhancing the leadership and coaching abilities of the AR team members. The planning process involved logistical preparation for these events and the development of reflection prompts that would guide the team's post-training reflections. These prompts were intentionally designed to encourage the team to connect the knowledge gained during training with the ongoing goals of the AR project, ensuring that professional development was not just an isolated activity but an integrated part of their growth as leaders. Isabella noted, *"Every conference or training felt like another puzzle piece fitting into place. It helped us see the bigger picture of how we could better support foster youth"* (July 2024).

The planning process involved logistical preparation for these events and the development of reflection prompts that would guide the team's post-training reflections. These prompts were intentionally designed to encourage the team to connect the knowledge gained during training with the ongoing goals of the AR project, ensuring that professional development was not just an isolated activity but an integrated part of their growth as leaders. Emily shared how these prompts "*forced us to pause and think about how our learning translated into action. It was about connecting the dots*" (July 2024).

The logistical planning during this phase was essential to ensure the smooth execution of these interventions. This included scheduling and coordinating travel and attendance at training sessions and creating opportunities for the team to engage in reflective practice after each event. By incorporating these elements into the planning phase, the AR team ensured that learning and growth were continuous and integrated throughout the cycle.

The iterative nature of the planning phase allowed the team to remain flexible and responsive. As new insights emerged from training and assessments, the TOC was revisited to ensure that the interventions remained aligned with the long-term goal of creating a supportive infrastructure for foster youth. The multi-interval assessment and professional development interventions were intentionally chosen to foster both immediate capacity-building and long-term institutional change, demonstrating the AR team's commitment to ongoing reflection, adaptation, and growth.

Action

During the action phase of Cycle 2, the AR team implemented key interventions informed by reflective observation, critical analysis, and direct engagement with foster youth, staff, and administrators. Building on insights from the gazing phase, the team prioritized

trauma-informed care and culturally relevant leadership training, informed by external

organizations like Embark Georgia. These trainings, alongside 206 hours of professional

development, equipped staff with the skills needed to better support foster youth, fostering a

deeper cultural shift towards empathy, inclusivity, and proactive support at EC. One of my

personal reflections following the completion of the Fostering Success Level I Training included,

"*Completing the Fostering Success Level I training opened my eyes to the complexities foster*

youth face, especially around identity and support. The 7 Life Domains model gave me a

tangible way to help students assess strengths and challenges by prioritizing level of need."

Knowing the impact of the preliminary events and the positive experience that Emily and

I had at the Embark Annual Leadership Conference and the Fostering Success Level I Coaching

Certification, we secured institutional funding to provide AR core leadership team members with

professional development opportunities. Key events included attending Embark Georgia regional

coalition meetings, completing Fostering Success Coaches Training Levels I & II, and obtaining

certification to administer the Intercultural Development Inventory. A key strategy of these

actions involved creating a networked support system by collaborating with regional and state

agencies, thus expanding resources beyond the institution's immediate capabilities. "*Building*

relationships with external agencies allowed us to pool resources in ways we hadn't considered

before," noted Olivia. "*It felt like we were shifting from working in silos to becoming part of a*

more expansive and coordinated support system" (June 2021). Emily remarked on the regional

coalition meetings: "*Participating in these discussions gave us insight into best practices from*

other institutions, which helped us think more holistically about how to support foster youth.

We're not alone in these efforts, and that realization has been empowering" (June 2021). This

approach ensures that foster youth receive comprehensive care rather than relying on isolated

services. A full list and summary of external trainings completed are outlined in Table 3.7.

Table 3.7

External Trainings and Professional Development Activities

Training	Attendee participation dates	Key takeaways
Fostering Success Coaching Institute: Foundations Level I Certification (24 Training Hours)	Emily: February 2020 Heather: February 2020 Isabella: March–June 2023 Olivia: March–June 2023	The 7 life domains offered a holistic visual of the areas a coach or a case manager can assess and discuss with a student to offer support and assistance: Education, employment/finances, housing/transportation, physical and mental well-being, supportive relationships and community connections, cultural and personal identity, and life skills. The coaching model provides a practice framework to empower students. It has seven core principles: Interdependent relationships, cultural humility, learner-centered, teaching in real-time, skill-based asset development, network development, and empowerment evaluation. It has three practice steps: Assess, prioritize, and teach, which assist professionals in better supporting students and their unique needs.
GearUp Georgia Conference (5 Training Hours)	Emily: September 2020 Olivia: September 2020	Topics included fostering courageous conversations and strategies for supporting students transitioning to higher education. The conference highlighted the immediate challenges and

Training	Attendee participation dates	Key takeaways
		opportunities for supporting at-risk students in postsecondary education. We returned the contact details on potentially starting a collegiate GearUp Club at EC.
Fostering Success Coaching Institute: Applications Level II Training (45 Training Hours)	Emily: July–December 2023 Heather: July–December 2023	Overall, the training equipped us with theoretical knowledge and practical skills to coach and support youth, especially those with adverse childhood experiences, fostering a supportive and empathetic coaching environment. A key takeaway was asking effective questions and facilitating growth through structured coaching interactions.
Intercultural Development Inventory Qualifying Seminar (12 Training Hours)	Heather: June 2024	This training comprehensively understood the IDI's theoretical foundations and the intercultural development continuum. This training equipped me to interpret IDI results, provide feedback, and guide individuals or groups through their development journey. I walked away with a clearer understanding of my cultural competence, identifying areas of strength and growth.
Fostering Success Coaching Institute: Equity Grounded Coaching (8 Training Hours)	Isabella: June–July 2024 Olivia: June–July 2024	This training helped to more effectively analyze the influence and impact of the dynamic of power/privilege in the work with the students. The training also highlighted cultural humility as a life-long learning process of self-evaluation. Practicing cultural humility allows practitioners to better serve and advocate across cultures.

During the action phase, the core leadership team dedicated 206 hours to extensive external training to build the necessary skills and knowledge to become more culturally relevant leaders while supporting foster youth at EC. The training encompassed foundational and advanced coaching strategies, intercultural competence, and equity-focused approaches. Through the *Fostering Success Coaching Institute's Foundations and Application Levels I & II*, the team adopted the 7 life domains framework, which provides a comprehensive view of the various aspects of students' lives—such as education, housing, well-being, and identity—that need support. Reflecting on the training, Isabella noted, "*The 7 life domains gave us a more holistic view of the students' lives, which helped us recognize that supporting foster youth isn't just about academic assistance—it's about addressing every dimension of their life experience*" (September 2020). The training also introduced a coaching model based on assessment, prioritization, and skill-building, equipping the team to empower students to navigate challenges using interdependent relationships and cultural humility. Olivia commented, "*The coaching model we learned has transformed how we approach fostering relationships with students. It's empowering to have a clear framework to guide our interactions, prioritizing what matters most to each student*" (September 2020).

In addition, I, as the researcher, completed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) certification, which enabled me to assess and enhance intercultural competence within myself and create a plan for implementing this assessment in future training and development opportunities for our AR teams. This training provided a deeper understanding of the intercultural development continuum, allowing the team to offer personalized feedback and guidance to help individuals and groups grow in their cultural awareness and effectiveness. One of my reflections remarked, "*The IDI certification helped me see not just where I stand in terms*

of cultural competence but how I can guide others along their journey. It's about continuous growth, for the institution and I" (July 2024).

The team expanded its capacity when Isabella and Olivia completed the equity-grounded coaching training, which emphasized the importance of understanding power, privilege, and cultural humility in student interactions. After the training, they presented their learnings to the CARE team, sharing insights into how power dynamics affect foster youth and other marginalized students. This presentation focused on fostering inclusive support structures through continuous self-reflection and advocacy. "*Equity-grounded coaching opened our eyes to the invisible power dynamics that can affect student interactions,*" shared Olivia. "*Our discussions with the CARE team were eye-opening, as we collectively began to see how our support structures needed to change to truly be inclusive*" (July 2024). The CARE team benefited from practical strategies for addressing these dynamics in their day-to-day work with students, further embedding trauma-informed, equity-focused practices into the campus culture.

Observations

These trainings strengthened the team's ability to foster a supportive, culturally informed, and trauma-sensitive coaching environment. The knowledge and insights gained laid the foundation for tailored interventions to foster youth success while advancing broader institutional changes in diversity, equity, and inclusion. Isabella reflected, *"The trauma-informed care training gave us the tools to approach students' emotional challenges with sensitivity. It's not just about academics—it's about understanding the whole person"* (July 2024). Team members also reflected on how the training fostered a unified approach, emphasizing the importance of cultural humility and continuous self-reflection. Olivia shared, "*Cultural humility*

was a recurring theme. It pushed us to reflect on our own biases and how those shape our interactions with foster youth. This was crucial for building trust." (July 2024).

Team members also recognized the need for a networked support structure, moving beyond isolated services. Reflection prompts encouraged the team to connect their new knowledge to the ongoing goals of the AR project. These discussions allowed team members to consider how best to integrate these insights into daily practice and foster systemic changes at EC. By applying what they learned, they addressed challenges in translating training insights into institutional practices and identified areas for future growth. As Heather noted, *"It wasn't easy translating theory into practice, but we realized that the real change requires consistent effort and small shifts in how we approach our daily work"* (July 2024). This commitment ensured that foster youth received comprehensive, empathetic, and culturally competent support. Excerpts from some of the reflection prompt responses are shown in Table 3.8.

Table 3.8

Training Journal Prompt Excerpts

AR team member	Reflection excerpts
Isabella	*The Equity-Grounded Coaching training opened my eyes to how power and privilege play out in our daily interactions with foster youth. It made me realize that advocating for these students requires constant self-reflection and a willingness to confront my biases. –*
Heather	*The trauma-informed care approach we learned has impacted how I engage with students. I feel more empathetic and prepared to address their challenges with sensitivity and awareness.* *One key takeaway from the IDI certification is the importance of building intercultural competence across the department/institution. It is not just about understanding differences but actively working to create inclusive spaces where everyone feels valued.*
Olivia	*Reflecting on the pieces of training, I have realized that while we have made strides, there is still so much work to be done to embed these principles into the broader institutional culture. It is encouraging but also a reminder of the long-term commitment required.*
Emily	*The training[s] were incredibly insightful, but I found it challenging to persist and complete them given how they were spread across several months. As someone wearing multiple hats on campus, balancing the demands of the training with my other responsibilities was difficult. There were moments when the time commitment felt overwhelming, but ultimately, the content was valuable and has strengthened our approach to supporting foster youth. Going forward, having a more condensed timeline or additional institutional support for staff participating in these long-term programs would be helpful.*

While the team dedicated significant time to external training, such as the Fostering Success Coaching Levels I & II and the Equity-Grounded Coaching, participants struggled to balance professional development with their daily responsibilities. One major challenge was the spread-out nature of the training, which caused strain for staff members wearing multiple hats. Emily noted, "*It was difficult juggling the demands of our day-to-day work with these long-term training programs. There were times when it felt overwhelming*" (July 2024). These comments are similar to Emily's earlier reflections on the time commitment needed to implement a coaching process: "*The model and training was powerful, but I cannot seem to overcome the question of how I will implement this…often I only have 15–20 minutes with a student and this model encourages at least 30–50 minutes per coaching session*" (February 2020). Despite the valuable insights gained, time management and the persistence required to complete the training became recurring issues. Olivia remarked, "*The content was so valuable, but with the stretched-out timeline, it was hard to stay engaged and balance it all. It's something we'll need to address in future cycles*" (July 2024).

Cycle 2 overlapped and intersected with AR cycles 1 and 3. As these intersections occurred, the team moved in and out of practicing their new skills and knowledge. We intentionally focused on how the team could embed these principles into daily practice and foster collaboration across departments. I noted, "*The challenge was moving from learning to applying. We realized it wasn't just about knowledge—it was about making that shift in how we work together every day*" (May 2023). Throughout this learning process, our key considerations and conversations centered on time management and staff support by using the collective knowledge gained to create condensed training at the institutional level for staff and students who would help with the remaining interventions. We also scheduled recurring check-ins for the core AR

team and staff undergoing long-term or multiple iterations of interventions to help prevent

burnout and help balance the multiple responsibilities we all carried. Isabella recalled, "*The*

check-ins were really helpful in keeping us grounded and ensuring that we weren't losing

momentum while juggling everything" (July 2024).

The team recognized that fostering ongoing personal growth through regular reflection

and team discussion would be critical in maintaining momentum toward creating a culturally

competent, trauma-informed environment for foster youth. Olivia reflected, "*Continuous*

learning is key—it's not just about one training, but about building a culture of growth and

support"

(July 2024).

***Practicing*: Holistic Student Support Exploration (Cycle 3)**

The metaphor of the kaleidoscope captures the ever-changing nature of the work, as each

rotation reflects the practitioner's adaptive response to the unique challenges presented by the

foster youth. *Practicing* is the phase in which the AR team translated the insights gained from

viewing and gazing into actionable strategies. This involved implementing interventions,

reflecting continuously, and adjusting our approaches based on ongoing observations and

feedback. A key component of this phase was creating opportunities for professional staff and

student mentors to apply the knowledge and skills they had gained through external training by

working directly with foster youth, ensuring that staff could put their theoretical learning into

practical use.

As mentors engaged with foster youth, they found themselves constantly adjusting their

approaches to meet the complex and changing needs of the participants. As one mentor, Michael,

reflected in his exit interview, *"Every time we encountered a new challenge, it felt like the*

patterns shifted again. We had to rethink our strategies constantly" (July 2024). Another mentor, Sofia, mentioned that *"The most challenging part was dealing with conflict. Simple things could escalate quickly, and we had to constantly adjust how we handled those situations"* (exit interview, June 2024). Emily described how this process could feel difficult: *"Every time we encountered a new challenge, it felt like the patterns shifted again. We had to rethink our strategies constantly"* (June 2023).

Through continuous reflection, the AR team refined our approach, leading to tangible changes such as improved support systems and a more adaptive strategy for addressing the evolving needs of foster youth. The second round of grant funding from Embark Georgia enabled the team to host Camp Kaleidoscope (Camp K), a summer program designed to provide foster youth with leadership-building activities, academic preparation, and life skills. As one mentor, Marcus, recalled in his exit interview, *"It was rewarding to see how the youth connected with us and shared their goals for the future. Watching them grow over the course of the camp was one of the most fulfilling aspects of the program"* (June 2024). Despite the challenges faced, particularly in managing youth behaviors, the camp provided a safe and supportive space for personal development.

The mentors continuously applied the trauma-informed care techniques they had learned in training, recognizing the unique challenges of working with foster youth. As mentor James shared in his exit interview, *"There were moments when we had to step back and rethink how we were approaching the youth because their reactions were much stronger than what we were used to"* (Month 2024). These reflections informed ongoing adjustments, ensuring that the interventions remained responsive and effective in addressing the needs of foster youth. As conflicts and challenges arose, the mentors and practitioners acted as the hands rotating the

kaleidoscope, guiding the formation of dynamic, responsive strategies and interventions based on their observations, new depth of understanding, and the shifting ecological conditions within postsecondary institutions.

Much like the gears of a kaleidoscope, the Embark Georgia statewide network, state agencies, institutions, and external stakeholders work together to support foster youth, symbolizing the complex and ever-changing needs of these students. One of Olivia's comments highlighted this metaphorical connection: *"Our collaborations, especially with Embark Georgia, felt like the gears in motion, creating something more comprehensive than what we could do alone"* (July 2024).

Overall, the *practicing* phase was marked by the professional staff and mentors' ability to rotate the kaleidoscope, adapt to new patterns, and ensure that their strategies evolved in response to the insights gained through direct experience with foster youth. Each challenge encountered during the camp provided an opportunity for growth and learning, ultimately contributing to the team's success in creating a more supportive and responsive environment for the youth

Reflection

The iterative and intersecting nature of AR was most evident in the impacts and outcomes of Cycles 1 and 2. Cycle 1 clarified institutional barriers, resources, and stakeholder roles. However, gaps in support for foster youth and the need for cross-departmental cohesion were noted. Cycle 2 emphasized staff development, highlighting culturally relevant practices. The training improved empathy and trauma-informed care but also revealed the necessity of further institutional integration. One staff member (also a member of the core leadership team) remarked, *"The training was helpful, but a lot of what I learned came from the kids themselves.*

It wasn't until I started interacting with them that I truly understood what we were dealing with"
(exit interview, June 2024).

As the AR team moved into Cycle 3, the focus turned toward ensuring flexibility and adaptability, particularly regarding external funding and unforeseen challenges. Initially, the interventions for Cycle 3 were designed to directly consult with foster youth at EC to better understand their lived experiences. However, challenges arose in identifying participants willing to share their experiences, largely due to the sensitive nature of their circumstances. The team adapted by exploring alternative methods, such as direct observation, which allowed us to gather insights into the students' challenges and successes without infringing on their privacy. One staff member reflected on the importance of this adaptive approach: *"Observing them in real-life settings, like Camp K, allowed us to witness firsthand how trauma shapes their behavior and responses. It was eye-opening to see how simple things, like entering a new, privileged environment, could trigger changes in behavior"* (core leadership team exit interview, July 2024).

Collaboration with the system-wide precollegiate summer program for foster youth provided additional opportunities to engage with these students in action. This method allowed the AR team to better understand how to support these students, inform future interventions, and ultimately adjust their strategies. Reflecting on this collaboration, a team member noted,

> *The more we worked with the students, the more we realized that their needs go far beyond academics. Basic needs like transportation and housing directly impact their success, and we had to backtrack multiple layers of issues to fully understand their barriers.* (Core leadership team exit interview, July 2024)

The lessons learned from an informational interview with another institution also highlighted the necessity of continuously evolving support structures for foster youth. Drawing from both existing literature and practical experience, the AR team recognized the importance of meeting basic needs as critical to foster youth success. One staff member shared,

> *It's easy to think that solving one problem, like helping a student find a job, would be enough, but often there are deeper issues. For instance, they can't get a job because they don't have transportation, and they don't have transportation because they can't get a driver's license. The root issues are always more complex than they seem.* (Core leadership team exit interview, July 2024)

These interventions reflected the AR team's commitment to adapting their approach to the shifting patterns of support for foster youth, with an ever-growing understanding of their complex needs.

Planning

In this planning phase, the AR team engaged in a cyclical process of refining each component of Camp K. As multiple grant-writing efforts progressed, lessons learned from each iteration informed the continuous development of the camp's structure. Collaboration with stakeholders, including system-wide precollegiate programs and experienced external partners, shaped a camp curriculum designed to meet the unique needs of foster youth, with a particular emphasis on personal growth, academic preparation, and life skills. As one staff member noted, *"The more we collaborated with other institutions, the more we realized how much more structured and intentional our camp needed to be to meet these youths' needs"* (core leadership team exit interview, July 2024).

A key focus of the planning process was ensuring that the camp was both adaptable and responsive to the complexities of trauma experienced by foster youth. Staff reflected on the need to incorporate more trauma-informed training into preparation for Camp K to ensure that mentors and staff were better equipped to handle the emotional and behavioral needs of foster youth. As one staff member (also a member of the core leadership team) expressed in the exit interview, *"We realized that being trauma-informed wasn't just a bonus, it was a necessity. We had to be prepared to deal with outbursts, breakdowns, and other trauma responses in real time"* (July 2024).

Over time, recruitment strategies evolved to include more targeted outreach to foster youth and their advocates, and program facilitation improved through more efficient budget management and staffing coordination. However, as one staff member pointed out, recruitment also posed challenges: *"We found that some youth were hesitant to participate due to a fear of being stigmatized. Even when we had their interest, the fear of publicly identifying as foster youth created a barrier"* (core leadership team exit interview, July 2024). One recruitment strategy we sought to implement was a student club for foster youth at EC. Unfortunately, this initiative also faced obstacles to sustained interest and participation. As one staff member reflected, "*We had a lot of excitement around the idea of a foster youth club, but when it came to publicly identifying as part of the group, many students backed out due to the stigma attached to being in foster care"* (core leadership team exit interview, July 2024). This insight led to adjustments in recruitment methods, focusing more on private outreach and collaboration with regional foster care coordinators to connect directly with potential participants. The team also explored alternative ways to foster community among these students, such as creating private support groups that would provide a sense of belonging without the need for public disclosure.

By continuously reflecting on the successes and setbacks of each phase, the AR team was able to adapt our strategies and ensure Camp K's ongoing relevance to the unique needs of foster youth. This process of planning, reflecting, and refining created a program that was not only responsive to the immediate needs of participants but also aligned with the larger institutional goals of fostering inclusive and empowering environments for marginalized youth.

Action

The CRLL self-study was a critical intervention during this phase, enabling the AR team to track leadership growth over time by administering the self-assessment at three intervals. This iterative process allowed the team to reflect on the changes in leadership practices, particularly in understanding and supporting foster youth in postsecondary education. Mentor reflections further emphasized this evolution, as one mentor observed in a reflection that *"adaptability, patience, and empathy/compassion were most important to me as a mentor"* (June 2024). Another mentor noted, *"Our biases must be reset when trying to be a leader for people you've never met"* (June 2024). These insights were crucial in shaping the mentorship approach, which became more grounded in empathy and cultural relevance.

One of the most critical components of this phase was securing funding through grant writing, which made Camp Kaleidoscope possible. While the AR team had the advantage of an established grant funder, we had to carefully review and discuss grant requirements and eligibility criteria. Collaboratively drafting the proposal for Camp K required outlining project objectives, budget allocations, a timeline, and expected outcomes. Flexibility was key during this process, as feedback from stakeholders prompted adjustments to the proposal. *"We learned early on that securing the grant was just the beginning,"* one staff member noted. *"We had to stay*

adaptable, refining our objectives as new challenges emerged" (core leadership team exit

interview, July 2024).

In this phase, the AR team engaged in a cyclical process of refining each aspect of Camp

Kaleidoscope. Multiple iterations of grant writing enabled the team to secure funding, facilitating

the design of a curriculum that focused on the holistic development of foster youth. This

included personal growth, academic preparation, and life skills, which were central to the camp

experience. Mentor reflections frequently mentioned that the youth needed more than academic

support; they needed "tools to navigate life's challenges" (core leadership team exit interview,

July 2024). A timeline of the grant process and related key activities are included in Table 3.9.

Table 3.9

Key Student Support Activities: Camp Kaleidoscope

Time	Event	Activities
11/2022	Notified of USG Summer Program Series Funding Opportunity	Heather, Emily, and Olivia met to discuss the funding opportunity and began collaboratively working on the submission requirements.
January 2023	USG Summer Program Series for Students Experiencing Foster Care – grant application submitted	The grant application was submitted to receive state funding to host a summer camp program for foster youth at EC.
February 2023	USG Summer Program Series for Students Experiencing Foster Care – grant application approved	Notified of grant approval and consultation/technical assistance meetings for the grant period.

Time	Event	Activities
March 2023	Recruitment of student mentors for summer program	Recruited 7 students mentors to work the upcoming summer camp.
March 2023	Notified of additional funding opportunity for the summer 2023 program enhancement	The AR Team drafted a request for additional funds to support the summer camp. Due to logistical challenges, we could not accept funds for summer 2023 but rolled them over to 2024.
May 2023	Training for Student Mentors and Camp Preparation Workday	The training included the minors' on-campus training, schedule and assignment overview, and conflict management. One mentor foster care experience.
June 2023	Camp Kaleidoscope Hosted at EC	EC hosted 15 foster youth for a 3-night, 4-day collegiate exposure program.
January 2024	USG Summer Program Series for Students Experiencing Foster Care – grant application submitted	The grant application for a summer camp program in 2024 was submitted for review.
February 2024	USG Summer Program Series for Students Experiencing Foster Care – grant application approved	Notified of grant approval for summer 2024.
April 2024	Training Day #1 for Student Mentors	Cross-institutional training with another system school completing minors on-campus training, first aid/CPR, and population-specific training. One mentor had foster care experience.

Time	Event	Activities
May 2024	Training Day #2 for Student Mentors	Institution specific training to cover schedule, duties, expectations, and what to expect during the camp. The mentors also participated in a workday to help prep camp materials.
June 2024	Camp Kaleidoscope Hosted at EC	EC hosted 14 foster youth for a 3-night, 4-day collegiate exposure program.
June 2024	Student Mentor Focus Group – Post Camp.	Mentors participated in an optional focus group to debrief the mentor and camp experience.
June -July 2024	Exit Interviews for the Student Mentors Serving on the Intervention Team.	

Collaboration with other institutions also played a crucial role in shaping Camp K. Best practices were shared, and insights from other summer programs helped the AR team fine-tune their approach. One significant takeaway from this collaboration was the importance of trauma-informed care in a camp setting. As one mentor observed, "*The trauma that these youth carry impacts everything—from how they communicate with others to how they respond to new environments. We had to be prepared to pivot when things didn't go as planned*" (mentor focus group, June 2024).

Accordingly, one of the primary activities in this phase involved facilitating a focus group with care team members and the core leadership team who regularly interacted with foster youth and alumni to discuss observations and determine need areas. This discussion revealed a need to shift from reactive services to proactive support mechanisms. For example, one participant emphasized, "*This student's crisis could have been averted if they had connected*

with our resources sooner," highlighting the importance of early intervention. From these

insights, it became evident that a more structured system was needed to document and track

foster youth to ensure timely and effective interventions. This finding prompted the AR team to

prioritize the development of trauma-informed care training and culturally relevant leadership

practices for staff, directly addressing gaps in support and enhancing the institution's capacity to

provide tailored assistance.

Mentor training became a focal point of the camp's preparation. A specific workday was

dedicated to familiarizing mentors with the camp's activities and the unique needs of foster

youth. The training sessions emphasized not only engagement strategies but also how to create a

trauma-sensitive environment. Mentors found this preparation critical, as one reflection

mentioned: *"One of the most helpful leadership actions was being a supportive mentor to those

foster youth"* (June 2024). Another mentor highlighted how "learning from past experiences as a

group mentor/facilitator was my biggest boon as a leader" (June 2024). These reflections

demonstrate how important mentor training was in shaping their approach and leadership during

the camp.

As staff became more experienced with the real-life challenges these students faced and

how to handle trauma, the team's approach also shifted, moving from sympathy to empathy. This

empathy-driven approach became central to how the AR team designed programming, ensuring

that foster youth felt supported yet empowered to take ownership of their own success. Multiple

members of the AR team reflected on the importance of this shift. One staff member reflected,

> *At first, I felt like I was simply trying to help them because I pitied their circumstances.*
>
> *But after seeing firsthand how their trauma affected them, I shifted to empathizing and*

focusing on how we could empower them to take control of their futures. (Core leadership

team exit interview, July 2024)

Another core leadership team member echoed these sentiments:

At first, I felt sorry for them, like I had personal pity. But over time, through training and

direct work with the youth, I shifted from sympathy to empathy. I realized that pity wasn't

helping them but holding them accountable and helping them recognize their own

challenges was far more impactful. (exit interview, July 2024)

Another staff member reflected, "*The hands-on work we did with the youth, combined with*

trauma-informed care training, helped us recognize the layers of challenges they face. Our

approach shifted from sympathy to empathy as we realized the complexity of their needs" (core

leadership team exit interview, July 2024). A mentor reflected on the change in perspective,

noting, *"We learned that simply being present and listening was sometimes the most powerful*

tool we had" (June 2024). This collective realization reinforced the importance of trauma-

sensitive mentoring, where the focus was on emotional support rather than trying to "fix" the

challenges the youth faced. Our deeper understanding of trauma's impact on foster youth

informed the team's ability to align our actions with the long-term goals of the TOC, creating a

sustainable support infrastructure for these students.

Camp activities were designed with intentionality, incorporating empowerment and team-

building sessions, field trips, and interactive experiences like trampoline parks and campus tours.

The AR team meticulously planned every detail, from managing camper check-ins to

coordinating transportation and dining. These activities were not only enjoyable but were

designed to help the youth build resilience, trust, and confidence, essential traits for their future

success. However, mentors also experienced the need for adaptability firsthand, noting that camp

required them to pivot frequently to meet the emotional and social needs of campers. One mentor observed in a reflection that *"working with their personalities and their circumstances, instead of steering them in a specific direction, was essential"* (June 2024). As one mentor noted, *"I learned that these foster youth may act like adults, but they still need support and guidance as a mentor"* (mentor reflection, June 2024). One mentor shared their experience of managing conflicts on day one and day two of camp: "*Campers grew closer, but that also meant emotions were high, and feelings got hurt easily"* (mentor reflection, June 2024).

Although there were challenges, mentors also reflected on the success of the camp design and professional development activities, with one sharing, *"I saw the two that had the biggest issue on day one talking and sitting at the same table by lunch on day two, so I would say their experiences improved"* (mentor reflection, June 2024). Another staff member explained *that "we wanted to make sure every moment of the camp was purposeful, whether it was a fun activity or a reflective session"* (core leadership team exit interview, month 2024).

The success of Camp K was built on a collaborative, multistep effort. Logistical planning and educational programming were blended to offer foster youth a transformative experience. The team ensured that mentors were equipped with the necessary resources, such as manuals and supplies, and established clear communication channels to handle any issues that arose during the camp. As one team member summarized*,*

> *Camp K required all of us to step up, collaborate, and stay flexible. The experience was rewarding not just for the youth, but for every mentor and staff member who participated. We learned as much from them as they did from us.* (Mentor focus group, June 2024)

Observation

Practicing through the practitioner's lens at EC was characterized by a commitment to action informed by deep reflection and continuous adaptability. The TOC served as a critical tool in guiding this process, ensuring that every action taken was part of a larger, coherent strategy to create a more supportive environment for foster youth. As one staff member reflected, *"We constantly had to recalibrate our approach, knowing that each student brought a different set of challenges and trauma with them. Our strategy had to evolve to meet their shifting needs"* (core leadership team exit interview, July 2024). The practitioner's role in shaping these evolving support patterns underscores the importance of practice-based learning and adaptability. This process of reflection was not static; it required a regular recalibration of strategies, as one core leadership team member explained: *"Every time we thought we had figured out how to best support a youth, a new challenge would emerge, reminding us that this work is never linear"* (exit interview, month 2024). By viewing our work through a kaleidoscope-like lens, practitioners continuously adjusted our interventions to ensure that the evolving needs of foster youth were met with responsive and effective solutions.

The culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) self-study was a key intervention during this phase, applied across three intervals to track growth in leadership practices. This self-assessment provided the AR team with a clear framework for measuring shifts in their leadership approaches and refining their understanding of the institutional context. As one staff member remarked, *"The self-study made us reflect on our own biases and practices, pushing us to become more inclusive and culturally aware in our work with foster youth"* (core leadership team exit interview, July 2024).

The CRLL self-assessments reflected significant changes in staff awareness and practices. As participants engaged in culturally relevant training, their ability to empathize with and support foster youth deepened. This transformation was reflected in their leadership approaches, with staff moving from merely sympathizing with the youth to actively empathizing with them. This shift was particularly evident in the staff's ability to create leadership programs that were more inclusive of diverse voices, including those of foster youth, which had historically been excluded from such initiatives.

Through reflection, the AR team also identified areas where culturally relevant practices could be strengthened. One such area was the recognition of the challenges foster youth face in privileged learning environments, such as entering college campuses where they may feel out of place. As observed during Camp Kaleidoscope, some foster youth struggled with sudden exposure to environments that contrasted sharply with their own lived experiences, which could result in behaviors that reflected trauma-related anxiety or frustration. One mentor observed in their exit interview that "when we took them to a campus that felt privileged, their behavior changed drastically. It was as if they felt they didn't belong, and they started acting out" (June 2024). Trauma-informed care techniques learned in earlier training sessions were critical in navigating these behavioral challenges. Mentors found that their ability to respond effectively to these issues improved, but they also realized the importance of continuous learning. As one mentor explained, *"We realized that our trauma training was just the beginning. Each youth's trauma manifested differently, and we had to adapt quickly"* (core leadership team exit interview, July 2024). This experience underscored the need for more in-depth training for mentors in behavior management and crisis intervention and led to discussions on how to better prepare youth for camp experiences and how to foster a sense of belonging within such environments.

The rewards of Camp Kaleidoscope were numerous, offering participants a safe and supportive space to explore their potential and develop new skills. Campers engaged in leadership-building activities such as trust exercises and group projects that fostered teamwork and resilience. The mentorship aspect was particularly impactful, as it provided foster youth with role models who understood their challenges. Exposure to a collegiate environment expanded the campers' educational aspirations, with several expressing increased confidence in their ability to pursue higher education. However, these successes were accompanied by significant challenges.

Recruiting participants for the camp proved difficult, as many foster youth were reluctant to openly participate due to past trauma and fear of being singled out as foster youth. This reluctance highlighted the ongoing need for more personalized recruitment approaches that respect these youth's privacy and emotional needs. On the logistical side, preparing the camp curriculum, camper materials, and coordinating staffing required significant effort. Collaborating with another campus that had previously implemented similar programs helped streamline these processes, particularly in mentor recruitment and supervision. However, ensuring clear communication across the team and managing the diverse roles of staff remained an ongoing challenge. Despite these hurdles, the camp succeeded in creating meaningful experiences for foster youth, with many expressing hope and confidence for their futures.

Looking ahead, further efforts are needed to improve participant recruitment, refine behavior management approaches, and ensure sufficient staffing and resources as the program continues to grow. Reflecting on the impact of Camp K, a staff member concluded, "*While we faced many challenges, the camp was a transformative experience for both the youth and the mentors. We learned that the work of supporting foster youth is never done, and we must continue evolving to meet their needs*" (core leadership team exit interview, July 2024). This

reflective practice will continue to guide the AR team's future interventions, ensuring that each turn of the kaleidoscope reveals new opportunities for growth and support.

Implications of the Action Research Project

The findings of this AR project reveal significant implications for both institutional practice at EC and the broader theoretical understanding of how culturally responsive leadership and trauma-informed care can support marginalized populations, specifically foster youth in higher education.

Institutional Implications

One of the most critical takeaways from this project is the realization that institutional structures must be flexible, adaptive, and inclusive to address the multifaceted challenges faced by foster youth. The AR team learned that while establishing organizational roles and processes—such as the Designated Point of Contact (DPOC) and the CARE team—provided foundational support, these structures often lacked the necessary depth to fully meet the needs of foster youth. Case management data and reflective observation illuminated how fragmented communication and resource allocation between departments hindered a cohesive support system. As one team member remarked, *"What stood out most was how disconnected our departments were. We had all the pieces, but they weren't working together"* (core leadership team exit interview, July 2024). This highlights the need for cross-departmental collaboration and integrated services to ensure that foster youth are not lost in the system.

EC's future efforts should focus on building a permanent infrastructure designed to support foster youth holistically and through trauma-informed care, weaving culturally responsive practices into every aspect of campus life. At the heart of this endeavor is the strategic shift of responsibilities to dedicated case managers who can invest their time, energy,

and expertise into meeting the unique needs of foster youth. These case managers will provide individualized support, coordinate wraparound services, and act as a central resource for on-campus and community-based connections. Equipped with specialized training in trauma-informed care, they will guide foster youth through their educational journey and deliver training to faculty and staff, enhancing campus-wide understanding and awareness. This approach ensures that support for foster youth is comprehensive and deeply integrated into the fabric of campus life.

The non-clinical caseworker and care team will need to work collaboratively to trauma-informed care and culturally responsive leadership practices are included as a core component of a core component of faculty, staff, and student leader development to foster empathy and equip campus leaders to meet foster youth's (and other vulnerable populations) unique needs.

EC will also seek to expand wraparound services. Wraparound services involve collaboration among multiple service providers, including educators, counselors, social workers, healthcare providers, legal advisors, and community organizations, who work together to develop and deliver personalized care plans. This approach emphasizes meeting individuals where they are, providing ongoing support, and tailoring interventions to their unique circumstances. The goal is to ensure that individuals have the comprehensive support necessary to overcome barriers, build resilience, and achieve long-term stability and success in all aspects of their lives. This is vital due to EC's small staffing capacity.

The sustainability of this support system will depend on the institution's ability to streamline services, allocate resources effectively, and maintain a consistent commitment to professional development for staff who work directly with foster youth.

Kaleidoscope of Learning: Professional Development and Leadership Growth

The kaleidoscope metaphor is central to understanding the dynamic learning process experienced by both the AR team and myself as the researcher throughout the project. Just as the shifting glass pieces in a kaleidoscope form new patterns with every turn, our personal and professional growth evolved as we gained deeper insights into the needs of foster youth. Each training session, reflection prompt, and collaborative meeting acted as a new "turn" in the kaleidoscope, creating an ever-evolving pattern of learning, reflection, and action.

For the AR team, professional development played a crucial role in this growth. The implementation of the CRLL self-study revealed that sympathy alone is insufficient in fostering a supportive environment for foster youth. Through hands-on experience and trauma-informed care training, staff members evolved from a perspective of sympathy to one of empathy, recognizing the complexity of the challenges that foster youth face. As one team member reflected after a training session, *"The trauma-informed training made me realize that it's not just about academic success for these students. We have to be prepared to support their emotional needs in ways we weren't before"* (team reflection, December 2023). This insight prompted the team to revisit the project's goals, leading to adaptations that incorporated more comprehensive support systems for emotional well-being alongside academic guidance.

The AR team's professional development was part of an iterative learning process. Programs such as Embark Georgia and the Fostering Success Coaches Institute provided the foundational knowledge necessary to make significant shifts in practice, but the experience also highlighted the need for ongoing support to prevent staff burnout. As the burden of supporting foster youth often fell on a small group of overextended individuals, it became clear that professional development needed to be institutionalized, ensuring that the campus culture as a

whole evolved to understand and address the complex needs of these students. One team member summarized this challenge well: *"We learned a lot through the trainings, but there's only so much a small group can handle. If we're going to make lasting change, it needs to be a campus-wide effort"* (team reflection, November 2023).

Reflective prompts and group discussions further emphasized the cyclical nature of learning within the AR process. Just as a kaleidoscope reveals new patterns with each turn, each reflection led to deeper insights and more refined interventions. After a summer camp event, a journal entry captured the growing awareness of the multi-dimensional needs of foster youth: *"Watching the campers engage made me think differently about how we mentor. They need more than academic guidance; they need social capital and emotional resilience"* (June 2023). These reflections demonstrated that the team's adaptive responses to new challenges ensured that their approach remained relevant and impactful as they gained a deeper understanding of foster youth needs.

This growth and evolution mirrored my own journey as the researcher. A journal entry in June 2023 captured a pivotal moment of self-awareness: *"I realized today how much my own background shapes my assumptions about foster youth. I need to continue reflecting on this if I want to lead with cultural humility."* This realization prompted more critical self-reflection, leading to a more empathetic approach in guiding the project. My personal growth, much like the kaleidoscope's shifting patterns, moved from theoretical knowledge to practical application, continually reshaping my understanding of how to best support foster youth.

Ultimately, the kaleidoscope metaphor reinforces that learning and growth—both personal and professional—are not static but continuously evolving. The AR team, like the interconnected pieces of a kaleidoscope, learned how our combined efforts—through

professional development in trauma-informed care and leadership practices—could create a more inclusive and supportive structure for foster youth. Each training session built upon the previous one, reshaping their approach with every cycle of action and reflection. As the kaleidoscope turned, both individually and as a group, the team's understanding deepened, leading to more comprehensive interventions. This iterative process of training, reflection, and adaptation ensured that the team's work remained rooted in the lived experiences of foster youth, allowing for more empathetic, effective leadership that could create lasting institutional change.

Implications for Foster Youth

The AR process also revealed that foster youth face systemic barriers far beyond academic challenges. Issues such as housing instability, transportation difficulties, and mental health concerns directly impact their ability to succeed in higher education. As the AR team observed, even seemingly small obstacles—such as the inability to obtain a driver's license—can have cascading effects that hinder academic progress.

This finding reinforces the need for basic needs services to be a central component of any support system for foster youth. Institutions must prioritize food security, housing stability, and access to mental health resources as essential elements of their foster youth support programs. Additionally, programs like Camp Kaleidoscope, which provide foster youth with leadership-building activities, academic preparation, and life skills, offer valuable models for how institutions can engage these students in a more holistic manner. By addressing both the academic and personal development of foster youth, institutions can create environments where these students feel empowered to succeed.

Theoretical Contributions

On a theoretical level, this AR project contributes to the understanding of how culturally responsive leadership and trauma-informed care intersect with organizational change in higher education. The use of the TOC as a guiding framework throughout the AR process demonstrated the importance of flexibility and adaptability in institutional interventions. The kaleidoscope metaphor—with its emphasis on ever-evolving patterns—was particularly useful in conceptualizing how support structures for foster youth must continuously shift in response to new insights and challenges. This dynamic process reflects the cyclical nature of AR, where reflection, action, and observation inform ongoing improvements.

Moreover, the project underscores the role of professional development in cultivating inclusive leadership that recognizes the value of diverse perspectives. By fostering a culturally responsive campus environment, EC can set a precedent for other institutions seeking to support foster youth and other marginalized populations. The lessons learned from this project have broader implications for how institutions can integrate CRLL principles into their leadership structures, creating more equitable and inclusive spaces for all students.

Shifting Perspectives: Expanding the View through Shared Learning

Our ongoing participation in the semiannual Embark Georgia Leadership Conferences and other significant events like the 2024 NASPA Annual Conference has allowed us to embrace a dynamic, ever-evolving approach to supporting foster and homeless youth in higher education. These conferences not only provide essential opportunities for training and professional development, they also serve as platforms for sharing our own organizational experiences. Like the shifting patterns of a kaleidoscope, each new interaction and presentation offers fresh perspectives, both reinforcing and expanding our understanding of the work we do. Table 3.10

highlights the various conferences attended where one or more members of the AR team presented.

Table 3.10

Conferences Attended by AR Team

Conference	Year & location	Attendees	Dissemination details
Embark Georgia Leadership Conference	2021, Virtual	Heather, Emily	Building a Campus Support Program: Lessons Learned from Higher Education Partners
Embark Georgia Leadership Conference	2022, Athens, GA	Heather, Jami, & Isabella	Higher Education Panel: Focus on Campus Supports
Embark Georgia Leadership Conference	2023, Athens, GA	Heather, Isabella	Pre-Collegiate Summer Camps Program: An Overview
NASPA	2024, Seattle, WA	Heather	Unlocking the Potential: Collegiate Summer Camps for Foster Youth

By disseminating knowledge gained from our experiences, we contribute to the larger body of knowledge in the field, helping other institutions adopt best practices and tailor them to their unique contexts. For example, our presentation at NASPA shared critical insights from three system campuses that participated in a system-wide program for foster youth. Through this, we not only showcased participant outcomes but also reflected on our organizational challenges and growth. This kind of knowledge-sharing amplifies the impact of our work, helping to create ripple effects that influence broader institutional practices and policies.

The implications of these efforts are clear: our work does not exist in isolation. To maximize its potential, we must continue to share our learning with the broader higher education community. As we look ahead, our next steps will focus on formalizing our dissemination efforts by exploring structured channels, such as publishing case studies and articles, developing

toolkits, and expanding proven initiatives like our pre-collegiate summer camps for wider adoption. In addition, we will deepen our engagement in peer learning networks to foster ongoing collaboration and innovation.

These evolving patterns of learning, much like the shifting shapes within a kaleidoscope, offer us a continual source of reflection and growth. By committing to these next steps, we not only expand the impact of our work but also contribute to a larger, systemic change that supports the diverse needs of foster and homeless youth in higher education. Through sharing our shifting perspectives, we influence the collective landscape, creating new opportunities for transformation in the lives of students and the institutions that serve them.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The central research question guiding this study is: What can be learned at the individual, group, and system levels by using the culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) model to examine organizational capacity to support foster youth and alumni holistically and effectively in postsecondary education? This chapter presents a synthesis of what was learned from the study, key insights and actionable knowledge. This study was grounded in action research (AR) methodology using qualitative and quantitative data to analyze what was learned at the individual, group, and organizational levels. This chapter is organized into three main sections: key findings and broad conclusions, insights and implications for future research, and study limitations accompanied by personal reflections.

Presentation of Findings: Emerging Themes & Shifting Patterns

The study findings emerged through an examination of individual experiences, group dynamics, and organizational structures, providing a layered understanding of the effectiveness of interventions implemented across research cycles. This chapter reflects on how each intervention impacted support systems, with insights contextualized within the study's theoretical foundation—particularly the CRLL model—to underscore actionable knowledge for enhancing support structures for foster youth in higher education. By examining these findings, the chapter bridges empirical research with practical applications, contributing to a more inclusive, culturally attuned, and empowering educational environment for foster youth.

This AR study employed qualitative methods to explore the integration of CRLL principles into support structures for foster youth. Data collection involved a range of sources, notably final in-depth interviews with AR team members, which offered rich insights into campus administrators' and staff members' perspectives on culturally responsive leadership and the effectiveness of the support systems. Facilitated group discussions with AR and CARE team members captured shared experiences, challenges, and reflections of those directly working with foster youth as they navigated the demands of postsecondary education. These group reflections helped identify recurring themes related to critical support needs and institutional barriers, contributing to a collective understanding of best practices and areas for improvement. Additionally, institutional data supported the development of detailed case studies of foster youth at Emerson College (EC), offering a nuanced view of students' academic, personal, and mental health challenges. These case studies illuminated the complex realities of foster youth in higher education, enhancing the qualitative analysis by providing context-rich insights into their lived experiences. The relationships of the themes and findings generated by this AR study to the research question are summarized in Table 4.1.

This study explored how individual, group, and system-level learning could be fostered through the CRLL model to enhance organizational capacity in supporting foster youth in postsecondary education. By framing the study within CRLL principles, the research delved beyond surface-level analysis to uncover a multidimensional understanding of foster youth support, offering actionable knowledge to create more inclusive, culturally sustaining educational environments.

Table 4.1

Research Question, Themes, and Findings

Research question	Level of the system	Themes	Findings
What can be learned at the individual, group, and system levels by using the culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) model to examine organizational capacity to support foster youth and alumni holistically and effectively in postsecondary education?	**Individual** Personal transformation that occurs through reflection, learning, and behavior shifts often serves as the foundation for broader change.	• Staff knowledge gaps: Need for individual staff to improve their understanding and skills in working with foster youth. • Staff growth & development / training impact: Reflects personal growth and development, focusing on the impact of training on individual staff members. • Holistic, empathetic support: Need for individual staff to provide comprehensive, compassionate support to foster youth.	Finding 1: Prioritizing staff development for cultural competence through trauma-informed and culturally relevant training grounded in the CRLL model effectively addresses knowledge gaps, builds individual and collective competencies, and enables staff to embody cultural humility and empathy in a holistic approach to foster youth support.
	Group Collective growth and adaptation among the AR Team, driven by shared dialogue, collaboration, and mutual goal setting.	• Siloed communication: Refers to communication barriers within and between teams, which affect group dynamics and information-sharing. • Improved cross-departmental	Finding 2: Holistic support for foster youth necessitates improved cross-departmental collaboration and shared responsibility, overcoming the limitations of siloed and informal communication to enhance support services.

Research question	Level of the system	Themes	Findings
		collaborations: Focuses on collaborative efforts across different departments, enhancing group interactions and teamwork. • Increased teamwork & partnerships: Emphasizes the role of collective teamwork within groups and partnerships to strengthen support for foster youth.	Finding 3: Effective wrap-around services for foster youth require the integration of community partnerships and cross-sector collaboration to extend holistic support beyond campus boundaries, addressing resource limitations and creating a network of care that transcends isolated efforts.
	System Shifts in institutional structures, policies, or norms that were influenced by collective insights and practices developed through the research process.	• Fragmented support systems: Systemic issue where support systems lack cohesion, impacting the overall effectiveness of services. • Flexible support systems needed: Need for adaptable support structures that can meet diverse needs at a systemic level. • Proactive consistent care: Involves establishing predictable, system-wide practices that consistently meet the needs of foster youth.	Finding 4: Inclusive leadership practices and opportunities require transforming fragmented support systems into flexible, sustainable structures that promote proactive, consistent care and resource visibility to foster integrated support for foster youth. Finding 5: Boundary-spanning partnerships and distributed leadership serve as catalysts for inclusive empowerment.

Research question	Level of the system	Themes	Findings
		• Resource visibility: Need for system-wide transparency and accessibility of resources for foster youth. • Sustainability of support: Emphasizes creating enduring support structures that continue to function effectively over time. • Sustainable changes: Need to implement long-lasting systemic adjustments to improve support systems and services for foster youth.	

Data Collection: Pieces of the Kaleidoscope

Data collection methods in this study were like fragments in a kaleidoscope, each offering unique perspectives that formed a cohesive understanding of the foster youth experience. These qualitative methods—interviews, focus groups, participant observations, and document reviews—represented distinct viewpoints from stakeholders such as staff, administrators, and foster youth. Combined, they created a nuanced, multilayered picture of the institutional practices and challenges foster youth face.

Qualitative interviews provided practitioners and administrators a platform to reflect deeply on their personal experiences and challenges in supporting foster youth, shedding light on how leadership development, cultural competence, and trauma-informed care shape individual effectiveness within support systems. *Focus groups* introduced a collaborative perspective, enabling stakeholders to discuss shared challenges and opportunities in supporting foster youth. These collective insights revealed misalignment patterns and moments of cohesion within institutional practices, bringing to light areas that required attention or realignment to foster youth success. *Participant observations* gave the researcher firsthand insight into day-to-day institutional practices, revealing how culturally relevant leadership practices functioned in real-world interactions. This method exposed strengths and areas for improvement within the support system, offering critical insights into how theory translates into practice. *Document reviews* grounded the findings within broader institutional contexts, highlighting how organizational policies supported or hindered culturally relevant and trauma-informed care for foster youth. These reviews underscored the role of policy in shaping culturally responsive environments. The data collected through these methods formed a kaleidoscopic image, providing a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities for supporting foster youth in higher education. Table

4.2 provides an overview of the research participants and data collected and analyzed by the AR

Team throughout the project.

Table 4.2

Research Participant Demographics and Data Collected

	Core Leadership Team	Staff Development Intervention Team	Campus Resource Intervention Team	External Stakeholders
Participants	4	6	13	3
Data collected				
Reflective journal prompts X 4	4 (100%)	4 (66.67%)	12 (92.31%)	0
Exit interviews	4 (100%)	4 (66.67%)	9 (69.23%)	0
Focus groups X 3	3(75%)	4 (66.67%)	8 (61.54%)	0
Critical incident interviews	0	0	0	3 (100%)
Race/ethnicity				
White or Caucasian	3 (75%)	3 (50%)	10 (76.92%)	2 (66.67%)
Black or African American	0	0	1(7.69%)	1 (33.33%)
Hispanic or Latino	1 (25%)	3 (50%)	2	0
Lived foster care experience	0	0	1(7.69%)	0
Student worker	0	0	10 (76.92%)	0
Professional staff	4 (100%)	6 (100%)	3 (23.08%)	0

It is important to also mention that all four of the AR core leadership team members also

participated in the staff development and intervention teams, so their demographic data is

duplicated in each column.

Context: The Light that Illuminates the Kaleidoscope

The real-world context of foster youth in postsecondary education served as the light that

illuminated these data fragments, clarifying gaps and opportunities in existing support systems.

Ecological factors, including trauma, systemic barriers, and institutional culture, brought each

data piece into focus. Stakeholders' reflections served as mirrors within this kaleidoscope,

revealing multifaceted insights into the institutional structures that shape foster youth

experiences and contribute to a dynamic, evolving understanding of effective support.

Integrating Insights with Literature: A Kaleidoscope of Knowledge

The findings from this study underscore a progressive understanding of how institutions

can more effectively support foster youth through a multifaceted approach grounded in culturally

relevant leadership, trauma-informed care, and proactive engagement practices. Employing the

kaleidoscopic metaphor introduced in Chapter 1, the study framed stakeholders' experiences and

fragmented insights as dynamic elements that, through iterative realignment, formed a cohesive

and comprehensive support framework for addressing the unique challenges foster youth face.

At the heart of this journey, the barriers experienced by foster youth—such as limited

social capital and fragmented support systems—were illuminated through the reflective cycles of

action research. These barriers, well-documented in literature by scholars such as Courtney and

Dworsky (2006) and Dworsky and Courtney (2010a), highlighted the urgent need for

coordinated, culturally relevant interventions. This realization shaped the study's emphasis on

using culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) as its conceptual framework. By focusing

on culturally responsive strategies, the CRLL model provided a foundation for embedding social

justice into leadership practices, creating a holistic approach to supporting foster youth.

Rather than merely documenting challenges, the CRLL framework guided researchers

toward actionable solutions that respected and extended students' cultural practices. This

approach resonated with Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, emphasizing the

necessity of cultural sustainability in fostering inclusive and empowering environments. The

commitment to culturally sustaining practices was not only theoretical but deeply practical,

offering institutional leaders tangible methods to support foster youth effectively. This alignment

with foundational theories validated and expanded existing knowledge, providing a robust academic and practical framework for institutional leaders seeking to create supportive environments for marginalized populations.

The iterative cycles of AR revealed shifts in practice and perspective, such as moving from deficit-based to strengths-based views of foster youth. Insights gained from reflective cycles emphasized collaboration and systemic change, revealing how coordinated efforts with internal and external stakeholders could dismantle barriers and foster holistic support systems. By contextualizing these findings within the broader academic literature, the study bridged theoretical insights and real-world applications. For instance, trauma-informed care practices were integrated to address the complex needs of foster youth, enhancing their resilience and agency within supportive educational settings.

The study's focus on culturally responsive strategies and social justice-oriented leadership practices not only aligned with but built upon foundational works, offering a path toward more inclusive and meaningful interventions. Comparing key literature and findings illuminated how culturally relevant leadership can be operationalized within institutional contexts to create actionable solutions tailored to foster youth's unique needs. This alignment, illustrated in Table 4.3, bridges theoretical insights and practical applications, providing a clear trajectory for institutional leaders to nurture inclusive, empowering, and sustainable environments.

Table 4.3

Comparison Of Key Literature Findings with Study Outcomes

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience	Confirmed by study	Explanation/notes
Brown, M., Altrichter, H., Shiyan, I., Rodríguez Conde, M. J., McNamara, G., Herzog-Punzenberger, B., Vorobyeva, I., Vangrando, V., Gardezi, S., O'Hara, J., Postlbauer, A., Milyaeva, D., Sergeevna, N., Fulterer, S., Gamazo García, A., & Sánchez, L. (2022). Challenges and opportunities for culturally responsive leadership in schools: Evidence from four European countries. *Policy Futures in Education*, *20*(5), 580–607.	The study aims to investigate the challenges and facilitators of culturally responsive school leadership in four European countries (Austria, Ireland, Russia, and Spain) within the context of increasing diversity in education systems due to migration. It explores factors and actors that hinder or support culturally responsive practices in schools, focusing on promoting academic and psychosocial well-being for students from diverse cultural backgrounds.	Support and practice indicators outlined in the study serve as tools for evaluating culturally responsive leadership in education systems, not only within the four project countries but also for other nations facing similar diversity and inclusion challenges.	Yes	This study's focus on adapting leadership practices and institutional structures to meet foster youth's needs within higher education demonstrates many principles of culturally responsive leadership discussed in the article, specifically those aimed at equity, inclusion, and holistic student development.
Campos-Moreira, L. D., Cummings, M. I.,	The study aims to develop a culturally	A framework for culturally responsive	Yes	Both the article and this study emphasize culturally

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience	Confirmed by study	Explanation/notes
Grumbach, G., Williams, H. E., & Hooks, K. (2020). Making a case for culturally humble leadership practices through a culturally responsive leadership framework. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance, 44*(5), 407–414.	responsive leadership framework (CRLF) to foster inclusive environments amidst increasing stakeholder diversity. Drawing on theories of organizational change, cultural humility, and cultural competence, the CRLF seeks to enhance organizational outcomes such as workforce retention, productivity, treatment innovation, and mobilization for change.	leadership for public sector and human service leaders.		responsive leadership as a means to create inclusive, equitable environments tailored to meet the unique needs of diverse populations, such as foster youth in higher education.
Cooper, J. N., Newton, A. C., Klein, M., & Jolly, S. (2020). A call for culturally responsive transformational leadership in college sport: An anti-ism approach for achieving equity and inclusion. *Frontiers in Sociology, 5*, Article 65.	This study explores innovative transformational leadership approaches within college sports that incorporate anti-racism and anti-sexism stances. The aim is to advance genuine equity and inclusion within collegiate sports	It emphasizes the importance of college sports organizations incorporating diversity policies and practices that address gender-biased language, racial discrimination, and culturally responsive leadership strategies.	Yes	This study and the article share a commitment to creating equitable environments through culturally responsive leadership, systemic change, and inclusive practices that empower underrepresented groups.

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience	Confirmed by study	Explanation/notes
	programs by implementing more substantial culturally responsive efforts.			
Genao, S. (2021). Doing it for culturally responsive school leadership: Utilizing reflexivity from preparation to practice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 16*(2), 158–170.	The study explores the understanding of culturally responsive teaching and leading (CRTL) among future school leaders and its impact on promoting social justice for underrepresented students, families, and communities.	The paper highlights six recurring themes from discussions on culturally responsive teaching and leading with social justice perspectives for education practitioners and school leaders.	Yes	Both studies advocate for deep, reflective, and inclusive practices that empower marginalized communities and foster equity through culturally responsive leadership.
Ham, S. H., Kim, J., & Lee, S. (2020). Which schools are in greater need of culturally responsive leaders? A pedagogical uncertainty management perspective. *Multicultural Education Review*, *12*(4), 250–266.	This study addresses the gap in the literature regarding the mechanisms through which culturally responsive teaching is initiated and implemented, particularly focusing on the role of principals' culturally responsive leadership by exploring	The intended audience for this study includes educators, school administrators, policymakers, and researchers interested in understanding the dynamics of culturally responsive leadership in multicultural educational settings.	Yes	The article's exploration of culturally responsive leadership to manage pedagogical uncertainty and its variable impact depending on the school's existing supports closely aligns with this study's efforts to foster culturally relevant, trauma-informed leadership for foster youth in educational contexts.

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience	Confirmed by study	Explanation/notes
	the concept of "pedagogical uncertainty" in relation to culturally responsive teaching methods, emphasizing the importance of support systems for teachers, including principals, colleague teachers, and community members.			
Hayes, C., & Juárez, B. (2011). There is no culturally responsive teaching spoken here: A critical race perspective. *Democracy and Education, 20*(1), 1.	Examines and brings attention to instances within the systems of White racial dominance where individuals and groups consciously choose to uphold White supremacy rather than challenge it. Specifically, the focus is on exploring the failure of U.S. teacher preparation programs to adequately equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively	The lessons derived from critical race theory (CRT) and Malik's counternarrative highlight the need for teacher education programs to confront and address issues of racism, White supremacy, and inequity within American society and educational institutions. By integrating the provided five key	Yes	This study and the article share a commitment to addressing systemic inequities in education through culturally responsive practices, community engagement, and the dismantling of dominant cultural norms that perpetuate inequality.

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience	Confirmed by study	Explanation/notes
	educate all students, particularly those from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds.	insights into teacher preparation programs, educators can better equip future teachers to navigate and challenge systems of oppression, ultimately promoting educational equity and social justice in classrooms.		
Hines, M. T. (2022). The development of Culturally Responsive Leadership Scale. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, *26*(5), 1–10.	The study aimed to create and validate an observation instrument, the Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL) Scale, to assess how principals use cultural responsiveness in school leadership. The CRL instrument had high content validity. However, this instrument needed a higher construct validity level.	Observation instrument to measure CRL of school principals.	Yes	Adaptation and application of this observation tool within this AR project reinforces the study's aims of fostering culturally responsive leadership, measuring its effectiveness, and driving meaningful change in educational environments for marginalized populations.
Hook, J. N., Davis, D. E., Owen, J., Worthington, E.	The study aims to explore and validate the	Developed a client-rated measure of	Yes	Both studies highlight the importance of humility, respect,

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience	Confirmed by study	Explanation/notes
L., Jr., & Utsey, S. O. (2013). Cultural humility: Measuring openness to culturally diverse clients. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *60*(3), Article 353.	concept of cultural humility as a critical component of multicultural competencies (MCCs) in therapeutic settings.	cultural humility as a component of multicultural orientation (MCO) of MCCs.		and openness in creating culturally responsive and supportive environments.
Khalifa, M., Gooden, M. A., & Davis, J. E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, *86*(4), 1272–1311.	Examines culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL), to explore characteristics of effective leaders, strategies for responding to diverse school contexts, and the impact of leadership on student learning and achievement.	Synthesizes existing literature around the four primary strands of CRSL to identify behaviors of culturally responsive school leaders.	Yes	This study's focus on culturally responsive practices, community engagement, and critical reflection aligns closely with the key principles and practices of the CRSL framework. This connection underscores the shared goal of creating equitable and inclusive educational environments for historically marginalized students.
Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, *32*(3), 465–491.	The study aims to challenge existing pedagogical paradigms, encourage critical reflection on teaching practices, and provide examples of culturally	The article proposes a framework that integrates students' cultural backgrounds and experiences into the educational process to promote engagement,	Yes	This study's alignment with culturally relevant pedagogy underscores a commitment to creating educational spaces that validate, empower, and equip marginalized students to thrive, in line with the principles articulated by Ladson-Billings.

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience	Confirmed by study	Explanation/notes
	relevant teaching both in theory and practice.	understanding, and academic success.		
Madhlangobe, L., & Gordon, S. P. (2012). Culturally responsive leadership in a diverse school: A case study of a high school leader. *NASSP Bulletin*, *96*(3), 177–202.	A qualitative case study that critically examines and describes the leadership roles and practices of a culturally responsive school leader in a culturally and linguistically diverse high school in central Texas.	Key findings illustrate that practices such as fostering caring relationships, consistent communication, and modeling culturally responsive behaviors are effective in engaging diverse student populations. The research advocates for incorporating culturally responsive leadership into educational training programs, suggesting it as a crucial element for advancing equity and academic achievement in multicultural classrooms.	Yes	Overall, the article and this study emphasize the transformative power of culturally responsive leadership in fostering inclusive, equitable, and supportive environments for diverse and marginalized populations.
Mun, R. U., Ezzani, M. D., & Lee, L. E. (2020).	The researchers aim to address the persistent	Provides a systematic review of the literature	Yes	This study aligns with the article's findings by promoting

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience	Confirmed by study	Explanation/notes
Culturally relevant leadership in gifted education: A systematic literature review. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, *43*(2), 108–142.	issues of teacher deficit views, inequitable identification policies and practices, and differential access to resources that contribute to the underrepresentation of traditionally underserved learners in gifted programs nationwide.	concerning leadership, systemic reform, and the identification and provision of services in gifted education for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) K–12 students in the United States.		culturally relevant leadership, confronting systemic biases, and building supportive and inclusive environments for marginalized populations, such as foster youth in educational contexts.
Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational researcher*, *41*(3), 93–97.	Aims to challenge deficit perspectives and advocate for pedagogies that honor and sustain students' cultural and linguistic practices while also providing access to dominant cultural norms. The article provides theoretical insights and practical examples to guide educators in implementing culturally sustaining pedagogies in their classrooms and schools. It introduces the	Informs educators, policymakers, researchers, and other stakeholders in education about the evolution of pedagogical approaches for supporting students from diverse cultural backgrounds.	Yes	This study and the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy share a commitment to promoting equity, embracing cultural pluralism, and fostering environments that sustain and celebrate the cultural and linguistic practices of marginalized populations. This connection underscores a shared vision of transforming educational practices to be more inclusive, affirming, and culturally enriching.

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience	Confirmed by study	Explanation/notes
	concept of "culturally sustaining pedagogy."			
Sleeter, C. E. (2012). Confronting the marginalization of culturally responsive pedagogy. *Urban Education*, *47*(3), 562–584.	Critiques the neoliberal approach to education reform in the United States and globally, highlighting its emphasis on standardization, high-stakes testing, and privatization, which neglects the importance of teacher professional development, context, culture, and systemic racism. It argues that such reforms undermine the potential of culturally responsive pedagogy, a method that values students' cultural backgrounds and experiences to enhance learning and engagement. The goal is to foster an educational environment that acknowledges and leverages the cultural	Advocates for a shift away from neoliberal policies towards an educational model that embraces culturally responsive pedagogy, emphasizing the need for political action, robust research, and public education to support and implement this pedagogical approach effectively.	Yes	This study's focus on culturally relevant leadership and systemic transformation aligns closely with Sleeter's critique of the marginalization of CRP, highlighting shared goals of promoting equity, deepening cultural responsiveness, and challenging restrictive educational norms.

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience	Confirmed by study	Explanation/notes
	strengths and knowledge of all students to promote academic success and social equity.			
Srisarajivakul, E. N., McPhee, K., Choe, E. J. Y., Rice, K. G., Varjas, K., Meyers, J., ... & Graybill, E. (2023). The Cultural Humility Scale for students: Development and initial validation among adolescents. *Journal of School Psychology*, *99*, 101–224.	The article focuses on the development, validation, and potential applications of the Cultural Humility Scale for Students (CHS-S) adapted from the CHS developed by Hook et al. (2013) for psychotherapy.	Adapted a tool to measure the cultural humility of teachers as perceived by middle and high school students.	Yes	The article and this study emphasize the critical role of culturally responsive and humble practices in building trust, reducing cultural barriers, and creating supportive environments for diverse and historically marginalized populations.
Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: Rethinking the curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *53*(1), 20–32.	Focuses on developing culturally responsive teachers to address the diversity in U.S. classrooms. It advocates for integrating multicultural education throughout teacher training programs.	Proposes a vision of culturally responsive teaching characterized by socioculturally conscious teachers view diversity affirmatively, see themselves as agents of change, understand the constructivist approach to learning,	Yes	This study reflects the key principles outlined in Villegas and Lucas's work, focusing on culturally responsive teaching, self-reflection, community engagement, and the transformation of educational practices to promote equity and inclusion for marginalized populations. Evidenced through continued professional development of the AR team.

Citation	Focus	Intended use/audience	Confirmed by study	Explanation/notes
		know their students well, and use culturally responsive teaching practices. This vision serves as a guide for transforming teacher education to produce educators capable of fostering equitable and inclusive learning environments that respect and build upon the diverse backgrounds of students.		

Individual Learning: Staff Development for Cultural Competence

Finding 1: Prioritizing staff development for cultural competence through trauma-informed and culturally relevant training grounded in the CRLL model effectively addresses knowledge gaps, builds individual and collective competencies, and enables staff to embody cultural humility and empathy holistically to foster youth support.

The development of staff cultural competence emerged as a critical theme, aligned with the literature on culturally relevant leadership and trauma-informed care. According to Ladson-Billings' (1995) concept of culturally relevant pedagogy and Guthrie et al. (2017), equipping staff with empathy and cultural understanding is essential for providing effective support to foster youth. Feedback from Camp K mentors and staff highlighted the impact of this approach. Michael (June 2024) noted that building effective communication with youth was initially challenging but ultimately rewarding, as it "opened up an understanding of what others go through." This process echoes the principles of cultural humility described by Campos-Moreira et al. (2020), emphasizing self-reflection and the need for continuous adaptation. Similarly, Andrew (June 2024) reflected on the importance of breaking down biases when working with foster youth, stating that personal engagement "removed preconceived notions and deepened empathy." This finding aligns with culturally responsive leadership as described by Brown et al. (2021), moving from knowledge acquisition to the embodiment of humility and respect.

Programs such as the Fostering Success Coaching Institute and Equity-Grounded Coaching equipped staff with the tools to build supportive, empowering relationships with foster youth. This approach was emphasized in exit interviews with staff like Marcus (June 2024), who shared the significance of "telling the truth about college" and providing a realistic yet supportive perspective. Such approaches helped mentors engage youth as capable and resilient individuals

with agency, thereby furthering the aims of culturally responsive leadership to uplift and empower. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, as articulated by Paris (2012), further informs this approach by advocating for practices that help students maintain and build upon their cultural and linguistic identities within educational settings. By recognizing and supporting the cultural strengths and lived experiences of foster youth, institutions can foster environments that not only validate but empower students to thrive. This is reflected in feedback from AR cycle participants, such as Sofia (June 2024), who highlighted the transformative potential of building authentic connections and understanding the lived experiences of foster youth, thereby enhancing the quality of support and fostering genuine inclusivity.

Cycle 2's emphasis on staff development, which aligns with these culturally responsive practices, illustrates the importance of creating a cohesive and inclusive support system for foster youth. Reflections from mentors, including David and James (June 2024), highlighted how the training fostered team cohesion, effective communication, and a shared commitment to youth success. By prioritizing cultural competence in this way, institutions create a foundation for sustained, impactful support. Such efforts not only align with the CRLL model but also provide practical methods for fostering inclusive environments that validate and empower diverse youth populations.

Group Learning: Holistic Support as a Necessity

Finding 2: Holistic support for foster youth necessitates improved cross-departmental collaboration and shared responsibility, overcoming the limitations of siloed and informal communication to enhance support services.

The study's focus on holistic support aligns with the broader concept of culturally responsive leadership, which emphasizes understanding and valuing students' diverse

experiences and cultural backgrounds (Brown et al., 2021). This approach goes beyond merely offering academic assistance; it seeks to integrate mental health, social, and personal support to create a more inclusive and empowering environment for foster youth. This connection underscores that providing culturally responsive, trauma-informed care is essential to supporting these students in a way that acknowledges their unique challenges and leverages their cultural strengths. Furthermore, the unique barriers faced by foster youth, including limited social and financial capital, fragmented support systems, and the impacts of trauma (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010a; Geiger & Beltran, 2017), can significantly hinder their access to and success in higher education, making it critical to adopt a comprehensive, integrated approach. Best practices identified by Geiger et al. (2016) and Courtney et al. (2011) stress the need for campus-based programs that incorporate trauma-informed care and proactively identify foster youth to deliver coordinated support. These programs serve as models for integrating academic, mental health, and social services within institutional structures.

The application of this holistic, culturally sustaining, and trauma-informed support model directly informed AR cycle 3, which focused on creating a coordinated system of responsive resources tailored to the specific needs of foster youth. The integration of proactive interventions and cross-departmental collaboration reflects the CRLL framework's commitment to culturally relevant leadership and the importance of developing cohesive support networks. By comparing key literature and findings, the study demonstrates that institutional practices must evolve beyond isolated, one-size-fits-all approaches and siloed departments that do not collaborate to provide foster youth support. Instead, they should embrace a culturally attuned, multidimensional strategy that addresses both academic pursuits and the broader personal and social needs of foster

youth. This integration ensures that institutions create an environment where foster youth are not only supported but empowered to succeed.

Finding 3: Effective wrap-around services for foster youth require the integration of community partnerships and cross-sector collaboration to extend holistic support beyond campus boundaries, addressing resource limitations and creating a network of care that transcends isolated efforts.

Beyond internal collaboration, effective wrap-around services depend on forging and sustaining external partnerships with community organizations, local agencies, and cross-sector allies. This integration addresses resource constraints and enhances the overall support system available to foster youth. The literature emphasizes that foster youth benefit from coordinated efforts that connect campus-based resources with external community support, creating a seamless network of care (Courtney et al., 2011; Geiger et al., 2016). This model moves beyond isolated efforts, recognizing that the complex needs of foster youth often extend beyond academic concerns to include housing stability, mental health services, and cultural identity development.

The seven life domains—finances and employment, housing, transportation, physical and mental health, supportive relationships and community connections, cultural and personal identity, life skills, and education—serve as a systematic framework for coding and analyzing support resources (Schmidt & Unrau, 2017). In response to strong demand, transportation was added to the existing model to reflect the specific needs of our community context. Organizing services within these domains allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the community and available wrap-around services beyond campus boundaries. This analysis provided the AR team with critical insights into which domains already had established community support networks

and referral options and where gaps existed, facilitating a focus on developing on-campus resources.

Figure 4.1 illustrates the community resources identified and confirmed during the resource mapping process. This visualization highlights areas with robust community support as well as domains requiring strategic development and resource allocation to better serve foster youth. Feedback from Camp Kaleidoscope staff and mentors illustrated how community partnerships enriched the overall experience for foster youth by providing access to specialized services and additional perspectives. For example, partnerships with organizations like Embark Georgia and local mental health providers offered tangible resources and expertise that foster youth may not have been able to access solely through campus-based support. As James (June 2024) noted, "Learning about available community resources and engaging with outside partners created a more supportive and interconnected system for youth."

By embedding a culturally sustaining and collaborative framework, institutions can proactively address the limitations of internal resources and create a network of care that fully supports foster youth. This approach mirrors culturally sustaining pedagogy as articulated by Paris (2012), which promotes maintaining and validating students' cultural and linguistic identities. Creating a comprehensive, interconnected support system ultimately empowers foster youth to navigate their educational, personal, and social challenges with resilience and agency.

Figure 4.1

Distribution of Community Resources Mapped Across the Seven Life Domains
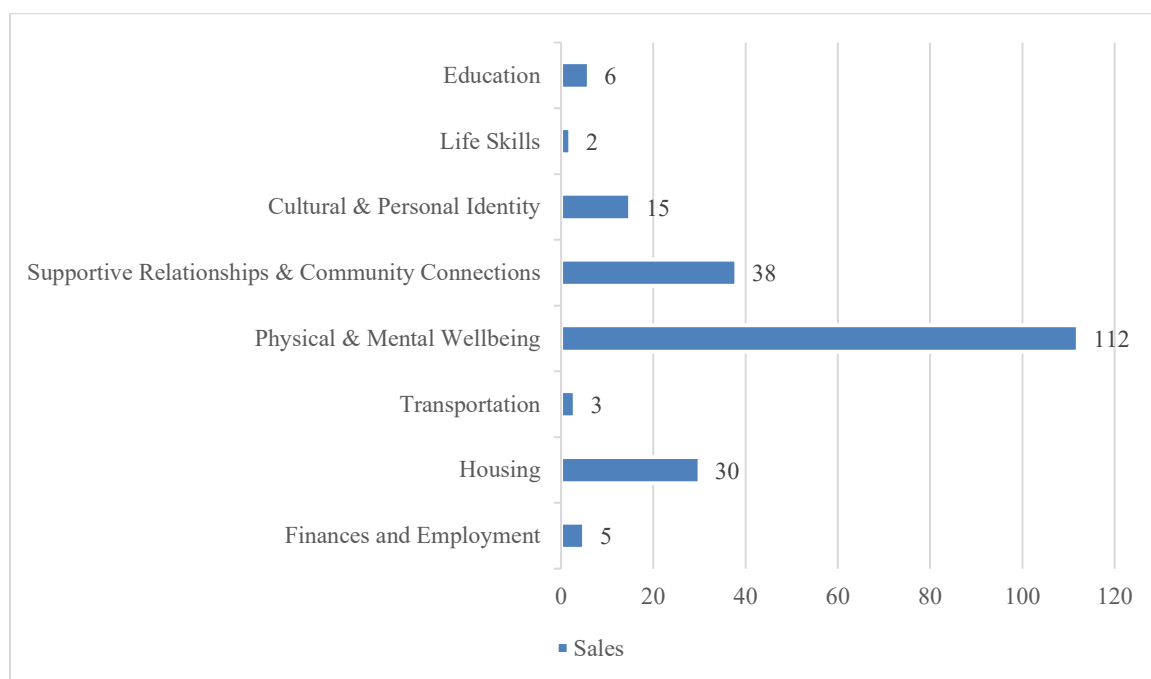
System Learning: Inclusive Leadership Opportunities

Finding 4: Inclusive leadership practices and opportunities require transforming fragmented support systems into flexible, sustainable structures that promote proactive, consistent care and resource visibility to foster integrated support for foster youth.

The study underscored the importance of inclusive leadership pathways specifically designed for foster youth, who often encounter unique barriers within traditional systems. Observations from the core team exit interview highlighted the necessity of creating supportive environments where foster youth feel seen, valued, and understood. Inclusive leadership requires fostering spaces where foster youth can build meaningful connections, as seen in tailored mentoring, small group interactions, and structured empowerment sessions (Hines, 2022). This culturally responsive approach extends beyond traditional academic support, incorporating

mental health, personal, and social dimensions critical for foster youth's success (Brown et al., 2021; Paris, 2012). As observed in mentor reflections, creating spaces of trust and belonging enables foster youth to engage more deeply and confidently with their educational journey. The interconnected structure of distributed leadership observed during the project also played a crucial role, with staff and external partners collaborating to foster a cohesive support network (Campos-Moreira, 2020).

The use of the culturally responsive leadership scale provided a structured, evidence-based method for measuring the depth and breadth of culturally responsive leadership behaviors across various settings. This tool not only quantified the prevalence of specific leadership behaviors but also offered critical insights into the effectiveness of training and development interventions. By employing the scale, the team was able to identify areas of strength—such as fostering meaningful connections, validating the lived experiences of foster youth, and creating inclusive opportunities—and target areas where additional growth was needed. The impact of this work is evident in the high prevalence of culturally responsive leadership behaviors observed throughout the project. Specifically, 17 of 22 adapted leadership behaviors were demonstrated, emphasizing the practical translation of CRLL principles into real-world applications. Table 4.4 illustrates the observed behaviors and their applications in creating a supportive and inclusive environment for foster youth. This evidence further demonstrates how culturally responsive practices were embedded at individual, group, and system levels.

Intentional training and development prepared our team with the knowledge and skills to exemplify these culturally responsive behaviors. Targeted workshops and self-reflection activities facilitated an understanding of how personal biases and cultural contexts influence leadership practices. While the scale was administered as a one-time assessment, it provided a

valuable snapshot of the team's proficiency in demonstrating culturally responsive leadership behaviors. This single observation offered critical insights into the strengths and areas for growth within our practices, serving as an essential benchmark for evaluating the impact of our efforts and informing potential future initiatives. However, in hindsight, employing the scale as a pre/post assessment would have allowed for a more precise measurement of change over time and a deeper understanding of how our training efforts strengthened specific leadership competencies. The feedback gathered from this observation highlighted the immediate outcomes of our training efforts and helped validate the integration of CRLL principles into our leadership approach.

By fostering inclusive opportunities and cultivating distributed leadership within one department, the project empowered individual participants and initiated meaningful transformation at a localized level. The culturally responsive leadership scale was instrumental in measuring this departmental impact, demonstrating how intentional practice and focused efforts can significantly enhance the capacity to holistically and effectively support foster youth. Although the project was contained within a single department, its success highlights a scalable model for broader institutional adoption. This demonstrated commitment to culturally responsive leadership has the potential to reinforce a culture of continuous improvement, accountability, and inclusive engagement across the institution, ultimately creating a more supportive and responsive environment for all students. By showcasing this pilot effort's effectiveness, the project lays a strong foundation for system-wide consideration and the possibility of expanding culturally responsive practices institutionally to benefit foster youth and other marginalized populations.

Table 4.4

Observation Checklist Adapted from Hines's (2022) Culturally Responsive Leadership Scale

Domain	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no	Example from Camp Kaleidoscope year 2 observations and data collections	Examples from the AR team
Inclusiveness	Ensuring that programs, curricula, and instructional materials/resources reflect foster youth's cultural backgrounds and experiences.	Yes	• Mentor training & workdays: This part of the schedule, mainly focused on preparing mentors to support and engage with participants meaningfully, aims to ensure an understanding of foster youth's unique experiences and backgrounds. It involves the intentional preparation of mentors to foster a supportive and culturally inclusive environment • Empowerment sessions for camp participants: Activities like the "Welcome Lunch and Empowerment Session by MAAC" focus on identity building, empowerment, and developing a sense of belonging for foster youth. • SEEDS training on team building, empowerment, and communication for camp participants: This session highlights team-building	• AR team members attended several professional development trainings over the course of the project and were able to implement their learnings

Domain	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no	Example from Camp Kaleidoscope year 2 observations and data collections	Examples from the AR team
			exercises while fostering empowerment and strong communication skills. The session is geared towards enhancing personal and cultural understanding, tailored to the needs of foster youth, emphasizing inclusivity and identity development	
	Connecting foster youth and faculty/staff to external organizations and resources that understand and cater to the unique needs of foster youth, considering their cultural backgrounds.	Yes	• Many of the guest facilitators for Camp K were the external organizations the AR team had built relationships with. These agencies specialized in working with foster youth and were able to talk about the services their agencies provide to foster youth before, during, and after college as relevant.	• Camp K was designed in collaboration with statewide and regional foster care networks, including participation in the Embark Georgia Regional Coalition. This network facilitated knowledge sharing, provided access to resources, and enhanced partnerships that were crucial to designing and refining support structures tailored to foster youth needs • Cross-sector collaboration was emphasized through participation in regional coalition meetings, where professionals across education, child welfare, and community sectors shared strategies to

Domain	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no	Example from Camp Kaleidoscope year 2 observations and data collections	Examples from the AR team
				improve support coordination for foster youth. This approach deepened the institutional capacity to align with and cater to the specific needs of foster youth through targeted resources • The program received funding through grant initiatives such as the USG Summer Program Series for Foster Youth. This facilitated connections with external partners and ensured that programming could be holistic, addressing basic needs alongside educational and social support. These efforts were rooted in partnerships with institutions and stakeholders who have a deep understanding of foster youth experiences
	Ensuring that a culturally diverse group of staff serves as interview panelists for hiring new members.	No		• Due to a small staff and time constraints, the lead researcher served as the sole interviewee for camp mentors.

Domain	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no	Example from Camp Kaleidoscope year 2 observations and data collections	Examples from the AR team
	Ensuring that extracurricular activities within the institution or program are inclusive and welcoming to foster youth and community members from diverse cultural backgrounds.	Yes	• The intentional structure of the Welcome Lunch and Empowerment Sessions allows participants to be introduced in a supportive environment that values their unique backgrounds and encourages open interaction, building trust and a sense of belongingc. • The intentional structure of the Welcome Lunch and Empowerment Sessions allows participants to be introduced in a supportive environment that values their unique backgrounds and encourages open interaction, building trust and a sense of belonging • Small group mentorship allows for a more intimate, focused interaction where foster youth can feel seen, heard, and understood in a safe, supportive environment.	• Mentor training and engagement sessions prepare staff to be culturally responsive and sensitive to the needs of foster youth, ensuring that extracurricular interactions are welcoming, inclusive, and meaningful.
	Creating academic support and social programs tailored to meet the diverse needs of foster	Yes	• Activities such as group discussions, outdoor experiences, and community-building exercises help foster youth connect, build	

Domain	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no	Example from Camp Kaleidoscope year 2 observations and data collections	Examples from the AR team
	youth from various cultural backgrounds, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility.		supportive peer networks, and develop confidence in inclusive and welcoming environments	
Development	Encouraging faculty and staff to pursue formal and informal education on matters related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and the challenges that foster youth face.	Yes	• Student mentors had training before the camp and debriefed each evening to ask questions, reflect, and plan for the next day.	• The AR Team completed over 200 hours of professional development
	Providing ongoing support to faculty and staff in addressing the complex needs and challenges foster youth from diverse cultural backgrounds face.	Yes	• Student mentors had training before the camp and debriefed each evening to ask questions, reflect, and plan for the next day. • There was a staff support member on call 24/7 during the camp for consultation and guidance.	• This is done well within the department in which the project took place, but it needs to be extended to a broader audience on campus.
	Providing faculty and staff with information that highlights the	No		• Staff participating in external professional development received increased knowledge and shared ideas, but no firm

Domain	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no	Example from Camp Kaleidoscope year 2 observations and data collections	Examples from the AR team
	importance of diversity, equity, inclusion, and the unique needs of foster youth in higher education.			evidence of this for others on the AR team.
	Making provisions for staff to receive training on topics and issues related to foster youth's cultural, social, and emotional needs.	Yes		• This was achieved through grant-funded training opportunities.
	Ensuring that student support staff recognize and understand how their own cultural biases and behaviors impact the experiences of foster youth within the institution.	Yes		• This was included in the mentor training curriculum, but many noted they did not fully understand the importance until after their mentor experience.
	Evaluating staff members' proficiency in integrating cultural	No	• We observed behaviors and interactions but did not complete a formal evaluation.	• We observed behaviors and interactions but did not complete a formal evaluation. Journal reflections collected.

Domain	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no	Example from Camp Kaleidoscope year 2 observations and data collections	Examples from the AR team
	responsiveness into their roles and positions, particularly concerning their support for foster youth from diverse backgrounds.			
Validation	Creating departmental practices that acknowledge and address the unique characteristics and lived experiences of foster youth from culturally diverse backgrounds. Ensuring that departmental policies and procedures demonstrate sensitivity and responsiveness to the culturally diverse	Yes	• Tailored programs demonstrate a commitment to creating departmental practices that address the unique needs of this population, ensuring that activities are not one-size-fits-all but rather reflective of their individual and collective experiences	• Departmental expectation to maintain external partnerships with Embark Georgia and community organizations that support foster youth. • A single Designated Point of Contact to work with foster youth enrolled at EC.

Domain	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no	Example from Camp Kaleidoscope year 2 observations and data collections	Examples from the AR team
	perspectives and makeup of the foster youth population within the institution.			
	Creating opportunities for families and communities, including those of foster youth, to contribute their lived experiences to the development of specific policies and programs, fostering inclusivity and collaboration.	Yes	• Evidence of outreach to families and group homes supporting the program to seek guidance on topics/logistics to best support their youth.	• Professional development opportunities and regional conferences attended by staff place a significant emphasis on the voice of youth in care and making sure they have a presence to share and provide guidance on programs and policies. We use those to help inform our own practices.
	Cultivating a school environment that fosters the validation of various cultures while celebrating the unique cultural identities of foster	No	• This behavior extends beyond what can be measured/observed within this project's scope.	

Domain	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no	Example from Camp Kaleidoscope year 2 observations and data collections	Examples from the AR team
	youth and their communities.			
	Using language in documents and statements that acknowledges and validates the cultural characteristics and backgrounds of foster youth, promoting a sense of belonging and respect within the institution/program.	Yes	• During the Welcome Lunch and Empowerment Sessions, the program used language and activities designed to make foster youth feel included and respected, emphasizing their strengths and building a collective sense of belonging. • Mentors were trained to use empathetic, culturally aware language that acknowledged the challenges faced by foster youth and helped build trust and belonging within the group	• The AR Team created and revised materials such as training guides, program brochures, and camp schedules using language and phrases relevant to foster youth and their needs. • The AR team used their journal prompts to reflect on training sessions that focus on recognizing biases, developing cultural competence, and understanding the diverse experiences of foster youth.
Cultivation	Ensuring that school policies underscore high expectations for cultural responsiveness throughout the department, specifically addressing the unique needs and experiences of foster youth from	No	• The camp had specific policies for the program, but nothing was implemented campus-wide.	• The team spoke about policies and changes to implement and pilot, but the scope of this behavior is beyond what was observed in this project.

Domain	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no	Example from Camp Kaleidoscope year 2 observations and data collections	Examples from the AR team
	diverse cultural backgrounds.			
	Developing policies and guidelines for addressing cross-cultural conflicts involving foster youth in compassionate and culturally sensitive ways.	Yes	• Camp staff, including mentors and facilitators, received training on cultural sensitivity, conflict resolution, and trauma-informed care prior to camp. • Facilitated small group discussions designed to allow participants to express themselves freely and address any misunderstandings or conflicts in a safe and supportive setting.	• Documented policies and procedures outlining how to identify, address, and de-escalate cross-cultural conflicts when they arise. These guidelines would include steps for active listening, validating participants' feelings and experiences, and fostering understanding between conflicting parties in a culturally respectful way. • daily reflection or debrief sessions where staff can address any issues that arose, including cross-cultural conflicts, in a structured and compassionate environment.
	Implementing formalities and procedures to warmly welcome foster youth to the school in culturally sensitive ways, recognizing and respecting the	Yes	• Upon arrival, each foster youth was greeted personally by camp staff and mentors. • The opening session allowed facilitators, participants, and mentors to share their own stories and ask questions (if they felt comfortable)	• All staff receive cultural sensitivity training before the camp begins to ensure they understand how to engage with and support the campers' diverse cultural identities and experiences.

Domain	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no	Example from Camp Kaleidoscope year 2 observations and data collections	Examples from the AR team
	diverse backgrounds and experiences of foster youth and their support networks.		regarding their experience in care.	
	Fostering a climate ensuring that all students with a history of foster care have equitable access to resources, opportunities, and support services.	Yes	• For the camp, all necessities were supplied. This included bedding, personal hygiene products, t-shirts, etc. • Transportation services were provided for youth who needed it for arrival and departure. • All social activities were included in the camp package.	
	Directing funding and human resources towards initiatives that promote ideas about diversity, equity, and inclusion, with a particular focus on addressing the needs and challenges faced by foster youth from	Yes	• Outside of the scope of this project.	• Securing and allocating grant funding demonstrates a commitment to directing financial resources toward initiatives that support foster youth. By focusing grant applications on creating culturally inclusive programming and addressing the unique needs of foster youth, the organization signals a priority on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Domain	Adapted leadership behavior	Behavior observed yes/no	Example from Camp Kaleidoscope year 2 observations and data collections	Examples from the AR team
	diverse cultural backgrounds.			• The intentional recruitment of mentors from diverse backgrounds.
	Organizing events and activities that highlight cross-cultural collaboration and communication, providing opportunities for foster youth and other students from diverse backgrounds to engage in meaningful interactions and build understanding across cultural differences.	Yes	• The collaborative nature of planning and hosting Camp K demonstrated intentionality in aiming to provide meaningful activities and opportunities for the foster youth who attended the program.	• AR Team meetings and ongoing training helped to cultivate the partnerships and knowledge needed to facilitate and learn from this project.

Boundary Spanning Partnerships and Distributed Leadership

Finding 5: Boundary-Spanning Partnerships and Distributed Leadership Serve as Catalysts for Inclusive Empowerment

The concept of boundary-spanning, as described by Weerts and Sandmann (2010), highlights how institutions can connect internal resources with external community support to enhance leadership opportunities for foster youth. Partnerships, such as those established with Embark Georgia, serve as concrete examples of boundary-spanning in action, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and resources between campuses and the broader community. These collaborations provide valuable tools and best practices for supporting foster youth and align with the literature's emphasis on two-way knowledge exchange between institutions and their partners (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). By leveraging these partnerships, institutions can offer foster youth access to external support networks, create leadership pathways tailored to their unique experiences, and cultivate a distributed leadership model. This approach invites diverse voices and fosters an inclusive culture, ultimately enriching the campus and community while empowering foster youth to thrive.

Designing leadership roles and pathways that consider foster youth's backgrounds and challenges enables institutions to build equitable and supportive environments where foster youth feel empowered to lead. The study suggests that restructuring academic programs, extracurricular activities, and institutional policies to be more inclusive can help foster youth actively develop their agency and leadership skills. This approach is widely supported in the literature, emphasizing the need to move beyond tokenistic inclusion by dismantling systemic barriers that hinder marginalized groups' leadership opportunities.

By prioritizing boundary-spanning partnerships and distributed leadership structures, institutions can enhance individual development and contribute to a broader culture of inclusivity and shared leadership across campus communities. This model fosters a strong sense of agency and belonging for foster youth and aligns with the CRLL framework's commitment to equity and empowerment, making leadership accessible to all students.

Shift from Sympathy to Empathy

Finding 6: Grounding staff training and self-study within the culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) framework effectively fostered a transformative shift from sympathy to empathy.

Training and self-study grounded in the culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) framework guided staff in a transformational shift from a perspective of "personal pity" or sympathy to one of empathy. This transition is vital because while sympathy can often stem from pity and lead to a paternalistic approach, empathy requires recognizing foster youth as resilient individuals with inherent strengths and potential (Paris, 2012).

This transformation was evident in structured mentor training and workdays, where staff were prepared to engage with foster youth meaningfully. The training focused on building empathy, understanding trauma, and incorporating culturally responsive practices, which helped mentors view foster youth not merely as individuals with challenges but as resilient leaders capable of shaping their own futures (CRLS observations, Summer 2024). Throughout their work with Camp Kaleidoscope, mentors exemplified this shift in practice. Participant observations captured instances in which mentors moved beyond a focus on vulnerability and instead prioritized empowering youth through active engagement, connection-building, and leadership opportunities (Mentor exit interviews, June 2024). Empowerment sessions, such as the "Welcome Lunch and Empowerment Sessions," further supported this approach by focusing

on identity building and fostering a sense of belonging, demonstrating a commitment to developing leadership potential rather than fostering dependency or focusing solely on vulnerabilities (CRLS observations, Summer 2020).

The evolution in mentor perspectives was reinforced during reflective debriefing sessions, where staff examined their biases and recognized the importance of supporting youth in ways that cultivate self-determination (mentor exit interviews, June 2024). As the lead researcher, I recall sharing in our core leadership team exit interviews (July 2024) that "working with these students firsthand significantly changed my perception" from one of sympathy to true empathy. This shift was further reflected in mentors' adaptive communication styles, prioritizing respect for foster youth voices and modeled self-advocacy and agency (mentor exit interviews, June 2024). Furthermore, trauma-informed training equipped staff to recognize how trauma impacts behavior, allowing them to respond with empathy rather than judgment (Ham et al., 2020). By adopting this approach, staff cultivated an environment in which foster youth felt seen, understood, and supported, empowering them to navigate challenges with greater confidence and fulfill their potential. Research by Srisarajivakul et al. (2023) suggests that cultural humility and empathetic engagement have a positive impact on student outcomes, aligning with the findings of this study that demonstrate how trauma-informed training and CRLL principles enhanced staff empathy.

Ultimately, this shift from sympathy to empathy reinforces the CRLL framework's commitment to equity and empowerment. It emphasizes the importance of meeting students where they are and supporting them as capable, resilient individuals ready to take on leadership roles in their lives and communities. The completed CRLS can be found in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

Adapted Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning Self-study Guide (K-State Staley School of Leadership Studies, 2020)

Domain & description	Considerations for action	Reviews

Historically Legacy of Inclusion/ Exclusion
 	
Historically, support services and leadership opportunities on campus have predominantly been available to students from more traditionally recognized groups, leaving foster youth and other marginalized populations excluded from meaningful engagement. This exclusion has resulted in foster youth facing additional barriers to accessing leadership learning and resources critical for their development. Professional staff must critically examine these patterns and actively work to dismantle systemic barriers, ensuring that foster youth are fully integrated into campus
	To address the historical legacy of inclusion and exclusion in supporting foster youth, staff can take these updated actions:
	
	1. **Acknowledge and Restructure Support Systems**:
	
	    o Recognize that traditional support services often overlook foster youth.
	
	    o Redesign spaces to ensure equal access for foster youth by integrating trauma-informed and culturally relevant practices.
	
	2. **Amplify Foster Youth Voices**:
	
	    o Include foster youth experiences and perspectives in leadership programs and co-curricular activities.
	
	    o Create platforms for foster youth to share their challenges and successes.
	
	3. **Incorporate Historical Context**:
	
	    o Learn from the historical exclusion of foster youth,
		Initial Review Date: Spring 2021
		
		The historical context at EC shows progress in supporting underrepresented groups, but foster youth remain largely invisible and underserved due to the lack of a dedicated system. Initial capacity-building efforts increased awareness, but transparency and visibility of foster youth services are still lacking. The Embark Program's absence from the website reinforces this invisibility. There's a need for proactive outreach and public-facing resources to help foster youth self-identify and access available services. Adding "Foster Youth" or "Embark" to online resources would enhance visibility and engagement.
		
		Strengths: EC has taken initial steps to raise awareness of foster youth and has begun integrating them into broader support systems. Capacity-building efforts are helping to highlight the need for better support for this population.
		
		Areas of Growth: More institutional acknowledgment of foster youth in diversity and equity conversations is needed. The Embark Program's lack of visibility (e.g., not being on the website) perpetuates their invisibility. Additionally, there is a need for proactive outreach and public-facing resources to help foster youth self-identify and access available services.
		
		Mid-Point Review: Summer 2023
		
		While the AR team's external training led to more inclusive practices within departments, institutional changes remain limited, with interdepartmental collaboration as a small success. Unfortunately, the Embark Program is still missing from the website due to delays in web development, preventing public access to essential resources. The lack of online visibility hinders efforts to support foster youth, and the team must push for greater institutional prioritization to address this gap. Progress within individual departments must now extend to broader institutional platforms.

Domain & description	Considerations for action	Reviews
leadership and support structures.	using narratives that address the barriers they've faced. ○ Integrate these stories into training to foster greater empathy and drive institutional change. By doing so, staff can create more inclusive and equitable support systems tailored to the needs of foster youth.	**Strengths:** Staff development has continued, with external training helping to foster greater understanding and inclusive practices for supporting foster youth. Increased interdepartmental collaboration has improved, although limited to specific departments. **Areas of Growth:** Institutional changes still need to be improved, and web development delays still hinder visibility for the Embark Program. To further support this population, continued efforts are needed to shift campus culture beyond essential support services. One recommendation was to pilot a student club or support network for foster youth, providing emotional and practical support. **Final Review: Summer 2024** Despite some progress in increasing the visibility of the Embark Program and enhancing foster youth support, significant challenges still need to be addressed. Campus administration has raised concerns about continuing to host Camp K due to conduct issues with participants for two consecutive years. Departmental staff are actively brainstorming solutions to address these behavioral concerns, focusing on the need for more targeted interventions and continued staff training. This reflects the importance of better-preparing staff to work with this population and create a safer, more supportive environment for foster youth participants. While improvements have been made, this setback highlights the ongoing need for institutional investment in training and support to address these behavioral challenges effectively and ensure the program's success. The Embark Program has created website content but does not have access to add the content due to the transition. **Strengths:** There has been progress in enhancing foster youth support through ongoing staff training, and awareness of the needs of foster youth has increased. Collaborative efforts among departments have improved the ability to provide more comprehensive support. **Areas of Growth:** Behavioral issues during Camp K have raised concerns about the program's future, emphasizing the need for more focused staff training and

Domain & description	Considerations for action	Reviews
		interventions. While the Embark Program's visibility has improved, publishing web content delays hinder outreach. Institutional investment in long-term support structures and visibility must be prioritized, and staff are actively brainstorming solutions to address recurring behavioral challenges at Camp K to ensure the program's continuation.
Compositional Diversity Historically underrepresented groups, including racial/ethnic minorities, women, and other marginalized populations, have faced barriers to participating in leadership programs and accessing critical support services. For foster youth, these barriers are compounded by their unique experiences of instability and limited representation. It is essential for professional staff working with foster youth to address these disparities by creating inclusive programs that recognize the diverse backgrounds and experiences of foster	1. **Increase Representation of Foster Youth**: o Actively recruit and retain foster youth in leadership programs and support services. o Ensure programs consider foster youth's unique backgrounds and challenges, promoting their participation and engagement. 2. **Alignment with Foster Youth Demographics**: o Ensure that leadership and support services reflect the demographic makeup of foster youth at local and national levels. o Hire staff willing to learn and serve students with foster youth experiences to provide relatable support.	**Initial Review Date: Spring 2021** EC has made strides in enhancing diversity in student support services, including specific roles like the Embark DPOC. However, the foster youth population remains underrepresented in leadership discussions. The preliminary events have sparked some awareness. Campus engagement is challenging for students in care who need to work to provide for themselves. We also suspect that there may be a potential stigma associated with using the resources provided. **Strengths:** Creating the Embark DPOC role marks significant progress in recognizing and including foster youth in diversity and support initiatives. This demonstrates the institution's commitment to beginning the process of addressing the needs of this underrepresented group. **Areas of Growth:** Despite these efforts, foster youth remain underrepresented, mainly in student leadership and engagement initiatives. More intentional efforts are needed to amplify their voices, ensure their representation in decision-making processes, and reduce the barriers preventing them from fully engaging in leadership roles. **Mid-Point Review: Summer 2023** Progress has been made in increasing visibility for foster youth among institutional leadership, with the Embark DPOC becoming more central. Departmental staff have shown increased knowledge and awareness of foster youth challenges, including the unique obstacles foster youth face due to a lack of family privilege. The next steps include ensuring that the leadership and support programs align more closely with the foster youth demographic and actively

Domain & description	Considerations for action	Reviews

youth and ensure they have equitable access to leadership and support services.	3. **Address Inclusion and Marginalization**:
	
	    o Identify barriers preventing foster youth from participating in programs and address systemic exclusion.
	
	    o Create platforms for foster youth to share their experiences, integrating their voices into institutional planning.
	
	4. **Creative Solutions for Support**:
	
	    o If fostering immediate diversity in programs isn't feasible, explore partnerships with foster care organizations, virtual mentorships, or guest speakers to enrich experiences for foster youth.
	
	By focusing on these actions, professional staff can better support foster youth, ensuring they have equitable access to leadership opportunities and support services
		addressing the stigma of seeking support. Collaborating with external organizations or using guest speakers could broaden representation and participation.
		
		Strengths: Foster youth connected to the department have been instrumental in providing feedback and ideas on increasing inclusion in campus programming and student groups. This collaboration has helped foster a more inclusive dialogue around their specific needs and challenges, enriching the department's support approach.
		
		Areas of Improvement: Despite staff efforts, foster youth continue to face significant barriers—such as financial instability, the need to work, and lack of family support—that hinder their ability to participate fully in leadership and extracurricular activities. Additional resources and tailored interventions are needed to address these barriers and provide foster youth opportunities for greater involvement and forward mobility on campus.
		
		Final Review: Summer 2024
		
		Foster youth participation in leadership programs has increased, but barriers like stigma and financial instability hinder the full implementation of extracurricular programs for foster youth.
		
		Strengths: The collaboration between staff and foster youth has created a more inclusive environment, showing the potential for sustained growth and leadership opportunities.

Psychological Dimension The psychological dimension focuses on the mental and emotional well-being of	1. **Assessing Emotional Barriers**: o Staff should evaluate learning environments to identify experiences that may trigger trauma or isolation for foster youth.	**Initial Review Date: Spring 2021** The initial review shows a gap in psychological support for foster youth, who often struggle with identity and stability. Though some resources are available, like counseling services, there's a lack of targeted mental health support that addresses the unique experiences of foster youth. The CARE Team focus group highlighted the need for early interventions and more proactive mental health

Domain & description	Considerations for action	Reviews
foster youth, including their perceptions of belonging, discrimination, and support within the institution. Foster youth often face unique psychological challenges, such as trauma, instability, and isolation, which can impact their cognitive and personal growth. For professional staff, it's essential to develop trauma-informed practices that foster resilience, self-worth, and emotional support, ensuring that foster youth feel seen, valued, and adequately supported in both academic and social environments.	o Address potential conflicts or barriers stemming from their marginalized status. 2. **Building Trust and Resilience**: o Create spaces that encourage emotional safety and trust among foster youth and their peers. o Focus on building resilience through trauma-informed support and validation of personal experiences. 3. **Centering Foster Youth Perspectives**: o Ensure that programming includes the perspectives of foster youth, acknowledging and validating their lived experiences. o Avoid over-reliance on dominant narratives that may marginalize foster youth. 4. **Equity in Emotional Support**: o Examine whether foster youth carry disproportionate emotional burdens within group settings.	outreach, which could better address their psychological well-being. It takes foster youth longer for trust to be earned with staff. **Strengths:** Some mental health services are available, and awareness of foster youth's unique emotional needs is increasing. A number of foster youth already have external counselors or psychologists in place for continuity of care. **Areas of Growth:** There is a significant need to implement targeted support groups and case managers trained in trauma-informed care. This will require dedicated resources and staff training to meet the specific emotional challenges of foster youth and build trust. **Mid-Point Review: Summer 2023** Staff training on trauma-informed care and culturally relevant leadership has improved departmental understanding of foster youth's psychological needs. However, many foster youth are referred to external mental health services due to the complexity of their needs, which campus counseling services view as outside their scope. The AR team has learned that foster youth often perceive the world differently due to their trauma and lived experiences, reinforcing the need for targeted psychological support on campus that addresses these distinct emotional perspectives and encourages trust-building with staff. **Strengths:** Staff training on trauma-informed care and culturally relevant practices has improved the understanding of foster youth's psychological needs. There is greater departmental awareness of their unique emotional perspectives, particularly around trauma and identity. **Areas of Growth:** Foster youth often face significant challenges in learning how to manage life independently, as they are used to structured environments. Establishing support groups focused on independent living skills could be an effective alternative to traditional student clubs. Additionally, fostering trust remains a critical need, as many foster youth feel victimized and perceive the world as working against them.

Domain & description	Considerations for action	Reviews

	o Ensure their emotional growth is supported without being tokenized or exploited.
	
	5. **Creating Safe and Brave Spaces**:
	    o Establish trauma-sensitive spaces where foster youth can express their emotions and experiences without fear of judgment.
	    o Promote open dialogue that supports emotional healing and growth.
	
	6. **Inclusion through Emotional Acknowledgment**:
	    o Acknowledge the internal emotional struggles of foster youth and invite them into programs where their emotions are validated.
	
	7. **Encouraging Self-Reflection**:
	    o Encourage foster youth to reflect on their sense of self and how it aligns with their outward presentation.
	    o Address internalized trauma or feelings of
		Final Review: Summer 2024
		
		There has been progress in staff awareness and the implementation of trauma-informed practices. By fostering brave spaces where foster youth can express their emotions and build trust through consistent, empathetic support, the institution can further enhance this population's psychological well-being and personal growth.
		
		Strengths: Progress has been made in staff awareness and implementing trauma-informed practices. By fostering brave spaces where foster youth can express themselves and building trust through consistent and empathetic support, the institution has strengthened its ability to address their emotional well-being and personal growth.
		
		Areas of Growth: Continued efforts are needed to maintain and expand trauma-informed support systems, including further staff training and tailored interventions that address the psychological dimensions of foster youth's lived experiences.

Domain & description	Considerations for action	Reviews
	inadequacy through tailored support. By addressing these psychological dimensions, staff can foster a nurturing, supportive environment that prioritizes the emotional well-being and growth of foster youth.	

Behavioral Dimension
 	
The behavioral dimension focuses on the interactions foster youth have within both cross-group and intragroup settings, particularly in culturally diverse environments. These interactions are critical for fostering social inclusion, trust, and engagement. For professional staff, it is essential to understand the unique behavioral challenges foster youth face, including trauma, lack of stability, and feelings of exclusion. Staff should be equipped to facilitate positive, trauma-informed interactions that promote resilience, build trust,
	1. **Equipping Foster Youth for Engagement**:
	  ○ Encourage reflection on personal experiences, trauma, and backgrounds to help foster youth engage across differences.
	  ○ Prepare students for dissonance and discomfort as they encounter diverse perspectives that may challenge their worldview, especially considering past trauma.
	2. **Principles for Trauma-Informed Engagement**:
	  ○ Facilitate sociocultural conversations that consider foster youth's experiences.
	  ○ Expand leadership and support content to validate
		Initial Review Date: Spring 2021
		Staff awareness is growing, but student engagement behaviors around foster youth remain primarily reactive rather than proactive. Focus group discussions highlighted the need for trauma-informed, proactive interventions that address behavioral issues early.
		Strengths: Initial behavioral shifts toward recognizing the needs of foster youth have been observed, particularly in crisis response.
		
		Areas of Growth: Proactive behaviors and engagement strategies need to be institutionalized across departments. Foster youth often experience a lack of self-exploration, and the weight of their trauma hinders their ability to move forward. They may perceive themselves as victims, believing that the world is against them, affecting their advocacy.
		
		Mid-Point Review: Summer 2023
		
		The trauma-informed care and coaching training has led to more empathetic and culturally aware behaviors among staff, particularly in crisis management. Staff are better equipped to recognize and respond to the unique behavioral challenges foster youth face, such as navigating trauma and self-advocacy struggles. However, while crisis management has improved, the shift toward proactive engagement strategies remains a work in progress.

Domain & description	Considerations for action	Reviews

and empower foster youth to engage in meaningful, inclusive community experiences.	and integrate foster youth perspectives.
	3. **Leadership Access**:
	   o Ensure equitable access to leadership programs by providing trauma-informed support, addressing barriers specific to foster youth.
	4. **Combatting Elitism and Promoting Inclusion**:
	   o Create inclusive leadership programs where foster youth feel valued, addressing elitism that may marginalize them.
	5. **Real-World Application**:
	   o Encourage foster youth to apply their learning in real-world contexts, supporting their growth and personal empowerment.
	
	By focusing on these updated behavioral actions, staff can better support foster youth and foster inclusive, supportive environments for them to thrive.
		Establishing clear behavioral expectations and early identification strategies when working with foster youth would prevent crises from escalating and create a safer environment for foster youth to engage – especially at Camp K.
		
		Strengths: Trauma-informed care and coaching training have resulted in more empathetic and culturally aware behaviors among staff.
		
		Areas of Growth: Establishing clear behavioral expectations and early identification strategies for foster youth, particularly in settings like Camp K, would help prevent crises from escalating and create a safer, more supportive environment.
		
		Final Review: Summer 2024
		
		Especially when working with Camp K, barriers like heavy trauma and feelings of victimization still require ongoing attention, with a focus on resilience-building and empowering foster youth to shift their self-perceptions and navigate challenges more independently.
		
		Strength: Staff development and observation of their work with you has visibly shown in our team's work.
		
		Areas of Growth: While behavioral improvements have been noted, particularly at Camp K, there is still a need for ongoing attention to heavy trauma and feelings of victimization. Focusing on resilience-building and empowering foster youth to shift their self-perceptions is critical to helping them advocate for themselves and move forward. Proactive behavioral interventions need to be reinforced across departments to ensure sustained progress.

Domain & description	Considerations for action	Reviews

Organizational/ Structural Dimension
 	
An institution's organizational and structural aspects play a critical role in shaping the support foster youth receive. This dimension includes creating inclusive programs, ensuring equitable access to services and resources, and allocating funding for targeted foster youth support. Professional staff must advocate for dedicated structures that address the unique needs of foster youth, such as establishing specialized, streamlining referral processes, and integrating trauma-informed practices into institutional policies, admissions, and program design.
	• **Foster Youth-Focused Student Organizations or Support Groups**:
	  • Encourage the formation of groups that address their unique challenges.
	  • Organize peer mentoring, advocacy workshops, and events specifically designed to support the foster youth community.
	
	• **Leadership and Development Programs**:
	  • Develop leadership programs that reflect foster youth experiences, incorporating trauma-informed practices and diverse perspectives.
	  • Allocate budget resources to support leadership development specifically for foster youth, ensuring equitable access to these opportunities.
	
	• **Intersectionality in Support Services**:
	  • Acknowledge the intersectionality of foster youth, particularly around race, gender, and socioeconomic status.
	  • Integrate the voices of foster youth of color to better address their unique challenges, ensuring
		Initial Review Date: Spring 2021
		Structurally, EC has made progress in integrating foster youth support into its broader student services framework, but fragmentation remains. Transitioning the DPOC role to the Dean of Students Office was a step forward, yet cross-departmental communication is still inconsistent. To address this, EC could establish Foster Youth-Focused Support Groups and organize peer mentoring and advocacy workshops to create a sense of community. Additionally, developing leadership programs that reflect foster youth experiences, incorporating trauma-informed practices, and ensuring equitable access to leadership opportunities would better serve this population. High school counselors could also be asked to provide lists of foster youth coming to EC for early identification.
		
		Strengths: EC has begun integrating foster youth support into existing structures, such as the DPOC role (2019). The 2020 Facility Renovation to expand basic needs support across campus was beneficial in our capacity building effort. In 2022 a non-clinical case manager position was added to the department.
		
		Areas of Growth: Proactive behaviors and engagement strategies need to be institutionalized across departments.
		
		Mid-Point Review: Summer 2023
		
		Organizational structures have improved, with better interdepartmental coordination and more streamlined communication about foster youth needs. The integration of the DPOC has facilitated access to resources, and new tracking systems help identify foster youth earlier. However, structural fragmentation persists. Facilitating Open Dialogue on Structural Barriers among departments, such as financial aid and fiscal affairs, would improve the transparency and coordination of services, particularly for students receiving aid through the ILP. The initiative to update the application process for self-identification should continue alongside proactive engagement efforts, such as outreach to gear-up programs, even if previous funding fell through. Some recommendations for action at this point include:
		  - Sometimes communication between fiscal affairs, financial aid, and DOS office when student receives aid through ILP.

Domain & description	Considerations for action	Reviews

	that support services are relevant and responsive.
	
	• **Facilitating Open Dialogue on Structural Barriers**:
	  • Create safe spaces for open dialogue about privilege, systemic barriers, and bias, acknowledging the discomfort of deconstructing these perspectives.
	  • Support staff and faculty through training to engage in self-reflection and critical conversations around equity.
	
	• **Using Critical Pedagogy for Awareness**:
	  • Employ critical pedagogy to build critical consciousness among staff and students about the systemic barriers foster youth face.
	  • Challenge dominant narratives, encouraging faculty and staff to critically examine institutional power dynamics and promote equity for foster youth.
	
	• **Active Engagement and Learning from Foster Youth**:
	  • Shift institutional conversations from simply understanding foster youth challenges to actively
		- Attempted to update the common application to our campus, but not once has a student self-identified through that process – 5 years in
		- Attempted to bring a collegiate group of Gear Up to Dalton State, but they lost funding and it never fully launched.
		
		Strengths: Coordination between departments has improved. Sometimes, CARE Team referrals lead to the identification of foster youth on campus, and we now have a follow-up plan for case managers. We piloted the first version of Camp K in the summer of 2023 to work directly with foster youth. The counseling center does not have the capacity to provide support groups or appropriate services for special populations.
		
		Areas for Growth: We still struggle to find a way to overcome trust issues and build deeper relationships with peers and staff.
		
		Final Review: Summer 2024
		
		Structural support for foster youth has continued to evolve, but gaps remain. Starting a foster youth support group or Community Chats would help these students build connections and feel more supported. Additionally, creating leadership programs designed to empower foster youth with trauma-informed practices would increase their engagement. Active Engagement and Learning from Foster Youth should be prioritized, fostering open discussions about privilege, bias, and systemic barriers. As administrative barriers like funding and communication challenges persist, a focus on fostering empathy, active listening, and consistent support will help address the remaining issues.

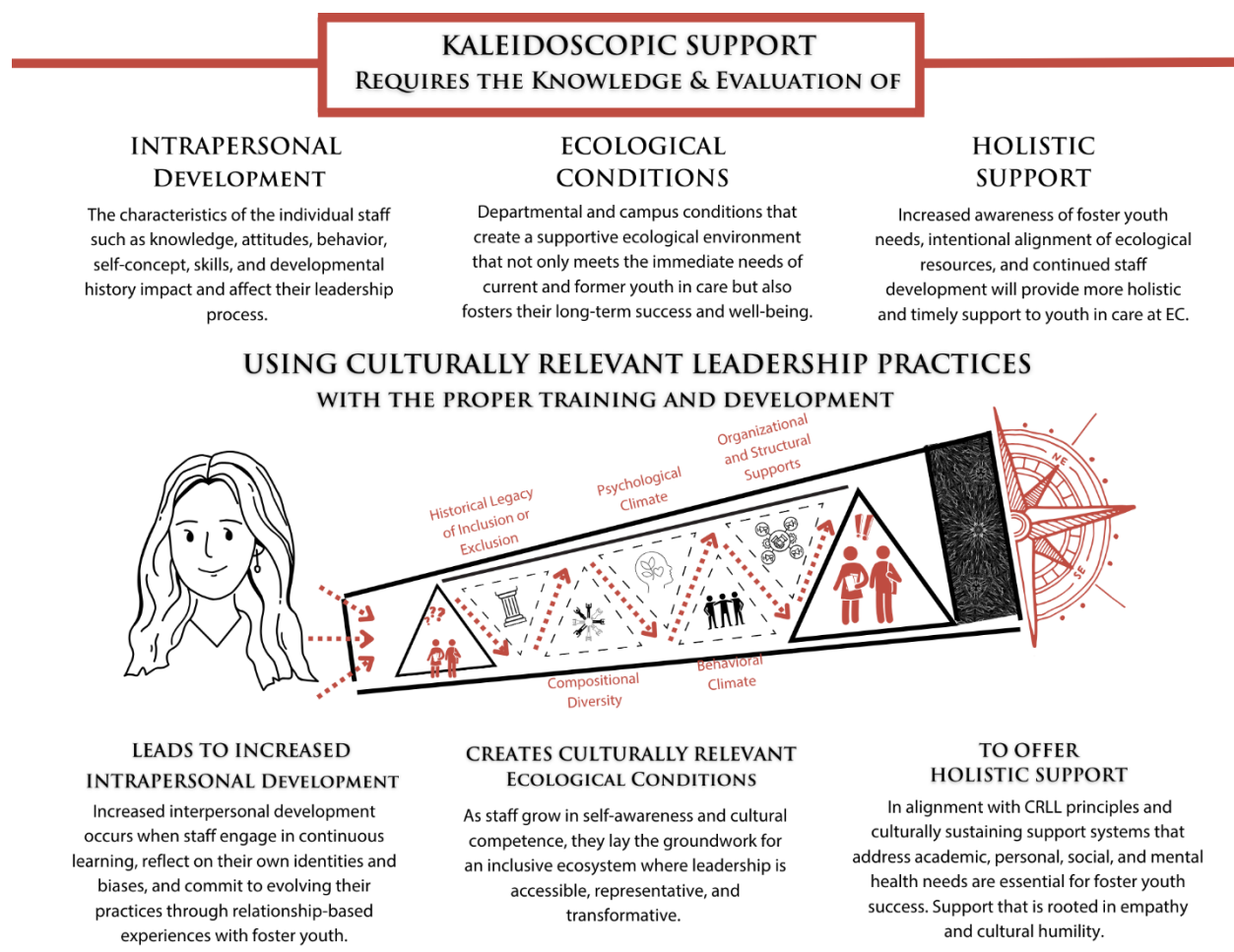| Domain & description	Considerations for action	Reviews
	engaging with and learning from their lived experiences. • Foster empathy, active listening, and transformative change to create an institution-wide culture of support for foster youth.	

A Kaleidoscope of Support: Implications for Crafting Inclusive Frameworks for Foster Youth and Future Directions

This study presents a comprehensive framework for educational institutions to enhance support systems for foster youth, aligning actionable strategies with CRLL principles and insights from existing literature. The findings underscore a critical need for policies and practices prioritizing cultural sustainability, cultural humility, and trauma-informed support, forming a pattern for creating inclusive and empowering environments where foster youth can thrive.

The study is grounded in CRLL principles and reveals a layered, multidimensional approach to supporting foster youth that encompasses individual, group, and systemic learning. Figure 4.2 encapsulates this multidimensional approach by visually demonstrating how staff intrapersonal development and ecological conditions can be positively impacted when viewed through a culturally relevant leadership lens, leading to increased competencies at the individual, group, and system levels, leading to holistic support services and culturally sustainable support systems.

At the individual level, targeted training enables staff to bridge knowledge gaps and transition from sympathy to empathy, empowering them to address the complex emotional and social challenges foster youth face. Group-level findings underscore the value of collaboration and shared accountability within the institution as departments work with external partners to form a cohesive, cross-departmental network. Systemic findings highlight the need for proactive, consistent care, transparent resource visibility, and adaptable, sustainable structures, establishing a responsive framework that can evolve with the needs of foster youth.

Figure 4.2

Kaleidoscopic Support

KALEIDOSCOPIC SUPPORT
REQUIRES THE KNOWLEDGE & EVALUATION OF

INTRAPERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The characteristics of the individual staff such as knowledge, attitudes, behavior, self-concept, skills, and developmental history impact and affect their leadership process.

ECOLOGICAL CONDITIONS

Departmental and campus conditions that create a supportive ecological environment that not only meets the immediate needs of current and former youth in care but also fosters their long-term success and well-being.

HOLISTIC SUPPORT

Increased awareness of foster youth needs, intentional alignment of ecological resources, and continued staff development will provide more holistic and timely support to youth in care at EC.

USING CULTURALLY RELEVANT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES
WITH THE PROPER TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Historical Legacy of Inclusion or Exclusion · Psychological Climate · Organizational and Structural Supports · Compositional Diversity · Behavioral Climate

LEADS TO INCREASED INTRAPERSONAL Development

Increased interpersonal development occurs when staff engage in continuous learning, reflect on their own identities and biases, and commit to evolving their practices through relationship-based experiences with foster youth.

CREATES CULTURALLY RELEVANT Ecological Conditions

As staff grow in self-awareness and cultural competence, they lay the groundwork for an inclusive ecosystem where leadership is accessible, representative, and transformative.

TO OFFER HOLISTIC SUPPORT

In alignment with CRLL principles and culturally sustaining support systems that address academic, personal, social, and mental health needs are essential for foster youth success. Support that is rooted in empathy and cultural humility.

Implications for Future Practice

The insights gathered in this study provide a pattern for actionable improvements in institutional practices. Implementing holistic support systems that address academic, personal, social, and mental health needs is essential for ensuring foster youth have access to a comprehensive, empowering network of resources. Dedicated programs staffed by professionals skilled in trauma-informed care and culturally responsive practices, combined with integrated departmental services, can reduce fragmentation and promote accessibility. Clear communication

channels foster a sense of belonging, empowering foster youth to confidently navigate campus resources.

Implement Holistic Support Systems

In alignment with CRLL principles, holistic, culturally sustaining support systems that address academic, personal, social, and mental health needs are essential for fostering youth success (Campos-Moreira et al., 2020; Cooper et al., 2020; Genao, 2021; Ham et al., 2020; Hayes & Juarez, 2011; Paris, 2012). Institutions are encouraged to develop dedicated support programs staffed by professionals skilled in trauma-informed care and culturally responsive practices. Integrating services across departments, with clear communication channels, can reduce fragmentation, enhance accessibility, and foster a sense of belonging and empowerment among foster youth.

Prioritize Staff Development for Cultural Competence

Prioritizing staff development for cultural competence via training grounded in CRLL's emphasis on cultural humility and equity is vital for building an inclusive campus environment. Institutions should encourage continuous self-reflection, mentorship, and shared learning among staff, reinforcing a culture of supportive feedback in which staff can discuss challenges, share best practices, and enhance each individual's capacity to meet foster youth's unique needs. Through ongoing training, staff can build their knowledge and skills regarding trauma-informed care, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and cultural humility. Moreover, this training should move beyond theoretical knowledge to provide practical strategies that enable staff to build supportive, empathetic relationships with foster youth.

Cultivate Inclusive Leadership Opportunities

Cultivating inclusive leadership opportunities for foster youth reinforces their sense of agency and belonging within the campus community. The application of CRLL encourages institutions to redesign leadership pathways to be accessible, inclusive, and reflective of foster youth's backgrounds. This approach may involve revising eligibility criteria, offering flexible scheduling, providing mentorship opportunities, and developing boundary-spanning partnerships that expand leadership opportunities and resources through community involvement. This approach not only values diverse perspectives but also fosters a culture of distributed leadership, empowering students to share their perspectives and contribute meaningfully to their own education and to the campus and wider communities.

Shift from Sympathy to Empathy

Shifting from sympathy to empathy aligns with CRLL's emphasis on resilience and respect in fostering authentic relationships. While sympathy can focus on perceived vulnerabilities and result in a top-down, paternalistic approach, shifting to empathy, which values resilience, facilitates the creation of truly supportive connections. Through providing training and professional development initiatives grounded in CRLL principles, institutions can embed approaches that recognize the impact of trauma on behaviors and responses into staff's daily interactions. These trauma-informed principles enable staff to acknowledge the impacts of trauma in meaningful, empathetic ways without denying foster youth's agency by focusing only on vulnerabilities. Meaningful dialogue between staff and foster youth creates mutual respect and connection, laying the groundwork for a support network rooted in empathy and cultural humility.

Future Research Directions

Future research could benefit from a focus on developing and accessing methods to improve interdepartmental communication and collaboration, ensuring that foster youth receive holistic, continuous support. By integrating CRLL principles into institutional practices, this study illustrates how culturally relevant leadership can drive meaningful improvements in support for foster youth. As institutions reflect on these findings, the CRLL framework offers a compelling foundation for fostering environments that honor diversity, empower agencies, and champion equity in higher education.

Building on these CRLL-informed practices, future research could explore the long-term impact of culturally relevant leadership on student retention, success, and leadership development for foster youth and other marginalized groups. Longitudinal studies could assess how CRLL interventions affect foster youth over time. Comparative studies across diverse institutional contexts could identify best practices, while research focusing on foster youth alumni may reveal challenges faced postgraduation, informing ongoing support services. Additionally, exploring applications of cultural humility—by developing tools to measure staff humility and examining its impact on foster youth outcomes—could refine training programs and enhance cultural sensitivity. By synthesizing these insights, institutions can make informed, strategic adjustments to enhance training, support structures, and overall commitment to equity and inclusiveness, creating spaces where foster youth can thrive academically, personally, and professionally.

Limitations and Challenges

This AR study, while providing valuable insights, is subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and guide future research efforts. One key

limitation was the sample size. The study involved a relatively small sample of professional and student staff within one department at EC who supported the AR project and interventions. This limited sample size may have influenced the generalizability of the findings, as it could have restricted the range of perspectives captured. Consequently, specific subgroups or nuanced viewpoints may have needed to be more represented, potentially limiting the ability to identify broader patterns or trends within the larger context of foster youth support.

Additionally, the voluntary nature of participation may have introduced self-selection bias, as professional staff and student workers who opted to engage were likely more motivated, invested, or aware of the support systems compared to those who did not participate. This may have influenced the outcomes and perceptions of the interventions' effectiveness. Furthermore, the workload capacity and reflective requirements placed on the AR team, coupled with time constraints and high expectations, may have limited the depth of engagement and reflection possible, potentially impacting the study's overall insights and findings.

The timing and duration of the intervention activities also posed a limitation. The study was conducted over a specific time frame, which may not have been sufficient to observe the long-term impacts of the interventions and outcomes. While initial outcomes were promising, further research is needed to evaluate the sustained effects of trauma-informed care and culturally relevant leadership practices.

Another consideration is the contextual nature of the study, which was conducted within a specific institutional and cultural setting. The findings may reflect conditions unique to this setting and may not apply entirely to other institutions or demographic groups without adaptation. Relatedly, institutional constraints such as limited staffing, time availability, and resource allocation affected the scope and scalability of the interventions.

The study's reliance on qualitative methods—while valuable for capturing rich, in-depth perspectives—may also have limited the generalization of findings. While efforts were made to mitigate researcher bias through peer debriefing and triangulation, subjective interpretation of participant narratives could still have influenced the conclusions.

Lastly, data collection methods relied heavily on student and staff self-reports, which carry inherent limitations such as potential recall bias, social desirability bias, or incomplete disclosure due to the sensitive nature of trauma-related experiences. Future research should address these limitations by expanding the sample size, incorporating longitudinal data to capture long-term outcomes, broadening the scope of institutions studied, and considering mixed-methods approaches to strengthen the reliability and applicability of findings.

Reflection on the Action Research Process: Turning the Kaleidoscope

The cyclical nature of the AR process mirrors the turning of a kaleidoscope, where each rotation brings new patterns, deepening our understanding of complex issues and the interconnectedness of stakeholder perspectives. Throughout this thesis project, each AR cycle introduced fresh insights, building upon previous cycles to construct a richer, more intricate understanding of foster youth experiences in higher education. As practitioners, administrators, and stakeholders reflected and acted on emerging data, they added layers to a growing mosaic of culturally relevant leadership strategies and support systems. These iterative cycles, much like the fragments in a kaleidoscope, represent the distinct contributions of individuals, programs, and policies; it is their interplay that brings clarity to the multifaceted challenges and potential pathways for supporting foster youth.

The AR process invited a continuous balance between reflection and action, with each cycle fostering new ways to adapt interventions based on the insights gleaned. As with any

dynamic process, there were times when the kaleidoscope did not turn smoothly—when the patterns became unclear, fragmented, or obstructed by systemic barriers. Challenges often emerged as points of misalignment between ideal practices and the realities within institutional systems, such as limited staff capacity, fluctuating resources, or uncoordinated support structures. These misalignments were not merely setbacks; they became pivotal moments of discovery that invited recalibration and adjustments that refocused the project's approach—often becoming as valuable as our more tangible achievements. For instance, when stakeholders encountered difficulties in fully implementing culturally relevant leadership practices due to structural limitations or insufficient training, these gaps highlighted the need for more foundational, practical support in a flexible framework that can adapt to varying capacities and contexts.

Each cycle's reflection phase allowed for critical examination, unveiling gaps and misalignments in our understanding. For example, when early data revealed a gap in trauma-informed training, the focus shifted to designing professional development sessions grounded in cultural humility and empathy-building. This shift illustrated the responsiveness required in AR, as one discovery often led to the next. These moments served as a call to pause, realign, and refine strategies to ensure that interventions were truly responsive to the unique needs of foster youth. Through this iterative research approach, the research team also refined our methodologies, developing more sustainable and cohesive practices that better align with trauma-informed care, culturally responsive leadership, and cross-departmental collaboration.

The culmination of this research represents a single image within the ever-turning kaleidoscope of inquiry—a moment of clarity achieved through the iterative processes of action and reflection. This final image offers a cohesive framework for empowering foster youth in

higher education, but it is not a conclusive solution. Rather, it serves as a stepping-stone, a foundation upon which future researchers and practitioners can build. The boundary-spanning roles identified in this project, along with the integration of CRLL and trauma-informed care, provide valuable insights, but as the kaleidoscope turns, new challenges will emerge, requiring these solutions to be reimagined and adapted to changing contexts. Each new study, each fresh perspective, adds complexity and depth to the existing body of knowledge, uncovering new dimensions to this multifaceted issue and enriching our collective understanding. The dynamic nature of foster youth experiences in higher education demands that institutions remain responsive, embracing the cycle of reflection, learning, and action to ensure that support systems are resilient and relevant. this way, the kaleidoscope becomes not only a metaphor for the research process but also a reminder of the commitment to growth, adaptability, and inclusivity that lies at the heart of supporting foster youth in higher education.

Each turn of the kaleidoscope changes everything, yet nothing is lost. Every pattern made

becomes a story, every shift a new possibility.

—Unknown Author

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Human Research Protection Program

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

April 17, 2024

Dear Laura Bierema:

On 4/17/2024, the Human Subjects Office reviewed the following submission:

Title of Study:	Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices to Enhance Student Support Services for Foster Youth in Higher Education
Investigator:	Laura Bierema
Co-Investigator:	Heather Williams, Diann Jones
IRB ID:	PROJECT00009303
Funding:	None
Review Category:	Exempt Flex 7

We have determined that the proposed research is Exempt. The research activities may begin 4/17/2024.

Since this study was determined to be exempt, please be aware that not all future modifications will require review by the IRB. For more information please see Appendix C of the Exempt Research Policy (https://research.uga.edu/docs/policies/compliance/hso/HRP-033-ExemptResearch.pdf). As noted in Section C.2., you can simply notify us of modifications that will not require review via the "Add Public Comment" activity.

- The local school has approved this action research project. We have determined that the proposed research is Exempt.

- The researcher has confirmed that the IRB submission and materials contain descriptions of voluntary research activities only, and participant consent will be obtained for research activities under conditions that minimize the possibility of coercion or undue influence.

- The PI is responsible for ensuring that UGA HRPP policies pertaining to research involving external sites, recruitment, and recommended consent disclosures for Exempt research are followed.

A progress report will be requested prior to 4/17/2029. Before or within 30 days of the progress report due date, please submit a progress report or study closure request. Submit a progress report by navigating to the active study and selecting Progress Report. The study may be closed by selecting Create Version and choosing Close Study as the submission purpose.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

Jennifer Queen, Quality Assurance Officer
Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia

APPENDIX B

DATA CODING SCHEMES

Table C1

Document Review Coding Scheme

Code	Description
Referral Cause	primary reasons or circumstances that led to the referral or interaction with our department
Support Needs & Interventions	what the individuals need(ed) to support their academic success. These needs span various emotional, educational, social, and health-related domains. specific actions, programs, and strategies implemented to address their needs and help them overcome barriers to academic success.
Barriers to Success	obstacles and challenges that hinder these individuals from achieving their full potential academically. These barriers can be systemic, personal, or environmental and impede progress in various areas of their lives.
Outcomes	the results or impacts of the interventions and support provided to foster youth. Outcomes can be measured in various ways, including improvements in academic performance, emotional well-being, social integration, and overall life satisfaction.

Table C2

Resource Mapping Coding Scheme

Code	Description
Finances & Employment	Resources that provide financial assistance, employment support, and programs aimed at improving economic stability and job readiness.
Housing	This domain addresses the need for stable and secure housing. Resources should include assistance in finding housing, understanding rental agreements, and providing temporary housing solutions to ensure students have a safe place to live while attending college.
Transportation	Transportation refers to how students travel to and from college, housing, work, and other essential locations. Resources should include recommended transportation solutions such as public transport or ride-share options.
Physical & Mental Well-Being	This domain focuses on students' well-being, including physical and mental health. Resources should consider access to healthcare services, mental health support, and promoting healthy lifestyles to ensure students from foster care can thrive in their college environment.
Supportive Relationships & Community Connections	This domain focuses on building and maintaining positive relationships. Resources should focus on social connections, including relationships with peers, mentors,

family, and the broader community, to create a supportive

student network.

Cultural & Personal Identity

This domain relates to understanding and embracing one's

identity and cultural background. Resources should help

students explore their cultural heritage, fostering a sense of

belonging and encouraging the development of a positive

self-identity.

Life Skills

This domain involves teaching practical skills necessary for

daily living and independence. Resources should consider

budgeting, time management, cooking, and other essential

tasks that help students manage their personal lives

effectively while pursuing their education.

Education

This domain covers academic achievement and support.

Resources should focus on providing academic resources,

tutoring, mentoring, and other educational supports to help

students succeed in their studies and reach their educational

goals.

Table C3

CII Transcript Coding Scheme

Code	Description
Awareness of Self & Others	Understanding cultural identities, biases, and power dynamics

Culturally responsive pedagogy/practice	Adapting strategies for diverse learners and using culturally relevant materials
Building relationships and communities	Creating a sense of belonging and connection among students, staff, and families from diverse backgrounds
Advocacy	Promoting policies and practices that support equity and social justice
Continuous learning and reflection	Ongoing self-reflection and learning to improve practice and understanding