

Strengthening Culturally Responsive Teaching Implementation Through Lewin's Change Model

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) through the theoretical lens of Lewin's Change Model to address persistent gaps between CRT theory and practice. Although CRT is widely recognized as an equity-centered framework that enhances student engagement, achievement, and belonging, implementation often remains superficial due to organizational, cultural, and structural barriers. Using a systematic and integrative literature review methodology, this study synthesizes scholarship across three intersecting domains: CRT implementation, educator change processes, and organizational change theory. Findings suggest that CRT functions as a belief-and-practice transformation rather than a discrete instructional strategy. Applying Lewin's unfreeze-change-refreeze framework provides a structured pathway for advancing sustainable CRT implementation. The unfreeze stage emphasizes educator readiness; the change stage highlights job-embedded professional learning and collaborative practice; and the refreeze stage underscores institutional reinforcement for long-term sustainability. The study concludes that successful CRT implementation depends on coherence among educators' beliefs, instructional practices, and organizational systems. By integrating Lewin's Change Model with CRT, educational leaders can effectively guide equity-driven, systemic instructional transformation.

Keywords: Culturally responsive teaching (CRT), equity-centered reform, educational leaders, Lewin's change model, sustainable implementation.

1. Introduction

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) has emerged as a central, equity-driven instructional framework. CRT is designed to improve academic achievement, engagement, and sense of belonging among diverse learners. Grounded in the work of scholars such as Ladson-Billings and Gay, CRT emphasizes the use of students' cultural knowledge, lived experiences, and sociocultural contexts as assets for learning rather than deficits to be remediated (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). When implemented effectively, CRT is associated with improved student motivation, stronger teacher–student relationships, and higher levels of academic engagement.

Despite CRT's strong theoretical and empirical foundation, persistent gaps remain between its theory and classroom-level implementation. Many educators report understanding the principles of CRT conceptually but struggle to translate the principles into consistent instructional practice (Brown et al., 2021; Franco et al., 2023; Khalifa et al., 2016). The implementation gap is often exacerbated by organizational and cultural barriers within schools, including rigid curricula, accountability pressures, limited instructional autonomy, and professional development that prioritizes compliance over pedagogical change (Saldaña et al., 2025; Brown et al., 2021; Franco et al., 2023). Therefore, CRT initiatives are frequently reduced to surface-level strategies rather than sustained instructional transformation.

In this context, Lewin's Change Model, comprising the unfreeze, change, and refreeze stages, offers a useful theoretical lens for understanding and guiding instructional change. Lewin's model emphasizes the importance of first disrupting existing beliefs and routines, then supporting active change, and finally stabilizing new practices within organizational structures (Lewin, 1951; Burnes, 2020; Vassel, 2025). Integrating Lewin's Change Model with CRT implementation provides a structured approach for addressing both the human and systemic dimensions of culturally responsive reform.

The rationale for combining Lewin's model with CRT lies in the shared emphasis on transformation rather than technical adjustment. CRT requires educators to critically examine their beliefs, shift their instructional practices, and sustain equity-centered approaches over time, all of which align with the sequential and relational nature of Lewin's change process (Mercan Kucukakin et al., 2025; Debnam et al., 2024; Ghaemi & Boroushaki, 2025). Applying a formal framework may therefore strengthen the effectiveness and longevity of CRT initiatives (Cummings et al., 2016; Govindasamy & Mestry, 2022). Accordingly, this paper examines the implementation of CRT practices through the lens of Lewin's Change Model, highlighting how educational leaders can support long-term, equity-driven pedagogical transformation.

1.1 Research Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to review and examine existing literature on how applying Lewin's Change Model may influence educators' effective implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices. Specifically, the study aims to investigate how the unfreeze, change, and refreeze stages can enhance educator readiness, facilitate instructional transformation, and

promote the sustainability of CRT practices. By synthesizing scholarship from CRT and change management literature, this paper aims to illuminate how structured change processes can address persistent implementation challenges and strengthen equity-focused instructional reform. Additionally, this paper seeks to deepen the understanding of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and Lewin's Change Model within the context of organizational change in education. The study integrates theoretical and practical perspectives to illustrate how educational leaders can effectively support and sustain long-term, equity-driven pedagogical transformation.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How do the stages of Lewin's Change Model (unfreezing, change, and refreezing) affect educators' implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices?
2. How does Lewin's Change Model guide educators in shifting instructional practices toward culturally responsive teaching?
3. How does Lewin's Change Model contribute to the long-term sustainability and integration of culturally responsive teaching practice?

2. Literature Review

This section serves as a central component of the study by establishing a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding existing research on Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and the change processes outlined in Kurt Lewin's Change Model within education. The literature review draws on prior scholarship to inform and address the study's research questions while situating the investigation within the broader discourse on educational leadership and school reform. Through a synthesis of the literature, it identifies patterns, tensions, and points of convergence in research related to Lewin's model and CRT implementation. The section concludes by highlighting gaps in the current literature, justifying the present study, and its contribution to advancing equity-centered, sustainable educational practices.

2.1 Foundations of Culturally Responsive Teaching

The foundations of culturally responsive teaching were laid by scholars such as Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay. CRT is an instructional approach that recognizes students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities as assets by intentionally integrating them into pedagogy and curriculum design (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lawson, 2023). CRT is rooted in the belief that culture profoundly shapes how students learn and that effective instruction must affirm students' background while promoting academic excellence and critical consciousness (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lawson, 2023). Rather than treating culture as peripheral, CRT positions culture as central to curriculum design, instructional strategies, and classroom relationships (Ialuna et al., 2024; Debnam et al., 2024). Instructional practices associated with CRT include culturally relevant curriculum materials, inclusive discourse strategies, asset-based assessment, and opportunities for students to connect learning to lived experiences.

For example, when teaching a unit on food, an elementary school teacher may incorporate examples from diverse regions, such as the United States, Asia, South America, Africa, and Europe, to intentionally reflect students' diverse cultural backgrounds. By integrating culturally relevant examples, the teacher creates learning experiences that acknowledge and value students' diverse identities and traditions (Bianco et al., 2024; Ulbricht et al., 2024; Patras et al., 2025). Research consistently shows that culturally responsive practices are associated with higher levels of student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement, among diverse learners (Bianco et al., 2024; Ghaemi & Boroushaki, 2025; Grice et al., 2023). The inclusive approach helps reduce cultural bias, affirm students' identities, and foster a sense of confidence and pride in their native foods and cultural traditions.

2.2 Key Concepts of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

A core principle of CRT is the rejection of deficit thinking in favor of asset-based perspectives on students. Culturally responsive educators recognize students' cultural backgrounds, languages, histories, and community knowledge as strengths that enhance learning (Mohd et al., 2024; Mercan Kucukakin et al., 2025). Instruction is designed to build upon what students already know and value, affirming identities while promoting high academic expectations (Siwatu, 2007; Patras et al., 2025). The perspective reframes diversity as a resource for learning rather than a problem to be remediated. Second, CRT emphasizes the intentional integration of culturally relevant content, examples, and perspectives into curriculum and instruction (Ialuna et al., 2024; Debnam et al., 2024). Lessons are connected to students' real-world experiences, cultural histories, and social realities, making learning more meaningful and engaging (Lawson, 2023; Klingner et al., 2005). Cultural relevance extends beyond representation to include critical examination of whose knowledge is valued and how power, identity, and inequality are reflected in curricular materials.

Third, maintaining high expectations for all students is central to culturally responsive practice. CRT rejects the lowering of academic standards based on cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic differences (McLaughlin & Jordan, 2024). Instead, teachers provide appropriate scaffolding, feedback, and support to ensure that all students can engage in rigorous learning tasks. High expectations communicate belief in students' capabilities and promote academic confidence and persistence (Lawson et al., 2024; Azizan et al., 2025). Additionally, positive, respectful, strong teacher–student relationships are foundational to CRT. Culturally responsive educators intentionally cultivate trust, care, and mutual respect by learning about students' identities, families, and communities (Azizan et al., 2025; Ialuna et al., 2024). The relationships create psychologically safe learning environments where students feel valued and empowered to participate, take risks, and express themselves authentically (Azizan et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2024). Also, CRT requires educators to develop cultural competence through ongoing self-reflection and professional learning (Mohd et al., 2024). When teachers examine their own beliefs, biases, and positionalities, these influences instructional decisions and interactions, fostering continuous growth that supports equity-centered pedagogy.

Moreover, an essential component of CRT is the development of responsive assessment and instructional flexibility. Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes flexibility in instructional

delivery and assessment practices (Kucukakın et al., 2025). Teachers use multiple forms of assessment to capture the diverse ways students demonstrate learning and adjust instruction based on students' needs and strengths (Lawson et al., 2024; Azizan et al., 2025). The responsiveness ensures that assessment and instructional practices are fair, inclusive, and aligned with students' backgrounds.

2.3 Benefits of CRT Implementation

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) offers significant pedagogical benefits. CRT positions students' cultural identities, lived experiences, and ways of knowing as central assets in a learning process (Miller et al., 2025). Grounded in the premise that culture shapes how students interpret information, interact with peers, and engage with instruction, CRT enhances the relevance and meaning of instruction (Miller et al., 2025; Azizan et al., 2025; Bianco et al., 2024). When teachers intentionally connect curriculum content to students' cultural backgrounds, learning becomes more accessible and authentic, increasing students' willingness to participate and persist in academic tasks.

One of the benefits of CRT is its positive impact on student engagement and motivation. Instruction that reflects students' identities fosters a sense of belonging and psychological safety, both of which are essential for learning (Miller et al., 2025; Azizan et al., 2025). Students are more likely to engage cognitively and emotionally when they see their cultures, languages, and experiences affirmed in classroom materials and discussions (Bianco et al., 2024; Klingner et al., 2005). Increased engagement often translates into improved academic performance, particularly for students who may feel disconnected from the curriculum.

CRT also strengthens teacher–student relationships. Through culturally responsive practices, educators develop deeper cultural awareness and empathy by moving beyond deficit-based perspectives and adopting asset-based approaches that recognize students' strengths, resilience, and community knowledge (Ialuna et al., 2024; Miller et al., 2025; Azizan et al., 2025). Stronger relationships built on mutual respect and trust support positive classroom climates, reduce disciplinary disparities, and promote collaborative learning environments where students feel valued and understood (Ialuna et al., 2024; Miller et al., 2025; Li et al., 2025). In addition, CRT supports equity and inclusion by addressing systemic barriers that contribute to achievement gaps. By adapting instructional strategies, assessments, and classroom interactions to reflect diverse learning styles and cultural norms, CRT helps reduce cultural mismatch between teachers and students (Li et al., 2025; Franco et al., 2023; Ghaemi & Boroushaki, 2025). Responsiveness is beneficial for diverse learners and students with disabilities, promoting differentiated access to content and understanding.

Finally, CRT contributes to the development of critical consciousness. The practice encourages students to examine social realities, power structures, and historical contexts through multiple perspectives (Miller et al., 2025; Klingner et al., 2005). The pedagogical approach not only supports academic learning but also prepares students to become informed, reflective, and socially aware citizens (McLaughlin & Jordan, 2024; Ulbricht et al., 2024; Siwatu, 2007). Collectively, culturally responsive teaching benefits provide evidence of improved engagement, achievement, and equity in contemporary educational practice.

2.4 Barriers to CRT Implementation

Despite benefits, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is not without significant critique. A central concern is the dilution of CRT during implementation, where it is often reduced to superficial cultural celebrations or isolated activities rather than enacted as a transformative, equity-centered pedagogy (Brown et al., 2021; Nguyen & Huynh, 2021; Kim et al., 2024). The surface-level applications fail to challenge inequitable power structures or meaningfully reshape curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The limitations are not solely the result of individual teacher shortcomings but are deeply rooted in systemic inequities that constrain educators' capacity to enact CRT authentically (Nguyen & Huynh, 2021; Kim et al., 2024). Therefore, the need for organizational and structural change is encouraged.

Educators' beliefs and deficit-oriented thinking further complicate the implementation of CRT. Teachers' perceptions of students' abilities, cultural backgrounds, and families significantly influence instructional decisions and the openness to culturally responsive practices (Franco et al., 2023; Windiyani et al., 2025). When educators hold unexamined assumptions or experience discomfort engaging in conversations about race, culture, and inequity, resistance to CRT often emerges, even in the presence of professional development initiatives (Windiyani et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2024). Resistance underscores the need for in-depth, reflective learning that challenges entrenched belief systems and implicit biases.

Organizational culture and structural constraints play a critical role in shaping CRT implementation outcomes. Rigid pacing guides, standardized testing mandates, and scripted curricula frequently restrict instructional flexibility and discourage culturally responsive adaptation (Kim et al., 2024; Mette & Cormier, 2026). Moreover, school cultures that emphasize compliance and accountability over inquiry and reflection may inhibit the sustained professional learning required for CRT (Windiyani et al., 2025; Lawson, 2023; McLaughlin & Jordan, 2024). Professional development is often criticized as fragmented, episodic, and prioritizing awareness over CRT practice.

Policy and accountability pressures further influence educators' willingness to engage in CRT. High-stakes evaluation systems can discourage risk-taking and innovation, prompting teachers to rely on traditional practices perceived as safer or more measurable (Windiyani et al., 2025; Nguyen & Huynh, 2021). Collectively, CRT challenges are systemic rather than individual, reinforcing the need for addressing organizational culture, leadership, and policy alignment to support meaningful implementation.

2.5 Change Management in Education

Effective implementation of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) requires intentional management processes. Change frameworks help address educators' beliefs, organizational culture, leadership practices, and structural conditions within schools (Kitanova, 2022; Enache & Petrescu, 2025). Change management is the systematic process of planning, guiding, and sustaining organizational change by supporting individuals and systems as they transition from established practices to new ways of working to achieve improved outcomes (Enache & Petrescu, 2025; Mokher et al., 2023; Gonzales & Roberts, 2022). In education, change efforts

are often hindered by deeply ingrained routines, institutional norms, and power structures, leading schools to be characterized as inherently resistant to change (Mokher et al., 2023; Kitanova, 2022; Gonzales & Roberts, 2022). Educational innovations require a critical lens for effective implementation.

Equity-centered reforms, such as CRT, often struggle to move beyond surface-level adoption without a deliberate, structured approach to change. CRT represents adaptive change that requires shifts in mindsets, values, and professional identities (Kilbride et al., 2024; Chao et al., 2025; Lawson et al., 2024). Educators are asked to examine assumptions about culture, ability, race, and power in the classroom (Lawson et al., 2024; Nguyen & Huynh, 2021). Without intentional management structures, educational reforms encounter resistance, fragmentation, or symbolic compliance (Kitanova, 2022; Gonzales & Roberts, 2022; Panagiotopoulos & Chatzis, 2025). Additionally, effective change management prioritizes shared vision, psychological safety, collaborative learning, and providing ongoing feedback, thereby bridging reform ideals and sustained pedagogical practices relevant to CRT implementation (Gonzales & Roberts, 2022; Sartania, 2021; Panagiotopoulos & Chatzis, 2025). However, schools function as complex social systems shaped by accountability pressures, policy constraints, professional cultures, and varying levels of educator readiness, which, if not strategically addressed, can undermine reform initiatives.

2.6 Lewin's Change Model in Educational Reforms

Kurt Lewin's change model provides a foundational theoretical framework for understanding and guiding sustainable instructional reform in education. Lewin conceptualized change as a dynamic social and psychological process rather than a technical or procedural adjustment (Jedaman et al., 2023; Lewin, 1951; Vasel, 2025). Lewin believes that meaningful organizational transformation requires deliberate preparation, collective engagement, and the stabilization of new practices to prevent regression to prior norms (Lewin, 1951; Govindasamy & Mestry, 2022; Jedaman et al., 2023). The model consists of three interrelated conceptual stages: Unfreeze, Change (Movement), and Refreeze.

During the *unfreezing* stage, existing beliefs, routines, and cultural assumptions are critically examined to create readiness for change. In education, the unfreeze stage involves surfacing implicit biases, challenging deficit-oriented thinking, and fostering psychological safety (Jedaman et al., 2023; Vasel, 2025). The stage challenges educators to reflect honestly on instructional practices, melting rigidity for change (Srijuntra, et al., 2025; Vasel, 2025). The *change* stage represents the active phase of transformation, where new pedagogical strategies, collaborative norms, and equity-centered practices are introduced, tested, and refined (Reinholz et al., 2021; Vasel, 2025; Cummings et al., 2016). At this stage, the already melted practices are infused with new ones. Finally, the *refreezing* stage focuses on institutionalizing the new practice through policy alignment, professional development structures, leadership reinforcement, and shared accountability mechanisms (Govindasamy & Mestry, 2022; Srijuntra et al., 2025; Burnes, 2020). The refreezing stage helps solidify the already-infused practice for sustainability.

Central to the three stages is Lewin's Force Field Analysis. The analysis posits that behavior

results from the balance between driving and restraining forces within a system (Burnes, 2020; Lewin, 1951). Sustainable reform is achieved by intensifying pressure to change while reducing restraining forces, such as fear, habit, mistrust, and workload constraints (Govindasamy & Mestry, 2022; Reinholz et al., 2021; Jedaman et al., 2023). Since change is shaped by social relationships, group norms, and power dynamics, lasting educational reform depends on shifts in collective meaning-making and organizational culture.

3. Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review to examine the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) through the lens of Lewin's Change Model. A systematic review was selected for its structured and transparent process of identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant research (Bangdiwala, 2024; Snyder, 2019). The review focused on three interconnected areas: culturally responsive teaching implementation, educational and organizational change processes, and Lewin's Change Model in educational settings. The approach enabled the integration of empirical and theoretical evidence to develop a comprehensive understanding of how change management principles support sustainable CRT implementation.

3.1 Data Sources

A comprehensive literature search was conducted between January and April 2026. The study used several scholarly databases and academic search engines, including ERIC, Education Source, EBSCO, ProQuest Education Database, Scopus, Web of Science, Sage Journals, SpringerLink, ScienceDirect, Wiley Online Library, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate. The sources were selected for their extensive collections of peer-reviewed research in education, educational leadership, and change management. The search employed combinations of keywords and Boolean operators, including *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, *Educational Change*, *Change Management in Education*, *Lewin's Change Model*, *Unfreeze–Change–Refreeze*, *Educational Leadership*, and *Equity-Centered Teaching*.

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The study's inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and seminal theoretical works on culturally responsive teaching (CRT), educational reform, organizational change, educational leadership, teacher beliefs, and professional development. Priority was given to studies published between 2020 and 2026 to ensure contemporary relevance; however, foundational works central to the development of CRT and Lewin's Change Model, including those by Ladson-Billings (1995), Lewin (1951), and Gay (2002), were also included. Additionally, only English-language studies directly relevant to educational settings were selected to ensure alignment with the study's purpose.

Also, the exclusion criteria included non-peer-reviewed publications, editorials, conference abstracts, dissertations, and opinion pieces lacking sufficient empirical or theoretical rigor. Studies unrelated to education, instructional change, culturally responsive teaching, or educational leadership were also excluded. Duplicate records were removed during the screening process, and articles focused solely on technical change management without

educational relevance were omitted. Additionally, studies lacking adequate methodological quality or relevance to examining CRT implementation through the lens of Lewin's Change Model were excluded from the final review.

3.3 Study Selection Process

The study selection process followed a multi-stage screening procedure consistent with systematic review guidelines. The initial search identified 165 records, of which 35 duplicates were removed, leaving 130 articles for title and abstract screening. Following screening, 58 articles were excluded as they did not directly address CRT, educational change, organizational change theory, or Lewin's Change Model. The remaining 72 studies underwent full-text review, resulting in the exclusion of 32 articles due to limited relevance, insufficient empirical evidence, inadequate focus on educational settings, or misalignment with the study's conceptual framework. Ultimately, 40 studies met the inclusion criteria and were retained for the final synthesis and analysis.

3.4 Data Extraction and Analysis

Relevant data from each selected study were extracted using a structured literature review matrix. The matrix included the author(s), publication year, study purpose, research design, sample characteristics, theoretical framework, key findings, and implications for CRT implementation and educational change. The studies were analyzed using thematic synthesis, with findings coded and organized according to Lewin's three stages of change: Unfreeze, Change, and Refreeze. The framework facilitated the identification of recurring themes related to educator readiness, instructional transformation, leadership support, professional learning, organizational culture, and the sustainability of CRT practices. The resulting themes were compared and synthesized to develop a comprehensive understanding of how Lewin's Change Model can support effective and sustainable CRT implementation.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The section provides a synthesis, analysis, and discussion of findings from an integrative and systematic review of scholarship on Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and organizational change in education. Relying on previous empirical data, the study integrates recurring patterns, themes, and relationships across studies to examine how Lewin's Change Model can strengthen sustainable CRT implementation. Organized around Lewin's three stages, unfreeze, change, and refreeze, the synthesis demonstrates how educator beliefs, instructional practices, and organizational conditions interact to shape the depth and longevity of culturally responsive teaching reform.

Application of Lewin's Change Model to CRT Implementation

Integrating Lewin's Change Model to implement Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) provides a coherent framework for successful, sustainable implementation.

Unfreeze Stage: Educator Readiness and Belief Change

Empirical studies affirm how the Unfreeze stage of Lewin's Change Model prepares

educators psychologically and organizationally. In the context of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and broader pedagogical transformation, the unfreeze stage requires educators to recognize the limitations of existing instructional practices and to develop an openness to new approaches (Govindasamy & Mestry, 2022; Vasel, 2025; Srijuntra et al., 2025). Bernardino and Tan (2022) examined organizational change across public schools in Pasay, Philippines where the COVID-19 pandemic compelled school leaders and stakeholders to reconsider traditional teaching methods. The sudden shift to remote learning disrupted established routines and heightened the need for more flexible, adaptive instructional strategies (Bernardino & Tan, 2022). Similarly, Okviana et al. (2020) found that the pandemic, alongside Indonesia's "Freedom to Learn" policy, required educators to transition from conventional face-to-face instruction to technology-mediated learning environments. The transition demanded improved digital literacy, greater instructional flexibility, and openness to new teaching tools, highlighting how systemic disruptions can expose the inadequacy of traditional practices and stimulate belief change (Okviana et al., 2020). Additionally, Krimi (2022) argues that effective educational reform requires disconfirming existing beliefs that sustain traditional teaching practices. Educators must acknowledge instructional limitations and confront implicit biases that may hinder equitable learning opportunities (Krimi, 2022). However, the process is most effective when schools foster psychological safety, enabling teachers to reflect critically on their practices without fear of professional judgment (Krimi, 2022). Through reflective dialogue and supportive leadership, educators become more receptive to culturally responsive and inclusive instructional frameworks.

Moreover, Vasel (2025) studied organizational change in an Arab-Israeli school serving a marginalized community. The study shows that deeply rooted cultural norms and traditional pedagogies can create resistance when reforms challenge established professional identities (Vasel, 2025). Through collaborative dialogue and shared leadership at the unfreeze stage, school leaders helped teachers reconsider their beliefs and gradually embrace innovative approaches such as inquiry-based, playful, and outdoor learning (Vasel, 2025). For instance, in a high school experiencing widening achievement gaps among students with disabilities and seeking to implement CRT as a corrective strategy, leadership may initiate unfreezing by presenting local performance trends, student voice survey data, and empirical research demonstrating the impact of culturally responsive practices (Govindasamy & Mestry, 2022; Mohd et al., 2024; Vasel, 2025). Evidence-based dialogue helps surface misconceptions, reduce fear, and build a shared sense of urgency while maintaining psychological safety (Kitanova, 2022; Gonzales & Roberts, 2022; Klingner et al., 2005). By framing change as a collective moral and professional responsibility rather than an indictment of individual competence, leaders can reduce defensiveness and foster openness to growth.

Nevertheless, the unfreezing stage is often the most fragile and contested phase of reform. Resistance may emerge from discomfort, fear of inadequacy, or perceived threats to professional identity and autonomy (Kitanova, 2022; Gonzales & Roberts, 2022). In addition, external accountability pressures, pacing demands, and limited time for professional learning frequently constrain opportunities for deep reflection (Mohd et al., 2024; Klingner et al., 2005).

When the restraining forces remain unaddressed, schools risk producing symbolic gestures of equity rather than authentic readiness for CRT (Patras et al., 2025; Lawson, 2023). Therefore, successful unfreezing requires not only increasing awareness but also intentionally reducing structural and psychological barriers that anchor the status quo.

Taken together, the studies demonstrate that effective unfreezing goes beyond introducing new policies; it requires deliberate efforts to challenge entrenched assumptions and cultivate reflective mindsets oriented toward equity and innovation. By encouraging educators to critically examine their beliefs and recognize systemic inequities, the Unfreeze stage lays the foundation for the meaningful implementation of culturally responsive teaching and other transformative instructional practices (Bernardino & Tan, 2022; Krimi, 2022; Okviana et al., 2020; Vasel, 2025). Therefore, the unfreezing stage softens old practices, ready for change.

Change Stage: Instructional Practice and Professional Learning

The change stage centers on translating newly formed beliefs into consistent instructional practice. Across studies, the change stage of Lewin's Change Model centers on implementing new instructional practices, supported by professional learning, mentorship, and collaborative structures (Okviana et al., 2020; Pubodhya & Rajapakshe, 2025; Vasel, 2025; Kumar, 2024). Pubodhya and Rajapakshe (2025), in the examination of organizational change in Sri Lanka's telecommunications industry, demonstrate that structured training programs and leadership support significantly improve organizational performance during periods of transformation. Although conducted outside the education sector, the findings highlight the broader principle that successful change depends on providing individuals with the competencies and institutional support needed to implement new practices (Pubodhya & Rajapakshe, 2025). The insight parallels educational reform contexts, where professional learning opportunities equip educators with the instructional tools and confidence necessary to adopt innovative pedagogical approaches during the change stage.

Similarly, Okviana et al. (2020) illustrate how the change phase in education involves developing new professional competencies and instructional methods. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and Indonesia's "Freedom to Learn" policy, teachers were required to transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to digital and distance learning environments (Okviana et al., 2020). The transition required educators to acquire new skills, including digital literacy, online instructional design, and the effective use of educational technologies (Okviana et al., 2020). Through professional collaboration and ongoing adaptation, teachers gradually integrated the competencies into their instructional practices, demonstrating how skill development and collective learning support the movement toward new pedagogical approaches (Okviana et al., 2020). The approach ensured a successful transition from traditional to digital teaching.

Additionally, Vasel's (2025) research further highlights the role of leadership support and collaborative innovation in facilitating instructional change. In an Arab-Israeli school serving a marginalized community, school leaders and teachers worked collaboratively to implement second-order educational change through innovative pedagogical approaches, including inquiry-based, playful, and outdoor education (Vasel, 2025). The study shows that when

leaders provide guidance, encouragement, and contextual flexibility during the change stage, teachers are more willing to experiment with new teaching strategies and adapt them to their specific classroom environments (Vasel, 2025). The collaborative process enables educators to move beyond traditional pedagogies and actively integrate innovative practices into instruction.

Moreover, Kumar's (2024) autoethnographic study highlights the significance of mentorship and culturally responsive relationships in supporting professional growth during periods of transition. Reflecting on his experience as a first-year Ph.D. student at Texas A&M University, Kumar demonstrates how mentorship and supportive academic relationships facilitated adaptation to a new academic culture (Kumar, 2024). Although situated in higher education, the study underscores a broader principle relevant to instructional change: supportive professional networks and culturally responsive mentorship play a critical role in helping individuals navigate new learning environments and develop confidence (Kumar, 2024). The successful transition helps with the application of new practices.

For example, in a high school experiencing widening achievement gaps among students with disabilities and seeking to implement CRT as a corrective strategy, the change stage might involve a structured professional learning cycle that includes workshops, demonstration lessons, and individualized coaching. Teachers intentionally pilot specific strategies, such as integrating culturally relevant examples, using dialogic teaching practices, or applying asset-based assessment, while PLCs analyze patterns in student engagement and refine instructional approaches accordingly. Introducing one focused CRT strategy per week can reduce cognitive overload and build incremental mastery (Vasel, 2025; Srijuntra, et al., 2025; Mohd et al., 2024). Instructional strategies aligned with CRT during the change stage include culturally grounded curriculum integration, structured academic discourse, scaffolding that connects academic content to students' lived experiences, and assessment practices that affirm identity assets. However, without adequate time, coherence, and visible leadership support, the change stage may produce fragmented implementation (Gonzales & Roberts, 2022; Klingner et al., 2005). Taken together, the studies demonstrate that fostering an environment of professional learning and support enables educators to translate conceptual understanding into meaningful classroom implementation (Okviana et al., 2020; Pubodhya & Rajapakshe, 2025; Vasel, 2025; Kumar, 2024). Nevertheless, a successful change requires refreezing to ensure sustainability.

Refreeze Stage: Sustainability and Institutionalization

The refreeze stage centers on sustaining and institutionalizing reforms to be embedded in the organization's fabric. Implementing culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and broader educational reform, the refreezing phase ensures that innovations introduced during the change stage are stabilized through leadership support, policy alignment, and ongoing professional collaboration (Vasel, 2025; Srijuntra et al., 2025; Jedaman et al., 2023). Across the studies, sustainability is achieved when schools establish structures that reinforce new practices and prevent educators from reverting to traditional instructional approaches (Bernardino & Tan, 2022; Krimi, 2022; Okviana et al., 2020; Pubodhya & Rajapakshe, 2025; Vasel, 2025).

Bernardino and Tan (2022), examining public schools in the Schools Division Office of Pasay, Philippines, found that once new instructional practices were integrated into school culture, institutions experienced improved communication, collaboration, and adaptability. The outcomes indicated that the change process had moved beyond temporary experimentation and had become part of the school's operational norms (Bernardino & Tan, 2022). Similarly, Pubodhya and Rajapakshe (2025), studying organizational change within Sri Lanka's telecommunications industry, emphasize that leadership plays a critical role in sustaining change by reinforcing new behaviors through evaluation systems, feedback mechanisms, and recognition structures. Although conducted outside the education sector, the findings underscore a broader principle relevant to schools: sustained change requires consistent leadership reinforcement that normalizes new professional practices.

Additionally, Okviana et al. (2020) illustrate how educators in Indonesia stabilized online teaching methods during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over time, the collective use of digital tools and shared professional learning helped normalize new instructional approaches, transforming them from emergency responses into standard educational practices (Okviana et al., 2020). However, Vasel's (2025) study of an Arab-Israeli school demonstrates that refreezing can be difficult when resources, training opportunities, or institutional incentives are limited. The study shows that although teachers began implementing innovative approaches such as inquiry-based, playful, and outdoor learning, long-term sustainability required continued leadership commitment and structural support (Vasel, 2025). Finally, Krimi (2022) emphasizes that sustaining educational reform depends on ongoing professional learning communities and psychologically supportive environments. By fostering collaboration, reflective dialogue, and trust among educators, schools can maintain the momentum of instructional change and ensure that new pedagogical approaches continue to evolve rather than fade over time (Krimi, 2022). Collectively, the studies emphasize that the refreezing stage requires organizational alignment, leadership reinforcement, and continuous professional collaboration to institutionalize CRT as a new institutional culture, ensuring long-term sustainability (Bernardino & Tan, 2022; Krimi, 2022; Okviana et al., 2020; Pubodhya & Rajapakshe, 2025; Vasel, 2025). For example, in a high school experiencing widening achievement gaps among students with disabilities and implementing CRT as a corrective strategy, the refreezing process might involve embedding culturally responsive expectations into curriculum maps, instructional walkthrough tools, and PLC protocols. Exemplary lessons are publicly showcased to reinforce shared standards, while onboarding programs introduce new teachers to CRT-aligned expectations (Klingner et al., 2005; Ulbricht et al., 2024; Li et al., 2025). Ongoing instructional audits, structured feedback cycles, and leadership walkthroughs ensure coherence and fidelity across classrooms (Kim et al., 2024; Mette & Cormier, 2026). Over time, the systemic supports reduce resistance, clarify expectations, and cultivate a shared professional commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy.

Sustainability is further strengthened through accountability and reinforcement mechanisms such as equity-focused data reviews, continuous coaching, and recognition systems that affirm culturally responsive practices. Importantly, refreezing does not imply rigidity or stagnation (Lewin, 1951; Cummings et al., 2016). Rather, it represents the stabilization of new norms and

structures that remain adaptable to evolving student demographics and community needs. In essence, refreezing and sustainability demand ongoing adjustments to secure the gains of reform while preserving the organization's capacity for learning and responsiveness, ensuring that CRT remains both institutionalized and dynamic (Srijuntra et al., 2025). However, leadership turnover, competing reform agendas, and shifting district and state policy priorities are significant threats to sustainability (Gonzales & Roberts, 2022). Without structural reinforcement, practices may gradually erode or revert to prior norms.

5. Findings

The systematic review indicates that Lewin's Change Model provides a practical framework for strengthening the implementation of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) by aligning educator belief change, instructional practice, and organizational sustainability. Across the reviewed studies, the unfreeze stage was found to be essential for preparing educators psychologically and professionally by helping them question traditional practices, confront implicit bias, and develop readiness for equity-centered reform (Bernardino & Tan, 2022; Krimi, 2022; Okviana et al., 2020; Vasel, 2025). The findings further show that the change stage supports the active translation of new beliefs into classroom practice through professional learning, mentorship, collaboration, and leadership support (Kumar, 2024; Okviana et al., 2020; Pubodhya & Rajapakshe, 2025; Vasel, 2025). Teachers are likelier to adopt innovative and culturally responsive strategies when they receive structured training, coaching, and opportunities to experiment with new instructional methods in supportive environments.

Additionally, the findings suggest that the refreeze stage is critical for sustaining CRT by embedding new practices into school culture, leadership systems, professional learning communities, and organizational routines. Long-term implementation is strong when schools reinforce change through ongoing collaboration, policy alignment, feedback systems, and structural support (Bernardino & Tan, 2022; Krimi, 2022; Okviana et al., 2020; Pubodhya & Rajapakshe, 2025; Vasel, 2025). Finally, the review finds that effective CRT implementation is not only an instructional process but also an organizational change process (Bernardino & Tan, 2022; Krimi, 2022; Okviana et al., 2020; Pubodhya & Rajapakshe, 2025; Vasel, 2025). Sustainable equity-driven reform depends on preparing educators for change, providing practical support, and institutionalizing new approaches that embed culturally responsive pedagogy in everyday school culture.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study examined the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) through the lens of Lewin's Change Model to clarify why CRT succeeds in some contexts yet remains superficial in others. Synthesizing findings across CRT scholarship, educator change research, and organizational change theory suggests that CRT is best understood as a belief-and-practice transformation rather than a simple instructional strategy. Accordingly, Lewin's unfreeze-change-refreeze framework offers a coherent, authentic, and sustainable pathway for advancing implementation.

Across the literature, the unfreeze stage highlights the necessity of educator readiness, built through critical self-reflection, cultural awareness, and the disruption of deficit-based assumptions, supported by psychologically safe leadership and equity-centered inquiry. The change stage emphasizes that durable shifts in practice require sustained, job-embedded professional learning—coaching, modeling, feedback cycles, and collaborative structures such as PLCs that normalize experimentation and build collective efficacy. The refreeze stage demonstrates that long-term sustainability depends on institutionalization: aligning policies, curriculum systems, evaluation tools, and professional learning routines so that culturally responsive pedagogy becomes an organizational norm rather than an individual preference.

The findings affirm that successful CRT implementation depends on coherence among educators' beliefs, instructional practices, and organizational structures. For educational leaders, the practical implication is clear: CRT is most likely to endure when schools intentionally reduce restraining forces such as fear, mistrust, workload pressures, and competing mandates while building supportive systems that stabilize equity-centered expectations. Future research should extend this work by examining Lewin-informed CRT implementation across diverse school contexts and by exploring how leadership practices, policy environments, and professional learning designs interact to shape the depth and sustainability of culturally responsive reform.

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