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Culturally Responsive School Leadership in Practice: The Role of Community Elders and School-Community Relationships in Primary Schools of Hadiya Zone, Central Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study investigated the application of culturally responsive school leadership in the Hadiya Zone of the Central Ethiopian Region, focusing on the roles of community elders and school-community relationships. The study used a qualitative single case study design. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Participants were chosen by purposive sampling techniques, who were prominent community leaders, educational experts, supervisors, school principals, and Parent-Teacher-Student Association members. Atlas.ti7 helped in the data analysis that included systematic coding and thematic organization. The findings of the study revealed that leaders of primary schools in Hadiya zone are not aware of culturally responsive school leadership implementation, which was also observed to be associated with the improvement of community participation, student involvement, and academic success in the event of its implementation. Furthermore, the study revealed that the role of community elders in introducing culturally responsive school leadership in the school management is very important. Thus, the study has practical implications for creating a culturally pertinent school climate with beneficial academic performance for students. Therefore, the study recommended that policymakers ought to come up with clear policies and guidelines, and training on the structure of culturally responsive school leadership for the school heads to enhance the implementation.

Keywords

Culturally-responsive-school-leadership, Hadiya-Zone, Indigenous-leadership, School community, Single case study

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Introduction

Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) is a principle that encourages educational leaders to address inequities within the educational system. It also focuses on making sure that the school environment is inclusive, building critical consciousness, and implementing culturally

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responsive leadership engagement in the community, and curriculum modification to consider the varied cultural backgrounds of the students (Khalifa et al., 2016). Other research findings also indicated that forming partnerships with a wide range of individuals is a key component of the CRSL initiatives (Niesche, 2024; Portillo, 2022). It, therefore, helps in creating the atmosphere where every student in the school will get the feeling of togetherness and genuine respect for the other students and feel the equality within the school setting to learn. Further, such a culture is essential in the establishment of a conducive environment that would enable the overall growth of the disadvantaged children and close the achievement gaps experienced by such children. Therefore, schools ought to build a solid association with the communities to achieve successful CRSL implementation in schools.

Globally, different studies, for instance, a study by Bhengu (2013) on school-community integration for school change: A case study of a rural secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal, Booyse et al. (2024) on a performance management framework for self-managing schools in an emerging economy, and a study by Davids (2022) on governance in South African schools: Democratic advancement or hindrance? All showed that a positive correlation between schools and communities is essential to improve schools and contribute to the increased academic performances of students. Moreover, other research findings demonstrate that the application of Indigenous frameworks may lead to more engagement and student achievement, and this indicates a significant effect of culturally relevant leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016; Sianturi et al., 2023; Washington & Johnson, 2023). Nevertheless, the existing literature of CRSL primarily centres on situational applications in developed nations. A significant gap exists in studies that examine CRSL in non-Western school governance. This gap is particularly evident in culturally diverse countries such as Ethiopia. Few studies have explored the contexts, challenges, and opportunities of CRSL where colonial governance structures coexist with Indigenous systems. These Indigenous systems are rich in tradition but often marginalized.

In Ethiopia, the ethnic diversity of students in the learning institutions has become challenging to handle. The problem is increased by the fact that the modern education system in the country, which has historically been Western-oriented, does not always conform to local social and cultural values, which prevents the system from producing good citizens and fails to improve development (Mulualem et al., 2023). This dependence on Westernized models of school governance has played a direct role in the display of marginalization of Indigenous knowledge and culturally based practices. As a result, community culture and local economies are often not mirrored in the curriculum, causing discontent, higher rates of dropouts, and reduced critical thinking capabilities, which have magnified dropout rates of pupils and decreased their critical thinking skills (Abdisa, 2022; Shume Nadew et al., 2024; Solomon & Aschale, 2019). The fact that ethnicity is politicized only intensifies the situation, which explains the pressing necessity to establish more appropriate school environments through coherent actions of the national character (Abebaw, 2022; Manaze & Zeleke, 2021).

A close-knit chain reaction can be seen in this case: the persistence of Westernized school governance models in Ethiopia has excluded Indigenous models and community values, creating

a pressing need for an alternative school leadership model such as CRSL. CRSL addresses this gap by incorporating cultural context and fostering community partnerships. Thus, this research indicates that elders serve as "living archives of Indigenous knowledge." Excluding their participation in school governance is not only socially unjust but also represents a missed opportunity to access valuable educational resources that connect community and school contexts. Their involvement is essential for culturally sustaining pedagogy. Some studies indicated the necessity to integrate Indigenous knowledge (Abdisa, 2022; Demssie et al., 2020; Solomon & Aschale, 2019) and increase stakeholder participation (Berhanu & Gobie, 2023). However, there is a gap in conducting in-depth context-specific research on the implementation of CRSL at the primary school administration of Hadiya zone.

To the extent of available documentation, CRSL remains largely absent as a formal framework in Hadiya Zone's education system. The Hadiya Zone Education Department's 2025 annual report indicates that no woreda in the zone has implemented a systematic CRSL program. Of all primary schools in the two study woredas, none have documented CRSL policies, performance indicators, or staff training records. This shows that there is a gap in conducting in-depth, context-specific research on the implementation of CRSL at the primary school administration of Hadiya zone. Thus, the unexplored role of community elders as custodians of Indigenous culture, exemplified by the Hadiya people's traditional Gassi Seera code of ethics, law, and social governance, deserves attention in educational administration.

This study, therefore, sought to critically investigate the application of CRSL in primary schools in Hadiya Zone, Central Ethiopia Regional State, and to propose evidence-based recommendations to improve the system. Specifically, to evaluate the level of awareness and practice of the school leaders on the CRSL principles in their daily practices, to pinpoint the Hadiya culture, values, and knowledge systems relevant to the context of school leadership, to design a contextually appropriate CRSL framework for the Hadiya zone based on empirical evidence and stakeholder inputs.

Therefore, the present study could contribute to proving the applicability and possible modification of the existing theories on CRSL, such as Khalifa et al., 2016, and Ladson-Billings 1995, to the Ethiopian context. Additionally, this research is significant for informing school governance regarding cultural orientation. It may also assist researchers, policymakers, and community leaders in fostering a more inclusive and cooperative school system.

Thus, the study addresses the following questions: How do primary school leaders in the Hadiya Zone implement CRSL? In what ways do CRSL practices in the Hadiya Zone enhance school community and student engagement? How can community elders contribute to improving the implementation of CRSL?

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the main theme of Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) and its key concepts, summarises the empirical results that have been found, identifies the contradictions and gaps in the research, and situates the current study in the scholarly sphere.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership: A Conceptual Framework

The overarching literature review of this study is based on CRSL, and it should be based upon a good understanding of the cultural contexts in which schools function. As noted by research findings, CRSL emphasizes the recognition of diverse cultural identities (Savvopoulos et al., 2024). This strategy aimed to create an environment where all learners feel seen and supported in who they are. Apart from academic growth, it supports children in different cultures to feel valued and respect each other (Martin et al., 2022; Niesche, 2024). Therefore, school administrators need to address diversity, reduce disparities, and build a community where every child can prosper, based on CRSL. The research findings currently show that there is a relationship between effective CRSL and school climate, student engagement, and academic outcomes for marginalized groups (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Accordingly, examining CRSL's methods further involves applying the contact hypothesis, which links learning in the community to including all students. According to Khalifa et al. (2016), mixing cultural groups in schools leads to improved attitudes and stereotypes, and this positive shift enhances the entire educational climate. The practice of community-engaged CRSL has been shown to have measurable benefits for intercultural understanding and school belonging through empirical studies (e.g., Coombs et al., 2024; da Silva et al., 2023). So, to understand the implementation and its influence on primary school administration, this study reviewed the theory of CRSL (Khalifa et al., 2016).

In spite of such a body of knowledge, many contradictions and lacunas remain. In particular, CRSL literature has tended to be produced in the Western context, and controversies persist about its usefulness in non-Western, Indigenous settings (Niesche, 2024; Smith, 2012). This study critically engages with the implementation of the CRSL framework (Khalifa et al., 2016) for primary education administration by directly juxtaposing it with Indigenous leadership paradigms. The researchers thus situate the current study as a solution to the aforementioned gap by creating a CRSL framework that incorporates the local epistemologies that are not based on Western epistemologies. Khalifa et al.'s framework, though holistic, is predominantly rooted in Western perspectives and fails to adequately address the communal, elder-centered governance central to many non-Western contexts. To achieve genuine responsiveness in areas like the Hadiya Zone, it is essential to supplement the CRSL framework with local epistemologies that prioritize collective memory, intergenerational knowledge, and a spiritual connection to place, dimensions often absent in Western leadership models. Therefore, the present study places itself

in the position of filling this gap by exploring the reconceptualization of CRSL through the indigenous paradigm in Ethiopian Primary schools.

Key Dimensions of Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Four key dimensions of culturally responsive school leadership are identified. The following dimensions are important to the success of CRSL based on empirical research. International findings and specific contradictions that arise out of the Ethiopian context are then addressed in relation to these dimensions.

Creating Culturally Responsive Leadership Engagement in Community

Different kinds of literature state that using community knowledge in school activities improves education, increases creative thinking, and widens student perspectives. For instance, if schools build meaningful connections to their community, educational progress will be improved on several fronts (Coombs et al., 2024). Acknowledging these partnerships, teachers receive and share great ideas, and students get to communicate and learn from peers from different backgrounds. This is further evidenced by the study result of da Silva et al. (2023), which shows that the existence of a school's structured community engagement initiatives is positively correlated with students' social responsibility and teachers' innovation. Accordingly, in Hadiya Zone and similar places, working with Indigenous communities closely might have huge potential to improve the relevance of education in schools. By joining with parents through community workshops and volunteering, schools close the distance between education and family life and encourage parents to help with their children's schoolwork. Moreover, as mentioned by research findings, involving local communities in school activities is essential for producing citizens with social skills and a sense of greater responsibility (da Silva et al., 2023).

As mentioned by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2021) in ESDP VI, the involvement of local communities in school activities helps to achieve good progress. However, while a community's participation is encouraged within the national policy, research in Ethiopia (Abebaw, 2022) shows that school leaders lack practical awareness of how to engage Indigenous people and manage diversity in a meaningful way. Thus, the study depends on creating major networks that link education to the community, support unity across the country, and encourage social unity. Improving community participation enables both teachers and students to drive social changes and underscores how necessary it is for schools to continue strong bonds with the community. Joining the efforts of all three sectors, like parents, teachers, and students, is necessary for improving schools. Because of this model, educational systems can do their jobs better, leading to useful progress in the results of schools (Bhengu, 2013). That's why it is necessary to have clear policies that define the jobs of both educators and community leaders in schools.

Ensuring Inclusive School Environments

Creating a diverse learning environment helps students learn about different cultures and welcomes everyone in the school. So, schools should develop good practices of what they need to be successful in a world that is increasingly connected by globalization. Research findings showed that encouraging diversity in the workplace improves how welcoming individuals and institutions are, which aids in outperforming competitors (Alemu et al., 2022). To involve all students and keep them safe, schools must use a range of techniques. Despite the policy commitments, an empirical study done by (Abebaw, 2022) identified a significant challenge among educational leaders in promoting diversity and providing for different cultures, while students who are marginalized still experience barriers. Thus, we should highlight that quality education is key, back appropriate diversity policies, and encourage educators to do more in their profession (Abebaw, 2022). Taking care of diversity makes any school better for everyone and ensures it will continue to exist in the coming years. Numerous studies point out that, while people recognize how culture shapes the education of children, historically marginalized students still experience many obstacles in schools (Riehl, 2000). The drive for inclusive settings, coupled with the consistent marginalisation of minority groups, highlights the need for the current study. Because of the demand for culturally attuned learning, powerful change, and justice, the CRSL framework is essential for educational leaders to be successful in their institutions (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Developing Critical Self-Consciousness

To lead in a culturally conscious way, a person must be self-aware about their values, beliefs, and biases. Gay & Kirkland (2010) make it clear that having critical awareness is important in culturally responsive teaching and that educators should examine their identities to create classrooms that support marginalized students. Gay & Kirkland (2010) provide empirical evidence that critical self-consciousness is a direct link to teachers' capacity to identify and challenge systemic inequities. Consciousness goes past awareness and demands that educational leaders critique their assumptions about race, culture, and the unfair systems that keep students from reaching their full potential. Engaging in reflection like this is necessary for people in education to confront what students of color deal with and help bring about important changes within schools. One interesting discussion found in the literature is the degree to which Western frameworks of critical consciousness are congruent with Indigenous epistemologies. For this process to be stronger, we should include Indigenous approaches, such as those recommended by Smith (2012), and students should evaluate themselves and their ideas when studying decolonization. When leaders accept this view, they gain a better insight into their values, beliefs, and biases, which increases their critical self-awareness (Gay & Kirkland, 2010). Thus, developing critical self-consciousness about race, culture, language, and identity is basic for building a leadership style that responds to cultural differences. The present study contributes to this debate by examining the possibility of fostering self-consciousness of Ethiopian school leaders that combines the Western CRSL principles and the indigenous communal values.

Giving Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership

As instructional leaders, principals should play a big role in studying learning environments and teachers' lessons, guiding students to do well in their academic performance (Feyisa & Edosa, 2023; Gedifew, 2023). Empirical research in the Ethiopian context (Feyisa & Edosa, 2023; Gedifew, 2023) shows that principals seldom receive training on culturally responsive instruction, while there is no empirical study that focuses on the impact of indigenous leadership models on instruction. Thus, effective culturally responsive instructional leaders should understand their values and mission to be aware of what shapes them (Khalifa et al., 2016; Sianturi et al., 2023). In the Ethiopian context, we do not have critical self-awareness on implementing CRSL, but we might develop CRSL practices through the right leadership development courses. This is an evident gap, as the existing Ethiopian education policy on diversity includes aspects such as national identity, language, culture, and race, and it also suggests a critical understanding that allows for critical thinking (MoE, 2023), but there is no empirical evidence on how school leaders implement this policy into culturally responsive instructional leadership in Indigenous peoples' communities. The present study aims at a direct investigation of this gap by studying the implementation of CRSL in the Hadiya Zone.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a single case study design with the following parameters: Case: CRSL as an interactive process of school leadership, community, and cultural responsiveness at three administrative levels (Zone, Woreda, and school) in the Hadiya Zone. Because a case study design is appropriate for a study that aims to gain an intensive understanding of a confined system in the case being studied (Coombs, 2022; Yin, 2016). Thus, the study used a multi-level data collection strategy to explicitly map the links between leadership decisions (from the Zone to the school level) and community engagement, and between community feedback and leadership practices, to capture interactions rather than describe individual factors. For instance, interviews were done using questions that elicit relational data, such as "When did a community suggestion influence a school practice? Who said what and what happened next?" These questions are designed to elicit relational data, rather than "What factors affect CRSL?"

Sampling and Participant Selection

This study used purposive sampling techniques to understand the thoughts and experiences of education stakeholders in the Hadiya Zone of Ethiopia. Purposive sampling is the sampling strategy that is most commonly used in qualitative research (Elizabeth, 2016); therefore, it was used to select the targeted groups. Thus, two Woredas within the zone and nine primary schools within the selected Woredas were included based on their rich historical and cultural backgrounds and relatively stable socio-economic conditions. Moreover, based on the 2025 Hadiya Zone Education Department annual report and school performance records, these areas have "strong ties among residents," a "good track record of supporting schools," and "good

cooperation between schools and the local community." These qualifiers were ascertained by (a) woreda level meeting minutes that reflect regular meeting between communities and schools; (b) pre-existing records in zone education offices that show above-average parental participation rates in school improvement plans; and (c) preliminary discussions with zone experts, with a view to confirming the continued existence of community-led initiatives, such as infrastructure support, and student attendance monitoring, amongst other indicators.

Additionally, participants were selected based on: (1) at least ten years in education or community leadership for educational experts; (2) community elders identified as leaders, aged 55+; (3) school governance or liaison roles; and (4) willingness to participate. A total of 49 key informants, twelve educational experts, four supervisors, and nine principals participated in interviews, and four FGDs, with six members in each group, two with community leaders and two with PTSA members, were selected. These specific roles are justified because they collectively represent all relevant levels of administration (Zone, Woreda, and school); each role has distinct responsibilities relevant to CRSL, and they represent various positions within schools (P = principals, S = supervisors, W = Woreda, Z = Zone, CL = community leaders, PTSA = members of the parents' teachers' association) these coding rules were used throughout to ensure consistency and transparency of participant identifiers. The coverage of participants from different levels allows for research questions to be addressed from multiple and complementary perspectives related to leadership, community involvement, and cultural responsiveness. The demographic characteristics of participants, including gender, age range, and experience, were clearly provided in the following table.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant Category		Code	Number	Gender		Age Range	Years of Experience
				M	F		
Zone Educational Experts		Z	4	4	-	35-55	10-25
Woreda Education Experts		W	8	6	2	35-55	10-25
Supervisors		S	4	4	-	40-58	15-30
Principals		P	9	7	2	38-52	12-22
FGDs	Community Leaders	CL	12 (Two groups of 6)	12	-	55-75	20-45 (community leadership)
	Parent-Teacher-Student Association	PTSA	12 (Two groups of 6)	10	2	-	5-10 (school committee)
Total			49	43	6	35-75	

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Data Collection Methods

Two main data collection methods were used, i.e., semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The sources of primary data were these only because the study was based on

first-hand accounts of the participants. All 25 participants were interviewed in face-to-face interactions. The interview format was semi-structured, with questions specifically crafted to elicit interactions, e.g., “What is an example of a situation where your leadership decision has affected community participation in culturally responsive activities or events?” and “How does community feedback impact school leadership's approach to cultural diversity?” Four FGDs were held with community elders and PTSA (six members in each group). FGD questions elicited interactive dynamics, including the prompt "tell me about a time when school leaders and community members have worked together to solve a cultural problem" and "how do disagreements between school leaders and the community get worked out? Each FGD group was comprised of:

First FGD group: Six community elders (as defined by their age and length of time in the community as mentioned in the above table) who are long-term male community members and have traditional decision-making roles within their community. This group was homogeneous with regard to local knowledge and authority, and allowed discussion of historical and cultural aspects of the implementation of CRSL (community-based rehabilitation of school land). The second FGD group also consisted of six community elders (not the same ones as in the first group), primarily former school committee members. The commonality in their experience was the land disputes of the past and the mechanisms used in conflict resolution. Whereas, the members of the third group of FGD were 6 Parent-Teacher Association (PTSA) members, 5 males and 1 female, parents of children currently enrolled in school. The last group was the fourth FGD group consisting of six members of the PTSA, 5 males and 1 female (not included in the third group), the chairperson and treasurer of the PTSA, and members who had immediate involvement in resource mobilization within the school. They both shared financial responsibility and community contributions as their focus.

The principal researcher (the author) conducted all FGDs, having experience in qualitative moderation techniques. There was no external enumerator, so there is uniformity in probing and interpretation over time. Another research assistant had made notes and conducted the audio recording. The duration of each FGD was 75-90 minutes. Sessions were all done in a neutral community hall after work to reduce disruption. In addition to duration, some key questions were taken into account when conducting FGDs, in line with Khalifa et al. (2016):

Group size and homogeneity: Groups were kept relatively small (six members) to facilitate discussion of the topic and prevent power imbalances. The moderator's role was to facilitate, not to take charge; the researcher used open-ended prompts and encouraged participants to build on peers' responses.

Saturation: FGDs continued until thematic saturation was achieved, meaning no new ideas emerged regarding agreement/disagreement and shared experiences with CRSL. All FGDs were audio-recorded, verbatim transcribed, and anonymized. Nonverbal cues were recorded in the field notes.

Data Transformation and Analysis

We had 25 interview transcripts and 4 FGD transcripts. All audio recordings of interviews and FGDs were transcribed. We reduced the corpus of data to a manageable data set following a systematic process. Two researchers initially read the full set of transcripts separately for an overview. We then reduced the data by identifying all segments of text about the interview and FGD questions. These comprised the coding data set. Coding was done using ATLAS.ti7 in three stages: open, axial, and selective coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During open coding, lines were tagged as meaningful segments of text. For instance, “they don't know the culture” and “they just read the book” were labelled as “lack of cultural awareness.” Following independent coding, the two researchers initially agreed on 87% of the codes. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved. To demonstrate the rigorous process of data transformation into themes, the following sample table (Table 2) is presented.

Table 2: Coding Table (from Raw Quote to Theme)

Example of Raw Quote	**Open Code**	**Axial Code (Category)**	**Selective Code (Theme)**
“Our principals only listen to the rules from the ministry manual. They don't listen to what we do in our village.” (CL1)	Failure in the integration of local knowledge	Structural Barrier (Policy & Curriculum Rigidity)	Theme 1: Poor Implementation of CRSL
“I didn't learn about the Seera system in my leadership. Just from Western books about management” (P5)	Training deficiency	Mindset Barrier (Perception of Indigenous knowledge as inferior)	Theme 1: Poor Implementation of CRSL
“After the school called the elders to resolve the fight, the students improved their behaviour. They listened to the elders” (P7)	Elders as conflict resolvers	Positive role of elders	Theme 3: The Role of Community Elders

Source: Researchers' Compilation, 2025.

This table illustrates examples of raw quotes that were condensed into code, categories, and finally, the three major themes. The multi-step coding process that was used meant that the analysis did not simply identify individual factors, but relational patterns between leadership, community, and culture. The segments extracted were brought together in one dataset and coded independently, following the thematic analysis steps proposed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding tree shown in Figure 1 below served as the framework for our investigation. Axial coding was then used to organize the codes into broader categories (e.g., "policy gaps," "training deficiencies"). Then these codes were integrated into the three major themes in the results using selective coding.

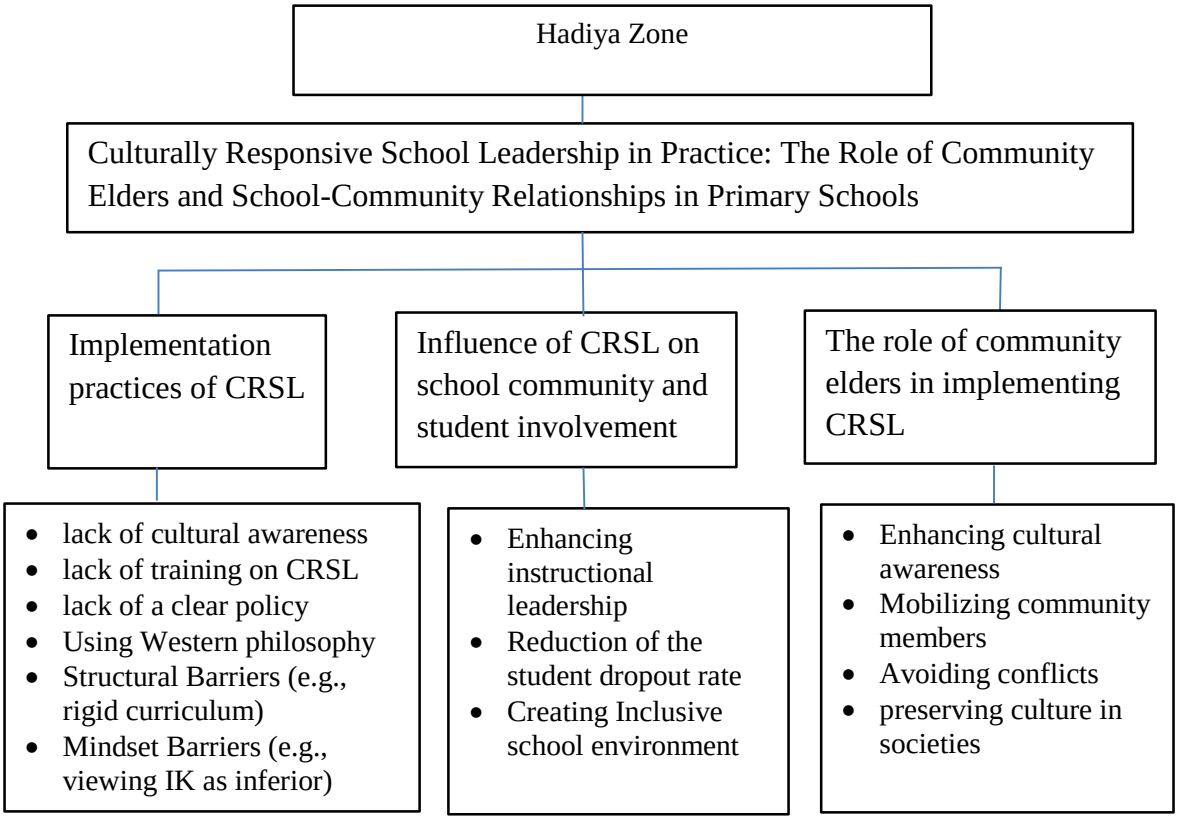

Figure 1: Coding Tree

Source: Researchers' Compilation, 2025

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Four criteria were used to assess trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Credibility was strengthened through a long-term period of work (during his three months in the field, the first author spoke with participants in two woredas and across the entire zone), data source triangulation (interviews and FGDs), and member checking (participants reviewed their interview summaries to ensure accuracy). Transferability was also addressed through thick description, which provided extensive details on the context, participants, and process so that readers could evaluate the extent to which the findings could be applied in other contexts. The detailed explanations of the Hadiya social structure, school leadership hierarchy, and the role of elders in community administration allowed readers to determine whether the results could be implemented under comparable conditions. A thorough audit trail containing raw data, analytical notes, and coding techniques increased the study's dependability. Confirmability was achieved through reflexivity, in which the researchers documented their assumptions and biases during the research process and ensured that their findings were grounded in the data rather than in what they assumed. A reflexive statement is provided in the limitations section.

To further mitigate confirmability and positionality, we deliberately bracketed our preconceptions about school leadership through reflexive journaling. During interviews with elders, we grounded our questions explicitly in their lived experiences. We employed local research assistants prominent in the *Seera* system. To preserve the authenticity of Indigenous voices, we used back-translation for a selection of quotes. Furthermore, we regularly discussed emerging interpretations with a local advisory group of elders to ensure cultural accuracy. Through these practices, we ensured that findings were rooted in the data rather than in our prior assumptions.

Thematic Saturation

Thematic saturation was achieved by an iterative process of concurrent data collection and analysis. Themes that arose from each interview and focus group discussion (FGD) were discussed, and the codebook was updated. Coding was in progress throughout the data collection, and code categories were discussed at a weekly meeting to check for any new codes or categories that emerged. In terms of the operation, saturation was reached when information stopped generating new codes or categories considered to be relevant to the research question, and further data was mainly used for elaboration or refinement of categories.

Upon conducting 25 key informant interviews and four FGDs (six members in each group), for a total of 49. These were the concluding interviews and discussions, which confirmed and expanded on themes already noted, but did not provide any new information. Therefore, the saturation of the themes was decided. This meant that the thematic saturation was achieved (Guest et al., 2006). Thus, data saturation was measured after every five interviews were done to determine the sample size. After the 10th, 15th, 20th, and 25th interviews, preliminary coding was performed. A total of 20 interviews were conducted, which yielded no new themes or codes, and the remaining 5 interviews confirmed patterns that have occurred, suggesting a saturation of 25 interviews. For FGDs, saturation occurred after the 3rd group, and the 4th group did not offer any further insights. This process was based on the guidance of Rahimi & Khatooni (2024) about saturation in qualitative research.

Analyst triangulation was used to add to the credibility of the saturation claim. The first five interviews and two FGDs were double-coded by two independent researchers, who reviewed each other's codebooks and discussed discrepancies to reach consensus. The first author then proceeded to code the data, again with periodic debriefing sessions with a second researcher who coded a sample of coded transcripts to check for inter-coder reliability. These practices may support saturation, but we recognize the limitations; saturation is context-specific and does not mean the full extent of the saturation, but rather that the information in the context is enough to meet the research goals. More data may still uncover specific differences, such as by subgroups of participants. The reported threshold should thus be seen as an operational threshold for this study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of Wachemo University (Ref. Wcu-IRB/0074/25, Date 06/11/2025). All research procedures complied with the guidelines and regulations of the ethics committee and the Ethiopian National Research Ethics Guideline (5th edition, 2014). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and data integrity was preserved without fabrication, falsification, or manipulation. Data were stored on password-protected devices accessible exclusively to the research team.

Results and Discussion

This study, specifically focused on qualitative data analysis, revealed three main themes through discussions from participants: (a) implementation practices of CRSL in primary schools; (b) influence of CRSL on school leadership and student outcomes; (c) the role of community elders in implementing CRSL in school management. The interview data, supported by quotations from participants' answers regarding these themes, are presented below.

Theme 1: *Implementation Practices of CRSL by Primary School Leaders in Hadiya Zone*

Regarding this theme, participants were asked to provide information on the practice and implementation of CRSL, the challenges, and strategies in primary schools. The results showed that leaders were not systematically applying CRSL. One of the most notable obstacles was the systemic cultural misconception of school leaders, which was not a personal issue but a structural one tied to principal training. For instance, one of the participants from the Woreda Education Office W1 noted that "There is a widespread lack of awareness among school leaders regarding the implementation of CRSL, which makes schools less inclusive and does not create a suitable teaching-learning environment." This indicates an inherent lack of connection between what is taught in training schools, grounded in centralized, non-contextualized Western models, and the culturally rich realities of the communities they are meant to serve. Similarly, a focus group discussion with community leaders CL2 noted that, "We have discussed that most of the school leadership practices in Ethiopian primary schools follow Western philosophy, which has limited the opportunities to implement CRSL." This criticism of Western philosophy points to an imagined colonial past in the education system, whereby leaders are viewed as perpetuators of a foreign paradigm instead of agents of local cultural knowledge.

Further analysis enabled the classification of barriers to CRSL implementation into two categories: Structural Barriers and Mindset Barriers. Structural Barriers are deeply embedded within the educational system. For example, educational expert W8 observed, "One of the key problems is that there is no clear policy on how to apply culturally responsive leadership engagement within the community. The national curriculum is strict and does not allow us to

localize the content to our local Seera traditions." This observation suggests that, despite individual leaders' intentions to integrate community culture, the absence of a supportive policy framework and clear guidelines hinders these efforts. Similarly, participant P5 stated, "One of the biggest challenges is insufficient professional development of school administrators and teachers in the area of culturally responsive instructional leadership."

Barriers in mindset are linked to deeply entrenched mindsets and attitudes. As one principal (P2) observed, "To be frank, the way of knowing of the elders is regarded by many of us as being backward and not as real education. We are forced to appreciate what the modern or the outside world brings to us." This statement illustrates the persistence of a colonized perspective that positions Indigenous knowledge as inferior to Western, formalized knowledge. Such attitudes underscore the absence of effective capacity-building mechanisms to translate awareness into practical improvements.

Irrespective of these systemic problems, participants also indicated improvement strategies. For example, one of the participants from the supervisor, S1, noted that "To improve the implementation of CRSL, school leaders must build awareness on CRSL practices and the traditions of the community to handle diversity and create an inclusive school environment for the teaching-learning process." This is not a training demand but are education need of the school leaders to be placed as learners in the community as opposed to the few experts. Another participant, P8, noted that "School leaders must be self-aware about the values, beliefs, and biases of CRSL, because it helps to build a leadership style that responds to cultural differences to make CRSL effective." Such a focus on self-awareness indicates the theory of critical consciousness (Gay & Kirkland, 2010), which argues that in order to establish CRSL, leaders should initially understand their cultural standpoint.

Moreover, some strategies were directed towards the decolonization of the curriculum and pedagogy. One of the participants, S2, noted that "To enhance the practical implementation of CRSL, school administrators should provide priorities for the value of culturally responsive teaching methodology in the classroom." This takes the state of general awareness to an actual instruction practice. In the same way, focus group discussion by Parent-teacher-students (PTSA1) also noted that "We perceive that engaging elders and parents in the school decision-making process helps to confirm the Indigenous cultural value in the classroom." These findings showed that such participation in such a type of community not only demonstrates clearly that the schools are serious, in terms of reinforcing community engagement, a sense of identity among the students, and not only safeguarding the culture and language of the indigenous students, but also fosters professional competence in the teachers. Thus, this quote discloses an important truth: community involvement helps not only a unilateral process of resource mobilization but also a mutual one to improve teacher professionalism by sharing their knowledge of local culture.

Themes 2: *Influence of CRSL on School Leadership and Students' Engagement*

In this theme, the questionnaires requested the participants to state their opinion on the impact of CRSL implementation on school leadership and student engagement. The described influences are not quantifiable results, but rather participant impressions of the possible benefits of CRSL due to its non-systematic implementation. The analysis indicated that the perceived effects were not only additive (adding new programs) but also transformative and changed the very nature of the relationships in the school ecosystem. For instance, another participant (Z4) noted that "Implementing CRSL in schools helps school leaders make sure that the classroom instruction is brought about in a way that is sensitive to the cultures of the students and that the level of academic achievement by the students is enhanced." This view has a direct relationship to the main purpose of schooling, academic success, and cultural relevance is not a distraction to academic success, but a means to improve it. Similarly, Z1 noted that "The successful application of CRSL in the schools contributes to the reduction of the student dropout rate, the discipline offences as well as the improvement in the teacher-student relationships." In this case, the effect is also seen through the lens of social and behavioural results, which makes CRSL a source of restorative justice and school safety, instead of a top-down policy.

Another important issue raised by participants was that implementing CRSL will foster strong relationships between schools and communities. For example, one of the supervisors, S3, noted that "Schools have people and groups who represent various cultures, ethnicity, tribes, religions, and traditions, and hence applying CRSL assists in ensuring that a school can provide an appropriate environment to a diversity of people." With such a statement, the purpose of CRSL helps to shift towards not only accepting diversity but also actively establishing an appropriate atmosphere in which diversity may thrive. Similarly, focus group discussions by community leaders (CL1) elaborated, "The adoption of CRSL in schools promotes the solidarity and respectability of diversified groups in case the values adopted are transferred to the school setting." This is an important point: solidarity is not accomplished through the repression of differences, but through the introduction of differences into the open and the justification of differences.

The other significant influence was the student belonging and mobilization of resources. A Principal (P1) noted that "CRSL implementation assists in offering lessons and resources that accommodate the cultures of the students towards gaining a feeling of belonging." This shows the psychological effect of CRSL, which connects it to the identity of students and their emotional state. As one of the school principals (P7) noted, "CRSL practices are connected with other religions and cultures; therefore, application of these practices assists in collecting community resources." This practical argument demonstrates how cultural fit may open up community goodwill and physical assistance, which will be especially valuable in resource-limited situations.

To sum up, CRSL is a process that schools use to deal with instructional leadership, conflict management, stakeholder involvement, disciplinary measures, and community-school fit. For instance, when asked about the benefits of the training (e.g., building culturally responsive

leadership helps to promote traditional values like respect and togetherness). This demonstrates that CRSL implements cultural congruence as a strategic asset for resolving institutional and community norms. The other interviewee (P2) provided a realistic example of how CRSL operates. In resolving transparency between administrators and teachers, P2 stated: “When administrators and teachers disagreed on how to handle a student behavior issue rooted in cultural differences, the seera system gives us a shared framework to resolve the disagreement through discussion.” This example demonstrates how CRSL facilitates professional conflict resolution through culturally informed communication.

Similarly, the focus groups with community leaders provided a more thorough understanding of participatory governance. One of the FGD from the community leaders, CL2 added, “We want to underscore that community leaders' participation is not a distant concept. Moreover, the traditional governance system works as a tool for participatory governance by redistributing power and resolving internal conflicts through shared cultural values.” This quotation focuses on the communal and organizational aspects of community involvement. Another participant from the zone education department, Z1, said, "In terms of discipline, our experience shows that the local governance system helps maintain discipline by aligning consequences with culturally accepted norms rather than relying solely on punitive measures."

Another participant, P3, noted that "Institutionalizing indigenous practices in schools helps to address the challenges of modern educational issues. The repetition of better academic growth, student involvement, and community participation, in turn, is not understood as a collection of separate positive effects but as an interactive structure, in which cultural responsiveness triggers mutually exclusive accountability and confidence discriminated by community-school reciprocity over time. The findings within the scope of this theme are, therefore, extended to postulate that the implementation of CRSL, when critically interpreted, re-aligns school power and legitimizes the non-dominant epistemological formulations, and contributes to reimagining the school-community beyond the satisfaction of the participants to a substantive one.

Theme 3: *The Role of Community Elders in Implementing CRSL at School Management*

Participants were asked about the influence of community elders and traditional leaders in implementing culturally responsive practices. The results showed that the elders are not only advisors but also critical co-stewards to the school's cultural mission. For example, the focus group discussion by Community leaders (CL1) wrote, “We recognizing Engaging local elders as members of the school committee can significantly enhance the cultural awareness of the school communities, which is used to implement CRSL.” This implies that the elders are a living link between the school and the cultural memory of the community, whose role cannot be achieved through any kind of formal training. Along with this, focus group discussions by parent-teacher-student associations (PTSA1) noted that “Community elders are greatly respected and heard by societies; thus, involving community elders in school management helps to mobilize community members to support the schools’ decisions.” This shows that the social capital of elders helps to support the school; thus, elders have a role as strong allies in any school initiative.

The greatest example of the role of elders was also evident in the aspect of conflict resolution. One of the Principals (P7) noted that "There had been a quarrel between one school and the community members about the tribalism between the disciplinary cases of the students in the school; the school management was in a position to calm down the situation because they communicated with the community leaders." This was made possible due to the efforts made through the application of the knowledge of the local elders. This story proves that seniors are not only figurative beings but are capable of acting as peace makers and thus can negotiate issues that the school administration cannot solve alone because they are completely ingrained in their cultural legitimacy. Another participant from the Woreda Education Office (W8) pointed out that "The societies have a high regard for the elders; therefore, the involvement of the community leaders in the school administration is useful in avoiding student discipline and other related conflicts like raping the female students, and other forms of harassment in the school atmosphere." This quote goes further to make them responsible for prevention, indicating that by simply being there and participating in the process, harmful behaviour can be deterred by the elders.

The findings also associated the elders with broader citizen and cultural preservation desired objectives. For instance, focus group discussion by community leaders (CL1) stated that "Involving local communities in school activities is essential for producing citizens with social skills and a sense of greater responsibility." This puts engagement of the community as a pedagogical approach to citizenship education, which is an important objective of any national education system. The other participant, P3, noted that "Community elders have a great role in preserving culture in societies; thus, they are highly respected within the communities and therefore play a significant role in bringing communities together in school work." This shows that elders in society have a significant role in maintaining culture in society, and they are therefore respected very much in society and consequently are very important in uniting communities in school work. Therefore, the role of elders is complex: it is a cultural preserver, mobilizer of the community, a conflict resolver, and co-educator. The findings imply that their systematized implementation in the school administration is not only positive but also a key to a culturally responsive approach and creates a stable environment at school.

Additionally, the participants in the study unanimously emphasized the role of community elders in promoting CRSL, which promotes a sense of belongingness, conflict resolution, and safety. Other people also observed that the logic of decolonizing, as implied by elder-mediated peacebuilding, would imply a challenge to the top-down, state-centric disciplinary models. For instance, one of the participants from supervisor S2 noted that "Traditional Hadiya leadership works on the principles of communal dialogue and restorative justice that are directly opposite to the punitive actions that are usually taken by the external school authorities." This was further evidenced by another participant (P5), who noted that "In a borderland example, when interethnic tensions spilled over into the school, it was the elders, not the principal or the police, who gathered both sides and de-escalated the situation through usual protocols." This showed that elders have a role in solving conflicts. Similarly, participant (P6) noted that "The tribal

conflict narrative often takes center stage in the official discourse; thus, elders help to not only invoke cultural values but also negotiate between interethnic tensions and student-disciplinary crises, which formal school architectures can never resolve." This indicates that elders are respectfully considered to solve such kind of conflicts within the society."

Participant (P7) also notes, "The elders do not replace the formal rules; they translate and mediate the rules, which helps to create a hybrid space where indigenous justice and institutional authority can co-exist." This indicates a bipolar model of governance whereby the elders in the community act as the cultural mediators and informal justice specialists who also work to guard against gender-based violence, as one woreda education office participant (W8) clearly stated that, "When girls are harassed or threatened at school, we go to the elders first, because they command the respect that no elected law enforcement officer or principal can match." The results showed that the semantic reporting proposes that the structural integration of indigenous leadership principles is not an act of tokenism but a real system of co-governance that determines the redefinition of authority, belonging, and safety as being culturally situated, relational achievements.

As illustrated in Figure 2, a lack of awareness of CRSL among school leaders sets off a chain reaction of negative consequences. According to the participants' observations, a leader's lack of cultural awareness resulted in a non-inclusive curriculum and rejection of Indigenous government institutions. This mistrust and alienation among communities lead to institutional failures, in which parents and elders believe their cultural responsibilities are being ignored and withdraw their support. As a result, pupils feel increasingly alienated and uninspired, which leads to serious disciplinary concerns and, ultimately, an exceptionally high dropout rate. This model depicts how CRSL inadequacies can trickle down to curriculum, community, and the student psyche, resulting in poor school performance.

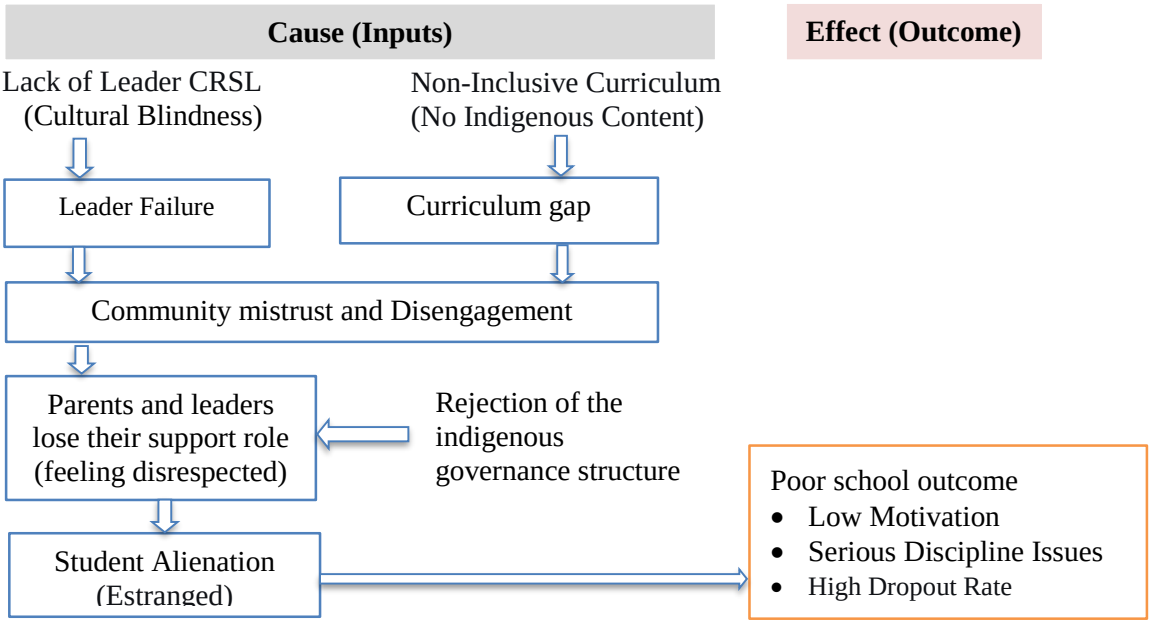

Figure 2: Cultural Disconnection Model (based on the data of the participants)
Source: Authors' Compilation, 2025

Discussions

To understand how culturally responsive school leadership is implemented in Hadiya Zone and assess its impact on school leadership and student engagement, the study focused on the roles of community elders in implementing culturally responsive school leadership. The study's results showed three key findings. First, the implementation of CRSL was hampered by systemic obstacles such as a lack of awareness, unclear policy, and insufficient professional development. Second, participants' perceptions of school leadership and student participation were found to be positively impacted by the implementation of CRSL frameworks in schools. Third, the result showed that community elders have a bigger role in implementing CRSL through community participation and indigenous leadership in education. This result highlights the fact that, in this single case, the use of CRSL is not the technical matter of introducing new practices, but a multi-tiered socio-cultural problem that needs a paradigm shift in the school leadership in accordance with the cultural ethos of the community.

In reference to the first theme, school administrators' limited knowledge about the application of culturally responsive school leadership indicates a low level of awareness. The most important implication is that strategies for overcoming the difficulties of implementing CRSL in primary schools through culturally inclusive collaboration should be developed. Participants suggested various strategies to address these challenges. One of the strategies suggested by participants is developing critical self-awareness of school leaders on the practices of CRSL and traditions of the society. This finding is aligned with the study findings of Gay & Kirkland (2010), who stated that critical consciousness is vital for culturally responsive education, requiring educators to examine their identities and knowledge bases. However, the findings of this study provide a contextual dimension: in the Hadiya setting, this self-awareness should not be limited to race and culture but also comprises an assessment of the validity and role of more traditional forms of governmental organization, such as the elders council, which are usually absent in a more mainstream leadership training. Such programs are essential to address topics of race, culture, language, national identity, and additional areas of diversity; therefore, the implementation of CRSL in primary schools might foster a deeper understanding to cultivate critical consciousness in school leaders.

Another essential strategy suggested by participants is that school administrators should provide priorities for the value of culturally responsive teaching methodology in the classroom. This finding is aligned with the research findings of Papp & Cottrell (2021), who indicated that culturally responsive teaching practices are increasingly necessary due to the growing diversity within classrooms in these and similar contexts. Moreover, the study findings are consistent with the research findings of Sianturi et al. (2023), which indicated that when teachers embraced their culture in teaching, it increased their professional skills, parents' partnership, and self-efficacy, which in turn enhanced children's learning outcomes and strengthened children's indigenous identity. This is furthered in the current study, which illustrates that the teachers must be explicitly supported and allowed by the leaders in the school to incorporate their culture, as they are currently working on a system that undermines such local knowledge.

Another essential strategy suggested by participants to overcome the challenges of implementing CRSL is inviting elders and parents in the school decision-making process, which helps to help confirm the Indigenous cultural values in the classroom. This finding is aligned with the research findings of (Chima Abimbola Eden et al., 2024), which showed that fostering partnerships with community elders and engaging families from diverse backgrounds can enrich the learning environment and strengthen cultural connections. Moreover, the finding is aligned with the research findings of Williams (2020), who indicated that making networks of Indigenous leaders implies an opportunity for systemic change, as allies come together in a global exchange of ideas. The findings are also further evidenced by Ethiopia's Education Sector Development Plans (MoE, 2021) and the current education and training policies (MoE, 2023), and they support Battiste's (2013) and Smith's (2012) suggestion that incorporating Indigenous knowledge with current education enhances students' learning outcomes. Thus, community elders have a role in sharing such kind of indigenous knowledge. Therefore, engaging such kind of community members helps schools not only explicitly show their seriousness about strengthening community participation and students' identity and preserving Indigenous students' culture and language, but also develop teachers' professional skills.

Moreover, other strategies suggested by participants to overcome the challenges with regard to implementing CRSL are creating an inclusive learning environment. This finding is consistent with the findings of Brown et al. (2022), indicating that implementing CRSL in schools increases diversity issues, which requires school leaders to put in place mechanisms to ensure equity of participation for migrant background students. This is also further evidenced by other research findings, which revealed that creating a culturally relevant school environment helps to create a supportive atmosphere by harnessing the capabilities offered by diverse populations and enhancing community ties within educational institutions (Abebaw, 2022). These findings are also supported by the research findings by Battiste (2013), who stated that the use of "decolonizing education" strategies allows CRSL to become a key practice for welcoming more diversity into schools. However, it remains difficult to practice culturally responsive school leadership in primary schools of the studied context in formal learning because school leaders may not be aware of how to implement it, and many people do not understand how they work. Therefore, supporting the workforce and providing targeted instruction is necessary for getting past these barriers.

Concerning the second theme, the findings of the study revealed that implementing CRSL in schools has a positive impact on school management and student engagement as perceived by participants. These findings are consistent with the research findings by Khalifa et al. (2016), Madhlangobe & Gordon (2012), and Savvopoulos et al. (2024), who found that implementing CRSL in schools, strengthening the relationship between parents, local agencies, and teachers, helps to make the school and social environment much more familiar and friendly to students. Furthermore, it has been found that good school-community relations help improve educational results across different schools (Shibuya, 2020). Moreover, the result of the study is directly related to the findings of Kennedy et al. (2023), indicated that the social processes both facilitate

and emphasize decolonization in academia help to enhance community participation in schools. This is further evidenced by social capital theory, which states that a group's behavior is improved when people trust their traditional leaders (Goist & Kern, 2018). The contribution of the current study is that, in the situation, the trust in the traditional leaders cannot be treated as a variable, but rather it is a tangible asset with which the schools can use to create their own social capital in the community. Thus, we can see that the implementation of CRSL within the schools helps to bring schools and communities together and assists in settling problems.

Another finding of the study under this theme revealed that implementing CRSL frameworks in schools has a positive impact on student motivation and academic outcomes. This finding is aligned with culturally responsive pedagogy theories found by Ladson-Billings (1995), which showed that instruction based on students' cultural identities enhances behaviour and participation. Moreover, the findings of the study are aligned with the research findings of Soleh et al. (2023), indicating that culturally responsive school leadership practices are positively influenced by ensuring a relevant school culture among students and staff, which increases students' participation and motivation. The study findings are also consistent with the research findings of McCarty (2021), having students learn within their cultural setting is highly valued, and how cultural and linguistic revival helps schools to preserve traditional Indigenous languages and observe cultural traditions.

Moreover, the findings of this study are consistent with the research findings by Brown et al. (2022), who found that culturally responsive school leadership impacts students' academic and psycho-social well-being from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition, the study findings aligned with the research findings of Sianturi et al. (2023) showed that when school leaders embrace Western philosophies with the culture of local community partnerships, it improves their professional skills, parents' agency, and self-efficacy, which in turn, enhances children's learning outcomes and strengthens children's Indigenous identity. One of the lessons of the current research is the perception of the participants that this integration was not a fusing of equals, but a needed redress to an excessive dependence on Western models. It was not to make a hybrid system, as the participants were keen on restoring the school to its indigenous cultural environment. These points highlight the importance of aligning school practices with local cultural norms to create a meaningful and relevant learning experience.

With regard to the third theme, the findings of the study revealed that community elders have a bigger role in community participation and indigenous leadership in education. These findings confirm the findings of Yang & Wayne (2012), who note that using Indigenous approaches helps solve unique community issues without relying solely on models from the West, which may enhance the knowledge and cultures of a region. This shows that it was commonly emphasized that Indigenous systems, based on traditional values, might solve the challenges in modern education through encouraging people by respecting, tolerance, and teamwork, which helps to minimize the implementation challenges of CRSL. Moreover, the findings of the study demonstrate the practical impact of Indigenous leadership in resolving conflicts and maintaining harmony within schools and communities, which is directly related to the findings of Wasihun

(2022), who emphasized that indigenous leaders should create customary norms and principles for sustainable management, and indigenous knowledge should be valued and acknowledged. Moreover, this finding also agrees with Fullan's (2007) viewpoint that stakeholder involvement means there should be organized opportunities for collaboration. What becomes apparent in this case study is that the already existing form of the organized opportunities to cooperate is the elder council and other conventional forms. The difficulty is not to develop new structures but to incorporate the school within such existing structures that are highly functioning structures of community governance.

Furthermore, the findings of the study are further evidenced by other research findings stated that using Indigenous leadership values can enhance cultural ties, increase membership in the community, and tackle inequities in schools (Ciocco et al., 2023; Stephensen & Cunningham, 2023). For these motives to become a reality, we must rely on leadership ideas that include both Indigenous and current approaches to stressing the main points of Indigenous governance (Coates et al., 2024). Existing literature, such as Harfield et al. (2021) and White (2010), emphasizes the adaptability of Indigenous leadership across various contexts, highlighting the necessity for comprehensive models that support diverse Indigenous communities, which help to implement CRSL. Moreover, the findings of this study are aligned with the research findings of Miressa & Shemelis (2022), indicating that partnering with communities directly improves student performance. In addition, other authors, for example, Teshager & Aweke (2020), argue that Indigenous thoughts, such as Ubuntu, highlight our common humanity, can be used to enhance resolving conflicts and reinforce the importance of community involvement. This is further evidenced by the study findings by Mohammed et al. (2017) indicated that to preserve cultural backgrounds, which are what the mediation services provided by the local elders help the school community develop lasting relationships and resolve disputes.

The concepts shown from the discussion are that Indigenous leaders have a great role in enhancing the implementation of CRSL in schools. Thus, if local prominent elders are members of the school committee, then they would have a role in increasing cultural awareness for school communities, making the learning environment more comfortable and appealing, resolving conflicts, encouraging peacebuilding, and preventing students from engaging in various conflicts. Therefore, involving Indigenous leaders in primary school management is not only a way to support culturally responsive school leadership of the research findings, but also shows that illustrating how implementing culturally responsive school leadership frameworks in schools helps stop bullying and ensures an inclusive teaching-learning environment.

Conclusion and Implications

This study offers a contextual examination of the Hadiya Zone to investigate primary school leaders' limited understanding of how to implement CRSL. The results demonstrate that in this case, the application of CRSL is closely connected with the possibility of having long-term outcomes on improving community engagement, student motivation, and educational results as perceived by stakeholders. Theoretically, the study can be added to the CRSL model, as it shows

how it is demonstrated in a non-Western and highly traditional situation. It expands the model by showing that the role of community in CRSL is not a unitary entity but is organized by legitimate systems of pre-existing governance (e.g., elders). The study proposes expanding Khalifa et al.'s framework to add a "community governance integration" dimension. This acknowledges that CRSL should collaborate with formalized indigenous structures, such as elder councils, as co-stewards of cultural responsiveness, rather than treating the community as a single, undifferentiated resource. According to the research, CRSL needs to transcend the community as an asset and begin to acknowledge and consider such prevailing power structures and incorporate them into its approach to be truly responsive. This conforms to and empirically supports postcolonial and decolonizing conceptions of education, demonstrating that the path to culturally responsive schooling can be paved with a deliberate recentring of Indigenous leadership and knowledge systems.

For policymakers, we now provide four specific actionable recommendations; the findings call for changes to national school leadership training programs. Such programs should include mandatory modules on (1) the history and principles of local Indigenous governance systems, such as Seera, (2) strategies to support and foster critical self-awareness of colonial mindsets, and (3) practical methods for co-creating culturally responsive curricula with community elders. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education should pilot a policy that formally establishes “Elder Advisory Councils” in each school and assigns them a defined role in conflict resolution, curriculum advice, and cultural event planning, but does not supersede the legal authority of the principal or the PTSA.

In the case of school leaders, the implication will be that they move beyond the symbolic gesture. Principals are recommended to do a cultural audit of their school, which comprises discovering underutilized community traditions (e.g., communication styles, dispute resolution procedures). They should then enter into a formal partnership agreement with the council of elders, outlining specific roles and responsibilities as well as meeting times. The principal's duty must be reinvented as a co-learner and cultural mediator who actively seeks elder wisdom and presents oneself as a student of community values.

Limitations and Future Research

The present research has certain limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, because it is a single case study, its findings cannot be statistically generalized to all primary schools in Ethiopia. However, the richness and depth of description can be generalized analytically, enabling readers to determine how well the research can be applied to their specific situation. Second, the research relied primarily on community elders and educational professionals; the perspectives of teachers and students were not treated as primary data sources, which limits our understanding of experiences at the classroom level. Third, the research was conducted in only two woredas; ethnic and leadership relations might differ in other regions of the country.

Future research can deal with these limitations. For instance, future studies would be aimed at comparing the implementation of CRSL in various zones or regions. Students and teachers need

to be given priority in order to gain an insight into how CRSL practices are being realized at the classroom level. To determine the long-term impacts of involving the elders in the school governance on student achievement and community cohesion, longitudinal research is required. Lastly, action research projects involving school leaders and elders in the co-design and implementation of CRSL strategies would be most informative to provide data on the process of transformative change.

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The data available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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