

## Abstract

### AN EXAMINATION OF PRIVATE K-12 SCHOOL BOARDS AROUND ISSUES OF CURRICULUM, PEDAGOGY, AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES

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This document-based, mixed methods research study draws from the theoretical lens of systems theory. Six local private K–12 school boards associated with a wider religiously affiliated school system should function coherently in design and practice. In most cases, they do, but incoherence exists in the area of board training. This study’s findings may be important leverage points that indicate where improvements can be made within this otherwise well-designed system of schools. This research looked at data from board documents, semi-structured interviews, and survey questionnaires. The study sheds light on the functions of school boards within select local private K–12 school systems on North America’s East Coast, where there is sparse research about the way these uniquely constituted boards function within their local school systems, specifically around issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices.

*Keywords:* systems theory, systems thinking, curriculum and pedagogy, culturally responsive practices, school boards, private K–12 schools, coherence, incoherence, leverage points.

## 1 | Introduction

Twenty-first-century schools must face unprecedented issues. How schools rise to challenges, such as school shootings, adoption of culturally responsive practices, best practices in curriculum and pedagogy, or innovative shifts as a result of a global pandemic, depends on how well these school systems can adapt at all levels of the school system to function as a coherent whole. When school systems fail to deal with the multiple and sometimes competing initiatives and issues effectively, incoherence within these systems results (Hatch, 2001; Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

When looking at school systems through the lens of systems theory, systems thinkers consider how the dynamic relationships within these education systems affect the entire system. Relationships within systems are described as either coherent or incoherent (Knecht, 2019). It is this coherence or incoherence that ultimately determines whether these school systems can facilitate optimum learning for its students. School systems must work together as a dynamic whole to remain relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond, and specifically in the delivery of curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices, as this study examined. More directly, this study sought to understand how school boards—integral parts of the school system—function around these specific issues to reveal potential leverage points within school systems that can strengthen the overall effectiveness of the school system.

Meadows (1999) stated, “Folks who do systems analysis have a great belief in “leverage points.” These are places within a complex system (a corporation, an economy, a living body, a city, an ecosystem: where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything” (p. 1). Ehrlichman (2018) stated, “Leverage points also represent opportunities where participants can have greater impact by working together than they can by working alone” (para. 3).

This priority on the entire system is the way forward for twenty-first-century school systems. Moreover, shifting to systems-focused research in education is a promising way to look at school systems in a way that can reframe conventional thinking. This reframing of conventional thinking, using the language of systems theory, is extremely possible within school systems. In fact, “modern systems theory, bound up with computers and equations, hides the fact that it traffics in truths known at some level by everyone. It is often possible, therefore, to make a direct translation from systems jargon to traditional wisdom” (Meadows, 1999, p. 3).

Effective governance is integral to running school systems properly (Resnick, 1999). Examining how boards govern is a critical area for ongoing research, and the goal is to establish effective governance within school systems. The overall function of school systems must effectively support students. McGuinn and Manna (2013) contended, “In no policy area is governance in the United States more complex than in elementary and secondary education, where multiple actors and institutions have some formal say over what happens in the nation’s classrooms” (p.1). They noted that even as concerns about the nation’s students have grown, the idea that governing bodies have not been assessed closely is concerning.

McGuinn and Mann (2013) also suggested that:

Although governance reforms alone cannot help all the nation’s young people reach higher levels and erase achievement gaps between advantaged students (typically White and from higher-income families) and their disadvantaged peers (frequently racial, ethnic, or linguistic minorities and those from low-income families), it is hard to imagine much dramatic improvement occurring without some fundamental rethinking of how the nation governs its schools. (p. 3)

Appropriate curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices encapsulate approaches to learning that are supported by research and espouse that all students, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, religious persuasion, gender, disabilities, or sexual orientation, can learn and achieve favorable outcomes. In cases where school boards are not knowledgeable on some issues, students will likely be underserved, which places students at a disadvantage academically. This study focused on how school boards functioned around these specific issues but more narrowly, on school boards within private K-12 school systems. Therefore, the research question that guided this study was: How do private K–12 school boards

function within their larger school systems to ensure that there is coherence/flow specifically in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy, and incorporating culturally responsive practices?

## 2 | Private K-12 School Boards

There are varying forms of private schools that may also include other categories of privately run independent and religiously affiliated schools. These private schools follow the several iterations of academic programs for curricular studies purported by public school systems and have formally adopted boards of governors to ensure the proper running of these school systems.

As of 2017, there were 5.7 million students in private schools in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, [NCES], 2021), and according to the NCES, private school enrollment decreased by 11% between 1999 and 2017, suggesting the need for a closer look at private K–12 school systems.

The findings of this study contribute to the whole systems theory body of research from the perspective of private K–12 school systems.

**School Boards and Their Historical Relationship to Culturally Responsive Practices.** A look at school boards’ activities as they relate to issues of culturally responsive practices is an inextricable component to any research regarding curriculum and pedagogy. The history of education within the United States education system has a long history of inequities grounded in racial and cultural disparities (Anderson, 1988; Butchart, 2010) .

In the 1954 landmark case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, the supreme court ruled in favor of desegregating public schools. Chief Justice Earl Warren’s statement that “separate but equal educational facilities for racial minorities are inherently unequal, violating the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment” captures important elements of cultural responsiveness during that era of civil rights unrest. While the court held that the “separate but equal” decision in the *Plessey v. Ferguson* (1896) case was inherently unequal, Chief Justice Warren’s decision in favor of desegregation has been historically understood to be a decision based on social science rather than court precedent (Mody, 2002). The *Plessey v. Ferguson* U.S. Supreme Court ruling upheld the decision that racial segregation was not in violation of the Constitution as long as the quality of the facilities of each race was equal.

School boards must become aware of current social issues in every decade as they enact policies and adapt to the cultural shifts of the day. Today, there is an ongoing debate about the teaching of the 1619 curriculum project. Other current event issues also include the critical race theory, discrimination along the lines of gender and sexual orientation, ability and disability levels, and other issues related to socioeconomics that pertain to culturally responsive practices (Bell, 1987, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harris, 1993; Lynn, et al., 2013). These issues are important to this study, which focused on how boards fit into the school system and, to this point, how boards ensure proper responses to issues such as these within the schools they govern. Even while some federal laws protect private, religious-based institutions from the mandatory inclusion of LGBTQ+ members because of religious exemptions, these private K-12 school boards will need to respond in fair and ethical ways.

**School Boards’ Impact on the School System.** If school boards do not primarily seek to impact the students in the schools they serve, their function is questionable. “The linkages between school boards and teaching and learning are often misunderstood. School boards do not directly cause student learning. However, it would appear from findings of the Lighthouse research, as

well as from the work of associated research, that the beliefs, decisions, and actions of school boards directly impact the conditions within schools that enable district efforts to improve achievement to either succeed or fail” (Delagrabelle, 2008, p. 240).

## 1 | Text Body

Through the systems theoretical lens, this study looked at local private K–12 boards associated with one religiously affiliated organization of schools. The study followed a mixed-methods research design and considered three sources of data: documents that guide the functions and reflect the activities of these local private K–12 school boards, semi-structured interviews of principals and chairpersons, and survey questionnaires administered to school board members. A Qual → quan, (Creswell & Clark, 2018) exploratory sequential mixed-method design was followed, where the board-related documents and semi-structured interviews provided qualitative data, and the survey questionnaires provided quantitative data. In exploratory sequential mixed-methods research, data collection and analysis is approached by combining qualitative and quantitative data in a sequence of phases (Plano Clark, 2019).

This study used a mixed method for completeness. It has also used triangulation, adding to the validity of the study as it offsets weaknesses by providing stronger inferences (Creswell et al., 2018). Mixing of the qualitative data with the quantitative survey data was not for the purpose of generalizability, but for its relevance to this study that found convergence in the results from the qualitative findings.

## 2 | Identifying the Research Population

The criteria for selection of the sample for this research was as follows:

1. *Carries the designation of private school.* Schools selected for this study carry the designation of private schools as described by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).
2. *One Private K–12 School System.* This study sampled six schools within one larger school system The Seventh-day Adventist system, a sectarian school system, is the religiously affiliated school system studied in this research. Religiously affiliated school systems have uniquely comprised boards. This unique board composition gave further insight into the way these boards function concerning the issues investigated in this study.
3. *Schools that encompass grades K–8, and/or K–12.* This study looked at schools that encompass grades K-8, and/or K–12. However, this study did not study schools within this religiously affiliated system of schools, that are expressly pre-kindergarten, day care, or tertiary level schools, even if active boards governed those schools.
4. *Schools with a student population of at least 50 to 250 students per school.* This criterion considers the average size of private schools as being smaller than public schools. The student population range also contributed to the comparability of school systems.
5. *Has an active school board.* For this study, active boards are defined as operational boards, meeting at least quarterly or no fewer than four times per calendar year, and that maintain minutes, agendas, and other documentation.
6. *Accreditation is conducted after each allotted 3- to 6-year term.* This study reviewed accreditation documents as part of its document investigation. Accreditation documents

can provide a whole systems view of each school. Some private schools may not conduct rigorous accreditation procedures to maintain their local, district, or state credentials. This study only included school systems that are recognized as accredited by a notable accreditation body where accreditation is conducted after each allotted 3- to 6-year term.

**The Method.** Over the course of three months, December, January, and February, the process of data collection took place for this document-based, mixed-methods study. After permissions were received to conduct the study within the territories on the East Coast, principals of individual schools were contacted. In all, participants from six private K–12 schools from the East Coast region of the United States participated in this study.

**Documents.** The following board-related documents were examined:

1. *Organizational manuals* are produced by the wider levels of the religiously affiliated organization to which the study’s participating schools belong. These organizational board documents are the North American Division (NAD) and the Atlantic Union Conference Office of Education (AUCOE). (2010). *A Guide for School Board Success*. These documents show the ways boards within this system of schools are to function.
2. *Constitution and bylaws documents*. These documents are necessary to determine more explicitly, how each local board is constituted. Constitution and bylaws documents also show the established policies for board membership.
3. *An investigation of agendas, minutes, and documents up to three years* and the most current documentation available were examined. Here, the researcher looked at the issues these boards discussed, particularly around issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices. This revealed how often these specific issues were addressed, if at all.
4. *Accreditation documents* are among the well-known processes for reviewing the health and effectiveness of a school system. As such, this study valued the feedback gained through accreditation document reports, helping the researcher to notice whether these local school systems were functioning coherently.
5. *Professional development schedules* This study sought to determine if these boards received training that addressed the specific issues examined in this study.

The researcher considered the possibility that some school systems may be reluctant to share some of the important documents required for this study via electronic media because of the highly sensitive nature of some board deliberations. Therefore, the researcher traveled to the East Coast to spend several days on school campuses while examining the aforementioned documents. Two principals opted to send select documents electronically, via email.

The researcher’s notes during the examination of documents were categorized into three parts: (a) evidence from the documents to support the systems view of each local school, (b) evidence from the documents to support issues related to curriculum and pedagogy, and (c) evidence from the documents to support issues related to culturally responsive practices.

Qualitative document analysis (QDA) can be conducted without additional data sources. Frey (2018), however, suggested that when using document analysis in a triangulated approach that includes another data source such as interviews or surveys, the documents can serve to refute or even expand on the findings of the data sources, and as such, can safeguard against biases within the study. This research did just that. It began with an examination of board-related documents that helped the researcher better understand how these school boards function in three

specific areas and continued with semi-structured interviews with principals and school board chairpersons

***Semi-structured Interviews.*** Interview participants were principals and chairpersons of participating schools. Interview participants were lead principals of their respective schools, and school board chairpersons, with one participant who served in a dual role of chairperson and constituent pastor. Interviews were scheduled and conducted as soon as participants were available. This meant that, in some cases, document reviews were conducted after the semi-structured interviews were completed. Four semi-structured interviews with principals were conducted via telephone and two in-person, while five interviews with board chairpersons were conducted via telephone.

The semi-structured interview protocol used in this study, consisted of 15 open-ended questions. These questions were subdivided into six sections. Here, the principal and board chair of each local school answered questions on the topics of effective boards, culturally responsive boards, curriculum and teaching practices, board training, board constitution, and boards thinking in systems. Here, these topic areas were constructed to further expand on the study's examination of its predetermined categories, systems view, curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices.

The semi-structured interview took an average of 30 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes to complete. All participants shared generously. All interviews, in-person or via telephone, were recorded with permission from participants. A secure recording software app on the researcher's phone, Call Recorder, was used in the interviews. These recordings were uploaded to transcribing software, Sonix. Once auto-transcribed, the researcher reviewed the transcripts to correct errors.

Transcribed pages averaged between 8–10 single-spaced pages for a 30–45-minute interview, and 15–20 single-spaced pages for a 90-minute interview. Most interviews lasted 45–90 minutes. Only one interview lasted 30 minutes, as the participant was pressed for time. Participants answered an average of 10 semi-structured questions.

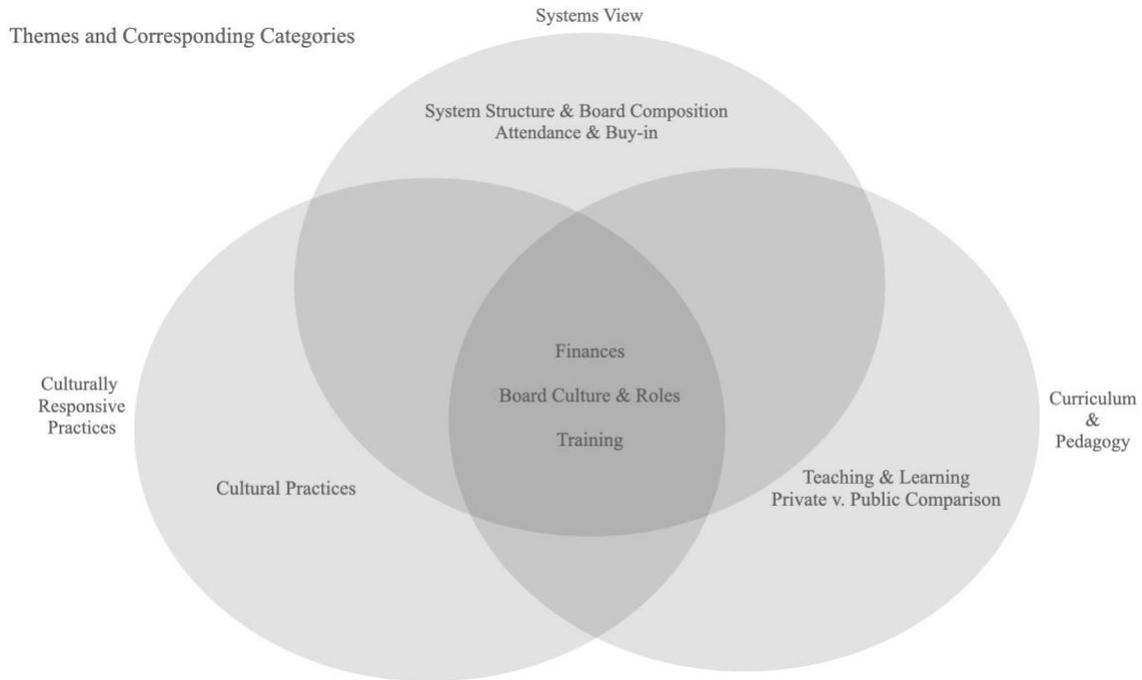
Manual coding was implemented for the line-by-line and axial coding process. Eight dominant themes emerged. Coding, which is the process of inductively locating linkages between data, involves several factors, including behaviors, events, activities, strategies, states, meanings, participation, relationships, conditions, consequences, and settings, to name a few. (Allen, 2017).

Conceptual themes arising out of the data were applied, and direct quotations associated with the themes are presented in this document. In the extended report, data from the semi-structured interview of principals and chairpersons have been organized to highlight important statements they made. The researcher organized the data resulting from the semi-structured interview according to issues regarding curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices. The eight themes are organized within these three main pre-determined research categories as stated in the study's research question (see Exhibit 1 and Exhibit 2).

### **Exhibit 1. Themes and Corresponding Categories**

Major Themes		Research Categories
System Structure & Board Composition	→	Systems view
Attendance & Buy-in	→	Systems view
Teaching & Learning	→	Curriculum & Pedagogy
Private v. Public Comparison	→	Curriculum & Pedagogy
Cultural Practices	→	Culturally Responsive Practices
Finances	→	Systems, Curriculum & Pedagogy, and Culturally Responsive Practices
Board Culture & Roles	→	Systems, Curriculum & Pedagogy, and Culturally Responsive Practices
Training	→	Systems, Curriculum & Pedagogy, and Culturally Responsive Practices

**Exhibit 2.** *Diagram of Themes and Corresponding Categories*



**Survey.** A survey to the wider school board was part of the methodology and data collecting process for this study. In preparing this study’s survey instrument, the researcher found samples of already validated instruments with questions that closely aligned with the ones this study asked. An adaptation of two of these survey instruments formed the framework for this study’s 48-question survey instrument. As a safeguard, a small focus group of three principals and one chairperson reviewed the final instrument before it was uploaded to the survey collector software.

A link to the 48-question survey questionnaire powered by SurveyMonkey was sent via email to the principals of the six participating K–12 local schools. Principals then forwarded the survey link to their respective school board members. Follow up reminders were sent to principals to encourage an increase in participation by the members of their school board. Of an anticipated engagement of up to 40 school board members, only 11 respondents to the survey questionnaire were received. Between the months of December and March, 11 participants responded to the survey questionnaire.

Although the survey sample size was small, the mixed-methods approach provided inferential data to better address questions that were not fully understood or explained through the document review and semi-structured interviews. The survey questions identified one notable problem area regarding how the board functions when it comes to culturally responsive practices.

## 1 | Conclusion

In the extended version of the research report, findings of the design and practices of six local private K–12 school boards are summarized in a triangulated format; meaning, findings from all three data sources are reported under the themes where convergence occurred. This document presents an abbreviated summary of findings.

## 2 | Findings

As shown in the extended report of the study’s findings around the eight themes, data from interviews address interviewees anonymously as principal 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6, representing their respective schools and chairperson 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 representing the associated school boards they represent. When presented in alignment with the three predetermined categories of this study, the research findings can be represented in the following way showing that Finances, Board Culture and Roles, and Training span all categories (see Exhibit 3).

**Exhibit 3. Themes and Corresponding Categories**

Major Themes	Research Categories
System Structure & Board Composition	Systems view
Attendance & Buy-in	Systems view
Teaching & Learning	Curriculum & Pedagogy
Private v. Public Comparison	Curriculum & Pedagogy
Cultural Practices	Culturally Responsive Practices
Finances	Systems, Curriculum & Pedagogy, and Culturally Responsive Practices
Board Culture & Roles	Systems, Curriculum & Pedagogy, and Culturally Responsive Practices
Training	Systems, Curriculum & Pedagogy, and Culturally Responsive Practices

The study’s findings show that in design and practice the system is organized and functions coherently according to its design. However, the eight major themes also revealed findings with implications suggesting incoherence within the system.

Private K–12 schools in this study have clearly stated values and beliefs, which is reflected in the way the boards are constituted with ecclesiastical representation and with a stated qualification of church membership. This design and practice contribute to a coherent system where much can be done to support the needs of all student groups these local school systems serve. However, this study also highlights a belief gathered as part of data that holds the position that private K–12 school boards are “chosen with no science.”

One chairperson believed strongly that, “There may be verbalized interest in ...education. They might have shown interest and believe in the principles of Adventist education... but they are not equipped to be a board of directors or governors. They are not. They are totally at the mercy of the principal.”

This study has found that in practice, training is lacking among all school boards within these local school systems. While the system is designed to support boards with training through available documents, little to no training occurs in practice. More specifically, in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices there is no training offered to board

members. However, as stated in each local school's constitution and bylaws, principals, as ex-officio members, are trained in these areas. Principals along with union and conference superintendents as ex-officio members, by virtue of their job description, are expected to be trained in the areas of curriculum and teaching practices. This includes all ex-officio members, except, perhaps, pastors.

There is agreement that pastors are not generally trained in the area of curriculum and pedagogy. One participant, a pastor, echoed this observation stating, "We're made up of a bunch of pastors." And he did not believe the current structure of pastors chairing boards was productive. "We are trained to be pastors..." The system is designed to be constituted this way, and board minutes show that at least one pastor was present in most board meetings across all participating schools.

Another chairperson, speaking about the constitution of her board, stated, "Most are not educators." Though she admitted that "they don't get in the way..." of the process.

Another principal shared,

This new board that they've created is made up of a former public school educator and a former educator of the local private school and then former parents of the school. [It's also made up of ] the pastor, the first elder, the first elder of another one of the constituent churches, another elder, another elder, another elder, another elder....

The seemingly pervasive issues of board members' lack of information and knowledge about important issues, such as curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices was referred to as "darkness" by one research participant and presented as data in the full-scale report of this study. It was further asserted that "principals are benefiting from this darkness." This scathing statement highlights the practical experiences within select private K-12 local school systems. It also highlights the need for proper training. However, according to systems theory, this practice can be changed. This observation may be another possible leverage point; a place within the system where focus can be given for change to occur.

The major findings of this study include the lack of board training and the concerns about the way these local boards are constituted, two issues that contribute to incoherence within the system, whether intentionally or unintentionally, despite the well-organized design of these religiously affiliated local private K-12 schools and the presence of qualified board members, some of whom had public school education backgrounds. This incoherence may also be why Principal 1 stated, "They [public school educators] understand curriculum but not OUR curriculum necessarily." The implication is that even with a background in education, it is possible to not understand the unique curriculum offerings and needs of private K-12 systems, and therefore, training is a necessary requirement despite educational background.

However, this training also serves to clarify the roles and responsibilities of board members. This can have a corresponding effect of creating greater buy-in among these boards, specifically as it relates to their focus and engagement concerning issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices.

Echoing concerns regarding the current way the system functions, one chairperson stated, I do not believe conference presidents should necessarily be the chief officer of education in his conference. We are pastors, most who become conference presidents are pastors. And our eyes are always going to be on religion...a lot more than education. [Our]

training is in theology and religion and church history and biblical languages and preaching and, you know, that stuff.

The issue of lacking training emerged as the foremost finding regarding how private K–12 boards function regarding issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices, even as it pertains to the type of training ecclesiastical representation receives. While ecclesiastical representation is embedded in the organizational structure of religiously affiliated private school systems, the way this impacts how they function when faced with issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices suggests this may be a leverage point within the system.

This study’s findings regarding the lack of training among boards is in line with responses from attendees at a 2010 Renaissance Adventist Education Summit, where school board competency was stated first among the obstacles within Adventist education. Attendees noted, “Boards...receive inadequate training for governing schools” (AUCOE, 2010, p. 11). With such empirical evidence, concerted efforts should be made in the direction of providing as well as monitoring the training schedules for local private K–12 school boards. Notably absent from the requested board-related documents for this current study were board training schedules. None of the participating schools provided documents indicating that their board engaged in training. All three data sources—documents, surveys, and interviews—corroborated this point.

**Issues of Culturally Responsive Practices.** During semi-structured interviews, principals and chairpersons agreed that issues regarding socioeconomics were addressed by their local boards—in particular, how students who were struggling financially could be supported. Evidence of other culturally responsive discussions was not generally noticed in the review of board minutes and agendas, except when associated with financial support for students. One chairperson reported that there is a general understanding that issues of race relations are not discussed on her board, while another principal confirmed that his board has addressed how they ensure ramp-accessibility if a student with physical needs required such accommodations. Along with supporting students of various socioeconomic backgrounds, the other culturally responsive issues studied in this research include a focus on supporting students with disabilities, issues related to students’ sexual orientation, restorative justice, as well as issues associated with race relations.

The researcher looked at the data from descriptive and statistical analyses of the survey to provide completeness to this investigation regarding how these private K–12 boards function related to issues of culturally responsive practices. A statistical analysis of survey data regarding questions associated with culturally responsive practices was conducted. This statistical analysis was conducted using Spearman’s rank-order correlational analysis. The extent to which the board engages with culturally responsive issues was measured by computing the mean score of Q 9, 10, 12, 23. This was used as the measure for the culturally responsive discussion.

Survey question 23 asked respondents the question: *Specifically, for students who are of a lower socioeconomic background, has your board explicitly stated financial accommodations for such students to attend this local private school?* Only five respondents answered question 23, stating they discussed it as a board, while two respondents indicated they developed a new policy.

The researcher then wanted to know, if this is the case, do issues regarding culturally responsive practices have any impact on the likelihood for the board to end up with a policy?

The correlation coefficient computed using Spearman’s rank-order correlational analysis showed the result  $r = .81$ , which indicates a strong and positive correlation. This means that the

more often these boards engage with culturally responsive related issues, the likelihood for these boards to develop a policy increases. This result is promising.

### **1 | Design and Practice**

Another way of viewing the findings of this study is to discuss the implications of this research in terms of the way these boards function in practice and by design and to focus on areas of coherence and incoherence:

#### **2 | *Coherent System***

According to systems theory, coherence occurs when there is proper functioning and flow within systems. There is evidence in this study that the wider and local systems to which six local private K–12 boards belong are coherent in design and practice.

**Design.** Documents, such as NAD manuals for school boards, union, and conference, as well as constitution and bylaws have all been designed with language to govern the proper functioning of boards within their local schools and the wider organization. Some guidelines have been offered as they relate to the board concerning issues of curriculum and pedagogy. Further, as reflected in the constitution and bylaws of each local school, each local board is designed to include representation from local conference and union officials. These members, in addition to the local principal, are considered ex-officio members.

**Practice.** Research data from participating K–12 school boards, both school board members and principals, show that, in practice, the organization runs in certain organized ways. Those coherent board practices are supported by documents and include regular board meetings where most board members are in attendance. Ex-officio members are trained, by virtue of their job title, in areas of curriculum and pedagogy, and understand the curricular and pedagogical needs of the school system. Principals, as ex-officio board members, are trained.

#### **2 | *Incoherent System***

As explained through systems theory, systems, can at times, function incoherently. This study revealed certain areas where the flow or the proper functioning of these private K–12 school boards was interrupted. This study further revealed that incoherence within these private K–12 local school systems resulted intentionally and unintentionally.

**Intentional.** Examples of factors that were implemented intentionally and resulted in incoherence within the system can be seen within the documents and practices of the local private K–12 boards.

**Design.** Constitution and bylaws documents show the specific qualifications necessary for board membership. Apart from membership at the local constituent church or churches, board qualifications include being present at board meetings “at least 2/3 of the time.” These criteria for board membership were intentionally stated but had an associated effect of contributing to incoherence within the system.

**Practice.** In practice, the board may be intentionally comprised of members who meet the stated requirements for board membership but who are not trained in areas of curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices. These intentionally chosen members may even serve in the capacity of chairperson of the board or chief education officer of the local conference by virtue of their position. Because of this, their relationship to or understanding of the issues outlined on the agendas may be minimal, and they may not have prepared for the items that appear on the agendas.

In practice, there may even be a sense that boards are to “lead from the boardroom” while leaving issues regarding curriculum and pedagogy to the principal and teaching staff. This may contribute to the perception that boards are not present, visible, or “known by teachers or parents,” resulting in a sense of distance, lack of buy-in, or misunderstanding of roles.

**Unintentional.** This study suggests that a large part of the incoherence observed within the system, specifically as it pertains to the way these private K–12 local school boards function regarding issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices, may be unintentional.

**Design.** Omissions of additional board qualifications/requirements, such as board training, contributed to incoherence within the system. All data showed a deficiency or lack of training, which may occur because it is not stated as a requirement or qualification for board membership. as church membership and attendance (at least 2/3 of the time) are.

**Practice.** In practice, the boards in these private K–12 local school systems are “not chosen with any science.” This is to say, that the board composition, oftentimes, does not include board members who are appropriately trained and knowledgeable about issues regarding curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices. According to the findings of this study, board members are chosen for the task because they may “express interest in Adventist education” or they may “like the principles of Adventist education.”

Some within the school system may also view the NAD’s curriculum as “set,” so there is little or no need to innovate. However, innovation is clearly needed as external forces affect the curriculum. For example, low enrollment has financial repercussions and leads to the necessity of multi-grade classrooms, which may not be ideal for students or teachers. One chairperson stated that he “does not agree with [the practice of] multigrade teaching and learning.” However, he also conceded that financial issues “inhibit the process of facilitating some internal curriculum needs.” Considering these findings, local schools must give thoughtful attention to these leverage point issues.

## 1 | Recommendations

There are fundamental tenants and ethos by which the larger religiously affiliated organization, with all its subsidiaries, was established and is governed. This study's recommendations, therefore, are cautious and recognize the complex nature of such an organizational structure. In systems theory terms, this study's findings have produced feedback about the way these local school boards function. Since this study used a systems theoretical lens, recommendations have been made regarding possible leverage points that may address issues that have resulted from observed incoherence in the way these local school systems function. The major findings of this study suggest giving attention to board training and choosing the board "with science" as two of the most striking incoherence emerging from this study. Recommendations regarding these two findings are particularly important to address if private K–12 school systems are to remain committed to ensuring coherence within the system where boards, principals, and the wider local system are working together to ensure strong delivery in their curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices.

Whether local schools decide to approach the important leverage point issue of in-service board training as a requirement for board membership is not the researcher's aim here. The researcher's aim, however, is to highlight the importance of ongoing and purposeful training as it pertains to issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices. This is critical because, in contemporary America, with ever-evolving curricular, teaching, and responsive practices, training cannot be overstated. It is critical to the survival of the school system, not only as it relates to the procedures and protocols of board functions, but also to the system as a whole. These local boards may also want to focus on the areas that will produce confidence among constituents about the curriculum and pedagogical offerings of the local private schools. The unique teaching and learning practices of private schools can be highlighted and confidence restored among its constituents that private schools can and are producing equally and, in some cases, even more rigorous curriculum offerings. It is hoped that principals will take a more intentional lead in this area to ensure that these issues remain a priority for their boards. Local schools can draw their own conclusions from these recommendations based on their local and individual context. However, the assumption that "principals are benefitting from this darkness" as it relates to the incoherence that has been noticed among these local boards regarding issues of curriculum and pedagogy, should be considered seriously.

Principals are positioned uniquely within private K–12 school systems. They view and monitor the needs of the local schools on a consistent basis. They also serve in the capacity of ex-officio members of the school boards. This is reflected in the constitution and bylaws of these private K–12 school systems. As such, their voice is and should be amplified, especially regarding issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices. Local school systems must also address the lack of understanding as it pertains to roles, insufficient financial backing, and a need to approach board member selections with "science" in systematic and intentional ways.

Within this organized private K–12 school system, curriculum is set at the NAD level of the organization. As such, this study, when referring to the way school boards function regarding issues of curriculum and pedagogy is really concerned about/with the awareness of board members regarding how curriculum and pedagogical offerings are adopted or implemented within the local school system. This awareness can contribute to more efficient decision-making and may even result in fewer deliberations on issues, more so than if these related issues were not fully understood.

Boards in private K–12 schools must pay close attention to issues that fall under the umbrella of culturally responsive practices as it relates to their individual context. In this area, the results have been shown to be promising.

The findings in this study should, at the very least, inspire conversations among private K–12 school boards about how they may meet the needs of students in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context while ensuring the unique offerings of these local private K–12 school systems they govern. Boards, then, should be viewed as integral parts of school systems to ensure coherence regarding issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and culturally responsive practices.

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