

HOOD COLLEGE



Culturally Responsive Leadership: Fostering the Environment for Inclusion and Equity

A DISSERTATION

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DOCTORAL COMMITTEE

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Culturally Responsive Leadership: Fostering the Environment for inclusion and Equity

Troy E. Boddy, DOL

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the link between principals' level of cultural proficiency and their ability to identify and address institutional barriers. Principal preparation programs spend little time developing a future principal's ability to address the diversity present in schools today. This knowledge is critical for principals and teachers who remain middle class and White, as student bodies grow more diverse. The field of pre-Kindergarten-12th grade education will benefit from this study by providing pathways for principals to lead for cultural proficiency and equity. The study draws on critical consciousness, cultural proficiency, critical race theory, and culturally responsive leadership research. This research aimed to identify what principals do to interrupt oppressive systems that serve as barriers for diverse learners. The following research questions inform the purpose. *What influenced principals to lead through the lens of equity and cultural proficiency? How do principals categorize their cultural proficiency and equity stance? What shaped their approach to equity and cultural proficiency? How does the level of a principal's cultural proficiency and equity influence their leadership of equity in their buildings?*

The study examined six principals whose staff and students identified their school as culturally responsive on a survey given by the state. This approach provided rich data that revealed what principals do to create school environments that support their diverse learners' access and opportunities. The study took place in a large, diverse, Mid-Atlantic school district. It included elementary school principals selected using the 2019 State School Survey item on cultural

responsiveness. Six Schools whose staff and students identified the school cultural responsiveness as favorable participated in a semi-structured interview and shared documents that represented their leadership. Participants completed a self-anchoring scale and sorting activity to identify their cultural proficiency level and equity stance. Data were triangulated to identify themes that emerged from the principals' lived experiences leading through the lens of cultural proficiency and equity. Results from the study indicated that principals had varied lived experiences that lead them to leading their schools with a cultural proficiency and racial equity lens. Principals consistently identified a higher level of cultural proficiency than equity stance. Principals consistently demonstrated vulnerability and a combination of questioning and critical reflection to apply their cultural proficiency and racial equity lens. Discipline was an entry point for five of the principals in the study. Another key finding was that race and gender made a difference in leading this work. This was particularly true for the African American and White female principals in the study. The principals' experiences in the study aligned with the research detailed in chapter 2. To better prepare leaders to lead in our diverse schools, teaching and leadership preparation programs need to provide ongoing opportunities for critical reflection. Districts can create coaching and professional learning opportunities for leaders. Districts should also consider using affinity groups to provide leaders of color a supportive space for them to connect and discuss challenges and solutions for engaging in cultural proficiency and equity work. Finally, districts can align the systems cultural proficiency and equity work to the school improvement process to embed the work in existing process used to serve students.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

To our reproach it must be said, that though for a century and a half we have had our eyes on the races of black and of red men, they have never yet been viewed by us as subjects of natural history. I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.

Thomas Jefferson

Our Nation, I fear, will be ill served by the court's refusal to remedy separate and unequal education, for unless our children begin to learn together, there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together.

Justice Thurgood Marshall

If we expect students to be winners and expect them to do well, they will rise to the occasion.

Jaime Escalante

At some time, we must acknowledge that it has become absurd to assume...that violations of the Constitution dating from the days when Lyndon Johnson was President ...continue to have an appreciable effect on current operation of schools. We are close to that time.

Justice Antonin Scalia

There is no achievement gap at birth.

Lisa Delpit

Despite the best efforts of America's educators to bring greater equity to our schools, too many children especially low-income and minority children are still denied the educational opportunities they need to succeed.

Russlynn Ali

The History of Approaches to the Education of Diverse Learners

The quotes above speak to the wide range of beliefs about educating children of color that span from our country's framers to contemporary practitioners. These beliefs frame our decisions and can create what Osta and Vasquez, (2019) calls an insidious cycle whereby the structural inequities produce inequitable outcomes. These outcomes then reinforce harmful stereotypes about students of color and students living in poverty. The results, in the end, are used to justify inequitable practices such as holding low expectations, academic tracking, and

punitive discipline in schools. The beliefs espoused in the opening quotes speak to the beliefs that have shaped our policies, practices, and law about how to educate diverse students. This is not a new issue in education in the United States but an ongoing conversation that we still have not gotten right. Throughout the history of education there has been an array of responses, mindsets, and legislation to address the education of diverse students. These responses have ranged from total exclusion from education to an antiracism stance.

School principals in the United States have always struggled with addressing the education of diverse learners. The struggle to educate diverse students is not a new conversation. Rather it has been an ongoing conversation that principals still struggle with today. Banks (2016) identifies three major movements in America's early responses to educating diverse learners. These three movements include nativism, assimilation, and cultural pluralism which continue to play out in schools today. Banks (2016) describes nativism as the response to the wave of European immigrants starting in the 1800s that populated American schools. One of the goals of the nativism movement was to promote blind loyalty to the nation and evolved out of a distrust of foreigners. This distrust led to policies that prohibited the speaking of foreign languages. As part of this fear foreign language books were burned. Christian holidays and Bible readings were also promoted in schools even in schools with high numbers of Jewish students (Banks, 2016). Wong (2019) describes how education was used to civilize Native Americans by getting funds from Congress to support the Civilization Fund Act of 1819. This money was given to missionaries to set up schools that used isolation to educate Native children. The goal was to civilize Native Americans in one generation by converting them culturally and religiously (Spring, 2016). African Americans also struggled to get a quality education for their children. There was great resistance by Whites to send their children to school with African American

children in the North and South. *Roberts v. City of Boston* in 1849 was the first separate but equal ruling in American judicial history. Some of the fear that fueled keeping the races separated was the fear that African culture would influence dominant United States Protestant culture (Spring, 2016).

Nativism continues to play out in schools and in the larger society. With the election of Donald Trump building his campaign on American isolationism, negatively labeling people of color, immigrants, and anyone from outside of the mainstream as the cause of the downfall of America. Donald Trump's message was one of American victimization: the country, like the white constituents he sought to recruit was being taken advantaged of and systematically exploited (deLeon, 2020). Canizales and Vallejo (2021) in their essay *Latinos & Racism in the Trump Era* described that Trump's xenophobic rhetoric had prompted an increase in White nationalist violence that targeted Latinos. Trump targets particularly vulnerable groups as a cause of societal ills (Johnson et al., 2018). Students who demonstrate their right not to stand for the pledge of allegiance or kneel in protest to police brutality during the National Anthem are punished in some cases because of policies grounded in nativist beliefs.

Between World War I and II, the assimilation movement began to take hold in the United States. The Assimilationist movement was built on the premise that cultural influences work both ways. Assimilationist acknowledged that members of the non-dominant culture influenced the dominant culture, but the Anglo-Saxon culture remained at the center of United States culture. The two major goals of assimilation were to rid ethnic groups of their ethnic characteristics and to force immigrants to acquire Anglo-Saxon values and behaviors (Banks, 2016). Assimilation during this phase of education helped to popularize the model minority image. The goal of assimilation according to Spring (2016) was to create a color-blind society where achievement

would be determined by individual competition. This is where the metaphor that American society is a melting pot of different cultures was introduced to the conversation. The notion of assimilation does not permit different cultures to interact interdependently (Berumen, 2019). Assimilation requires that someone outside of the dominant culture give up who they are to fit in to society. Schools in the United States have primarily used assimilation programs to integrate immigrant groups into mainstream American culture (Spring, 2016). When students do not meet the expectations of school which are framed through the lens of White dominant culture, the blame falls on their personal and cultural background (Berumen, 2019). Valdes (1996), in her work with Mexican students, describes the genetic argument, the cultural argument, and the class analysis argument on blaming the children and their communities or backgrounds for failure and lack of assimilation and success in school.

Students and families who assimilate are often able to have more access and opportunities to learn. Members of White dominant culture makes the false assumption that their experience is the representation of everyone's reality and if a person outside of the mainstream fails it is their fault and not the oppressive systems that create barriers for minority students (DiAngelo 2016). In the aftermath of the George Floyd murder and the Black Lives Matter movement community members are demanding that school systems address the lack to representation of people of color in the curriculum. This mirrors the resistance on the notion of assimilation in the early twentieth century by Southern, Eastern, and Central European immigrant groups and later the 1960s and 1970s by African Americans, Asians, and Latinos.

Pluralism was introduced to support the rights of immigrants. They believed that Southern, Eastern, and Central European immigrant groups had a right to maintain their ethnic cultures and institutions in the United States. They used a "salad bowl" argument to illustrate the

unique role each ethnic group would add to the United States society (Banks, 2016). Banks (2016) identifies that the cultural pluralism movement remained dormant until the 1940s when racial conflict broke out in cities in Western, Northern, and Southern states.

The Intergroup Education Movement was one attempt to address pluralism in American schools. A major goal of intergroup movement was to reduce racial and ethnic prejudice and misunderstandings (Banks, 2016). Schools began teaching isolated instructional units on various ethnic groups, in addition to holding assemblies, and cultural gatherings. The belief was that factual information would reduce racial tension and respect for differences (Banks, 2016). The intergroup education movement did not impact school practice as intended, but elements of this movement are still being used in schools today in the form of cultural assemblies, monthly recognitions of cultural, racial, and ethnic groups, professional learning, and specialized courses that focus on various marginalized groups. The assimilation movement continued to be the preferred method of educating diverse students in the United States. This method worked well for ethnic people who were White, but at the cost of losing their ethnic heritage. African Americans and Latino Americans often did not benefit from their efforts to assimilate as they were denied opportunities to participate in main-stream life. African Americans rejected the idea of assimilation and demanded that schools hire more African American teachers, incorporate textbooks that reflected their history, and schools that were sensitive to their needs.

The civil rights movement gave birth to Multicultural education which is another form of Pluralism. In this context African Americans wanted to have the same rights as Whites but also what to be represented in the curriculum and have access to the same opportunities as White students. This movement was in response to African Americans' refusal to embrace the idea of assimilation. Multicultural education is based on five dimensions (a) Content interaction, (b) the

knowledge construction process, (c) prejudice reduction, (d) an equity pedagogy, and (e) an empowering school culture and social structures (Banks, 2005). This theory of education was to serve as a bridge that allowed racial, ethnically, and religiously diverse citizens to retain their uniqueness while also being able to be a citizen of the nation and of the world (Banks, 2005).

While schools have been described as the great equalizers for preparing students to participate in our democratic society, principals' beliefs about how to best prepare students for society varies. There are some who still believe the myth of meritocracy based on the creed of individual effort and uphold the notion that equity is accessible to all in our society. As a result of meritocracy, those who are not successful are blamed for what are in fact primarily institutional problems (Nieto, 2010). The themes of nativism, assimilation, and pluralism are still present in current school culture. In many cases, these themes are propagated by staff throughout a school building. Principals can influence the culture of a school to create opportunities for students to learn to learn and are in a position that can influence the actions of others. Nieto (2010) adds that there is a great deal of silence in the discourse about equity concerning the institutional barriers that make it nearly impossible for some students to make it. Principals as influencers and shapers of school culture must have the knowledge and pedagogy to interrupt institutional barriers to the success of students of color. Table 1 provides a summary of the history of the various responses to the education of these students.

Table 1:*Historical Foundation: Education of Diverse Learners*

Period	Movement	Description	Social Context	Impact
1800s	Nativism	The movement was to promote blind loyalty to the nation.	There was great fear that the wave of European Immigrants would change American culture. 1819 Civilization Fund Act 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson-Legalized segregation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreign language books banned • Christian holidays were celebrated • Bible readings were promoted • Separate but equal policies enacted
1900s	Assimilation	Grounded in the idea that non-dominate cultural influences the dominate culture.	There was an interest in creating a “color blind” society that would create one American culture. 1905 U.S. Supreme Court requires California to extend education to immigrant Chinese children. 1924 Congress makes Native Americans U.S. citizens for the first time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreigners had to give up their culture to be considered American • Maintained dominate culture • The idea of America as a mixing bowl • Popularized the model minority myth
1900s	Pluralism/ Intergroup movement	Funded on the belief that immigrants had the right to retain their ethnic culture Came about to reduce racial and ethnic prejudice and misunderstandings through providing factual information to bring common understanding.	European Immigrants wanted to hold on to their ethnic cultural identities. Racial conflicts that broke out in the Western, Northern, and Southern United States in the 1040’s. 1930-1950 NAACP addresses unequal pay for Blacks and Whites in Southern Schools. Increased spending on Black Schools in Southern states. 1932 A survey of schools showed that three quarters of schools surveyed used intelligence testing to track students. 1945 The G.I Bill of rights provided access to veterans to attend college or receive training. This bill benefited White men but not women and minorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The idea of America as a salad bowl • Teaching isolated units on different racial and cultural groups • School cultural assemblies

Period	Movement	Description	Social Context	Impact
1960s	Multi-cultural Education	African Americans wanted to have the same rights as Whites and wanted their children to have the same access and opportunities as White children.	<p>1954 Brown v. Board Supreme Court unanimously agrees that segregated schools are inherently unequal.</p> <p>With the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement African Americans began pushing back on the idea of assimilation because no matter how they tried they realized they could never assimilate. Educators were interacting with more diverse students.</p> <p>1965 The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA) President Johnson felt that education should be a primary objective for the US. The act provided grants to school districts serving low-income students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other racial and ethnic groups began to demand to be represented in the curriculum and in the teaching force. • Moved away from the idea of assimilation that worked well for Eastern Europeans but not work for people of color. • Focused on students' ethnic and racial differences. • Did not focus on how educators racial ethnic backgrounds impacted teaching, leading, and learning.
1960s-1980's-Present	Diversity	Response to the civil rights movement and a response to affirmative action/ a preventative measure to avoid discrimination lawsuits.	<p>This response created training that were intended to build intergroup relationship and prejudice reduction. The encounter groups expanded in the 1990's to include religion, LGBTQ+, ethnicity, language.</p> <p>1974 Milliken v. Bradley ruled that schools may not be desegregated across school districts.</p> <p>Late 1970s "taxpayers' revolt" led to Proposition 13 in California and other states which froze property taxes.</p> <p>1983 A Nation at Risk described widespread mediocrity in education and recommended sweeping reforms for US students to be complete globally.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide legal cover for discrimination lawsuits. • Pulled in voice and experiences from minority groups but placed the burden of educating Whites on the people who suffered most from decimation. • Elevated individual differences and culture
1990s-Present	Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)	CRT was a response that called educators to value and worth in students or color by creating classroom conditions that were responsive to their needs.	CRT aimed to address underachievement of too many students of color by helping educators recognize the gifts they brought to the classroom.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset based approach • Provided a framework for transforming teaching and learning. • Focus on individual students.

Period	Movement	Description	Social Context	Impact
2000s- Present	Cultural Proficiency	CP provided a model to support the transformation of individuals and organizations to respond effectively to difference and new environments.	<p>The globalization created the background of cultural proficiency. Technology and the global economy required that we learn how interact in new contexts.</p> <p>2002 No Child Left behind a standards-based reform effort with the intent of providing access and opportunity for all students while providing supports to schools, teachers, and principals.</p> <p>2012 President Obama granted flexibility to the NCLB requirements if states developed plans to close the achievement gaps, improve equity and increase the quality of instruction.</p> <p>1998 Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) was a systematic effort to establish consistent standards for principals. These standards continue to evolve as the principalship becomes more complex.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on individual and organizational change • Provided tools to respond effectively to difference. • Defined culture • Provided a frame to help educators to understand that each person brings diverse cultures to the classroom.
1954- Present	Equity	Equity is ensuring that students get what they need in order to be successful. This includes access	<p>The resegregation of schools and the lack of access and opportunities afforded for poor and minority students compared to their White peers.</p> <p>1954 Brown v. Board of Education was put into law after a unanimous Supreme court decision that ruled that schools be desegregated.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Push for including of poor, and students of color into rigorous course work. • Funding to level the playing field. • Accountability through standardized testing.
1933- Present	Anti-Racism	Anti-racism is a response to antiblackness. Anti-racism seeks to abolish the policies, practices, and procedures that work against people of color throughout the history of the United States.	<p>The public lynching of George Floyd on national television during the world-wide pandemic exposed the racial inequities that have always been present in our society to citizens across United States and the world. Millions demonstrate these racial inequities in all parts of the world and began to self-study and engage in conversations about race to become better allies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross racial commitment to address racial injustice. • Connects racism to the everyday decisions that are made by elevating the examination of practices, policies, and procedures for the racialized outcomes they produce. • Encourages the examination of the historical context. • Calls individuals to take responsibility in addressing racism in society. • Challenges White supremacist culture.

The Influence of Socialization and Culture on Leadership

How leaders are socialized and how they cultivate their worldview are critical to the principalship and how successfully they can navigate the needs of diverse student populations. Socialization and culture also shape beliefs about how to respond to diverse learners by moving from excluding students for color to creating inclusive schools. I had the opportunity to hear Pedro Noguera speak at an equity conference where he said, “We teach who we are” (Noguera, 2016). This statement resonated with me because teachers and principals bring identities and social identifiers into their classrooms and schools. Identities set the context and the lens for approaching teaching, learning, and leading in schools. Identity also frames and influences how one either fosters opportunities or creates barriers for students. Unless principals are required to engage in expanding their cultural lenses, they may limit their response to the needs of their diverse student body. One defaults to what one knows which could mean seeing through a very narrow cultural lens. Considering this when working with staff in my district, I added to Noguera’s statement, “We teach who we are and what we know.” My extension to the quote recognizes the ongoing inside-outside work is needed to develop an equity/cultural proficiency lens. Inside-outside work is what individuals do to examine their worldview and expand their beliefs about the lived experiences of others. Cultural proficiency is a way of being that enables one to respond effectively in a variety of cultural settings to the issues that emerge in diverse environments (Lindsey, 2005). If who we are and what we know impacts how school principals approach leadership, it is important to prepare school leaders to develop and extend their worldview to better serve their diverse learners.

By 2014 in the United States, public school enrollment had reached a majority-minority milestone. The number of African American, Asian, and Hispanic students currently enrolled in

public schools exceeds the number of non-Hispanic White students enrolled in pre-kindergarten-12th grade schools throughout the United States (Maxwell, 2014). Although public school students in the United States are more diverse and less affluent, principalships have remained fairly homogeneous and middle class (Maxwell, 2014). Presently, 80% of principals in the United States are White, 10% are African American, 7% are Hispanic, and 3% are another race/ethnicity (Kemp-Graham, 2015). The cultural racial lens and identities that mostly White and middle-class principals bring to school leadership increase the likelihood that the status quo is maintained unless this lens is developed and cultivated.

Adams et al. (2016) elevated the work of Harro's (2008) cycle of socialization that stated we are each born into a specific set of social identities that predisposes us to unequal roles in the dynamic system of oppression. Schools are one of the institutions where these social identities and systems of oppression are reinforced. Adams et al. (2016) added "this socialization process is pervasive (coming from all sides and sources), consistent (patterned and predictable), circular (self-supporting), self-perpetuating, interdependent, and often invisible (unconscious and unnamed)." DiAngelo (2016) described the concept of a frame of reference as a useful way to think about the forces of socialization as to how we make meaning of the world. This frame of reference is given to us at birth and reinforced or expanded throughout our lives. Hammond and Jackson (2015) described culture as how our brain makes sense of the world and added that the brain uses cultural information to turn everyday happenings into meaningful events. Lindsey et al. (2013) added,

You are your culture, you live your culture, and you express your culture whether you intend to or not. Your culture is the defining aspect of your humanity. Culture is a dominant force in shaping behaviors, values, and attitudes in schools. (p. 22)

The cultural lens that we are born with is how we make meaning of the world. It is, therefore, important to consider the lens of principals who work with diverse students need to possess an expanded world view to be able to respond to the needs of diverse students in their schools effectively. When leaders engage staff in professional learning focused on cultural proficiency or cultural competence, they provide teachers with a framework to talk about cultural differences. According to Barroso (2019), Americans turn to their family and friend networks to talk about race and race relations. She found that the frequency and with whom one communicates often depends, at least in part, on a person's racial and ethnic identity, age, education, and political affiliation. Barroso's (2019) survey identified that most Black and Asian adults (63% and 66%, respectively) say race or race relations come up in their conversations with family and friends at least sometimes, compared with Whites and Hispanic adults (50% and 49%, respectively) (Barroso, 2019). Black Americans are more likely than other racial or ethnic groups to say that they have discussions on racial topics often: 27% of Black adults compared with 11% of White, 15% of Hispanic, and 13% of Asian adults (Barroso, 2019). A principal's cultural socialization plays a role in the worldview brought to teaching, learning, and leading. Since principals in the United States are mostly White and middle class, they are less likely to engage in frequent conversations around race and race relations. By having limited or no conversations about race, White, principals, who make up the largest percentage of school leaders, may have cultural worldviews that have not been expanded to fully address the needs of diverse student bodies. Their limited worldview has an impact on the teachers they lead as well as the student learning in their buildings. It should not be assumed or expected that every principal is equipped to recognize and address the racial opportunity gap if they, like many

Americans, they do not normalize conversations about race and see it as a defining factor of addressing inequity in public schools.

The culture and climate of a school are strongly influenced by the principal. In schools where achievement was high and where there was a clear sense of community, we found invariably that the principal made the difference (Boyer, 1983, p. 219).” Hallinger and Heck (1998) proposed that the principal does not directly affect student achievement, but rather indirectly affects learning by impacting the climate of the school. Leaders play an essential role in fostering the conditions that create opportunities for diverse learners to thrive academically and socially-emotionally.

The pathway to the principalship matters because they bring their racial and cultural identities and this cultural and racial lens to the schoolhouse and how they are prepared to lead in our diverse society is important for student success. Identity shapes how differences are viewed and how the school’s policies, practices, and procedures have an equitable impact on the student body. Cultural proficiency is a leader’s ability to respond positively to differences that emerge in the context of the school community. Closing the opportunity gap for students of color requires leaders to foster equitable opportunities to learn. Principals who have a narrow cultural and racial lens need opportunities to develop and expand their cultural proficiency and equity lens is imperative to prepare them with the necessary knowledge and skill to respond to the needs of diverse learners.

The Leaders Our Schools Need

As population demographics continuously shift, so do the leadership practices and school contexts that respond to the needs that accompany these shifts (Khalifa et al., 2016). The student bodies of United States schools continue to become more diverse, while principals and teachers

remain majority White and middle class. Thus, it is critical for the academic and social-emotional wellbeing of students that leaders who are responsible for fostering a positive school environment lead through a lens of cultural proficiency and equity to increase learning for every student. Cultural proficiency reflected through the actions of the classroom teacher has been widely researched in the literature, but the role principals play is still an emerging field.

Khalifa et al. (2016) define culturally responsive leaders as those who promote a school climate inclusive of minority students, particularly those most marginalized within the school context. Such leaders also maintain a presence and meaningful relationships with the community members they serve. They lead professional development to ensure their teachers, staff, and the curriculum are culturally responsive to minoritized students. Principals are responsible for fostering the conditions for all students to learn, including diverse students and therefore, they must lead through the lens of cultural proficiency. This lens enables leaders to use the lens of personal characteristics and historical context to view their policies, practices, and procedures to identify who benefits most and who benefits least. This lens must be cultivated and used to make decisions that benefit a wide range of students so that opportunity and achievement gaps can narrow.

School leadership is a crucial component of any educational reform, second only to the very act of teaching (Leithwood et al., 2004). Unless cultural responsiveness is promoted by the principal, implementation of cultural proficiency professional learning can run the risk of being disjointed or short-lived in a school because district-level mandates are only effective to the extent they are locally enforced by school leaders (Khalifa et al., 2016). Rimmer and Shaffer (2016), stated,

Principals who lead for equity need both the knowledge base and leadership skills to 1) establish a vision and mission for their school community that every student's success is non-negotiable; 2) lead for the improvement of instruction, supporting teachers through coaching, professional learning, and professional learning communities; 3) create a culture of results-focused learning that values racial, linguistic, and economic diversity; and 4) lead an equity agenda — an intentional plan to provide all students the opportunity, access, and support to achieve rigorous levels of knowledge and skill that they can apply to real-world experiences. (p. 9)

The development of knowledge and leadership skills can provide leaders with the opportunities to expand their worldview to meet the needs of their diverse learners. The principal can play an essential role in organizing teaching, learning, and leading using the lens of equity. Khalifa (2018) identified that the principal and other administrators, such as assistant principals and district leaders, are not only best positioned but responsible for ensuring that both school policy and practice are non-exclusionary (i.e., anti-oppressive) for minority students.

The Need for Leaders with Expanded Worldviews

Therefore, it is important to the future of schools in the United States that we develop a better understanding of the critical role principals have in creating a school climate focused on learning for all students, particularly those who have not been served well in schools. Although the empirical research regarding teachers' role as agents of inclusive education of diverse students is prevalent, such comparable data does not exist for principals. Yet, principals are in a unique and powerful position to impact the success or failure of a multicultural program (Manning & Baruth, 2017). Culturally responsive leaders enact their vision for teaching, learning, and leading in their schools. They organize learning so that all students in the school

are included and are academically, socially, and emotionally successful. This study, which addresses this gap in the research, has the potential to influence leadership preparation programs and the support provided to in-service principals.

With schools in the United States becoming more diverse, principal preparation and induction programs must provide a more rigorous focus on cultural proficiency and equity to help leaders become self-reflective to expand their worldview lens. This, in turn, will help them respond to diverse learners and their needs. Within the body of robust, empirical, international research on understanding what makes school principals successful, educational researchers have found that principals' sense of identity as educators with strong moral purpose is a critical antecedent and co-requisite of their capacity for effective practices (Day & Letihwood, 2007; Moller, 2012; Moos et al., 2011; Scribner & Crow, 2012). Aspiring leaders may find that leading through the lens of cultural proficiency and equity can be perilous work (Brooks et al., 2007) filled with many challenges by those who do not value similar ideals (Marshall, 2004).

Effective leaders will hold an understanding of the need to recruit and sustain culturally responsive teachers who are better prepared to work with students of color from living in poverty (Clotfelter et al., 2006). Preparation and onboarding support must help teachers to develop critical consciousness. Lowery (2019) described critical consciousness as an understanding of lived experiences in an inequitable society. Furman (2012) asserted that critical consciousness is developed throughout each stage of leadership development. In this way, the more leaders are exposed to the lived experiences of others, the more their critical consciousness expands. Some preparation programs have found that too often students in leadership programs have been ill-prepared to engage the multiple layers of social and cultural realities within which their students and school communities live everyday (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2014). Although the diversity

coursework in educational leadership programs may address an array of differences related to social class, race, language, gender, ability, sexual orientation, identity, and their intersections, it is highly likely that such a course either does not address or under addresses theories associated with differences. Such theories include critical theories, queer theories, disability studies, feminist views, and postmodern theories as well as, intersections. Because diversity is not typically addressed in the other required courses a student takes in administration preparation programs (Hawley & James, 2010), it follows that theories associated with difference are typically not addressed or under addressed in educational leadership programs (Tillman et al., 2013, p. 76).

Cultural proficiency is developed through exposure and experience by interacting with diverse people. This moves us from ethnocentricity to developing a worldview that appreciates difference. To increase the likelihood that leaders develop their cultural proficiency, they must be provided with opportunities during their principal preparation experiences as well as through ongoing support once assigned a school to continually develop and expand their worldview to be effective leaders in schools with diverse students. Many administrators serving in multicultural schools would reject the idea that their own biases or prejudices represent a barrier to fostering an educational environment of excellence. Lopez (2003) held that school leaders must be prepared to work with individuals who are culturally different and held create learning environments that foster respect, tolerance, and intercultural understanding.

Adams et al. (2016) provided insights into how hierarchies of privilege at the individual, institutional, and sociocultural levels maintain systemic oppression in the larger society. Schools are no less immune from inequity and discriminatory practices than any other human

organization. Therefore, leaders who would focus attention on issues related to race and ethnicity must be willing to begin leading an ongoing change process.

Culturally responsive and equity focused leaders lead with a moral purpose that is informed by their ever-expanding worldview. In schools where White privilege persists and when Whiteness in schools remains invisible which can challenge White educators' ability to see how different life is for students of color, whose race and racial culture are hyper visible (Singleton and Linton (2006). To complicate the ability to understand how diverse students experience school leaders have to have an expanded view of the levels of racism that plays out in schools and larger society. Race forward (2021) identifies that racism takes place at four distinct levels which include internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism. These levels work along three dimensions that reinforce each other: the context, the psychosocial processes, and the application. All three factors impact and are impacted by attitudes and behaviors that contain both conscious and unconsciously (Adams et al., 2016, pp.18-19). In this way, principals with a limited worldview will not see how their actions may be reinforcing oppressive systems for students. No leaders should assume that the vision they bring to the enterprise requires no vetting process, particularly if that vision involves implementation of perceived or real changes in the organization (Welch, 2006). The principal's moral imperative should include the active desire to interrogate the policies, practices, and procedures that deny access and opportunity to diverse students.

Statement of the Research Problem

The principal's ability to foster a school culture committed to educating every student, regardless of racial, cultural, and socio-economic background, is critical to the success of our diverse student population. Hallinger and Leithwood (1998) found that culture plays a significant

role in shaping the thinking, behaviors, and practices of students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other school stakeholders. School districts across the United States have stated that they are actively working to close the racial and poverty gap in their respective districts. As stated earlier educational reformers have long claimed school leadership is a crucial component to any reform of education, second only to the very act of teaching (Leithwood et al., 2004). With the growing diversity of our nation's schools, leaders must demonstrate culturally responsive leadership to educate all students. This study will examine the obstacles school leader's face in implementing their vision for cultural proficiency and racial equity using the lens of critical race theory. (Khalifa et al., 2016).

My Cultural Proficiency and Equity Journey

I am a second-generation principal who grew up in a neighborhood filled with African American teachers, bus drivers, lawyers, and a pilot. My introduction to inequities in education came from the stories my parents told me about *back in the day*. My mother gave me the perspective of being a student who never had a new textbook but had teachers committed to her success. She recalled having to pay to ride the school bus to high school while White students rode for free. Her stories painted a picture of the many structural barriers that sought to limit opportunities for African American students. In 1938, my father became the principal/teacher of a three-room school which the community referred to as "The Hill Top." A new school was built in 1952 after a campaign was launched by community members. He served as the principal of the new school, Sandy Spring Elementary School, until 1961 when desegregation in the district was complete. He shared stories of the fight to get new textbooks and a library for his students. African American educators at the time were paid less than their White colleagues. African American educators in the district hired Thurgood Marshall to help them fight for and eventually

win equal pay. African American principals were demoted to assistant principals in newly desegregated schools, and one African American teacher was placed in each segregated school to promote diversity. My father was later asked to assume the role of community coordinator. This role was created to serve as a liaison between the African American community and the schools. African American parents felt their children were not getting the opportunities and access promised by desegregation. Many of their children were seen as slow by White teachers. These themes remain consistent with how students and parents of color experience schools today.

Growing up surrounded with this history, I developed my critical lens and honed it to be aware of obstacles and structural barriers. First, I was aware of the world through the lens as an African American. Then, as I encountered more diversity, I was able to expand and extend this critical lens to other groups of people. As a new teacher and the only African American male teacher in a school of 700 students, I entered the teaching profession eager with the mindset of being the best teacher I could be so that my students could be the best learners. I taught in a school that was 80% Latino, 70% speakers of other languages, and over 50% of these students receiving free and reduced meals. I had a principal who pushed us and created opportunities for staff to teach students through an asset-based mindset and to appreciate our diverse students. Still, there were staff who pitied the students and lowered their expectations. I understood that my role was to educate my students so they could compete with students who by circumstances of birth were privilege to greater access and opportunity. As a result, my students often had the highest scores in reading and mathematics in the building.

My exposure and openness to expand my worldview allowed me to see my students and families who lived lives very different from the middle-class household and neighborhood that I experienced. As a teacher I went on to teach at an even larger elementary school which served

the same type of population. The school participated in the Communities for Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Assessment for all Students Project. This project was a collaboration between Harvard, Brown, and Yale and several other universities to assist schools in reforming practices to better serve students. My school was a multiage pre-kindergarten through third grade primary school. This experience allowed me to interact and be observed by the likes of Howard Gardner, James Comer, and Ted Seizer. My work as a multiage (kindergarten through third grade) teacher allowed me to see how children learn over a four-year span. This experience expanded my toolkit for differentiation, project-based learning, the principles of Reading Recovery, child development, and ESOL instruction. Most importantly, I internalized that learning is a continuum and good teaching and persistence create opportunities to learn that closes gaps. The viewpoint of the principal at this school was years beyond most educational leaders. She knew good instruction and led the work alongside of the staff to create a school community committed to high-level teaching and learning for our diverse students. Later in my career, I served as an assistant principal at an urban-suburban elementary school under another strong instructional leader who taught me to lead as my authentic self. She taught me everything I know about special education and connecting with the school community.

I was privileged as a teacher and an emerging leader to have worked under three strong principals who helped me to understand what culturally proficient leadership looked like. Together these three leaders expanded my critical lens. My culturally proficient and equity lens was developed through my lived experience as an African American male and my observations of how others were excluded because of different factors of diversity. Being exposed to professional learning around equity and culture enhanced my world view. I saw that the way Black and Brown boys were being excluded from opportunities to learn required that I leverage

my power and position to interrupt and educate. This is how I approach my culturally responsive leadership stance.

Prior to taking over a school in my district, it is typical that the outgoing principal takes the new principal on a tour of the school. The tour I was given was nice enough and it was clear to me there was a lack of rigor in the building. I noted on the tour that the advanced math class only had 10 White and Asian students, which I thought was odd given the size of the school. I observed very competent teachers that just needed a little push. During the visit the principal shared many of the school's traditions and shared the importance of each event. The outgoing principal talked about the community by separating them into involved parents and the uninvolved parents. In the summer when I took over the building, staff and parents described the leadership of the last principal as having an inner circle and outer circle of parents and staff. If you were "in," you received all the attention and praise; if you were "out," the school could be a difficult place to work and disenfranchised parents who were not a part of the inner circle. This serves as an example of Leader Member Exchange theory with the in groups and out groups having two different experiences based on the relationship with the leader. It is important to note the inner circle consisted of mostly White parents and staff members. As I planned to begin my first year, I set forth creating a school culture that was inclusive of the entire population.

The student population was majority-minority, but my African American, Latino, and students living in poverty did not have the same access and opportunities to learn through experiencing a rigorous curriculum as many of their White and Asian peers. During my first year on the job, there were only 10 students in above-grade level math, four White, and six Asian students. All the students running for student government were White or Asian. White and Asian students also made up most of the students in chorus and instrumental music. The staff of the

school was White, except for two African American teachers and one Latina teacher. Over the years, I was able to hire three Asian teachers and several more male teachers. At the time, the staff did not look at disaggregated student data; they talked around the racialized outcomes in student experience and achievement results.

Over time, I organized our work through the slogan, “One band, one sound.” This resonated with the staff, and they began to reimagine their role by collaboratively working to serve each student in the school. I then started to ask questions of staff as we planned for events and opportunities for students. “Have you reached out to students and families that might not know about these opportunities?” and “Do the students represent the diversity of our students?” We also addressed access to above-grade-level math by incorporating blind data reviews. After 5 years of intentional work at all levels of the school, there were few gaps in student achievement and an increase in advanced scores on state testing for all students. Each year we would have a schoolwide performance to communicate the shared vision for our school goals. We used a play we wrote that incorporated the goals, vision, and practices we wanted the adults and students to accomplish during the school year. This provided clarity and a shared experience that could be built on during the year. We engaged in reviewing reading and math interventions to see if they were making a difference for students. Students kept data notebooks and monitored their progress. We examined school practices and procedures to remove barriers for students.

We also looked for new ways to engage parents by having them share a day in the life of their child at the back-to-school night. We took pictures of every student in the building so that every family could see how their child experienced school. In this way, we created a school that, while not perfect, was a place where everyone in the school community felt connected and, most importantly, felt cared for.

After my own experience as a school principal, I moved into a district level position, as the Director of Equity Initiatives for a sizeable Mid-Atlantic school district. In this position, I am responsible for implementing the school system's vision for addressing the persistent racial opportunity gaps. The *opportunity gap* refers to inputs—the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities—while *achievement gap* refers to outputs—the unequal or inequitable distribution of educational results and benefits (Great Schools Partnership, 2013). This opportunity gap is replicated and maintained through unexamined practices, policies, and procedures that create barriers for students of color and students living in poverty. To interrupt these practices, principals need coaching, support, and a thought partner to provide an outside perspective that allows them to unpack practices, policies, and procedures that increase access and opportunity for students of color and students living in poverty. Principals in my district are comfortable reaching out to the equity office when they need coaching and support and as they work to foster more inclusive schools. I have served in the role of director for 10 years and have led many district initiatives that require interaction with principals. As a result, in a supervisory role I have established trusting relationships with many principals who see me as a support rather than an evaluator. I believe that principals are the gatekeepers of the culture of a school. If school systems are going to increase learning for students of color and students living in poverty, they must engage in ongoing self-reflection of their identity and deepen their understanding of the often-unintended school policies, practices, and procedures that create barriers to student success. It is crucial for principals to continually make efforts to understand the lived experiences of students, their families, and the communities in which they live so they can respond to their unique needs. In this study, I explored the link between principals' knowledge of their level of cultural proficiency as well as their ability to identify and address institutional

barriers to interrupt inequitable practices to allow access and opportunity for their students of color.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the link between principals' level of cultural proficiency and their ability to identify and address institutional barriers to interrupt inequitable practices to allow access and opportunity for their students of color. The study addressed the following research questions:

RQ 1. What influenced principals to lead through the lens of equity and cultural proficiency?

RQ 2. How do principals categorize their cultural proficiency and equity stance? What shaped their approach to equity and cultural proficiency?

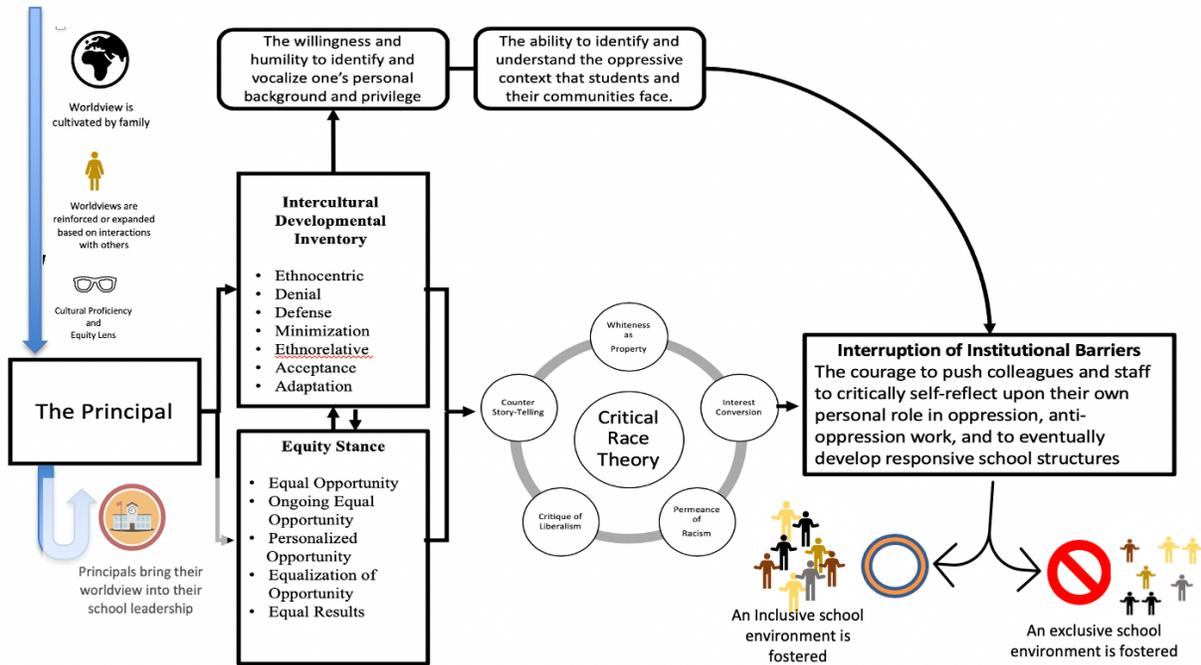
RQ 3. How does the level of a principal's cultural proficiency and equity influence their leadership of equity in their buildings?

- a) What do principals identify as institutional barriers for access and opportunities to learn for students of color?
- b) How do principals address these institutional barriers for access and opportunities to learn for students of color?

To conceptualize my thinking aligned to my research questions, I correlated continuum of mindsets and behaviors that illustrate the inside/outside work of cultural proficiency and equity (see Figure 1). To create the schools that students need, leaders have to begin with themselves by examining their biases and their understanding of people different from themselves; then leaders need to develop the knowledge and skill needed to interrogate and interrupt practices, policies, and procedures to foster the conditions needed to create an inclusive school.

Figure 1

Principals' Level of Cultural Proficiency, Ability to See and Address Barriers



Harro's (1982) cycle of socialization, as referenced by Adams et al (2016), provides the starting point for the conceptual framework. Harro (1982) cited that we are all born into our families who provide us with our first socialization that helps form our identity and worldview. As we move outside of our homes, we are then socialized by institutions. Our identities and worldviews are reinforced by the messages we receive about who we are. We will either accept these messages or expand our worldview and our lens. Principals' worldviews shape how they lead their schools. Part of our worldview is how we interact with and view those who are different from us. Bennett's (1986) Intercultural Development Inventory provides a lens through which principals can reflect and identify their level of cultural proficiency and how it is reflected in their role as school leaders. Bennett's inventory is comprised of five levels ranging from ethnocentric, the lowest level, to adaptation, the highest level of cultural proficiency. The inventory also supports the inside/outside work of cultural proficiency which leads into question

two: a focus on how principals developed and cultivated their cultural proficiency lens. Principals will also use the Equity Stance measure, created by Newton (n.d.) to identify their equity leadership. This correlates with Khalifa's (2018) framework for culturally responsive school leadership. Principals need to reflect on and articulate their cultural proficiency journey. As they deepen their cultural proficiency and their ability to identify and understand the barriers that students of color face, critical race theory provides a window through which principals can identify, label, and interrupt institutional barriers and, thereby, foster an inclusive school (see Figure 1).

Overview of Research Methodology

The phenomenological study (Patton, 2015) examined the experiences of elementary school principals' as they sought to foster a school culture focused on cultural proficiency and racial equity by interrupts instructional barriers. As the researcher, I identified schools based on student responses on the State School Survey that reflected their perceptions of the schools' cultural responsiveness. The survey collected data from staff and students from grade 5-11. Scores are grouped by elementary and middle and high school. For this study, I used data from the elementary school data set. Scores for the State School Survey ranged from greater than 9 (a *most favorable perception*) to less than or equal to 2 (*least favorable*) of the topic or school. For this phenomenological study, I selected schools where students and staff rated the cultural responsiveness as *mostly favorable* in the 5.5 to 9 score band because the demographics of those schools mirrored the school district's demographics. I further narrowed the number of potential principals to 12 by identifying schools where teacher and student rated the school's cultural responsiveness within a .3 difference on the 2019 State School Survey.

The elementary principals were invited to participate in the study and fill out a demographic questionnaire. They were sent a Zoom link to the semi-structured interview. During the semi-structured interview, an interview protocol was used to capture the lived experiences of the principals. Open and focused coding were both used to identify themes found in the principal's responses to the instruments. A sorting activity was used to identify their cultural proficiency and equity stance. Pseudonyms were used to conceal identities. The interviews were transcribed and coded.

Significance of the Study

A paucity of research studies exists on the role principals must take to develop their teacher's cultural proficiency (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2014; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). This research could significantly enhance leadership practices to build the capacity of staff to create learning environments that leverage diversity as an asset and results in equitable outcomes for every student. Smith (2005) cautioned that the lack of respect or acceptance of the cultural diversity of student populations might result in a disconnect between the principals' leadership and the leadership needed by culturally diverse student populations. In addition, this body of work can support districts in implementing the revised National Policy Board for Educational Administration Professional Standards for Educational Leaders formally known as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium. In the latest revision, Standard 3 is dedicated to equity and cultural proficiency. This standard states, "effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being" (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 11). Helping principals operationalize the standard of practice will advance opportunities for diverse student populations to learn.

Principals' abilities to continually develop their cultural awareness throughout their careers will improve their ability to adapt positively to changes in demographics and cultural norms of the broader society. This ability will help them be better leaders in creating inclusive environments where every student is connected to the school and has teachers who are responsive to their needs. Teachers would be provided with coaching and professional learning to increase their ability to meet the academic and social-emotional learning needs of their diverse students.

Another area of significance of this research is recommendations to principal preparation programs and professional learning for in-service principals to expand their equity lens. This will enable principals to successfully respond to the needs of diverse students. This knowledge and skills will support principals in providing leadership for teachers to increase their abilities to effectively support the academic and social-emotional needs of every student to be successful in school and the world beyond. When teachers, who are the best indicator of student success, work in environments that are committed to equity and excellence we will have a significant impact on the successful education of diverse students.

As the diversity of our nation's students increases, more school districts will come to recognize the need to have leaders who can successfully lead diverse schools to create the conditions for every student to learn. School districts invest a great deal of money in training and hiring consultants to build awareness of equity and cultural proficiency. In reviewing the webpages of six surrounding school districts each had identified training as one of the strategies of their equity departments. The state school board in which the study took place also has required that each county to craft and implement an equity policy during the 2019-2020 school year. This practice is not the most economic nor self-sustaining method for building school

leaders who can continually expand and apply their lens of cultural proficiency to create equitable educational and social-emotional outcomes for students. Measuring the impact of equity efforts has eluded many organizations. Identifying tools to measure growth and applying knowledge would enable districts to customize the support and the professional learning of principals to enable them to expand and apply the lens of cultural proficiency in a focused, measurable, and cost-effective manner.

Boundaries/Delimitations

For this study, I selected to focus on elementary school principals because of the nature of their roles; they are more hands-on with leading professional learning and engaging with staff. High school leaders' roles are very different and more removed from these processes than elementary school principals. I also believe that the elementary and middle school years are formative for children, and if we can create inclusive schools, then we may be able to mitigate the migration of students to connect with other peers that look like them. It is also a challenge to accurately identify someone's worldview on equity and cultural proficiency. This study will provide a snapshot in time. This study was conducted while schools were implementing some form of distance learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic. How principals engage with staff and students differed greatly during this time. The study also took place during a period when Americans participated in uprisings across the country and the world decrying systematic racism. It also took place in the aftermath of a contentious presidential election. These events undoubtedly impacted the perceptions of principals who lead for equity. Data collection for this study took place using email and virtual interviews which created some challenges that would not have been present during normal times. Extra effort was needed to connect and build trust with principals so that they were comfortable sharing their stories.

Definition of Terms

Color Blind Racism: the belief that pretending that we do not notice race (Ozlem, 2017, p. 130).

Critical Consciousness: a reflective awareness of the differences in power and privilege and the inequities that are embedded in social relationships (Kumagai Lypson, 2009).

Critical Race Theory (CRT): the view that race, instead of being biologically grounded and natural, is socially constructed and that race, as a socially constructed concept, functions as a means to maintain the interests of the White population that constructed it. According to CRT, racial inequality emerges from the social, economic, and legal differences that White people create between races to maintain elite White interest in labor markets and politics, and, as such, create the circumstances that give rise to poverty and criminality in many minority communities (Britannica, 2018).

Cultural Blindness: no noticing or acknowledging of the culture of others and ignoring the discrepant experiences of cultures within the school; treating everyone in the system the same way without recognizing needs that require differentiated interaction (Lindsey et al. , 2003, p. 6).

Cultural Competences: the knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions necessary to effectively interact with other cultural groups (Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012).

Cultural Incapacity: trivializing and stereotyping other cultures; seeking to make the cultures of others appear to be wrong or inferior to the dominant culture (Lindsey et al., 2003, p. 6).

Cultural Proficiency: a way of being that enables one to respond effectively in a variety of cultural settings to the issues that emerge in diverse environments. Culturally proficient people may not know all there is to know about others who are different from them, but they know how

to take advantage of teachable moments, how to ask questions without offending, and how to create an environment that is welcoming to diversity and to personal and organizational change (Lindsey et al., 2005). Organizational cultural competence refers to an organization's ability to perform effectively in cross-cultural situations through a congruent set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies (Nelson et al., 2008, p. 798).

Cultural Responsiveness: the ability to learn from and relate with people of one's own culture as well as those from other cultures. Culturally responsive educational systems are grounded in the belief that culturally and linguistically diverse students can excel in academic endeavors if given adequate support and resources. Pedagogy and practice facilitate and support the achievement of all students in "culturally responsive schools; effective teaching and learning occur in a culturally supported, learner-centered context, whereby the strengths students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and utilized to promote student achievement" (Kozleski, n.d., para. 2).

Culturally Responsive Leaders: those responsible for promoting a school climate inclusive of minoritized students, particularly those marginalized within most school contexts. Such leaders also maintain a presence in, and relationships with, community members they serve. They lead professional development to ensure their teachers and staff and the curriculum, are continuously responsive to minoritized students (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Culture: the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning (Lindsey et al., 2003).

Educational Equity and Opportunities to Learn: occurs when educators provide all students with the individual support they need to reach and exceed a common standard (Linton, 2011).

Equity Lens: the way in which leaders look at their policies, practices, and procedures to identify who benefits most and who benefits least using the lens of personal characteristics and historical context. This lens is used to make decisions that create equitable educational outcomes.

Equity: as described by Montgomery County Public Schools' Nondiscrimination, Equity, and Cultural Proficiency Policy (2017), the commitment to ensure that every student and staff member, without regard to their actual or perceived personal characteristics, are given the individual challenges, support, and opportunities to exceed a rigorous common standard to be prepared for academic and career success (Policy Board of Education of Montgomery County, 2017).

Opportunity Gap: the inputs—the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities, while achievement gap refers to outputs—the unequal or inequitable distribution of educational results and benefits (Great Schools Partnership, 2013b).

Social Justice: the practices and structures that contribute to improved access of marginalized populations to various school programs and activities. Consideration for social justice and equity originates from various perspectives—political, economic, opportunity, and results (Brown, 2004; Marshall, 2004; Theoharis, 2008).

Social-Emotional Learning: the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020).

Systemic Oppression: the practices, policies, and procedures that create barriers for certain groups of people to benefit another group.

Summary

This chapter introduced the need to produce culturally responsive leaders in order meet the needs of a diverse student population. Currently principals receive very little preparation that engages them with the opportunity to expand their critical consciousness. Chapter 1 has provided background information and introduced the problem and research methodology that will be address in the following chapters. Chapter 2 provides a review of relevant literature on cultural proficiency, equity, principal preparation, critical race theory, and school culture. Chapters 3 provide an overview and rationale of the methodology used for data collection for the study. Chapter 4 frames the data analysis through telling the stories of each principal, their context for leading cultural proficiency and racial equity and how they addressed institutional barriers for their students. Chapter 5 of this dissertation will provide the reader with implications and recommendations to support principals in developing the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of diverse students.

Table 2:

Research Overview and Chapter 1 Summary

Element	Summary
Statement of the problem	Our decisions are guided by our world view, which is developed throughout our lives based on the messages we receive about our identities and the depth of our exposure to diversity. Principals bring their worldview to schools and these worldviews inform how they make decisions about students. Principals who do come to leadership with an expanded worldview may not have enough knowledge to foster the conditions needed to support the social-emotional and academic achievement of students of color.
Significance	As the diversity of our student population increases and the demographics of our principals remains mostly White and middle class it becomes increasingly important for preparation programs and school districts to understand what principals do that foster the conditions for cultural proficiency, equity and inclusion. This information will help inform how principals are supported to move theory to practice.
Research Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What influenced principals to lead through the lens of equity and cultural proficiency?2. How do principals categorize their cultural proficiency and equity stance? What shaped their approach to equity and cultural proficiency?3. How does the level of a principal's cultural proficiency and equity influence their leadership of equity in their buildings?<ol style="list-style-type: none">a) What do principals identify as institutional barriers for access and opportunities to learn for students of color?b) How do principals address these institutional barriers for access and opportunities to learn for students of color?
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A qualitative, phenomenological study• Principals were selected using the 2019 Maryland State School Survey by identifying schools that scored between 5.5-9 on the 10-point scale. Using this range allowed me to find congruence between staff and students' responses on the question, rating the school's cultural responsiveness. A total of six elementary schools were selected based on a correlation of .3 or less between how staff and students responded to the question.• Data gathering methods:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Demographic survey○ Semi-structured interviews including a sorting activity and self-anchoring scale exercise)○ Documents that were selected by the principals that represent their cultural proficiency and equity leadership were reviewed.○ Focus groups

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

School principals are leading schools today that are drastically different from the ones they attended as students. To successfully create an inclusive school culture, one where all children meet rigorous standards, school principals not only need to be culturally proficient but use this proficiency to identify and interrupt barriers to student achievement and wellbeing. The challenge for principals is to move beyond merely celebrating and appreciating diversity to that of intentionally creating inclusive spaces for diverse students to learn.

Research that examines the role of principals' cultural proficiency and equity lens determined that most preparation programs have not cultivated the critical consciousness in future leaders that will allow them to understand the needs of students that look different from them (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Hansuvadha & Slater 2012; Lowery, 2019). This finding is important because the needs of students have never been more diverse. Just as important is what principals do with their cultural proficiency and equity lens to identify and interrupt institutional barriers that maintain the status quo in schools. This study focuses on a subset of elementary school principals who have demonstrated high levels of cultural proficiency. It is essential to review research that explores the role of principals in creating school culture, the role of cultural proficiency, equity, leadership preparation programs, and the principal's role in framing leadership through the lens of cultural proficiency and equity. This research serves as the foundation for creating the conceptual framework for this study that explores the link between principals' level of cultural proficiency/equity and their ability to identify barriers and interrupt inequitable practices in their schools.

This chapter provides an overview of the research literature that examines the process in which principals form and use their cultural proficiency and equity lens and how this lens is used

to create inclusive schools that serve diverse students. The term, equity lens, refers to how leaders look at their policies, practices, and procedures to identify who benefits most and who benefits least through the lens of personal characteristics and historical context. This lens is used to make decisions that create equitable educational outcomes for students. The themes identified in this review include a) an exploration of how cultural proficiency and equity is shaped and expanded through experiences including principal preparation programs, b) how this cultural/equity lens is foundational for leading diverse and inclusive schools, and c) how principals use their knowledge and influence to identify and interrupt institutional barriers to student success.

The literature review included searches on the following terms and phrases: *culturally responsive leadership, social justice leadership, inclusive schools, cultural proficiency, leading for equity, achievement gap, principal preparation, diversity, racial identity development, cultural responsiveness, emotional intelligence, resonant leadership, and school culture*. The scope of the literature reviewed for this study ranges from 1970 to 2020. Resources for this study included journal articles, books, national reports, and dissertations. I relied on JSTOR, ERIC, and Google Scholar, Discover Hood to conduct my searches.

Cultural Competency, Cultural Proficiency, and Cultural Responsiveness

As outlined in the historical context in Chapter 1, there have been many responses how to best educate diverse learners. These movements which focused on educating diverse learners still play out in today's educational context and, sometimes, multiple responses play out in the same school building. The 1950s began the demand for educational equity for minority students. Mendez v. Westminster School District in 1947 and, later in 1954, Brown v. the Board of Education denounced the policy of separate but equal. The push for a more pluralistic

educational system continues today although nativism and assimilation are also still at play in schools. One of the modern pluralistic responses to educating diverse students is cultural proficiency which is a mindset that allows a principal to respond to a wide range of diversity issues that emerges in their schools. According to Lindsey et al. (2005), cultural proficiency is a journey and no one principal will have all of the knowledge about the diverse communities in which they lead, but these leaders are willing to be vulnerable to learn and ask questions to create an inclusive school environment. Schools cannot become culturally proficient without leaders who are committed to both high academic achievement and to ensuring that the school is meeting the social, emotional learning needs of their students, including stereotype threat and implicit bias (Lindsey et al., 2005; Steel & Aronson, 1995).

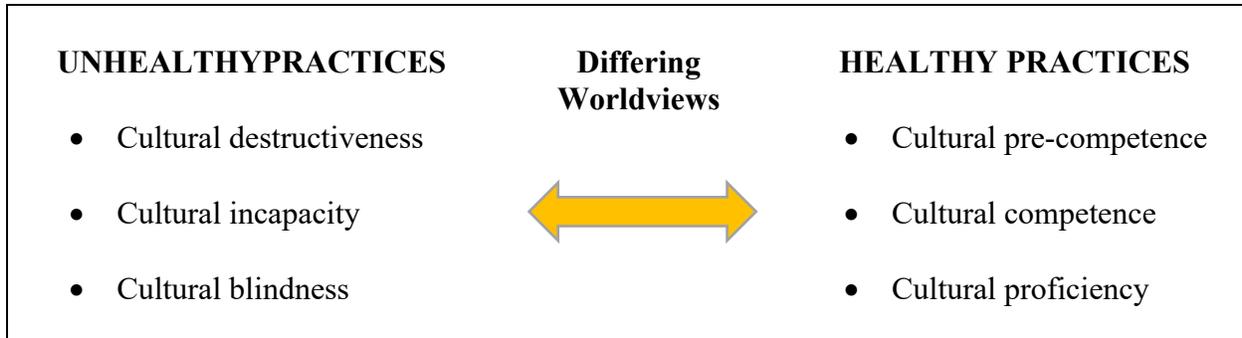
Principals have the responsibility to foster the conditions that enable all students to learn, and therefore they must be aware of how different groups of students experience school. They need to know how an academic mindset and sense of belonging in the school environment is cultivated in students of color. Stereotype threat is the predicament in which a member of a minority group fears they will live up to the stereotypes about the group to which they belong (Steel & Aronson, 1995). Steel and Aronson (1995) conducted four studies where they identified 114 Black and White Stanford University graduate students. One of the studies examined how Black students performed on a 30-minute test comprised of items from the verbal section of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). The test was described as a diagnostic of their intellectual ability in the stereotype threat group. In the non-stereotype threat group, the test was described as a laboratory problem-solving task. The results implied that Black students' scores in the stereotype-threat group were depressed. The depressed scores of Black students are a result of the conflict of assimilation caused in students outside of the mainstream. A developed cultural

proficiency allows principals to possess a level of awareness that enables them to respond to diversity issues in their schools and communities to create environments where student not only learn but feel they are included in the school community.

Principals who possess a cultural proficiency mindset will seek to remove barriers to access and opportunities for their traditionally underserved minority students. Lindsey and Lindsey (2016) identified behaviors that create barriers to and for cultural proficiency in the form of the Cultural Proficiency Continuum (see Figure 2). The continuum developed by Lindsey and Lindsey (2016) moves from cultural destructiveness, the elimination of references to the culture of “other.” Cultural incapacity exists when the culture of “others” is viewed as a deficit. Cultural blindness is pretending not to see the difference, i.e., “children are children.” These behaviors, left unaddressed in schools, create an academic and social-emotional barrier for diverse students. Principals with a cultural proficiency mindset are able to identify these behaviors in themselves and their staff. This knowledge enables them to put structures and practices in place to interrupt institutional barriers. The practices that promote cultural proficiency constitute cultural pre-competence, where there is greater awareness of differences. Examples of practices at this level might include disaggregating student data by racial and service groups. Cultural competence exists when one’s commitment to inclusion plays out in the examination of practices, policies, and procedures. Cultural competence is played out in leadership practice by disaggregating data and examining the barriers and the resulting inequitable student outcomes. Cultural proficiency consists of operationalizing a shared vision for educating every student in a school.

Figure 2

The Cultural Proficiency Continuum



Lindsey and Lindsey (2016)

Delpit (2006) argued that educators say that they believe all students can learn, but educators' practices may not align with their espoused beliefs in creating learning environments inclusive of all students. She goes on to describe how this deficit thinking about students and their families causes leaders and teachers to underteach and underserve minority students. The unhealthy practices identified on the Cultural Proficiency Continuum play out when staff view minority students through a deficit lens. These students are believed to have no culture, or their culture is viewed negatively. Leaders with a cultural proficiency mindset can see the assets that minority students bring into the schoolhouse and to foster a school community that builds on these assets.

Cultural competence refers to the knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions necessary to effectively interact with other cultural groups (Hansuvadha & Slater, 2012). The role of principal is as much political as it is about academics. As far back as the early 20th century, educators puzzled over how to design curricula that work efficiently to address the different needs and interests of the increasingly diverse families including class, ethnicity, race, and gender (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 33). Modern-day principals still struggle with how to ensure learning for

today's even more diverse students. The ability for principals to effectively interact and respond to the needs of diverse groups is a critical leadership skill for leaders in today's diverse schools. To effectively lead diverse schools, principals must be equipped with the ability to interact with those who are different from themselves in ways that will result in positive academic and social-emotional outcomes for diverse students. While the research suggest that a cultural proficiency lens is important to respond effectively to the diversity of today's students the challenge for school districts is how do they ensure that principals develop cultural proficiency.

Principal Preparation

Prior to the 1930 under half of all elementary principals held a college degree. It wasn't until the 1930's and thereafter that principals received professional training in educational theory, testing, administration, or supervision. At best, they received some professional learning during the summer. The desire to professionalize the principalship led to more formal principal preparation programs Rousmaniere (2015). Principal preparation programs continue to serve as the main vehicle to prepares the nation's principals. There is concern that they are doing little to prepare leaders for the realities of leading diverse schools. A common theme in the research is that principals identified that they received little preparation in the areas that would help them lead diverse schools (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Gardiner, 2006; Gooden & O'Doherty, 2014; Theoharis, 2008). The increasing diversity requires that principals can lead schools that look much different from the ones they attended as students.

There is a growing body of research that provides insight into reimagining principal preparation to include opportunities for critical reflection, awareness building, and the confidence to address diversity and equity challenges in schools (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2014; Lowery, 2019). This research is of great importance if we are to create equitable learning

outcomes for students. Gooden & O’Doherty (2014) argue that many principals believe that they are color blind and just see human beings, but principal preparation programs should not divorce themselves from the diversity of the world today and their diversity and prepare leaders to deal with the realities of the impact of race on education. Principals need to understand how students who are different from them racially, ethnically, culturally, and along with other diversity factors may experience school very differently from their experience as a student. In addition, principals will use this knowledge to foster the conditions that enable students to access opportunities to learn. Boykin and Noguera (2011) described the opportunity to learn as students of color having access and opportunity to high-quality instruction. Opportunities to learn are created through student engagement, guiding functions, and asset focused-factors which include interpersonal relationships, intersubjectivity, and information-processing quality. Principals are responsible for creating opportunities for all students to learn, but this is only possible if there are structures in place for them to learn about their biases and gain an awareness of the lived experiences of others to understand how race and other factors of diversity impacts how students experience school. Opportunities for leaders to personally reflect on their worldview can over time expand how they understand the lived experiences of their diverse students as well as allowing them to foster a responsive environment that offers more access and equitable outcomes for students.

Cultural Responsiveness

There is a strong link between cultural proficiency and cultural responsiveness. Cultural responsiveness is the ability to learn from and relate with people of one’s own culture as well as those from other cultures. Culturally responsive educational systems are grounded in the belief that culturally and linguistically diverse students can excel in academic endeavors if given adequate support and resource (Kozleski, 2010 para. 2). Both terms, cultural proficiency and

cultural responsiveness are action-oriented in that they involve creating an inclusive environment that affirms differences, interrupts prejudice, and brings students cultures into teaching and learning, and involves creating a clear vision for educational equity (Ballenger & Ninness, 2013; Gay, 2000; Lindsey & Lindsey 2016). Culturally responsive educational systems are grounded in the belief that culturally and linguistically diverse students can excel in academic endeavors when given adequate support and resources to learn (Kozleski, 2010). Cultural responsiveness calls on principals to act on the belief that all children can learn. This belief needs to be framed through the lens of being aware of what students are experiencing and actively working to remove barriers to students' success.

While cultural proficiency is a mainstay in equity work, it does have its critics. Professional learning focused on cultural proficiency or cultural competence provides staff with a framework to talk about cultural differences without having to talk about racism, power, and injustice (Gorski, 2016; Pon, 2009). Gorski (2019) added that discussions about cultural proficiency or cultural responsiveness creates the conditions that build learning around those staff members who are least likely to want to engage in deeper conversations about racism and injustice. Pon (2009) suggests that cultural proficiency, in fact, is a form of racism because it "others" non-Whites, and, if not done well, can lead educators to make broad generalizations about groups of people. To facilitate the creation of a culturally responsive and culturally competent mindset in schools, principals should communicate a clear vision for cultural proficiency that is action oriented and does not neglect conversations about race, power, and privilege. Principals must also support their staff's ability to organize teaching and learning through asset-based practices that provide access and opportunities for minority students. School practices such as international or cultural nights, displaying flags from countries around the

world, and cultural assemblies must be grounded in deeper work that aims to interrupt power, injustice, and racism (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Khalifa (2018)). To foster the conditions that create inclusive environments for diverse students' principals must be courageous in leading conversations that go beyond celebrating diversity and to understanding the context in which diverse students and families live and learn.

The Role of Leadership in Fostering an Inclusive School Culture

While beliefs about how to best educate diverse students in the United States have changed over time, the one consistent component in transferring these beliefs has been the school principal. Principals play a critical role in fostering a school culture that can support the goals of pluralism. Riehl (2000) maintains that throughout their history, schools in the United States have struggled with educating diverse learners. Leaders have to balance the rhetoric and reality of addressing diversity. Administrators committed to social justice must attend to the inequities in their schools which can sometimes place them in conflict with the institutions they lead. In other cases, school principals maintain the status quo to avoid conflict. Moffitt (2007) finds that leadership is synonymous with power because of a leader's ability to influence what happens in organizations. While principals do not directly affect student achievement, they indirectly affect teaching and learning by impacting school culture through how they behave and their behavior and leadership style (Hoy, 1990; Grissom et al, 2021). Principals play a significant role in fostering a school culture that values cultural proficiency. Khalifa et al. (2016) suggested that, unless promoted by the principal, implementation of cultural proficiency can be disconnected and short-lived in a school. In their role, principals should use the lens of cultural proficiency to scan their school environments for behaviors along the cultural proficiency continuum that demonstrate unhealthy practices and behaviors and identify strategies that moves the school

toward healthy practices that promote cultural proficiency and inclusiveness. Principals must not only cultivate their cultural proficiency, but they must also build staff capacity to develop their cultural proficiency (Prolman, 2017). While principals influence school culture they must foster the conditions where staff supports these efforts.

Deliowsak et al. (2017), examined the impact of staff perceptions of school leaders of two middle schools. The study focused on two schools that were similar in the number of students, staffing, and programs, but one school (School A) had a higher level of achievement than the other school (School B). Staff were surveyed using the 35-item School Culture Survey that required them to rate the leader's level of collaboration among school staff. The survey used a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*. The study findings suggested that staff at School A had the highest mean scores for professional development. Collegial support and collaborative leadership were rated lowest at school A. The highest mean scores for School B. The learning partnership was rated the lowest. This data revealed that School B had a more collaborative culture than School A. The data from the survey of principal behaviors showed that for School A, the highest-rated score identified was restrictive leadership behavior and the lowest rated was supportive behaviors. Scores for School B identified supportive principal behaviors as the highest rated and restrictive principal behaviors as the lowest. The research from this study suggests that although standardized test scores were higher at School A, the culture was individualistic, and the leaders were more restrictive in their leadership behavior. This leadership style is more reflective of a nativist mindset. The culture of School B was more collaborative, and the leadership behavior reflected a more pluralistic approach. This study supports the contention that a principal's behaviors influence the practices

and behaviors of the staff. Schools today need leaders who model the leadership behaviors that set the vision for staff practices and behaviors to foster culturally proficient learning spaces.

Tuters (2017) conducted research to study what informed, influenced, or motivated elementary educators from three diverse Ontario, Canada, school districts. to work to disrupt inequities and how these actions influenced their practices. Theses educators were self-identified as engaged in equity work. Informal interviews were conducted with the educators to gain insight into their motivation for engaging in the work. Three sources of motivation emerged from the interviews. First, personally experiencing inequities was most commonly described by participants as their main motivation for engaging in equity work. Educational equity occurs when educators provide all students with the individual support they need to reach and exceed a common standard (Linton, 2011). Equity serves as the larger umbrella; proficiency is one of the strategies that support this larger body of work. Educators described the feeling of isolation, lack of voice, and powerlessness to describe their personal experiences. Second, seeing other people experience inequities or family members and friends engaging in inequitable behaviors was the educator's source of motivation. The third and final reason that educators were motivated for doing equity work was through their experiences in education. Participants identified that their motivation was ignited through a class that makes them think about education through the lens of equity. The Tuter's findings informs us that principals should use their influence and power to create spaces for professional learning. These professional learning spaces should be organized for staff to tell their stories of exclusion and experiences of inequities, and to provide opportunities to examine practices through a lens of equity.

Principals have the power to influence the discourse in schools about teaching and learning for diverse students. While the principals have the power and influence on shaping

school culture, teachers also have power and influence in their classrooms. How this power is used creates either opportunities or barriers to learning. Delpit (1988) describes this dynamic as the following:

- Issues of power that play out in schools and classrooms.
- Rules for those in; that is, there is a “culture of power.”
- Rules of the culture of power that are known to those in power and that are used to maintain power.
- Hidden rules of the culture of power that are only shared with a few; knowing the rules makes obtaining power easier.
- Those with power who frequently don’t know they have it or are unwilling to acknowledge its existence.

To foster a school culture that values cultural proficiency and racial equity, principals need to create spaces where they can engage staff in professional learning and dialogue focused on the power dynamic that creates barriers for diverse learners. Principals should also exert their power and influence to uncover the hidden rules that provide access to some students but not others as well as how power must be shared to achieve the goals of a pluralistic society and schools.

Principals’ Use of Power to Influence School Culture

Principals are key in influencing a school culture committed to cultural proficiency and equity. Leadership style combined with a commitment to educate every student regardless of background is crucial in fostering a school culture that addresses institutional barriers to student success. Resonate and dissonant leadership styles provide a window through which leadership moves can be aligned with how principals can influence school staff to serve their diverse

students. The resonate leaders can connect with staff emotionally and in the support, they provide to their followers. Dissonant leaders on the other hand are disconnected and less supportive of their followers. The discussion of race for many people triggers deep emotions because as noted earlier this is a conversation that does not take place in many White households. DiAngelo (2016) described this phenomena as White fragility where even the slightest amount of racial stress becomes too much to endure and derails any efforts to address institutional barriers. In the converse, Winters (2020) contends that, because Black people have layers of marginalization, conversations about race can trigger a level of what she terms Black fatigue which renders them unable to engage in these conversations.

When Black people engage in conversations about race and racism they are sometimes silenced. Delpit (1988) describes these conversations as the silenced dialogue where people of color are silenced when they speak their truths about who to best teach Black children. Silence is enacted through the context of power, which is enacted in the classroom, through control over what and how much gets taught and to whom. This power is built into the culture and has rules that are known by some and hidden to others. Those with power are not aware of it, and those without it can recognize it and name it. DiAngelo (2012) continues this idea of silence as a form of power when White people do not engage in conversations that identifies, names, or challenges norms, structures, and institutions that maintain the status quo. She describes the range of silence from *I don't want to offend* to *I don't want to dominate the conversation*. This silence allows White people to keep their racial perspectives hidden. Castagno (2008) conducted a study to explore how teachers engage in conversations about race and found that teachers silence racial conversions in classrooms by ignoring them, addressing them with superficial responses to maintain inclusive environments, or using coded language to talk around race. Principals have to

explicitly name and normalize conversations about race and create structures for staff to do the same to interrupt institutional barriers in schools. At the same time, principals need to recognize that staff will have a wide range of emotions about engaging in conversations about race but they have to resist pacifying those who are not ready for the conversation to stifle the work.

Rather than ignore the emotional evoked by conversations about race it should be acknowledged and recognized as part of the journey. Because race is a topic that brings out strong emotions; to navigate this work principals must demonstrate strong emotional intelligence. In general, the more emotionally demanding the work, the more empathic and supportive the leader needs to be to create the climate and predisposition of employees (Goleman et al., 2013). As Venera writes,

“The emotionally intelligent leader is composed of a “reservoir” of positive emotions that stimulate the availability of employees to increase performance. Emotional intelligence strengthens the leader’s ability to inspire, enthuse, arouse passions, and keep people motivated. This is the “resonant” leader compared and contrasted to “toxic” leaders, which generate negative emotions with toxic leaders on the workplace climate, the groups and the organization’s performance. It is thus clear that the leader’s behavior depends on his own emotional state (2019, p. 160).”

Principals with a resonant leadership style are better suited to foster the conditions that build a psychologically safe space to engage in cultural proficiency and equity work. Under the guidance of an emotionally intelligent leader, people feel a mutual comfort level. They share ideas, learn from one another, work collaboratively, and form an emotional bond that help them stay focused amid profound change and uncertainty (Goleman, 2013). Venera (2019) states that

being a leader is primarily about motivation, empathy, and inspiring and enthusing others through the ability to communicate emotionally.

Goleman (2013) indicated that dissonant leadership produces disharmony and causes confusion with followers. Dissonant leaders are not in control of their emotions, and this creates an environment of discord. No one will be motivated, inspired, excited, or even loyal to the leader if they are not capable of emotional connections. The dissonant leadership style works against the conditions needed to establish the psychological safety for staff to engage in the emotional work of talking about race. The relationship between resonance and dissonance determines the emotional climate of the organization and its culture and directly influences its performance (Venera, 2019, pp. 160-166.). The dissonant leadership style is helpful in providing the push that some staff may need to implement practices that promote culturally responsive and equitable learning spaces.

Emotional intelligence is important for leading cultural proficiency and racial equity work. Emotional intelligence accounts for 85% to 90% of the difference between outstanding leaders and their more average peers (Boyatzis & Mckee, 2005). Singleton and Linton (2006) found that, as principals begin cultural proficiency and equity work, they must tap into their passion for this essential work. Goleman et al. (2002) maintained that skillful leadership involves both a feeling and thought because, in times of stress or emergency, emotions control the rest of the brain. Conversations about racial equity can be highly emotionally charged and leaders of this work need to be in tune with their emotions. Resonant leaders are in tune with those around them. Leaders who can create resonance are people who either intuitively understand or have worked hard to develop emotional intelligence namely, the competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Boyatzis & Mckee, 2005).

Principals influence school culture and the critical conversations and actions to support educating diverse learners. To lead this work, principals must demonstrate a high level of emotional intelligence that allows them to be centered and focused on the vision of fostering an inclusive school. They must also have the skill to help lead their staff through these important conversations to interrupt institutional barriers for their students.

The research reviewed in this chapter provides a lens by which new leadership models can be developed to promote principal's success in addressing the educational and social emotional needs of the nation's diverse student body. Educators in the United States have always struggled on how to best teach diverse students. This has been an ongoing part of the educational discourse since the onset of the common school, where access to education was opened to students from diverse backgrounds. As a nation, we have a range of strategies and politics to address the education of diverse students ranging from nativism to antiracism. Fingerhut, (2018) found that 58% of Americans have an appreciation of the growing diversity of the United States. Education needs leaders who can push teachers beyond appreciation by fostering the conditions in which our diverse students can thrive and develop a positive social emotional wellbeing that includes a positive self-image. Hallinger and Leithwood (1998) found that culture plays a significant role in shaping the thinking, behaviors, and practices of students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other school stakeholders. Thoughts, behaviors, and practices can view diverse students through a lens of assets or deficits. Deficit beliefs about students can replicate the outcomes of the research of Steel and Aronson (1995) on stereotype threat that illustrated the impact negative stereotypes had on the test scores of Black students. Kendi (2019) summarizes that people of color have a dueling consciousness: one of being themselves and one of looking through the eyes of another racial group. The person of color has to navigate beliefs

that intend to keep them segregated, force them to assimilate, give up their authentic identities, or reset these efforts by demanding their equity through antiracism. This dueling consciousness impacts leaders of color as they become able to recognize the systems that oppress students of color but have to implement policies and practices that create barrier for success. Our students deserve schools where they can be their authentic selves and be educated in a school environment that supports their social emotional needs and actively removes barriers that create inequitable outcomes and principals are essential for fostering these conditions. In order for students to retain their identities school staff must be able to critically reflect on their worldviews that may not affirm the diverse identities students bring into the school. In order to examine these worldviews, it is critical that staff participate in dialogue where they are able to hear multiple experiences and perspectives are shared.

Courageous Conversations

Creating space for staff to engage in conversations grounded in addressing the institutional barriers requires principals to be able to frame conversations that create space for staff reflection and for the conversations to be productive. Singleton and Linton (2006) identified the need to begin engaging in conversations about race by keeping individual contributions to such conversations personal, local, and immediate. This means that Black individuals can only tell their racialized experiences of the impact of race and racism from their own personal experience and not speak for the group to which they belong. In this way, Blacks avoid being the spokesperson for their racial group by telling personal stories that cannot be easily dismissed by others. Linton (2011) described another way to address inequities by using an equity framework. His framework is made up of three components: the individual, professional, and leadership. It calls for individuals to examine and address inequities through their individual actions and the

collective actions of members of a school community. Linton also described that, in his framework, each member is held accountable for ensuring success of diverse students. Using such a framework allows for expanding staff perspectives around issues of race, but it also helps members to identify specific aligned actions to address inequities and be held accountable for making progress.

Asberry (2007) provided a critique of some of the approaches identified in the *Courageous Conversations about Race*, by Singleton and Linton (2006), by challenging the number of chapters dedicated to justifying the need to talk about race and to make the conversations comfortable. By focusing on comfort, Asberry argued that the authors are maintaining White privilege by consoling the readers. She also critiqued what she identifies as the snail's pace by which people move through the process of engaging in *Courageous Conversations*. This slow process can frustrate people of color and those who are further along in their understanding and ability to engage in courageous conversations about race. In their seminal work, *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups* Jones and Okun (2001) identified the characteristics of White supremacy culture. One of the characteristics of white supremacy identified on their list was the idea of the right to comfort. This idea is characterized by the belief that those with the most power should be granted emotional and psychological comfort when in distress. The right to comfort also allows those in power to blame the person causing the discomfort for causing them pain.

Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015) conducted a study to examine how high school leaders engaged school members around educational inequities to understand and better serve students at an all-girls school in Texas. The qualitative secondary analysis research method was used to build on data collected in prior studies to peruse new research questions or theoretical

perspectives (Gladstone et al. 2007). Data were collected via interviews of adults and focus groups for students and parents. The results from this part of the study revealed positive comments about the feel of the school and how it was different from other schools the students attended. Parents commented that there was a feeling of care demonstrated by the staff. Parents were also happy that the school engaged their children in conversations about racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Teachers also had favorable comments of the school and noted that it had a collaborative atmosphere and that they had a principal that understood them and were able to communicate their personal experiences about racism and sexism. The second part of the study focused on engaging 11 principals using a semi-structured interview. Findings from the interviews revealed that principals identified the importance of collaboration and consensus-building in cultivating leadership capacity to improve student learning. Principals also identified relationship building as a key leadership strategy. They used their spirituality to serve their staff, students, and community. Finally, the principals communicated a deep understanding of diversity and leadership for social justice to support traditionally underserved students.

The interviewees consisted of leaders who became principals to address social justice and equity in their schools. Leaders were identified using snowball sampling. There were 18 principals identified, and seven eventually participated in the survey. Principals who enacted social justice leadership improved instruction, raised achievement, enhanced staff capacity, and strengthened school and community culture. Principals felt that raising student achievement for marginalized students was their moral obligation. These leaders also improved school structures; five out of seven principals discussed their efforts to increase rigor and access to educational opportunities. They identified increased accountability for student achievement and addressed tracking. They identified both structural issues and individual challenges. The changes in the

structures moved from blaming students for their failure to focusing on the unjust system. Principals also focused their resistance by enhancing staff capacity. Principals did this by resisting the assumption that typical teacher education or staff development programs were adequate preparation for substantiating a social justice orientation and practices for educators. Other practices were for the principals to empower staff, examine the issues of race, and build relationships with students. The research also focused on identifying the barriers and resistance principals faced in leading social justice work. The resistance they faced was inside and outside of the building. They described that they felt resistance coming from the demands of the principalship, the momentum of the status quo, obstructive staff attitudes and beliefs, and insular and privileged parental expectations. They also felt that there were staff who resisted the work through nostalgia (if only we had good students again). These leaders also identified the feeling of isolation because they felt the system didn't support their social justice work. Instead, the system often focused on compliance with the bureaucracy. All the principals stated that their preparation programs did not prepare them for social justice work. The consequences of resistance faced by principals took a personal toll and resulted in a persistent sense of discouragement. The principals also identified proactive strategies to continue the work that included having a supportive network, engaging in professional learning, and building relationships (Theoharis, 2008). The research of Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015) is important because it suggests that, through their intentional leadership behaviors, principals can foster a school climate that can meet the needs of diverse students. This can only be accomplished by leaders who are intentional about examining their own biases and developing an understanding of the experiences of others while, at the same time, creating structures and using tools to facilitate and engage staff members in conversations that allow them to understand self and

others to better serve students. Principals using their influence must set a clear vision and support professional learning so that cultural proficiency and conversations about race, power, and privilege is not a one-time event but part of the fabric of the work of the school.

Critical Race Theory

The mindset and beliefs of principals are only one part of the equation for addressing institutional barriers in schools; the other part of this equation is being able to recognize the institutional barriers to address them. Diem and Welton (2020) found that often school leaders try to address institutional barriers through technical fixes such as implementing a new literacy program or providing additional interventions for students who need more support. Most often the adaptive challenges which explore the root causes of the outcomes are not interrogated. When the adaptive challenges are not interrogated, the technical fixes have little impact on addressing the racial, ethnic, and cultural impact on student outcomes and experiences. Critical race theory (CRT) is the view that race, instead of being biologically grounded and natural, is socially constructed and that race, as a socially constructed concept, functions as a means to maintain the interests of the White population that constructed it (Britannica, 2018). Because principals often see themselves as colorblind, they are often unable to see the systematic barriers that negatively impact the diverse students in their buildings. Color blind racism is the belief that pretending that we don't notice race will end (or has already ended) racism (Sensoy, 2017). CRT provides a lens through which principals can interrupt the inequities in student outcomes and experiences in schools. The theory can serve as a lens that provides principals a context for to identify the root causes of the persistent opportunity gaps found in schools.

Race and education have always been an essential element in the way opportunities for learning have manifested in schools in the United States. This premise has always been

straightforward; marginalized groups, be they African American, Asian American, Native American, Latina/o, the poor, or women, have sought education as a pathway for economic mobility, economic empowerment, political voice, and social transformation (Howard & Navarro, 2016). This struggle for equitable educational outcomes continues in schools today. Because of the lack of focus on race and equity in many principal preparation programs, professors need to help future leaders identify, interrogate, and interrupt the systems of inequities that deny marginalized groups access to opportunities to learn. Early research on multiculturalism focused on the cultural knowledge that diverse children bring with them to school. It presented ways to recognize and incorporate this cultural knowledge in schools and classrooms (Edmonds, 1986; Gay, 2010).

In the early 1990s, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) built on the work of multicultural and critical race scholars in the legal field when they suggested that social inequity in education was based on three central propositions:

- Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States.
- U.S. society is based on property rights.
- The intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool through which we can understand societal (and, consequently, school) inequity.

CRT allows principals to ask questions about the structural and systematic oppressive conditions that impact the student experience. Systemic oppression consists of the practices, policies, and procedures that create barriers for certain groups of people and benefit other groups.

In the field of education, CRT challenges the typical discourse about race and racism by examining policies, practices, and procedures that render certain racial and ethnic groups subordinate to others (Solorzano, 1998). Critical race theory is based on five core tenants:

1. Centrality of race and racism—All CRT within education must acknowledge race and racism as a permanent fixture in society and, in turn, schools. CRT also includes intersections with other forms of subordination such as gender, class, and citizenship.
2. Challenging the dominant perspective—CRT works to challenge dominate narratives commonly used to describe inequities that mask self-interest. Diverse perspectives are placed at the center of the discourse.
3. Commitment to social justice—CRT must always be motivated by a social justice agenda and the elimination of racism, sexism, poverty, and other oppressed groups.
4. Valuing experiential knowledge—CRT builds on the oral traditions of many indigenous communities of color. In this way, student voices and voices of marginalized people are important in developing and understanding inequities. These stories create a counter story to the dominant perspective.
5. Being interdisciplinary CRT scholars believe that, to understand racism. it must be situated in both the historical and contemporary context. This history must be told using multiple perspectives (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

While there is support for the use of CRT to question educational practices, there is also criticism of the use of such a framework from members of the far right because they believe that this work indoctrinates their children with left-wing propaganda. Most recently, Donald Trump issued an order to eliminate federal government from conducting training on racial sensitivity because it was anti-American. He also called for his supporters to report any sightings of such

activities (Baker, 2020). The former president also went on to call for the U. S. Department of Education to investigate schools using the 1619 curriculum (“The 1619 Project Curriculum,”nd) because he believed this was teaching children a revisionist history (Richardson, 2020). The pushback on CRT has been present from both conservatives and those within the field since its introduction. Richard Posner, a Seventh Circuit judge in the 1990s described critical race theorists as “lunatics” who “have swallowed postmodernism hook, line, and sinker.” He went on to argue that “CRT exaggerated the plight of groups that are self-appointed and that the use of storytelling is intellectually limited (Bridges, 2019, p. 57). “

Delgado and Stefancic (2000) identified some of the earliest critiques of CRT by some who disagree that minority scholars speak in a unique voice about racial issues. They also contended that critical race theorists sought to advance their points of view. The model minority myth was used to prove that the playing field was level and worked for Jews and Asians. Critics within the movement questioned if it was straying from its materialist roots and overly dwelled on matters of concern of middle-class minorities including microaggressions, racial insults, unconscious discrimination, and affirmative action in higher education which does little for the underlying structures of inequality and much less for the plight of the poor (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000).

The tenants of CRT provide the necessary lens by which principals can come to understand the persistent racial/ethnic inequities that play out in schools across the United States. CRT supports the use of students’ voices as a tool to help educators understand how inequitable practices, policies, and procedures can negatively impact diverse students. Counter-storytelling also provides leaders the opportunity to interrupt and challenge dominant discourse about students' successes and failures in school. Ultimately, CRT helps leaders to move away from

viewing education and school through a colorblind lens to recognizing that student outcomes are predictable by races because the educational system is built to create winners and losers. It is also important for leaders to be knowledgeable of the critiques of CRT as they will inevitably encounter challenges to this work. A principal who is constantly building the ability to interrogate school practices is better poised to foster a school culture where all children can learn by implementing practices, policies, and procedures that foster the conditions by which all students can achieve success.

Culturally Responsive Leadership

Culturally responsive leaders promote a school climate inclusive of minoritized students, particularly for those marginalized within most school contexts. Such leaders also maintain a presence in and relationships with the community members they serve. They lead professional development to ensure their teachers, staff, and the curriculum are continuously responsive to minoritized students (Khalifa et al., 2016). Khalifa et al. (2016), in their syntheses of the literature, identified four behaviors of culturally responsive leaders:

- Critically self-reflects on leadership
- Develops culturally responsive teachers
- Promotes culturally responsive/inclusive school environment
- Engages students, parents, and indigenous contexts

Critical self-awareness, frequently identified in the literature, refers to the principals' need to be aware of who they are, their values, and beliefs about teaching children of color. Critical self-awareness is also commonly referred to as critical consciousness (Gay, 2010; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Khalifa, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2001). Principals must not only develop their critical self-awareness, but they also have to foster critical self-awareness in their staff so they

can serve their diverse student well. The critical consciousness aspect of culturally responsive teaching requires that teachers know who they are as people, understand the contexts in which they teach, and intently question their knowledge base and assumptions (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

The second theme that emerged from the review of the literature was that, in their culturally responsive leadership, principals must expose teachers to professional learning focused on culturally responsive teaching. Singleton (2012) maintained that principals of any color can lead this work. After principals have found their passion or entry-point, they are positioned to lead the work with staff and be vulnerable in sharing their racial and cultural journey. Lithwood et al. (2004) and Grissom et al. (2021) identified the principal as having an influential role in supporting professionals, in addition to recruiting, and evaluating teachers to provide a professional learning community focused on achievement for every student. Khalifa, et al. (2016) stated that principals must also be willing to address staff who may not believe in this work. The third and fourth trends build upon the first two, culturally responsive leaders work to create inclusive environments. This requires principals to address stereotype threat, othering, racism, sexism, and homophobia to foster learning spaces that are inclusive of all students (Singleton 2015; Steel & Aronson, 1995). Indigenous people and other people of color who strive to conform to White culture and/or embrace White racial consciousness often find themselves living in what we define as the *third culture* always striving, but never succeeding, at fitting into Whiteness while no longer culturally accepted within their own primary racial culture (Singleton, 2015).

The last trend identified in the research was engaging students and parents to help build on the need to create inclusive school environments. Culturally responsive leaders, according to research by Ishimaru (2012), focused on the shift from heroic leadership to shared leadership.

Bush (2020) defined heroic leadership a transformational, with principals inspiring colleagues and stakeholders to enhanced commitment to achieve school goals. Three principals of small urban schools in California with large Latino populations were identified in this study. These principals were all second-year principals and had participated in the People Acting in Community Together (PACT) program. As part of the program, they used a community organizer stance to build shared leadership between the school and community. Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observation of real-world interactions among the principal, staff, and community at school events were used to collect data. The three key findings of the research were that strong relationships were built, and the leadership capacity of community members was developed through collaboration, principals served as intermediaries between the school and central office. As a result of the collaboration with the principals and staff, parents felt empowered to support the schools. These principals moved from traditional top-down leadership to a shared leadership model. In this way, social capital among the principals, staff, and community was built. Finally, principals felt that being the bridge between shared leadership with the community and being an agent of the school system forced them to manage from the middle to create a balance among the many competing interests. These efforts resulted in all three schools having higher student achievement than other schools in the district and the state.

In light of the current racial unrest, the demands for equitable outcomes, and the increasing diversity of schools in the United States, we need leaders now more than ever who lead with the lens of cultural proficiency and equity. What we know is that we have much work to do to prepare leaders of schools that our diverse students need. My research will examine how principals employ their cultural proficiency and racial equity lens is actively used it to break down institutional barriers to foster a school climate of inclusion and equity.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological study (Patton, 2015) was designed to explore the link between elementary principals' level of cultural proficiency/equity and their ability to identify and address barriers to interrupt institutional barriers to allow access and opportunity for their students of color. The study also identified what inspired these principals to pursue a cultural proficiency and racial equity leadership stance. Principals play an essential role in influencing the culture of a school. They impact student achievement by fostering the conditions that make it possible for their staff to implement practices that empower every student to achieve. Khalifa (2018) found that principals can foster these conditions by continuously working on their critical self-consciousness. Critical self-consciousness is the ability to interrogate one's worldview while expanding the understanding of how people who different from you might experience the world differently. Critical self-consciousness provides principals with alternative explanations to ways of being that might be interpreted as wrong or deficit. Principals also facilitate the development of the critical self-consciousness of their staff members to interrupt their deficit beliefs and behaviors.

Equity is achieved using multiple lenses such as race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, language, and other diversity factors that identify a person's characteristics. Schools often employ programs, such as restorative justice, or focus on cultural proficiency and social justice to frame their approach to addressing the opportunity gap (Gorski, 2019). When implementing cultural proficiency initiatives, principals should consider embedding critical race theory or other theories that bring race, poverty, and power to the forefront of the work addressing longstanding inequities. This chapter will provide a rationale for the selection of the phenomenological model, a discussion of participant selection, and a description of data collection and analysis methods.

Research Design

The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific and to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation. In the human sphere, this typically translates into gathering ‘deep’ information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions, and participant observation. It means representing the phenomena from the perspective of the research participant(s). Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe phenomenological research as a qualitative strategy used to analyze an experience reported by participants. For this study, the method was selected to understand what shaped leaders’ approach to cultural proficiency, the influence of cultural proficiency on their leadership, and how it allowed them to identify institutional barriers and interrupt inequities. The phenomenological approach is best suited to understand how leaders make sense of their journey leading with the lens of cultural proficiency/equity and how this lens informs their work. Patton (2002) stated that phenomenology aims at gathering a deep understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences (Patton, 2002). Phenomenological research can be robust in indicating the presence of factors and their effects in individual cases. However, it must be tentative in suggesting their extent in relation to the population from which the participants or cases were drawn (Lester, 1999). Patton (2015) described phenomenological studies as being framed through the lens of empathy, an inquiry stance through which the researcher makes meaning from the actors’ point of view by entering into the shoes of the other. This study examined the lived experiences of six elementary school principals whose leadership was grounded in cultural proficiency and equity as identified through the survey results.

Setting/Context

The study took place in a large Mid-Atlantic urban/suburban school district. The district is one of the largest and most diverse in the nation. The district’s website states that there are over 165,000 enrolled students. During the 2020 school year there were ≤5.0 American Indian or Alaskan Natives, 14.3% Asian, 21.6% Black or African American, 31.3% Hispanic/Latino, 27.7% White, and ≤5.0 two or more races, 17.5% are English as a second language students, 33.5% receive free and reduced meals, and 11.5% students who receive special education services (see Table 2).

Table 3

Student Demographics Based on 2018-20019 Enrollment (Piscataway School District data)

% Student Racial/Ethnic Composition 2019-2020								
	% Total	AM	AS	BL	HI	PI	WH	MU
All Students		≤5.0	14.3	21.6	31.3	≤5.0	27.7	≤5.0
ESOL	17.5	≤5.0	≤5.0	≤5.0	12.4	≤5.0	≤5.0	≤5.0
FARMS	33.5	≤5.0	≤5.0	10.7	18.5	≤5.0	≤5.0	≤5.0
Spec. Ed	11.5	≤5.0	≤5.0	≤5.0	≤5.0	≤5.0	≤5.0	≤5.0

Note. Racial/ethnic composition figures reflect State Department of Education (SDE) abbreviations: American Indian or Alaskan Native (AM); Asian (AS); Black or African American (BL); Hispanic/Latino (HI); Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (PI); White (WH); Two or More (Multiple) Races (MU).

The district has 24,000 employees serving over 200 schools. The district’s website identifies that 56.1% are professional staff (including teachers), 40.4% supporting services, 3.3% administrators, and 0.4% business operations (administrative). The webpage also breaks down the staff demographics as follows; 8.49% Asian, 18.3% Black/African Americans, 13.19%

Hispanic/Latino, 58.3% White, and 1.43% two or more races. There are 209 principals according to the school district’s staff statistical profile. Demographics of the principals for the 2020 school year were 0.0% American Indian or Alaskan Natives, 2.9% Asian, 33.5% Black/African American, 3.8% Hispanic/Latino, White 59.8, and 0.5% two or more races (see Table 3).

Table 4

Principal Demographics (Piscataway School District data)

% of Principal/ Racial Ethnic Composition 2013							
	AM	AS	BL	HI	PI	WH	MU
% Total	0.0%	2.9%	33.5%	3.8%	0.0%	59.3%	0.5 %

Note. Racial/ethnic composition figures reflect MSDE abbreviations: American Indian or Alaskan Native (AM); Asian (AS); Black or African American (BL); Hispanic/Latino (HI); Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (PI); White (WH); Two or More (Multiple) Races (MU).

During the 2020 school year, the school district embarked on a districtwide boundary analysis to address overcrowding, economic, and racial demographics. This stirred division in the school community with parent groups formed to protest the analysis. These groups spread a great deal of miss information such as that the district was going to bus students from one area in the district to another. Along with the misinformation, there were some among the anti-boundary group that stoked racial fear. On March 15, 2020, the district closed all schools due the COVID-19; 2 weeks later it implemented distance learning for the over 165,000 students. During the COVID-19 pandemic racism against members of the Asian community was elevated. Racial disparities were revealed because of the impact of COVID-19 on the health of people of color and, in terms to education, access and opportunities for children of color and students living in poverty to learn remotely. Also, the district responded to the deaths of Ahumaud Arbery,

Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd by providing resources to schools and the community for engaging in conversations with staff, students, and community members. The school district was one of the first in the nation to put race on the table and to address the racial achievement gap in 2005. Understanding the phenomenon and the collective awakening of the hidden racial inequities for portions of our society has created a sense of urgency from the community, staff, and students to address long-standing racial inequities. School principals in this context had propelled some leaders to recommit to their equity work while others struggled with not knowing what to do. During the 2021 school year, the district launched an antiracism systemwide audit. The audit was designed to examine school culture, workforce diversity, community outreach, curriculum, working conditions, and the student data system. The audit was to be implemented over a year and a half and would engage students, staff, and families through surveys, focus groups, data reviews, and town hall meetings. This process was cheered on by some and scrutinized by others in the community. This context is important for understanding the lived experiences of principals addressing the institutional barriers that impact the same racial and ethnic groups that were being impacted by the COVID-19 virus and who were participating in national uprising to stand up against the murders of Black citizens at the hands of police officers. Phenomenological studies are a retrospective process that allow consideration of the social-political context, which in this study focuses on how principals are leading for cultural proficiency and racial equity during the pandemic which will add another level of richness to their stories.

Researcher Positionality

In the role of researcher, I came to this study in my role as the Director of Equity for a large Mid-Atlantic school district that has focused on racial equity since 2005. I had been the

director of the Equity Unit since 2011. This district was one of the first to have such a position and focus on racial equity. I bring a deep level of knowledge of what the district had implemented and of the training principals received through the years because that work was generated by my team. For better or worse, my name is affiliated with equity in the district. In this role, I was also in a position of power and my work was very visible; however, I did not supervise principals. I believe that cultural proficiency and equity is the foundational work of every school leader and must be present in every aspect of the school's operation. Leaders in diverse school districts have a responsibility to be leaders for cultural proficiency and equity to serve their schools well.

To reduce bias in selecting leaders to participate in the study, I used the 2019 State School Survey to identify six principals who had staff and students who rated their cultural responsiveness between a 5.5 and 9 on a 10-point scale. The scores suggest that staff and students have a favorable perception of how the school of these principals demonstrates cultural responsiveness. This data source eliminated the likelihood that I selected schools that I have a relationship with or whose equity and cultural proficiency work I deemed was exemplary. Schools at the top of the scale were not selected because those schools were some of the least diverse in terms of student demographics.

I used a semi-structured interview to engage the six elementary school principals. Patton (2015) described naturalistic inquiry as an approach that focuses on discovery and minimizes the researcher's manipulation of the study setting and places no prior constraints on what the outcomes of the research will be. Non-biased, open-ended questions allowed principals to share their experiences and let their stories unfold naturally. An empathic stance during interviewing, in essence, is understanding a person's situation and perspective without judging the person and

communicating that understanding with authenticity to build rapport, trust, and openness (Patton, 2015). During the interviews, I demonstrated an empathic neutrality and mindfulness stance, which Patterns described, so that the principals could share commonalities in their lived experiences as leaders for equity. Rapport building was established throughout the data gathering process by using an inviting tone, reminding principals that their participation was voluntary, and communicating how their participation in this study would help the system better prepare leaders to address cultural proficiency and equity. I knew four of the six leaders well. One leader grew up in my neighborhood. We attended church together and our fathers worked together. I also went to college with his older brother. One principal I supported as a member of the development team when she was an assistant principal. The other two principals I worked with over my 20 years in the system. The other two leaders I did not know as well, but because of my position in the district they knew me. I used these connections to put each participant at ease by engaging in general conversations to catch up or to see how the reopening of schools was going for them before jumping into the actual interview. I also provided them with an overview of the interview, so they felt comfortable with the process. More importantly, I communicated that I wanted to learn from their experiences and knowledge base.

Research Questions

Maxwell (2014) stressed that in qualitative research, it is important to frame your research questions so that they are reflective of the particular population or context being studied. Thus, phenomenologists focus on how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world and in so doing develop a worldview. The purpose of the study is to explore the link between principals' level of cultural proficiency and their ability to identify and address institutional barriers to interrupt inequitable practices and

provide access and opportunity for students of color. The following research questions informed the study.

R Q 1. What influenced principals to lead through the lens of equity and cultural proficiency?

R Q 2. How do principals categorize their cultural proficiency and equity stance? What shaped their approach to equity and cultural proficiency?

R Q 3. How does the level of a principal's cultural proficiency and equity influence their leadership of equity in their buildings?

- a) What do principals identify as institutional barriers for access and opportunities to learn for students of color?
- b) How do principals address these institutional barriers for access and opportunities to learn for students of color?

Participants

The study took place in a large urban/suburban school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The district is one of the largest and most diverse in the country with a student population of 165,000 students. The students in the district were diverse, as were the communities in which the 208 schools were situated. There are noticeable wealth gaps in the district, with 33.5% of students qualifying for free and reduced meals. The district is considered to be high achieving, but academic success is still predictable by race and socioeconomic status similar to other school districts in the country. Participants were selected using the 2019 State School Survey. I further narrowed the number of potential principals by identifying elementary schools with teacher and student ratings of the school's cultural responsiveness that is congruent within a .3 range on the survey. This resulted in 11 principals qualified to participate in the study.

Six principals who selected to participate and five who did not choose to participate in the study. Data from the State School Survey is organized into an elementary/middle, and high school data set. I used elementary school data which provided me with the largest number of schools to select from and it represented the most diverse student population. Principals participated in a semi-structured interview and a focus group. There is some risk to participants during the focus group because of the likelihood of some of the principals knowing one another. This could slow down the process of sharing their lived experiences until they warm up. As the researcher, I worked to create an inviting space to reduce any apprehension and reminded them of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation in the research project.

Table 5

Summary of Participants' Demographic and Background Information

	Mr. Anderson	Ms. Grant	Mr. Garrett	Ms. Rene	Mr. Calvin	Ms. Lee
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Age range	45-54	45-54	55-64	35-44	55-64	45-54
Race/Ethnicity	Black/African American	White	White	Black/African American	White	White
Education	Master's	Master's	Master's	Master's	Master's	Master's
Years in Education	20-29	20-29	20-29	20-29	40-49	30-39
Teaching Background	Elementary School	Elementary School	Elementary School	Elementary School	Elementary School	Early Childhood/Elementary Education
Years as a Leader	10-19	1-9	20-20	10-19	20-29	1-9
Leadership Preparation Program	Douglass College	Douglass College	Hope Franklin University	Douglass College	Midwest University	Douglass College
Program focused on CP or Equity	No	No	No	No	No	Yes

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

This phenomenological study examined the experiences of a principal's leadership in fostering a school culture focused on equity and cultural proficiency. As the primary investigator, I identified schools based on the staff's and students' responses that reflected their perceptions of the schools' cultural responsiveness using the 2019 the State School Survey. The survey collected data from staff and students from grade 5 for elementary schools and from grader 8 for middle schools. Scores are grouped by elementary and middle school schools and secondary. For this study, I used data from the elementary school data set. Scores for the 2019 State School Survey displayed in Table 5 ranged from greater than 9, indicating students had a most favorable perception of the topic/school, to less than or equal to 2 indicating student had a least favorable perception of the topic or school. I also used the teacher's responses from the 2019 State School Survey using the same ranges as those for the student responses. For this phenomenological study, I selected schools where there was congruency between how students and staff rated the cultural responsiveness as mostly favorable (i.e., in the 5.5 to 9 band). This band crated the greatest opportunity to identify schools that most reflected the demographics of the school district.

Table 6

State School Survey

Topic Range	Benchmark Level and Interpretation
Greater than 9	Most favorable perception of the topic/school
Greater than 5.5 to 9	More favorable perception of the topic/school
Greater than 2 to 5.5	Less favorable perception of the topic/school
Less than or Equal to 2	Least favorable perception of the topic/school

I identified 10 elementary principals for the study with the goal of selecting six principals to participate in the study, fill out a demographic questionnaire (Appendix A), and provide an artifact that represented their leadership of cultural proficiency and equity. The six selected principals were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview on Zoom. Interviews were conducted virtually as mandated by the institution's IRB because of the pandemic.

I created an interview protocol (Appendix B) that included questions that allowed principals to reflect on their experiences leading for cultural proficiency and equity to interrupt institutional barriers for students of color. Patton (2002) maintained that the only way to understand the lived experience of a person is to observe participants and to engage them in in-depth interviews. I also had the principals identify their cultural proficiency level using descriptions from Bennett's (1986) Intracultural Developmental Inventory (Appendix C) and their stance on equity using the Equity Stances (Newlin, n.d.) (Appendix D).

Each principal was given a pseudonym to conceal their identities, and the semi-structured interviews were recorded in Zoom. The interviews were transcribed and coded using the individual responses and patterns that emerge from multiple interviews. Demographic information was collected from principals that included the number of years a principal, area of the county, student demographic, race, gender, administrator preparation program, and school location. As a follow up to the semi-structured interviews I invited the principals to participate in a focus group to discuss the artifacts they provided to demonstrate their leadership of cultural proficiency and equity in their schools. Discussion of themes identified as a result of the analysis of the transcripts from the semi-structured interviews also took place during the focus group. Since all of the principals were elementary school leaders, it was very likely that they would

know other participants in the group and there could be some risk being uncomfortable discussing their practice with their peers.

Pilot Test

To ensure reliability and minimal bias in the study, I selected two principals from elementary schools scoring at the greater than 9 or the 2 to 5.5 range on the State School Survey to participate in a pilot study. I identified one elementary principal who had recently retired to pilot test my protocol and questions. Elementary Principals participated in an hour-long semi-structured interview. This allowed me to test my interview protocol to ensure clarity of the interview questions.

I reached out to two principals to participate in a test pilot of my interview protocol. One principal had students and staff who gave the school a rating of 10 in the state survey and a recently retired principal who would have qualified for the study since staff and students' ratings were between 5.5 and 9 on the state survey. After the first pilot interview, I realized that I needed to be more specific when I referred to equity in my interview questions. The first principal talked about equity through the lens of special education so I realized that I would need to be explicit about framing the responses through racial equity. The other upgrade I made was to the self-anchoring scale. I got confused with the sequence of the order of the past, current, and future state questions so this was remedied by bolding key words, so I didn't get confused during the interviews. I held the second pilot interview, and the upgrades helped the interviewee focus responses through a racial equity lens. I also was able to test out the Jamboard website to see if my sorting activities would work. Jamboard is an interactive whiteboard designed for collaboration. I used the notes feature to create virtual post-it notes with the statements that corresponded with the Intercultural Development Inventory and Equity Stance continuums. I

struggled with how to do a sort virtually, but then one day, while using Jamboard during a training session, I realized this would work for my interviews.

Researcher's Role

The role of the researcher in this phenomenological study was to position myself to gain an understanding of the influence a principal's leadership had in fostering a school culture focused on equity and cultural proficiency. As the researcher, I fostered the conditions that allowed principals to share their experiences of leading for cultural proficiency and equity in their diverse schools and pulled out additional information to capture their full experience.

Data Analysis

I created a code book that reflected the theoretical framework, data from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were analyzed using a combination of open and focused coding to pull out themes from individual participant's responses. Open coding was used to identify themes from individual principal's transcripts. Focused coding using the data collected from the interviews, demographic surveys and sorts were then used to identify themes among the participants responses to the research questions. Patton (2015) stated that that initial coding seeks to identify what is happening in the data and enables the researcher to label data. The codes were then used to compare and sort larger sets of data that elevated the principals' stories focused on the rewards and challenges as leaders of cultural proficiency and equity. During the open coding phase, I identified words that individual principals used to describe their lived experiences. To capture this data, I created a word document that aligned my research questions with the questions from the semi-structured interview protocol. These data were then color coded, and alphabetical coding aligned with the code book to capture patterns in each participant's data. A capture document was created for each individual participant. For the second phase of coding, I

used focused coding to combine patterns from the open coding representing themes found among the participants. I created a second capture sheet with additional space to capture the additional each participant’s coded responses as I realized it was more helpful for me to see all of the participants’ responses in one document. This process helped me identify patterns that arose consistently during the interviews to describe principals’ experiences leading equity and cultural proficiency work. Through this process, I identified similar themes. These themes helped bring clarity about the work of principals in leading culturally responsiveness and equity. I triangulated the coded data with the documents principals submitted that reflected their cultural proficiency and equity leadership and identified the level of cultural responsiveness from responses on Bennet’s (1986) inventory (see Appendix C). I also identified their equity stance in practice (see Appendix D) and used the information on the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A). The themes from the semi-structured interview (see Appendix B) and the focus group discussion (see Appendix K) along with review of sample documents supplied by the principals were all included in the triangulation of data. Table 7 includes a matrix showing the relationship of the instruments and analyses to the research questions.

Table 7

Research Matrix

	Research Questions	Participants	Data Sources	Analysis
RQ1	1.What do principals do to lead through the lens of equity and cultural proficiency?	Six elementary principals	State School Survey Demographic Questionnaire Q# 12, 13, 14, 14a	Identify school leaders scoring between 5.5-9 on the school survey Identify patterns between participant demographics and their interruption of institutional barriers

RQ2	2. How do principals categorize their cultural proficiency and equity stance? What shapes their approach to equity and cultural proficiency?	Self-identification Sort	Identify patterns between Cultural proficiency and equity stances
		Intercultural Development Inventory	Open coding of transcripts to identify themes
		Equity Stance Categories	Focused coding to identify common themes
		Semi-Structured Interview	
		Q # 1, 1a, 2, 3, 4, 4a	Focus Group Discussion
		Evidence and Artifacts of their cultural proficiency and equity work	

	Research Questions	Participants	Sampling and Instruments	Analysis
RQ 3	3. How does the level of a principal's cultural proficiency and equity influence their leadership of equity in their buildings?		Semi-Structured Interview Q #7, 8, 8a, 8b, 9, 9a 10, 10a, 10 b, 10 c, 11, 11a, 11b, 11c, 11d	Open coding of transcripts to identify themes
	a) What do principals identify as institutional barriers for access and opportunities to learn for students of color?			Focused coding to identify common themes
	b) How do principals address these institutional barriers for access and opportunity for students of color?			

Boundaries/Delimitations

For this study, I elected to focus on elementary school principals because of the nature of their roles; they are more hands-on with leading professional learning and directly engaging with staff. The role of secondary school leaders is different and more removed than that of the elementary and middle school principals. I also believed that elementary school are formative years for children, and if we can create inclusive schools at this level, then we may be able to mitigate the migration of students to connect with other peers that looked like them in middle and high school. It is also a challenge to accurately identify someone's worldview on equity and cultural proficiency as these data were collected by self-reporting. This study provided me with a snapshot of principals leading this work during a pandemic and racial unrest in the nation. During this time, principals' engagement with staff and students was different than during other more settled times. This study took place as Americans and global citizens participated in uprisings across the country and the world decrying systematic racism against African Americans and Asian Americans. School leaders had a heightened awareness of inequities present in society as a result of this racial awakening. These circumstances undoubtedly impacted the perceptions of the participating principals who led buildings during this time. Data collection for this study took place using email, Google forms, and virtual interviews. This was an efficient way to connect with participants because they did not have to come to me. The major challenge with conducting research during this time was that schedules were more challenging than in pre-COVID times and there was an increase in email overall, so I had to send several reminders to participants.

Trustworthiness

Creswell and Creswell (2018) define trustworthiness as using multiple validity procedures and strategies to check the accuracy of the findings. Triangulation of the data was used to build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell & Creswell 2018). I triangulated the demographic data, identified levels of cultural proficiency and equity, responses to the open-ended questions, and evidence or artifacts of their cultural proficiency and equity work to ensure the accuracy of the findings and confirming my findings as being reliable and objective. Each data source reinforced the findings of the other data sources to tell the principals' lived experiences and their efforts to lead through the lens of equity and cultural proficiency. The study examined the practices of six principals from a large school district therefore, larger studies will have to be conducted in the future to identify how these findings would play out in another context and at the secondary level. The findings shed light on what leading for equity and cultural proficiency look like in a diverse urban/suburban school and how these leaders operationalized this work.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the link between a principal's level of cultural proficiency and the ability to identify and address institutional barriers to interrupt inequitable practices to allow access and opportunity for students of color. Principals were selected based on the State School Survey using the alignment between how staff and students responded to the survey question on a school's cultural responsiveness. Demographic data and evidence or artifacts of the principal's leadership around cultural proficiency and equity work in their schools were also collected. Six principals each participated in a semi-structured interview and a focus group to reflect on their work to remove institutional barriers for students

of color. Data were analyzed using open and focused coding to identify themes. Chapter 4 will provide an overview of the study, a description of the participants' school settings, and the study findings. Chapter 5 will present the practical implications and suggestions for future research and a reflection of my learning as a result of this process.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the link between principals' level of cultural proficiency and their ability to identify and address institutional barriers to interrupt inequitable practices to allow increased access and opportunity for their students of color. The study employed a phenomenological method to understand the lived experience of principals whose staff and students identified their school as culturally responsive on a state survey. This approach provided the researcher with rich data study of what these principals did to foster school environments that supported their diverse learners' access and opportunities.

Phenomenological approach was best suited to understand and empathize with the ways leaders make sense of their journey to lead with the lens of cultural proficiency and equity and how it informs their work (Patton, 2002, 2015). Creswell and Creswell (2018) described phenomenological research as a qualitative strategy used to analyze an experience reported by participants. This method was selected to understand what shaped leaders' approach to cultural proficiency and the influence cultural proficiency has on their leadership and how it allows them to identify institutional barriers and interrupt inequities. One of the desired outcomes of this study was to inform how principal development programs both pre and in-service are oriented through the lens of cultural proficiency and racial equity to better serve diverse learners. A second outcome was to inform how leaders operationalized cultural proficiency and racial equity work to remove barriers for students of color.

Chapter 4 contains the analysis of the transcribed notes from semi-structured interviews which consist of 14 questions aligned to the research questions along with responses from two sorting activities (see Appendix B). One sort identified participants' level of cultural proficiency (see Appendix C) and the second identified their equity stance (see Appendix D). The interviews

were recorded in Zoom and the video, audio, and written transcription files were saved to an encrypted folder on my laptop. This same process was used to secure the transcripts from the focus group. Data from the demographic survey (see Appendix A) was captured using Google forms along with an artifact provided by each participant to demonstrate their leadership in cultural proficiency and equity. Open and focused coding was employed to analyze the transcripts from the semi-focused interviews and focus group discussion. In addition, several other coding methods including process and theoretical coding were used to triangulate the data. Apriori coding was used to analyze the descriptions of the principals' lived experiences through the lens of historical foundations. The key terms identified in Chapter 1 were also considered during the analysis along with the categories identified in the literature review. Theoretical coding was used to identify elements from the study's theoretical framework which included Khalifa's (2018) framework and CRT. Finally, process coding was used to analyze Bennet's (1986) Intercultural Development Inventory Categories and Equity Stance (Newlin, n.d.). Data from the demographic survey (see Attachment A) was used to look for patterns in how principals approached their cultural proficiency and equity leadership.

Research Questions

The study draws on research on critical consciousness, cultural proficiency, critical race theory, and culturally responsive leadership. The goal of this research was to identify what principals do to interrupt oppressive systems that serve as barriers for diverse learners. The study addressed the following research questions:

Research Question 1. What influenced principals to lead through the lens of equity and cultural proficiency?

Research Question 2. How do principals categorize their cultural proficiency and equity stance? What shaped their approach to equity and cultural proficiency?

Research Question 3. How does the level of a principal's cultural proficiency and equity influence their leadership of equity in their buildings?

- a) What do principals identify as institutional barriers for access and opportunities to learn for students of color?
- b) How do principals address these institutional barriers for access and opportunities to learn for students of color?

Data Collection

This section will provide an overview of the phases of the collection of data and the tools and methodology used in this study. In addition, I will share adjustments I made to the protocol based on my pilot survey and having to navigate virtual interactions due to COVID-19. The data from the study will be in the form of case studies of the six principals and the themes that emerged from their lived experiences.

Phase 1

Data collection for this research study was collected in four phases. During Phase 1, participants were identified using the State School Assessment. Students and staff rate their school on a scale from 1-10 through multiple lenses of school culture including cultural responsiveness. The Maryland State School Assessment data were downloaded from the Maryland State Department of Education website in the form of two Excel documents. One contained staff responses and one had student responses. These data were filtered by county and then to identify only elementary schools. The staff and student data were then filtered using only scores ranging from 5.5 to 9.0. Finally, the data were filtered, and color coded to identify staff

and students scores correlated at the .3 range at the same school. A total of 11 schools were identified using this process.

Phase 2

The IRB request (see Attachment E) was submitted to Douglass College in March followed by submission to the school district which was approved in late April. As part of the district's protocol, an official letter (see Attachment F) was sent to the 11 schools that met the selection criteria. Principals at these schools were invited via email to participate in the study (see Attachment G). The email invitation included a brief description of the study, the time commitment required of participants, and a consent form. The email also indicated how they could terminate their participation at any time and how confidentiality would be maintained. Included in the invitation was the link to the demographic survey. Once principals confirmed their participation in the study, I sent them a link to Sign Up Genius to have principals identify a date and time for their semi-structured interview. This group of six principals provided me with a purposeful sample that allowed for information-rich responses to the research questions (Patton, 2002).

The demographic survey comprised the second phase of the data collection process (see Attachment A). The survey took approximately ten minutes and gave principals the opportunity to provide demographic information such as race, age, and gender as well as some background on their leadership preparation programs. They were also asked to select a pseudonym that was used to identify them throughout the study. Principals also uploaded an example/artifact that represented their leadership of cultural proficiency and equity.

Phase 3

This phase of the data collection included the semi-structured interview. This phase had four components which included two sorts one to identify their level of cultural proficiency (see Attachment B). Principals used the Jamboard interactive whiteboard tool to read through 5 statements that represented various positions on cultural proficiency and their stance on equity. The next component was the semi-structured interview questions (see Attachment B). As part of the semi-structured interview, principals engaged with three self-anchoring scale questions to describe the current, past, and future state of their cultural proficiency and equity leadership (see Attachment B, questions 7-9). The six semi-structured interviews were held on Zoom and subsequently transcribed using the transcription feature in Zoom.

Phase 4

The fourth phase of the data collection included an hour-long focus group which consisted of following up on questions that emerged from the semi-structured interview along with a discussion about their shared leadership artifacts that represented their cultural proficiency and equity leadership (see Appendix K). The focus group with three participants was also held on Zoom and the conversations were transcribed using the transcription feature in Zoom. Data for this study is presented by providing a demographic data. This data includes race, gender, age, education attainment, number of years as a principal, and staff and student demographics. The leadership context for each of the six principals in the study will identify their leadership of cultural proficiency, and equity stance which will be followed by themes and connections to the research.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data for this research was analyzed using a code book that allowed the researcher to analyze the data from multiple lenses to capture the depth of the principals' experiences. Themes from the historical foundation, terms, and literature review were coded using a priori coding. Each theme was given a letter from the alphabet and a color code for each theme. Theoretical coding was used to capture connections to Khalifa's (2018) theoretical framework, culturally responsive leadership, and critical race theory. Both categories were color coded as well. Finally, process coding was used to examine the Intercultural Development Inventory and the Equity Stance sort.

To organize the data, the researcher created a Word document that organized the interview data into a table by the research questions and the corresponding interview questions (see Attachment H). The transcribed notes were copied and pasted into the document. I created a separate Word table for each participant. Data were then analyzed using color coding aligned to the codebook (see Attachment I). The transcribed notes were also annotated to identify patterns. The individual forms were reviewed to identify individual and cross-participant patterns. The data were then placed into a summary form that organized the data by research questions and interview questions in a Word document (see Attachment J). This allowed the researcher to analyze the data across all six participants to identify patterns and anomalies in the descriptions of their experiences. This analysis produced the themes that emerged from the data and also identified participants' unique experiences based on race, gender, and context.

Study Context

The study took place in a large school district in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The district boasts over 200 schools, 25,000 staff members, and over 160,000 students.

Schools in the district had implemented distance learning starting in March of 2020. This study took place during the transition of students who opted to return to in-person learning for the remainder of the school year. Small groups of students receiving special educational services returned to 68 schools in early March 2021. The next set of students returned in mid-March with the remaining students phasing in through the month of April 2021. Each of the interviews took place on Zoom at the convenience of the participating principals. During this time principals were working both remotely and in their school buildings. The principals in this study led in a variety of different school contexts. There were two schools, Standing Bear and Grace Lee Boggs Schools, that were funded as comprehensive elementary schools. This meant that they were not provided additional funding from the district because of the higher socioeconomic status of the families of enrolled students. Harriet Tubman and Silvia Rivera Elementary Schools were the two focus schools in the study. These schools were provided additional staffing in the form of focus and academic intervention teachers and additional paraprofessional support based on the number of students living in poverty. Two schools in the study, Ben E. Mays Elementary and James Peck Elementary schools are funded as Title 1 schools. These schools received additional federal funding based on the number of students living below the Federal poverty level.

The next section will introduce each of the principals in the study and their context for leading cultural proficiency and racial equity work in their schools. The introductions will present demographic information on each principal, school context, and student and staff demographics. The introductions will also address research question 2 on how principals categorize the cultural proficiency and equity stance. The introductions of the principals will be followed by a presentation of the themes. Theme 1: The Awakening: Living and Leading in a

racialized World will focus on how principals developed their awareness of cultural proficiency and racial equity. This theme aligns with research question 1 which asks what influenced principals to lead through the lens of equity and cultural proficiency. Theme 2 Getting started: Jumping into the Deep End of the Equity Pool will address sub question (a) which asks, what do principals identify as institutional barriers for access and opportunities for students of color. Theme 3: Opening Gates and Building Bridges: We are the Designers of the Planks will address sub question (b) which asks, how do principals address institutional barriers for access and opportunity to learning for students of color. Finally, theme 4: Walking Through the World in Different Skins: The Intersection of Race and Gender will address research question 3, how does the level of a principal's cultural proficiency and equity influence their leadership of equity in the building. These themes provide insight into the lived experiences of principals who are striving to foster an inclusive school environment.

Mirrors and Windows: Reflective Summary of Leadership and Context

Mr. Anderson

Mr. Anderson, an African American male in his early 50s, is the principal of Harriet Tubman Elementary School. The school sits in the middle of a lower middle-class neighborhood with a mix of single-family dwellings, townhomes, and apartments. Mr. Anderson has over 20 years of experience and has been the principal of the school for 5 years. Harriet Tubman has a student population of 594 students. The student body is made up of 44.6% Hispanic students, 27.4% Black students, 10.9% White students, and 6.1% two or more races. Table 7 provides a summary of demographics of the student enrollment at Harriet Tubman Elementary School.

Table 8*Harriet Tubman Elementary School Student Demographics (Piscataway School District data)*

2020-2021 Official Enrollment Principal: Mr. Anderson											
	% Gender			% Racial/Ethnic Composition							
	% Total	Female	Male	X	AM	AS	BL	HI	PI	WH	M U
All Students		46.6	53.4	≤5%	≤5%	10.9	27.4	44.6	≤5%	10.9	5.9
ESOL	19.9	8.2	11.6	≤5%	≤5%	≤5%	≤5%	15.3	≤5%	≤5%	≤5%
FARMS	50.2	23.2	26.9	≤5%	≤5%	≤5%	14.6	27.9	≤5%	≤5%	≤5%
Special Education	16.0	<5.0	11.3	≤5%	≤5%	≤5%	≤5%	7.4	≤5%	≤5%	≤5%
Total Students:											594

The school employs a total of 86.1 staff members, with 59.8 classified as professional staff and 26.3 servings as support professionals. The demographics of the teaching staff which includes teachers and administrators made up of 75.4% White, 7.7% Black, 7.7% Asian, 6.2% Hispanic, and 3.1% are two or more races. In addition, 84.1% of the staff are female. Table 8 provides demographics of the staff at the school.

Table 9*Harriet Tubman Elementary School Staff Demographics (Piscataway School District data)*

2020-2021 Official Staff Diversity							
% Racial/Ethnic Composition					% Gender		Staff
AS	BL	HI	WH	MU	Female	Male	
7.7	7.7	6.2	75.4	3.1	83.1	16.9	59.8
14.3	20.0	31.4	34.3	0.0	77.1	22.9	26.3
Total Staff:							86.1

One of the ways the school district equitably funds schools is to allocate more resources to schools who have higher populations for students receiving free and reduced meals. Harriet

Tubman Elementary School is one of over 30 schools in the district funded as a Focus school. Harriet Tubman Elementary School has smaller class sizes, an academic support teacher, focus teachers, and a focus paraeducators to make up for the impact of poverty. In addition to focus school funding, the school provides special services to the following: English as a Second Language (ESOL) services to 23.7% of the students, free and reduced meals (FARMS) to 41.5% of the students, and special educational services to 19.0% of the students.

Mr. Anderson has a master's degree and administrative and supervisory certificate from Douglass College. Mr. Anderson reported that his leadership program did not include content related to cultural proficiency or equity as part of the program. He has been an administrator for over 10 years. Prior to becoming an administrator, Mr. Anderson was an upper elementary grade teacher. He is also a second-generation principal in the district. His father was a principal and director in the central office. As part of the semi-structured interview, participants were asked to identify their level of cultural proficiency and equity stance using the categories on the Inter Development Inventory (IDI), (Bennett, 1986) and the Equity Stance (Newlin, n.d.). Mr. Anderson identified adaptation as the descriptor that best represented his cultural proficiency leadership. Adaptation refers to the ability to respond and adjust behaviors in a culturally responsive way. This is the highest level on the scale indicating that he believes that diversity is a strength. Mr. Anderson's leadership of cultural proficiency aligns with the adaptive stance from the IDI categories. Mr. Anderson discussed the importance of cultural proficiency and equity stating it was important for leaders to see diversity as a strength and the potential in every student. He also noted that "If we are really teaching the whole child, you have to acknowledge who they are." He also positioned this work as an opportunity to learn by reflecting that there is something we can learn from the child and their families. Mr. Anderson noted that "cultural

proficiency means that you are in tune with kids and that their culture is a major part of who they are.” Mr. Anderson’s reflections of his beliefs about cultural proficiency demonstrates that, for him, cultural proficiency is about learning and adapting to see the whole child and their families.

Mr. Anderson’s equity stance was viewing equity as a personalized opportunity. This stance is characterized by the school guaranteeing that an academic program is designed to enable each student to demonstrate performance that meets or exceeds a common high level of achievement in a reasonable length of time. Mr. Anderson acknowledged that, “As educators we are part of a larger institution our system that has a history of racism that continue to play out in schools and society.” Because of the permanence of racism in our society Mr. Anderson commented that, “I have to make equitable decisions.” He described equity as ensuring that every child gets what they need. He described how he used his equity lens to question his staff at problem solving meetings to push them beyond responding in the same old ways. Equity was also how Mr. Anderson built relationships with students and families. Mr. Andersson discussed that the equity work that he engaged his staff in required them to be able to transfer their knowledge to children by providing them with clear expectations. Mr. Anderson used his equity lens to ensure that his students, staff, and families got what they needed to be successful while challenging the status quo. Mr. Anderson shared a training slideshow representing his leadership of cultural proficiency and equity. This aligns with the adaptation from the IDI tool that he selected as most representative of his leadership. Adaptation is the ability to respond and adapt behaviors and the slide show presentation focused on building trust with students and how to create an environment that avoids triggering the flight, fright, flee, and appease stance when students and adults are threatened.

Ms. Grant

Ms. Grant is a white female in her early fifties and the principal of Grace Lee Boggs Elementary School. This is Ms. Grant’s first year as a principal. The school is nestled in a predominately middle-class neighborhood consisting of single-family homes. Ms. Grant is Nationally Board Certified educator with a master’s degree. She has been an educator at the elementary school level for over 20 years. Ms. Grant received her leadership training at Douglass College and identified that cultural proficiency and equity was not part of her leadership program. Her experience aligns with the research findings that few leaders feel prepared to lead cultural proficiency and equity work in schools. Grace Lee Boggs Elementary School has an enrollment of 398 which makes it a relatively small school compared to many of the district’s other elementary schools. The demographics of the student enrollment included 41.5% who were White, 18.1.% Asian, 17.3% Hispanic, and 15.1% Black. Special services included ESOL services for 18.1%, FARMS for 21.6%, and special educational services for 8.8%. Table 9 includes the student enrollment statistic.

Table 10

Grace Lee Boggs Elementary School Student Demographics (Piscataway School District data)

2020-2021 Official Enrollment Principal: Ms. Grant											
	% Total	% Gender			% Racial/Ethnic Composition						
		Female	Male	X	AM	AS	BL	HI	PI	WH	MU
All Students			55.8	<5.0	<5.0	18.1	15.1	17.3	<5.0	41.5	7.5
ESOL	18.1	10.3	<5.0	<5.0	6.0	<5.0	6.5	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
FARMS	21.6	11.6	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0		7.3	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
Special Education	9.8	8.8	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
Total Students:											398

There were 46.2 staff member positions at the school, 31 teacher-level positions and 15 supporting services staff positions which includes teachers and administrators. The teacher demographics consisted of 77% White, 11.4% Asian, 8.6% Black, and 2.9% Hispanic. In addition, 88.6% of the teaching staff was female. Grace Lee Boggs is considered a non-focus school because of its low number of students receiving FARMS. Non-focus schools have larger class sizes and no additional academic intervention teachers. Table 10 displays the staff information.

Table 11

Grace Lee Boggs Elementary School Staff Demographics (Piscataway School District data)

2020-2021 Official Staff Diversity								
	% Racial/Ethnic Composition					% Gender		Total Staff
	AS	BL	HI	WH	MU	Female	Male	
Professional	10.8	8.1	2.7	78.4	0.0	91.9	8.1	32.6
Supporting Services	8.3	25.0	25.0	41.7	0.0	70.8	29.2	15.8
Total Staff:								48.4

Ms. Grant identified adaptation as the characteristic that represents her attitudes towards cultural proficiency. Ms. Grant described how she has to do what she needs to do for her school community so they receive information in ways in which they can understand it. She noted that this is sometimes in conflict with the district’s messaging. It was also important for Ms. Grant to reach out to others as part of her practice to hear other points of view. In this way, she demonstrated vulnerability because she recognized that she does not have all the answers. Ms. Grant also realizes that developing a school culture of cultural proficiency requires flexibility, making adjustments with the understanding that it will not all happen in a year. Ms. Grant’s attitude about cultural proficiency aligned with her practice of adaption to meet the needs of her school community.

Ms. Grant identified her equity stance as students having a personalized opportunity that is well designed and meets their unique needs. Throughout her reflection, she emphasized the importance that every student is getting/receiving instruction and getting their social emotional needs met. She stressed that this response to student needs would be different for every child. Ms. Grant had the same stance when it came to the adults in her school in making sure that their social emotional needs were met. One of the ways that she promoted her equity stance was to take the bias out of the selection process for placing students in advanced classes. To reduce teacher bias, she presented the student achievement data without student names or other identifiers when advocating for placement in accelerated classes. She also set expectations for staff to apply this equity stance as they interacted with students and parents. To ensure that equity was being applied to practice Ms. Grant used observations to monitor staff transfer of professional learning on cultural proficiency and equity into their daily practice. Ms. Grant expressed her beliefs about cultural proficiency and equity work by stating, “Our work is equity work.” Ms. Grant shared her school’s improvement plan as an example of her leadership of cultural proficiency and equity work in her building. This artifact aligns with her equity stance of being a personalized opportunity. The school improvement plan is the way in which she said she infuses equity and cultural proficiency in all aspects of the work of the school. The school improvement plan in the district is framed through the lens of equity and cultural proficiency. The first question leaders need to ask to identify who is not learning enough at the school, district, and national assessments of learning. Once the students are identified student and teacher voice data is collected to design interventions that will address the opportunity gaps in mathematics and reading achievement. Across the district, the school improvement plan is referred to as the number one equity tool.

Mr. Garrett

Mr. Garrett is a White male over 55 and the principal of Standing Bear Elementary School. The school is located in section of the district that was mostly family farms and single-family homes, but because of development it has become more suburban and more diverse. Mr. Garrett has over 20 years of experience as an administrator and Standing Bear Elementary School has been his only principalship. He attended Hope Franklin University for his leadership preparation program. He indicated that the program did not discuss cultural proficiency nor racial equity as part of his learning experience. The school has 379 students that represent the following demographics: 42.8% are Asian, 25.1% are White, 15.6% are Black, and 11.2% are Hispanic. Students receiving special services included 8.9% ESOL, 8.4% FARMS, and 14.8% special education services. Table 11 includes the demographics of the students.

Table 12

Standing Bear Elementary Student Demographics (Piscataway School District data)

2020-2021 Official Enrollment Principal: Mr. Garrett												
	%	% Gender			% Racial/Ethnic Composition							
		Female	Male	X	AM	AS	BL	HI	PI	WH	MU	
All Students		52.8	47.2	<5.0	<5.0	41.2	17.2	13.2	<5.0	23.0	<5.0	
ESOL	9.8	<5.0	5.5	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	
FARMS	13.5	8.4	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0		<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	
Special Education	13.2	<5.0	8.7	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	
											Students	379

Standing Bear Elementary School is considered a comprehensive school and receives no additional staff or reduction in class size. The school has a total of 52.2 staff positions, 35.5 are professional staff positions which includes teachers and administrators, and 16.7 positions are supporting services staff which include paraprofessionals and building services workers. The demographics of the professional staff are 92.5% White, 5.0% Asian, and 2.5 Black identifying

Standing Bear as the least diverse school in this study. Women make up 82.5% of the professional staff. Table 12 includes the statistics of the school staff.

Table 13

Standing Bear Elementary Staff Demographics (Piscataway School District data)

	2020-2021 Official Staff Diversity							Total Staff
	% Racial/Ethnic Composition					% Gender		
	AS	BL	HI	WH	MU	Female	Male	
Professional	8.1	2.7	0.0	89.2	0.0	86.5	13.5	34.3
Supporting Services	19.0	23.8	4.8	47.6	4.8	76.2	23.8	16.6
								Total Staff 50.9

Mr. Garrett identified his leadership through the lens of cultural proficiency as adaptation. This is reflected in his belief that, “You have to address culture. If you, don’t you are missing out. You are not going to maximize kid’s potential.” Mr. Garrett expressed the belief that you have to be intentional and develop your lens. He stated that you have to communicate your vision and, like other leaders in the study, he used questioning with staff to encourage them to critically reflect even when he knew the answer. Vulnerability was also a theme that came up in his interview regarding it being a way for leaders to say they “don’t know” as a way to use this work to collectively learn and seek out answers.

Mr. Garrett’s identified his equity stance as an ongoing equal opportunity. In this stance, the school opens access to all academic programs regardless of past academics or other factors. While this stance creates access, it does not guarantee equitable outcomes for students. This stage of equity is a lower level of response because at its core this stance provides every student with access, but it does not differentiate to meet individual student’s needs. One of the ways Mr. Garret engages his staff in conversations focused on equity is by using the Evidence of Equity questions developed by the district’s Equity Unit. He shared that he uses these questions to

ensure that the leadership team is utilizing an equity lens in their planning and decision-making processes. “I refer to the Evidence of Equity questions that the Equity Unit put out at every one of my leadership team meetings.” “This tool will help us considering the impact of our decisions.” The Evidence of Equity questions, if consistently used, will help to move Mr. Garrett up the Equity Stance continuum as the questions will force conversations that move beyond access and towards equitable outcomes for students.

Ms. Rene

Ms. Rene is a 40-year-old African American woman who is the principal of Silvia Rivera Elementary School which is located in a suburban area of the county. Ms. Rene has over 10 years of leadership experience. Silvia Rivera Elementary School has long been highly acclaimed for student achievement. The school opened in 1990 with a majority White student body. The school is now majority minority with White students making up only 17.0% of the school’s population. Silvia Rivera Elementary School is also funded as a Focus school which receives additional staffing and has reduced class size. Silvia Rivera Elementary School was her first and only principalship. Ms. Rene received her leadership training at Douglass College, and she indicated that cultural proficiency and racial equity was not a part of the program. It is important to note that this is the largest school in the study with a student body of 800 students.

The student demographics of the school consist of 27.6% Asian, 29.4% Black, 17.0% White, and 18.5% Hispanic. Students receiving special services at the school are as follows, 17.3% ESOL, 23.6% receive FARMS, and 9.1% of students receive special educational services.

Table 14

Silvia Rivera Elementary School Student Demographics (Piscataway School District data)

2020-2021 Official Enrollment: Principal: Mr. Rene										
%	%Gender		% Racial/Ethnic Composition							
	Total	Female	Male	X	AM	AS	BL	HI	PI	WH

All Students	46.1	53.9	<5.0	<5.0	27.6	29.4	18.5	<5.0	17.0	7.5
ESOL	14.3	5.6	8.6	<5.0	<5.0	7.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
FRMS	29.8	14.3	15.5	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0		<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
Special Education	10.1	<5.0	6.8	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
									Total Students	800

There are 72 staff positions at Silvia Rivera Elementary School with 53.3 identified as professional teaching staff and 18.1 as supporting services. The professional teaching staff demographics are made up of 83.1% White, 7.7% Black, 4.6% Hispanic, and 3.1% Asian with 87.7% of the staff being female.

Table 15

Silvia Rivera Elementary School Staff Demographics (Piscataway School District data)

	2020-2021 Official Staff Diversity								Total Staff
	% Racial/Ethnic Composition					% Gender			
	AS	BL	HI	WH	MU	Female	Male		
Professional	3.1	7.7	4.6	83.1	1.5	87.7	12.3	56.3	
Supporting Services	5.0	25.0	15.0	55.0	0.0	75.0	25.0	17.5	
							Total Staff	73.8	

Ms. Rene identified adaptation as the way she leads for cultural proficiency. The lens of adaptation is reflected in her belief that “If we don’t start in elementary schools in teaching and fostering an atmosphere where students first learn to love themselves and value what they bring to the table and then others being able to value the students, then you can forget it.” This reflection communicates the need for schools to build on students’ strengths and see the value that each one brings to the learning environment. Another example of this stance was the way in which Ms. Rene talked about students making mistakes. She stated, “I am religious, so I look at every mistake as your testimony.” “How can you build from that so that I can interact with a student from a place of love?” Again, this view of seeing students as deserving of a second chance and that adults need to adjust their thinking to see past the mistake and see the student’s

worth is crucial for students to know that adults care. She was the only leader that mentioned religion. As a leader, Ms. Rene wants to foster an environment that adapts to meet students as they come.

Ms. Rene identified her equity stance as equity as an ongoing opportunity. This stance is exemplified by allowing access to academic programs regardless of academic performance. Ms. Rene said her leadership for equity is important because, “We know the world doesn’t value students for color.” “As the mother of two African American girls, I know what they are facing.” She went on to reflect that she thinks about how “how I want my children to be treated” this is her motivation when interacting with the students in her building. She reflected on how, after engaging in some professional learning about the school-to-prison pipeline, “It was like a gut punch” and really make her think. Ms. Rene believes that it is her role to create the conditions where one more child and one more adult is afforded the opportunity. This statement summarizes Ms. Rene’s belief that equity is an ongoing opportunity. Ms. Rene shared an example of a newsletter as the artifact that represented her leadership of cultural proficiency and equity. The newsletter was sent to the staff after the death of George Floyd. She shared that this represented her being vulnerable and sharing her feelings about the events. In this way, she used the newsletter to model critical reflection and creating space for the staff to engage in conversations about systematic racism.

Mr. Calvin

Mr. Calvin is a 60-year-old White male who is the principal of James Peck Elementary School which is an intermediate, Title 1 school with grades 3-5. This was the only intermediate school in the study. Mr. Calvin attended Midwest University for his leadership preparation program. He responded that neither cultural proficiency nor racial equity were a part of his

program. James Peck Elementary School is nestled in one of the more urban sections of the school district. Mr. Calvin has been an administrator for over 20 years with a total of over 40 years as an educator. James Peck Elementary School has 419 students.

The student body is comprised of 64.4% Hispanic students, 16.0% White students, and 12.6% Black students. Special services included special services for 39.6%, receive English as a second language services 73.3% receive FARMS, and 6.9% receive special educational services.

Table 16

James Peck Elementary School Student Demographics (Piscataway School District data)

2020-2021 Official Enrollment: Principal: Mr. Calvin											
	%	%Gender		% Racial/Ethnic Composition							
		Total	Female	Male	X	AM	AS	BL	HI	PI	WH
All Students		47.7	52.3	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	12.6	64.4	<5.0	16.0	<5.0
ESOL	39.6	19.6	20.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	35.8	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
FARMS	73.3	35.6	37.7	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	9.1	60.9	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
Special Education	6.9	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	6.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
Total Students											419

The school has 50.4 staff positions including 37.4 professional positions, and 14.5 supporting services staff positions. The demographics of the staff are made up of 65.0% White, 12.5% Black, 12.5% Asian, 10.0% Hispanic, and 77.5% of the staff are women.

Table 17

James Peck Elementary School Staff Demographics (Piscataway School District data)

2020-2021 Official Staff Diversity								
	% Racial/Ethnic Composition					% Gender		Total Staff
	AS	BL	HI	WH	MU	Female	Male	
Professional	12.5	12.5	10.0	65.0	0.0	77.5	22.5	36.2
Supporting Services	0.0	22.2	44.4	33.3	0.0	77.8	22.2	14.25
Total Staff								50.4

Mr. Calvin identifies adaption as the indicator most closely aligned to his cultural proficiency leadership. Mr. Calvin views cultural proficiency as building community to celebrate diversity by knowing children's stories. He also said, "it was important to think about Maslow's Hierarchy of needs and that students needed to feel they belong." He expanded on this idea by stressing that he wanted staff and parents to feel welcomed in the school. The foundation for his stance of cultural proficiency is rooted from his childhood where he was excluded from going on a field trip because he had holes in his jeans which was all he had to wear. Mr. Calvin's cultural proficiency leadership is focused on building a community where everyone is welcomed.

The equity stance that Mr. Calvin selected that most aligns with his equity stance is viewing equity as an ongoing equal opportunity. This stance focused on access to academic programs regardless of past performance. Mr. Calvin creates pathways for students to reach their goals is one of the ways he used this stance to create access for students. He reflected on how he and his staff engaged in courageous conversations about George Floyd and others in conversations with staff as part of his racial equity focused leadership. Another way he exerted leadership in this area was to have staff critically reflect on what families went through to get here so their children could have a chance. He also focused his work on moving staff from making excuses about poverty and language to have higher expectations for what students could do.

Ms. Lee

Ms. Lee is a White woman in her early 50s and is the principal of Ben E. Mays Elementary School. Ms. Lee has over 30 years of experience as an educator and has been the principal of the school for four years, and this is her first principalship. Ms. Lee attended Douglass College for her leadership preparation program and, unlike other participants who

attended Douglass College, said they did have a focus on cultural proficiency and equity in content related to scheduling, staffing, and systematic change. This might suggest that a focus on cultural proficiency and equity is dependent on who is teaching the course it may also reflect when the degree was granted as equity and diversity may have not been a focus at the time. Ben E. Mays Elementary School sits in the middle of a working-class neighborhood consisting of modest brick homes and apartment complexes. The demographics of the student body are made up of 82.9% Hispanic, 6.6% Black, and 5.2% Asian. Students receiving special services include 57.2% English as a second language services, 79.8% FARMS, and 11.1% special educational services. Table 17 displays the student demographics.

Table 18

Ben E. Mays Elementary School Student Demographics (Piscataway School District data)

2020-2021 Official Enrollment Principal: Ms. Lee											
	%	% Gender		% Racial/Ethnic Composition							
		Female	Male	X	AM	AS	BL	HI	PI	WH	MU
All Students		48.4	51.6	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	5.9	83.8	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
ESOL	52.1			<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	48.6	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
FRMS	83.8			<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	73.6	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
Special Education	10.3	<5.0		<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0	9.2	<5.0	<5.0	<5.0
											Total Students 677

There are 70 professional staff and 30 supporting services staff. The demographics of the professional staff are 74.7% White, 8.0% Asian, 9.3% Hispanic, 8.0% Black. Females make up 90.7% of the professional staff. Table 18 displays the staff demographics.

Table 19

Ben E. Mays Elementary School Staff Demographics (Piscataway School District data)

2020-2021 Official Staff Diversity								
	% Racial/Ethnic Composition					% Gender		Total Staff
	AS	BL	HI	WH	MU	Female	Male	
Professional	8.0	8.0	9.3	74.7	0.0	90.7	9.3	70

Supporting Services	11.4	22.9	34.3	31.4	0.0	85.7	14.3	30
							Total Staff	100

Ms. Lee identified adaptation as her lens for cultural proficiency leadership. This is reflected in the following comments, “Where you come from matters and you bring strengths, regardless of where you come from.” “We also celebrate the holidays and celebrations that students bring that maybe we don’t know about.” In this way, she approaches cultural proficiency as an opportunity to learn and foster a school environment that is inclusive to the diversity that students bring to the school to support their learning and social emotional wellbeing.

Ms. Lee identified her equity stance as equity as a personal opportunity where the school should guarantee each student will receive an academic program that is well-designed to meet the student’s unique needs. “As educators, our job is to provide the students the skills that they need to be successful in school.” Equity as a personal opportunity also played out for Ms. Lee as she reflected on a conversation with a teacher about a student they were considering for an advanced mathematic class. “The teacher stated that he couldn’t do the work and he was inappropriate on the computer by changing the password on the Chromebook.” In this interaction the teacher demonstrated low expectations of the student and focused on what she perceived as misbehavior and did not see his giftedness. Ms. Lee had spoken to the student, and he communicated to her that his mind wonders. “I thought it would be cool,” Ms. Lee reflected that there was no malice on his part just curiosity. The student later got into a magnet program for gifted students. Ms. Lee uses her cultural proficiency lens to foster an inclusive environment where learning is exchanged between students and adults. Through her equity stance, Ms. Lee is working to interrupt the barrier of access based on low expectation and biased views of students.

Ms. Lee shared her school improvement plan as an example of her cultural proficiency and equity work. This provided her with the opportunity to ensure that cultural proficiency and equity created personalized opportunities for students.

Summary

The demographic information, along with responses supports the first half of research question two which focuses on how principals categorize their cultural proficiency and equity stance. This section provides a window into how each of the leaders viewed cultural proficiency and racial equity in their practices. All six principals identified adaption as the descriptor that best represented their cultural proficiency leadership. Adaption is the highest level on the IDI scale and identifies cultural proficiency as behaviors are adjusted to be responsive to the needs people. This situates the adults to foster learning spaces that are responsive to the needs of its students. Mr. Anderson for example acted out this stance as an opportunity to learn from students and families. Ms. Grant implemented this descriptor as doing what she needed to do for her school community. Mr. Garrett also looked at as an opportunity to learn like Mr. Andersson to help them reach their full potential. Ms. Rene also identified adaptation as the descriptor of her cultural proficiency leadership. Ms. Renes operationalized this lens by stressing the importance of creating a school where child love themselves and are valued by others. Ms. Rene also saw adaption as an opportunity to learn, but she added a religious bent on this idea by connecting students' mistakes to their testimony. She used it as an opportunity for them to learn, but also for the teacher to look beyond their mistakes to see their humanity. Mr. Calvin's leadership of cultural proficiency as an opportunity to build community and to know the children's stories.

Another common theme with 5 out of the 6 principals was that none of their leadership programs had a focus on cultural proficiency or equity. This finding is constant with the common

theme in the research that principals reported they received little preparation in the areas that would help them lead diverse schools (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Gardiner, 2006; Gooden & O’Doherty, 2014; Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015; Theoharis, 2008). Figure 3 summarizes the participants’ identification of their cultural proficient and equity stance. How these principals developed their lenses is explored in the next section of this chapter.

Figure 3

Participants Categorization of Their Cultural Proficiency and Equity Stance



Themes

Theme 1. The Awakening: Living and Leading in a Racialized World

The principals in the study each became aware of racial equity through different life experiences. Tuters (2017) conducted research to study what informed, influenced, or motivated elementary educators’ work to disrupt inequities and how these actions influenced their practices. Three sources of motivation emerged from the interviews. Personally experienced inequities were most commonly described by participants as their main motivation for engaging in equity work. The second source identified by the participants was seeing other people experience inequities or family members and friends engaging in inequitable behaviors. The final

source that educators reported of motivation for doing equity work was a professional learning experience. The participants in my study discussed personal experiences which aligned with these same sources of motivation reported in earlier research.

Mr. Anderson and Ms. Rene, the African American principals, both experienced racism directly as part of their lived experiences which helped frame their cultural proficiency and equity leadership. Mr. Anderson reflected on being called the “N” word when in school. He also reflected on the historical inequities that people of color experienced. Mr. Anderson talked about one of his ah ha moments that occurred while he was engaged in an equity training when he was a teacher. He reflected about attending an all-male boarding school. During the training, he went on to think about what if he were assigned to teach at an all-woman’s school. He would have to adjust to how he framed things and adapt to the culture of an all-woman’s school. “At the end of the day, we have to teach the whole child, and this means recognizing their racial and cultural background which allows us to see their full humanity.”

While Ms. Rene shared her experience as a teenage mother and her school wanted to send her off to a school for teenaged mothers. She managed to stay in the school but recalled only one teacher worked with her to stay on track while the remaining teachers did little to ensure that she was passing their courses. It was this experience that framed her equity work. Ms. Rene said she never wanted any student to feel unwanted. She also shared how, when engaging in professional learning on the school-to-prison pipeline, she really began to think about the educational system.

Ms. Lee felt that she always was a champion for children of color, but it wasn’t until she adopted two of her son’s African American friends into her home that she really began to see the world through her son’s eyes and the very different ways her racially different sons were treated by the world. She also talked about how her children had different strengths and, while her

biological son might get a great score on the SATs, the other son had other gifts. She shared how in her household they talk about each child's strengths and not what they couldn't do. Ms. Grant, on the other hand, spoke more about current events that started with George Floyd. She talked about how we should have been having these conversations earlier, because these things have always been going on. She was the only participant who did not discuss becoming aware of race and racism earlier in life.

Mr. Garrett described his racial awakening through Black friends he grew up with and who had the same economic level as his family. He reflected on how, as they matured, they had very different experiences and outcomes. He said, "he didn't understand why their lives were so different until he was older and was able to put the pieces together." Even growing up in a diverse neighborhood and with friends of color, he noted he was oblivious to race and equity until he got his first teaching job, and he was exposed to a wide range of diversity. Mr. Calvin grew up in the Midwest in the White section of town. He said growing up he would hear people talk about how he should not go to a certain part of town because that is where Black people lived. He shared how his mother would intervene and say that in our house we are not afraid of Black people. Later, he was the first out of 10 children to go to school, and his mother encouraged him to go somewhere where there were diverse people. While attending college, he befriended two African Americans and an Iranian peer. Mr. Calvin said his awareness of how people were treated differently was through watching varied experiences his friends encountered based on race and culture. "While in college the Iran crisis happened, and I saw my friend treated badly. I was appalled by the way he was treated, and I learned more about the situation." Each leader experienced their racial awaking at different times in their lives, and this created the lens through which they lead the work in their schools. This racialized lens and the understanding that

people walk through the world differently based on race, gender, income, and other factors of diversity served as a foundation for each of the participants' cultural proficiency and equity leadership.

Theme 2. Getting Started: Jumping into the Deep End of the Equity Pool

One of the roles of a principal is to create access and opportunities to learn. Boykin and Noguera (2011) described the opportunity to learn as students of color having access and opportunity to high-quality instruction. In this role, principals who are leading in increasingly diverse schools should incorporate a cultural proficiency and racial equity lens as part of their leadership. Entering the role with an equity lens increases the likelihood that access and opportunity are extended to students of color by removing barriers that have kept them from rigorous instruction. Schools cannot become culturally proficient without leaders who are committed to both high academic achievement and ensuring that school is meeting the social, emotional learning of their students, including addressing stereotype threats and implicit bias (Lindsey et al., 2005; Steel & Aronson, 1995). According to Lindsey et al. (2005), cultural proficiency is a journey and no one principal will have all the knowledge about the diverse communities in which they lead, but these leaders are willing to be vulnerable, to learn, and to ask questions to create an inclusive school environment.

The entry point to cultural proficiency and racial equity for five of the six principals was through addressing how their schools approached discipline and who's behavior was being over-monitored. For example, Mr. Anderson's entry point to cultural proficiency and racial equity was addressing adult attitudes and behaviors. He described his interruption of the inequities in the following statement, "When I first came to the school, there was a lot of low hanging fruit." This path was to get early, easy wins to improve outcomes for students in his school. Another method

he employed was using counter storytelling with staff. He presented them with an alternative image of a student who they may not know or chose not to see. In this case, counter storytelling provided an asset-based view of the student. Counter storytelling was used during collaborative problem solving using school data and not relying on the bias and deficit base views of students. He would tell his staff during these meetings, “We were not going to talk about behavior.” This interrupted the barriers and bias staff imposed on students as a means to gatekeeping.

Ms. Lee similarly encountered a discipline system that dehumanized students. “Staff at the school had engaged in equity professional learning and implemented equitable classroom strategies under the previous leaders, but when I asked them why it was important, they struggled with coming up with a response.” Staff used flip charts that were color coded red for bad behavior, yellow for caution, and green for good behavior. These cards were publicly displayed and either the teacher or student would flip their cards if they were misbehaving. Ms. Lee shared, “I was shocked because it was so outdated and did not promote positive social-emotional development.” “I thought, okay, I am going to wait and see what happens, but I did make it known that I was not a fan.”

We would have monthly Positive Behavioral Interventions (PBIS) celebrations for students who got two or fewer warnings during a month. When I looked at who did not attend the celebrations, I saw Black boys sitting in the classroom during the monthly celebrations.”

It is important to note that Black students only were 5.9% of the student body. Ms. Lee reflected on the messages they were sending to these students. Later in the school year, Ms. Lee created professional learning communities with one of them focused on behavior. To interrupt this practice of publicly shaming students, she shared articles about how the practice can destroy

children. “I shared articles about alternative practices.” As a result of interrupting discipline practices that were detrimental to African American boys, the school staff came to see that teaching students how to advocate for themselves was a less harmful practice. The following year, the schools adopted a new system where students were not called out for “bad” behavior but for how they helped others in the classroom. This was a culturally responsive way to build classroom community and accountability to one another. This change of practice helped to improve the experiences of Black male students . Ms. Lee continued the theme of adaptation and equity as a personalized experience in her work by removing the harmful practices that excluded Black males to one that fosters an environment that viewed misbehavior as an opportunity to learn.

Ms. Rene believed that, as a leader, racial equity is important because we know that the world doesn’t value our students of color.

I think about this when I am interacting with students. I make sure they know if they made a mistake, it isn’t the end of the world. We talk about how we fix it and turn it around. It should not be their story.

When Ms. Rene first arrived at her school, she looked at student referral data and saw the majority of the students were Black.

The number one reason for the office referral was disrespect. How can you quantify disrespect, and it was always disrespect? We had to do a lot of work around that as part of our PBIS work. I interrupted that practice by saying we spend a lot of time writing up negative referrals, I want to see just as many positive ones.

She added, “we shouldn’t only be calling home for the kids that were in trouble.” Mr. Rene said that many of the behavior referrals came from the art, music, and physical education

teachers. “We did a lot of work with our specialist team on creating structures to build relationships.” Ms. Rene’s approach to equity is congruent with her identified stance of equity being an ongoing opportunity as represented by the importance of valuing students of color every day.

Mr. Garrett reflected that he had not always been intentional nor deliberate about addressing cultural proficiency and equity in his school. “When I first came to the school, I visited classrooms and I started to see patterns of how Black students were treated. Standing Bear Elementary School “...was majority White when I first became the principal, and I remember on one occasion I walked into a classroom and saw the two Black male students in the class placed in the back of the room apart from the other students.” Mr. Garrett later spoke with the teacher about his observation. “She didn’t get what it communicated not only the students being excluded but the messages it sent to the rest of the class. I also asked what you would say to the parents if they walked into the room?” Mr. Garrett also reflected on how the misinterpretation of behavior by staff served as a gatekeeping mechanism to filter Black students away from receiving more challenging learning opportunities which aligns with his equity stance equity being an ongoing opportunity.

Mr. Calvin shared that, when he arrived at the school one of the issues, he faced much like the other principals focused on how discipline was handled. He listened to staff to hear their perspectives on things that could be improved at the school. Mr. Calvin had noticed that there were very few discipline referrals. During the discussion, it was revealed that staff didn’t send students to the office because they felt the former principal did not address behavior issues. When discussing his philosophy about supporting students, he said,

I have to work to have staff understand the difference between sympathy and empathy.

We have to work on understanding the difference and how empathy can lead to building bridges for kids to cross to be successful and we are the designers of the planks.

He also shared how he had to have a *come-to-Jesus* meetings with his staff from time to time to address how they engaged with students. One of these meeting focused on how staff addressed mistakes and errors. “Every kid in that class should be treated the same regardless of where they come from or their economic status. No one should be demeaned period.” “If we want students to do something different, we need to change the conversation.” “Instead of saying you need to stop blah, blah, blah, we might say, let me help you or are you ok.” “We don’t want Charlie Brown’s teacher here.” He stressed to staff that this might take a few times, but that was ok. Mr. Calvin said, “some people were pissed and he let them know this is the way it is going to be.” Mr. Calvin’s approach to discipline was aligned to his view on cultural proficiency being adaption which is responding to behaviors in a culturally responsive way and his equity stance of equity being equal opportunity. The lens he used to his leadership through the lens of SES or poverty, he didn’t mention race as part of the student’s identity. He also took a less collaborative stance than the other leaders. He mentioned his assistant principal, but he never shared how he engaged other staff in the work during his interview.

Ms. Grant’s entry point to her work was to address the adult mindsets. The Grace Lee Boggs Elementary School demographics have changed over the years, and there are now more students and families of color. “I kept hearing that the school has changed as I interacted with staff and community.” Ms. Grant used questioning as a strategy to push staff and community by asking, “What are you talking about? What has changed?” She felt that their implicit bias was

kicking in, and that they did not even realize what they were saying. “I had to talk to my Parent Teacher Association (PTA) who also talked about how the community is changing. I asked them,

What are we doing to let families know that they are welcomed? Do we have a welcoming committee? Are we reaching out?” Ms. Grant also identified that she also tries to model for the PTA and staff and constantly having conversations with them on how we make sure that we are being inclusive of all of our parents.

Ms. Grant shared that prior to her arrival, there was no National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) parent representative or supporting services representatives, and they didn’t know these roles were supposed to be a part of the school’s leadership team. “The NAACP representatives now comes to the PTA meetings to share information.”

Ms. Grant’s stance of adaptation is evident in the way she approaches cultural proficiency in her interactions with staff and parents. She interrupts their color/culture blindness by asking questions to promote critical reflection and calling them to act to adapt to the students and parents that attend the school and not the students and families of past decades. Her equity stance of equity was being an ongoing opportunity designed to meet the unique needs of students and, in this case, parents. She shared about pushing the PTA to get out of their comfort zone and think about how they need to intentionally reach out to the newer more diverse community members. Ms. Grant also used her equity stance to push staff to think about what they meant about the students not being the same as they were in the past. This color/culture blind racism is harmful to the students as the instruction they receive may not be suitable to their needs. Ms. Grant leveraged her power as the principal to push her school community to be responsive to their current reality and not to the “good old days.” This aligns to the denial stage of the Intercultural

Development Inventory (Bennett, 1986) because the community does not want to recognize that the community has changed.

Theme 3. Opening Gates and Building Bridges: We Are the Designers of the Planks

Delpit (2006) describes deficit thinking about students and their families encourages leaders and teachers to underteach and underserve students of color. Gooden & O’Doherty (2014) suggest that many principals believe that they are color blind and just see human beings. Bridges (2019) described colorblindness as a way to render actions and outcomes nonracial by claiming they don’t see color and that things are just the way they are and, thus, removing any ownership of the problem. This colorblindness also helps to maintain Whiteness as property, another tenet of critical race theory. Whiteness as property, as described by Harris (1993), suggests that the dominate group has the rights to establish the rules for those that are identified as subordinate or oppressed members of society. Further, CRT in education denies that racial justice in education will be achieved when historically subordinated individuals and groups simply have been included in the educational institutions that had excluded them in the past. Instead, it proposes that these educational institutions need to be transformed. They need to be undone and then reconstituted with the experiences, interests, and needs of the historically subordinated in mind (Bridges, 2019). Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) discussed how education needs a radically new paradigm that ensures justice. They argue that if we do not move beyond feel-good, non-confrontational conversations, there will be no radical change in the current order. Principals in this study addressed the deficits students and families experienced in their school in different ways to interrupt deficit thinking that maintained Whiteness as property.

Ms. Rene shared an experience with a student that opened her eyes to how she herself was a barrier to her students. “I had an African American male who was in an on-level math

class and his mother advocated for him to be placed in a higher-level math class. The mother felt that this is what he needed.” Ms. Rene shared how at the time she was all about the numbers and his numbers did not convey that he could handle that level of rigor.

Every time I turned around, she was advocating for him. I finally gave in. We came up with a contract on all the things that he would need to do to stay in the higher-level class. The student thrived in the class and later was the only student from the school to get into a magnet program. This taught me that I was the barrier, even as an African American woman, who you would think would respond differently but I have work to still do.” In this example, Mr. Rene had to reflect on her privilege and came to the understanding that even though she was a person of color she maintained and oppressive system that maintained barriers instead of building bridges.

Ms. Lee reflected that, after reading the book *Stamped* by Ibram Kindi, “There are so many lies we have been told. We have to stop holding kids back and creating walls. The walls have to break down. We should hold students back just because they aren’t the Blue Jay group.” This reflection provides a window into how Ms. Lee interrupted the barriers adults create for students in her school. This leadership move helped the staff to move further down the Cultural Proficiency Continuum (Lindsey et al., 2005).

Mr. Anderson shared how, when he took over a school with a great culture where the staff all got along, he found out early on that the staff would send students to the office for simple infraction that should have been taken care of in the classroom. He said the staff wanted to have a specific consequence for every possible infraction that he was to implement. All of the kids being sent to the office were Black and Latino. The staff was uncomfortable having their colorblind lens stripped away because they had never had these conversations under the previous

leader who wanted to make sure everyone was happy and, in doing so, maintained a colorblind status quo. “We talked about the function of behavior and the only way to improve it was by teaching and positive reinforcement.” Mr. Anderson’s approach to addressing behavior aligns with his cultural proficiency lens of adaptation and equity stance of equity as a personalized opportunity. This is evident in the way he worked with staff to reexamine the purpose of discipline to move them beyond focusing on punishment but rather using it as an opportunity to learn.

Mr. Garrett was reviewing math scores during his first year at Standing Bear Elementary School for the purpose of placing students in advanced math classes.

Math courses were in the upper grades at the time, and there was one particular African American girl who blew every assessment out of the water. On paper she presented as being more than capable to handle the rigors of advanced mathematics but was not recommended for the advanced math class. I started asking questions about it and came to the conclusion that staff were serving as gatekeepers for this student.

As he engaged with the teachers, they described her bad attitude, and her behavior, which Mr. Garrett said, “was not perfect, but that should not be the barrier to getting what she deserved.” Mr. Garrett used his power as the principal to inform the staff that she would be placed in the advanced math course, and we would work with her to be successful. Mr. Garrett said this event set a tone for the staff that “we would not be keeping students from accessing rigor because they didn’t fit teacher perceptions of who deserved the highest level of coursework.” In this instance, Mr. Garrett was, in fact, addressing Whiteness as property. Through the lens of CRT, Whiteness as property grants White people, in this case students, to the best and most challenging curriculum. Teachers, in this case, served as the gatekeeper whose role

was to maintain the status quo and block entry for students who did not fit the image. In this way, Mr. Garrett shifted his equity stance from equity being an ongoing opportunity to equity as a personalized opportunity by creating easy access to rigorous coursework.

Mr. Calvin and Ms. Grant's focus, unlike the other principals, was on adult behaviors and attitudes about the change in neighborhood demographics and, thus, the school. In one instance, Ms. Grant recalled how she had to call out attitudes that created barriers by reminding staff that even during virtual learning, "We still have a school with children in it, our school has learners in it, there are students really below, on, and above grade level. So, what has changed?" Ms. Grant shared that the attitudes about the changing demographics has been her biggest challenge. "People don't even realize it is their unconscious bias, they don't even realize what they are saying." Ms. Grant's school had the highest population of White students (41.5%) of all the schools in the study. It is interesting that Ms. Grant's entry point to her work was to focus on adults rather than students. An examination of the school's suspension data for the 2020 school year, revealed that one White male student served an out-of-school suspension. Addressing behavior appeared to be more of a concern in the other schools in the study that had enrollments that were predominately students of color. In this case, Ms. Grant was being responsive to meeting her school community in trying to move them to embrace and model her cultural proficiency stance of adaptation.

Theme 4. Walking Through the World in Different Skins: The Intersection of Race and Gender

Socialization plays a major role in how we see ourselves and how others view our worth and value in the larger society. Adams (2018) shared Hiro's cycle of socialization, a framework that suggest we go through the socialization process at various stages. Our first socialization

takes place in the homes in which we are born. Our families define who we are and how we should be. We have no choice as we are born with specific identities such as gender, race, and income level among other factors already ascribed to us. Conversely, these specific identities have meanings that have already been defined by society. The next level of socialization takes place outside of the home in the institutions such as daycares, schools, religious institutions, and the media that either reinforce the messages received from our families or conflict with those messages. As we go through life, we reach a fork in the road where we decide to continue the status quo out of fear or ignorance or disrupt these patterns.

Principals are also socialized into society and receive messages about their identities and how society values these identities. As such, socialization plays out in how principals lead for cultural proficiency and racial equity in their buildings. One challenge that was unique to the African American principals in the study was entering the work having already experienced the impact of racism firsthand. Kendi (2019) stated that people of color have a dueling consciousness: one of being themselves and one of looking through the eyes of another racial group. The person of color has to navigate beliefs that intend to keep them segregated, force them to assimilate and give up their authentic identities, or reset these efforts by demanding their equity through antiracism. This dueling consciousness impacts leaders of color as they are able to recognize the systems that oppress student of color but have to implement policies and practices that create barrier for success. Singleton (2015) called this phenomenon the third culture in which the person of color may strive to fit in but never fully fits into mainstream society and, at the same time, risks not being seen as a full member of their own group.

Socialization played a major role in each of the principal's journey, except for Mr. Anderson and Ms. Renee, the two African Americans in the study. Mr. Anderson reflected on

growing up in a middle class African American neighborhood. This was the same neighborhood that I grew up in and many of the residents were educators including Mr. Anderson's parents. The schools in the district drew students from a larger area which were mostly White. Mr. Anderson described being one of only a few Black students in advanced classes and the feeling of isolation, "You know it was always me and Mick the only Black kids in the class." He also remembered being called the "N" word in school. Mr. Anderson's parents sent him to a boarding school for part of his education indicating that they had high expectations for his success; however, the societal messages labeled his Blackness and maleness as a deficit in one instance but also as an anomaly in being in advanced classes.

Mr. Anderson stated that his race affects even the smallest detail of this work (being a leader in general) but definitely leading equity work. "The Floyd stuff. It's kind of a watershed moment and the dialogue has accelerated to a new level." He felt the conversation is moving a million miles per hour and he is not sure where he is getting on the train. "I have found myself more reluctant than in the past because I am tired." This wariness possibly is felt because, not only is Mr. Anderson a member of a minoritized group, but he also has the added pressure of leading the work in spaces where his experience is not the norm. "This journey is personal, and you have to think about your journey and then you have to make yourself vulnerable." As a person of color, staff can have the perception that "This [equity focus] is Mr. Anderson's thing and not because he know who the kids are." He stated that he was glad that the district is invested in the work, so that this perception is interrupted. I also interpret this as a support to principals to know that there is a safety net to catch them when they experience resistance.

Mr. Anderson talked about how these experiences caused him to play it safe in his youth and as an administrator. "You have to play it safe in certain ways and I am pushing the message

of cultural proficiency and equity, and this isn't a conversation that some staff members were used to." This idea of playing it safe was also a theme in Ms. Rene's experience as an African American woman. "I think a piece of it is as an African American leader, making sure that it's not your initiative." "I have to make sure that staff don't see it as my initiative." "There is always the fine dance that this is not my thing, but it is what the kids need so I have to pick and choose what and when to push so that we don't lose traction." Ms. Rene's personal as a teenaged mother experiences was the foundation on which she could resistance in the face of resistance from her staff.

"The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman (Malcolm X, 1962)." This quote describes the experience of Ms. Rene as she tried to transform her school and how the students of color gained access and opportunities to learn. She describes the pushback that she received from her majority White, female staff, "It was torture, to be honest." "It all stemmed from the yearly climate survey the district has all school staff, students, and parents complete each year." The staff slammed her on the survey because she was pushing them out of their comfort zone and making them address the inequitable experiences of their students of color. Her staff used the survey as an opportunity to "get" Ms. Rene for interrupting the status quo and forcing them to see the realities of their exclusionary practices. As a result of the negative staff climate, she was reprimanded by her director and asked what she was going to do about the data. "I didn't feel like I was getting support for trying to move the work forward." "It still haunts me to this day, because I know this is what's right, but am I going to be left out on my own for that?" Ms. Rene persisted with her equity work and, as a result, the school won a national award because of the academic growth of her students of color. To add

insult to injury, the same director who reprimanded her celebrated her achievement as if they had provided her support when the times were rough.

Ms. Rene recounted another instance of staff pushing back on her efforts when she decided to move some teachers to other grade levels because it was the long-standing practice at the school that, if you taught a grade level, you would never be moved. Ms. Rene thought the teams needed to be mixed up a bit. “I expected pushback but not to the extent to which they reacted.” The staff reacted to the grade level teaching assignment changes by wearing all black to represent that they were mourning because she was tearing apart their relationships by changing grade level assignments.

I laughed because in my mind, I was like yeah you know you all could have picked a different color....It was too much like Black Lives Matter...What hit me most about it was they did it during spirit week and it was picture day...What it said to me was that your feelings were more important than the kid’s feelings...These actions spoke volumes because, like I said, educators, are supposed to be student focused, but only when it’s convenient.

Ms. Rene’s experiences with her staff were much more extreme than the other leaders but even with such extreme pushback she pushed forward. She used her power to improve their practices for the diverse students in the school to the extent that the school received a national award. Ms. Renee’s staff tried to silence her leadership and vision for the equity work in the building by outright challenging her decisions, but she persisted. Delpit (1988) describes Ms. Renee’s experience as the silenced dialogue where people of color are silenced when they speak their truths about how to best teach Black children. In this case Ms. Renee would not be silent.

Ms. Renee's reflection on her race and gender on the work was in alignment with Mr. Anderson in that it made a difference in how they approached their cultural proficiency and equity leadership. She, like Mr. Anderson, described that staff perceived this to be important to her because she was African American and not because the district had identified it as a core value. Ms. Renee said this showed up when she has challenged or pushed for Hispanic or African American students to get into advanced courses. Staff thinks that, because she is a person of color, she is challenging their decisions about student placement when, in reality, these students had the same or higher scores than the student they are advocating for. Ms. Renee is demonstrating what Khalifa (2016) described as being able to interrupt the oppressive systems in school and using this leadership move to address Whiteness as property. In this case, the property was the advanced coursework. Ms. Renee is also employing counter storytelling to paint a more accurate picture of the students of color being overlooked for placement. She also talked about how she brings her lens as a parent of two Black girls into her conversations with staff. "During a leadership team meeting some of the staff were surprised that I said there are some classrooms in this school that I would not put my daughters in." One of the staff members expressed her sadness over the statement. I think it is a good thing that I can bring my African American parent lens into our conversations. In this way, Ms. Renee is using her experiences as a Black woman and a parent to facilitate critical reflection for her staff.

The two White women in the study, Ms. Lee and Ms. Grant, did not receive the external pushback like Ms. Renee, but their challenges were more internal. Ms. Lee's responses reflected a lack of confidence in her ability to lead courageous conversations.

I know even for me when I have certain conversations I hesitate because I'm so aware now of so many more things than I used to be. That now I am worried about saying the

wrong thing and I never used to worry about that because I always believed that people knew where my heart was and where my intentions were...Now I understand that there is an assumption that I've been making right, and so I feel like the more I know the less confident I become.

While Ms. Lee did not specifically mention her race or gender in her responses, one could extrapolate that being a member of the dominate culture that she has come to realize there is much that she does not know, and in an effort, not to do any harm, she is challenged because she's fearful of saying the wrong thing. Fear and ignorance are at the core of the cycle of socialization. Ms. Lee reflected on how she read *Stamped* which opened her eyes to many things she was never taught. Ms. Lee also operates from a place of fear that, because there is so much that she does not know, she will say the wrong thing. If the fear of being misunderstood is not addressed, Ms. Lee's growth in leading for cultural proficiency and racial equity could be paralyzed.

Ms. Grant described pushback from staff and families lamenting the way things were but not naming what had changed. This is one of the ways that colorblind ideology maintains Whiteness. As noted earlier, Ms. Grant pushed back by questioning and asking, "What has changed?" Ms. Grant reflected on how she had been challenged and how she challenged her peers throughout her career. In using questioning and inviting others to question her, she breaks down the hierarchy and inserts herself as learning. Unlike Ms. Lee, Ms. Grant does not operate from a place of fear but of addressing her ignorance of the issues associated with race. In trying to grow in this work, Ms. Grant views her role as,

Just making sure that I am reaching out to others. I am not the expert. I need to read and find out and hear other points of view so that I am not a White woman standing in front of a staff saying this is the way it should be.

In this stance, Ms. Grant demonstrates her vulnerability in not situating herself as an “expert” but as someone on the same journey. “I am a White woman living a middleclass life. I have to have people share their experiences and give them voice and be quiet.” This reflects Khalifa’s (2016) description that a culturally responsive leader must first engage in critical reflection about their personal background and privilege and lead staff in critically reflecting on their background and privilege.

The two White males in the study, Mr. Garrett and Mr. Calvin, experienced resistance but addressed it head on through questioning and stating expectations. Mr. Garrett didn’t mention his gender or race when reflecting on his leadership. He did reflect on being vulnerable as a leader and recognizing that you do not have all of the answers. In the cycle of socialization, his core would be ignorance in terms of recognizing he does not have all of the answers. The pushback that Mr. Garrett faced was colorblindness. His said staff believed they were being fair by “treating everybody the same.” He went on to reflect that,

Many of his staff is very tied to traditions and don’t like to change...So, they (the staff) acknowledge that the students have changed but don’t recognize that means they need to change...There was also a lot of discomfort when bringing up conversations that weren’t touchy feely.

Mr. Garrett shared that his staff, “felt that cultural proficiency and equity work was more needed at schools where there were more African American and Latino students so sometimes, they don’t think that it applies to us.” The staff prior to his arrival at the school did not engage in

cultural proficiency or racial equity work, so they operated as they always did when the school was almost entirely White. The staff at Standing Bear Elementary School operated from a core of fear, insecurity, and ignorance as reflected in their discomfort in having difficult conversations, thinking the work was not pertinent to them, and holding onto traditions that maintained the status quo. Mr. Garrett addressed resistance by asking questions. In this way, he addresses challenges by opening up a conversation with staff to get them to critically reflect on the situation. In one instance, Mr. Garrett reflected on how he talked about a discussion with a teacher who had placed the only two African American students at the back to the classroom away from the other students. He recalled asking the teacher,

Is this the best thing for the student to be separated from the class? Is there something that I might not know that could help the students?...I don't think the teacher intentionally did this, but I was like whoa.

In this way, Mr. Garrett was calling on the teacher to critically reflect on her actions with her students. Mr. Garrett reflected how, "This was a way to set the tone. It wasn't my intent, but it provided them with a message about what was important to me." He was assigned to his first school by an African American superintendent who told him that his job was to stop Black hate in the school. The school enrollment was 68% African American. The superintendent told Mr. Calvin that once they get to know you, they will forget you are White. "I remember going home that first night and thinking how dare these people talk to these children this way." Mr. Calvin addressed this by confronting his staff. "We need to think about every child in this building as your personal child." He shared some of the things he overheard in the building with the staff and asked, "Do you want people talking to your children like that?" Mr. Calvin recalled "Staff

was shocked that I went there.” While Mr. Calvin was direct, he did show his vulnerability by saying,

I just made it clear that if you they wanted to stay here, it will stop...I am happy to help you and we will all help each other...I don't need anybody to leave, I need everybody to step up.

In his approach, Mr. Calvin did not give staff space to resistance, but rather he acted on his observations and communicated expectations with the offer of support to staff. He stated that the school was in the bottom 10% of schools and moved to the top 25% of schools in the district. Mr. Calvin did not mention his maleness and Whiteness directly, but he was well aware of it in the context of a school that was 68% African American, and his superintendent also reminded him of his Whiteness. Mr. Calvin operated with a level of confidence in leading the work.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented a review of the purpose and the research questions that guided this study. The research design, the context of the study, selection of participants, the research methods and the positionality of the researcher were presented. Data collection process was accomplished using a demographic survey, a semi-structured interview and focus group conducted and recorded on Zoom, and open and focused coding of transcripts. An introduction of the principals was provided, and a thematic summary was presented and analyzed using the research questions and theoretical framework as guides. Table 19 provides a matrix of the themes aligned with the participants' contributions.

Table 19*Summary of Themes*

	Awareness	Entry Point	Interruption	The Intersection of Race and Gender	Applying an CP/ Equity Lens
Mr. Anderson	Personal Experience	Discipline	Reframed the purpose of discipline	Reflected on his race and gender had an impact on his CP and equity leadership	Vulnerability Critical Reflection Questioning
Ms. Grant	Professional Experiences	Adult Behaviors	Changing Demographics	Reflected on being a White woman influences her CP and equity leadership and not having all of the answers.	Vulnerability Adapting Monitoring
Mr. Garrett	Experiences of Friends	Discipline	Student access to acerated math	Did not mention the role of gender or race as impacting his CP and equity leadership.	Vulnerability Questioning
Ms. Renee	Personal Experience	Discipline	Student access to acerated math	Reflected on her race and gender and how it influences her CP and equity leadership	Adapting Critical Reflection Vulnerability
Mr. Calvin	Experiences of Friends	Discipline	Changing Demographics	Did not mention the role of gender or race	Courageous Conversations Vulnerability Critical Reflection
Ms. Lee	Experiences of Children	Discipline	Student access to acerated math	Indirectly identified that being a member of the dominant culture she was cautious of speaking because she is aware there are things she doesn't know.	Opportunities to learn Questioning Vulnerability

Chapter 4 contains factors that link elementary principals' level of cultural proficiency/racial equity and their ability to identify and address institutional barriers to allow for access and opportunity for their students of color. The phenomenological design facilitated the identification of themes that emerged from triangulation of data from the semi-structured interviews, self-rankings, and focus groups. Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe phenomenological research as a qualitative strategy used to analyze an experience reported by participants. This method was selected to understand what shaped these leaders' approaches to cultural proficiency and the influence cultural proficiency has on their leadership and, specifically, how it allows them to identify institutional barriers and interrupt inequities. The phenomenological approach is best suited to understand how leaders make sense of their journey

to lead with the lens of cultural proficiency/equity and how it informs their work. The participants responses reflected on their insights of how they experience leading cultural proficiency/equity in their respective schools. Phenomenological research is a constructive approach that supported the findings, patterns, and themes from the lived experience of a small number of subjects in order to create meaning of the multiple ways in which they experienced a phenomenon (Hatch, 2002; Creswell,2003; Patton 2015).

Chapter 5 will contain conclusions and interpretations of the data aligned with the theories that support the findings. It will also present recommendations for supporting principals who are able to lead for cultural proficiency and equity and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

I grew up between two worlds: the segregated world that my parents experienced where sharp color lines were drawn and the desegregated world that I experienced where the lines were blurred. What was constant between our experiences was the permanence of racism. My siblings and I grew up hearing the stories of teaching, leading, and attending segregated schools. My father reflected on having to stand on piles of newspapers to stay warm in his classroom. He spoke about how African American teachers in the district hired Thurgood Marshall to fight for equal pay for colored teachers in the district. My father shared how the community rallied together to petition for a new school for the colored students. The old three-room schoolhouse with a wood stove and an outhouse was substandard when compared to the more modern White schools. My mother talked about how mad they would get when they opened their hand-me-down textbooks that were written in and had pages torn out from the White students who used them when they were new. My mother was a straight “A” student and remembered how they would not move on to the next lesson until every student had mastered the content being taught. Teachers then lived in the community, attended the same churches, and shopped in the same stores because of the limited access granted to them because of segregation. The teachers looked like and lived similar lives as their students. My parents shared stories of the dedication that teachers had to ensure that Black children were educated.

My school experience was much different. I attended a newly built school. My principal was African American and most of my teachers were White. There was one Black male who was a fifth-grade teacher. I went to school with White, Asian, and Latino students that was nestled in a neighborhood that was diverse. My best friends consisted of a Black boy named Chad, a Jewish boy named John, and Chinese twin brothers, Walter and James. While my generation had access

and opportunities to learn in a diverse school environment with teachers working hard to be colorblind, the racial inequities were still present because they were working so hard not to see our color that they did not see us. My father loved history, so we were well aware of our pre-slavery history and the contributions of African Americans. I rarely remember learning much about Black history in school, with the exception of Black History Month displays and a filmstrip of Martin Luther King that influenced my decision in third grade to run for vice president and to attend Morehouse College. You see, I noticed that there were no Black students in the Student Government Association (SGA) and so I thought that I needed to change that. In reflection it was the blurred lines where we had access but still had not been fully integrated into all levels of the school. For my campaign manager, I reached out to my best friend John, who was Jewish, and had been my friend since kindergarten. He said he would do it, but I would not win because there had never been a Black Vice President of the United States. We went to a set of encyclopedias and looked. John was right, there were no Black vice presidents, but that did not deter me. I ran for office and won. I persisted in adversity because of the messages my parents gave me, which was that, as a Black person, you have to work 10 times harder and sometimes that wouldn't even be enough, but don't let that stop you. My third-grade teacher was amazing. She understood me and used my creativity to create opportunities to demonstrate my knowledge. For years to come, third grade was the last time that I felt smart or connected. In fourth grade I was called the "N" word to my face for the first time. While it is just a word, it tinted my rose-colored outlook on the world and let me know my place in it.

In high school I had teachers that I loved and who supported me and others that I detested. I had a biology teacher who totally crashed my dream of being a doctor. We had some tasks where we had to name one of the systems of the body. I never had a good memory, and

these kinds of tasks did not work with my learning style. This particular teacher had my older sister 10 years before me and didn't like her, so he didn't like me either. His feedback to me after my presentation was, "you will never be a doctor, but you could be a great illustrator." I did not feel smart, but I hung out with the smart kids. High school consisted of trying to figure out my identity, feeling torn about what group of friends I should hang out with, and trying not to be one of the negative statistics that were constantly blared in the news about young Black men like myself. By senior year, I had found my groove, gotten into Morehouse College and received the second runner up to Boy's State a leadership opportunity offered by the American Legion. I also had the most leads in the schools' annual Rock-N-Roll Revival.

Just as I had said in third grade, I attended Morehouse College in 1984. My father and nephew drove me down, help me unpack and left me to begin my new journey. My dad tried to hide sadness as he left me to fend for myself. He wanted me to stay close to home, but I was bullheaded, as he often would point out, so I had to do it my way. My experience at Morehouse help to further affirm a positive Black identity and helped me realize that I was, in fact, smart. Our professors were committed to our success and exposed us to Black excellence. We were told that Morehouse holds a crown above our head, and we would grow into it. The administration and professors had high expectations for our achievement not only while at Morehouse but for what we would do once we left her gates. I attended school with the children of Black royalty. Bernice King, Bill Cosby's children, Maynard Jackson's former mayor of Atlanta's children, and so many others. We also attended convocation twice a week as freshmen and once a week as upper classmen during which we would be reminded of the crown placed above our heads. We'd also hear from leaders from all over the world. I joined the SGA and planed all of the homecoming events from the parade to the coronation of Miss Maroon and White, our

homecoming queen. I was also on the yearbook committee. Academically, I soared most semesters and I had a few come-to-Jesus conversations with my father after a bad semester or two. Most importantly, I realized that I was smart and could make a difference in the world. It is because of my family and the nurturing I experienced while at “The House,” as we affectionately refer to Morehouse House, that I am a doctoral student at Douglass College.

I have come to realize that these experiences are not atypical; they play out for many people of color trying to navigate a world where race matters. My school experience was both inclusive and exclusive. I lived both inside the mainstream and outside of it. I was privileged to grow up in a household where my parents consistently reminded us of our worth. Having a father who was well known and well respected in the community was both a privilege and a nightmare. While it could be easy to blow off these experiences as this is what all young people go through, which is partially true, it is also true that these experiences played out differently for me because of race, gender, identity, and class. To understand my experience and my worldview, one has to accept that both are true. It is these experience that I brought to my classrooms, my school, and later to the district where I lead equity work. Having this lived experience did not mean I understood and had the knowledge to address the barriers my students faced, but it did let me know that these barriers existed. Through the years, I gained the knowledge and skills to address obstacles that were most often constructed by the adults charged to educate students. In the next section, I will discuss (a) how the principals in this study came to embrace cultural proficiency and equity work, (b) how they characterized their cultural proficiency and equity stance (c) how they leveraged their cultural proficiency and racial equity lens to interrupt institutional barriers, and (d) how they used their power to address behaviors and discipline. Next, I will identify

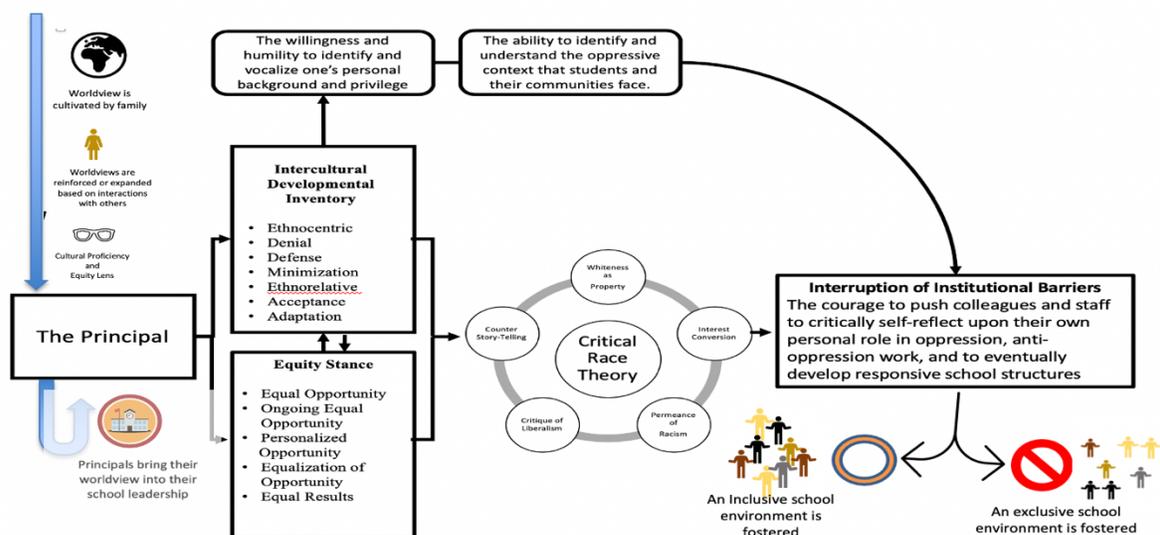
implications for practice and for further research. Finally, I will provide a conclusion and an afterword to reflect on my experience and the context in which this study took place.

Discussion

The following section will provide a discussion of the research finding highlighted in Chapter 4. The significance of this research has the potential to inform how college and university preparation programs and how local school districts can help to develop their cultural proficiency and equity lenses to better serve the diverse students who make up the majority of the student in our nation’s schools today. Developing an understanding of how principals develop their lens and apply it in their school context will help inform the development of observable leadership standards, professional learning opportunities, and provide central office leadership a lens to coach and support leaders as they foster inclusive school environments. This section will connect the research questions and conceptual framework to the findings in the study.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



RQ 1: What Influenced principals to lead through the lens of equity and cultural proficiency?

In their roles, principals are charged with creating opportunities for every student in their charge to learn. These opportunities to learn play out for students in very different way depending on the worldview and willingness of the principal to recognize, analyze, and interrupt the forces that create barriers for students and, particularly, students of color. Throughout the evolution of education in the United States, we have adopted various stances from nativism, which aimed to promote American values to the exclusion of all other identities, to antiracism which acknowledges the permanence of racism and calls leaders to view antiracism not as a permanent stance but something that constantly has to be strived for. Leaders need opportunities to critically reflect on themselves and their experiences and how these experiences either elevate learning for children of color or maintain the opportunities gaps that have been a persistent outcome in far too many of our schools.

“We are who we teach,” was the quote from Pedro Noguera I shared in Chapter 1. If we bring who we are to our classrooms, then it is safe to assume that leaders bring who they are into the buildings that they lead. It is crucial that principals are afforded the opportunities and coaching to critically reflect on who they are and their role in fostering a school climate that supports learning for every student. Leaders have to engage in both internal self-examination and seek opportunities to understand how their diverse students experience school. This is the work that is important to understanding how we improve learning and social emotional outcomes for students of color. Since the influence of principals is only second to that of the teachers, the “who” is vitally important to fostering a school environment. Currently this lens is not intentionally developed in teachers nor by leadership preparation programs. Tilman and

Scheurich (2008) and Hawley and James (2010) noted that, at best, principal preparation programs have a diversity course and more likely either under address the topic or completely ignores this body of work. Lowery (2019) and Furman (2012) described critical consciousness as the development of the lived experiences in an oppressive society. In addition, they recommend that, as we prepare leaders, they need to be continually provided with opportunities to develop their critical consciousness to enhance their leadership in our diverse schools and society. The leadership development program in the district that has been long celebrated as an example of growing leaders from within the district. Teachers apply to the assistant principal (ap) pool and if hired by applicants then enter the two-year training program. The program prepares aps on the technical aspects of the job such as, policies and procedures. Aps are introduced to district leaders and spend some time developing their equity lens and engaging in reflection. Later aps can apply to participate in an internship where they take over operations of the building for two months. The district makes an effort to engage future leaders in equity work but equity is often a special session that is disconnected for the technical aspects of the job.

Tuters (2017) identified the experiences that influenced elementary school principals to engage in equity work as personally experiencing inequity, seeing others experience inequities, or a learning experience. Principals in this study had many of the same influences as the elementary principals in Tuter's research. These influences included the two African American principals in the study. Mr. Anderson and Ms. Rene who reflected on experiencing racism directly. Ms. Lee who, after adopting two African Americans, began to see the world through the way her sons experienced the work realized how much she didn't know about race and racism. Much like Ms. Lee, Mr. Calvin, and Mr. Garrett, the White males in the study, their awareness of race and racism came from seeing their friends experience racism. Mr. Calvin talked about how

his Iranian friend was treated after 9/11 and Mr. Garrett reflecting on how the lives of his Black friends growing up in the same neighborhood turned out vastly different from his. Ms. Grant's development took place in professional learning opportunities and conversations with colleagues about race and racism that developed her critical consciousness. As a child, Mr. Calvin was also educated about racism by his mother who told him, "We don't think about Black people like that in our house." Mr. Calvin's mother shaped his worldview to appreciate diversity by changing the narrative used to describe the African American neighborhood.

Each of the principals came to their racial awakening through different pathways—some of them as part of their personal experience, some through experiences of those they care about, and some through both formal and informal education. While each of the principals in this study had experiences that influenced their worldviews, we know that there are many more leaders who have not had these same opportunities. How then do we better ensure that our school principals are able to lead diverse schools that create opportunities for each student to be successful both social-emotionally and academically? The principals in this study all went through leadership preparation programs at various colleges and universities as part of their pathway to become principals. Their school district also had a highly recognized leadership development program which provided cultural proficiency and equity as part of a three-year curriculum. All but one of the principals in the study went through this program. Only one of the six participating principals reported that cultural proficiency or racial equity was addressed in their preparation program. This aligns with the findings of Gooden & O'Doherty (2014), Hawley & James (2010), and Furman (2021) who found that most leadership development programs left principals ill prepared to provide leadership in their incredibly diverse schools. Colleges and universities need to include explicit standards for cultural proficiency and equity in their

leadership programs to equip leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to lead racially diverse schools. These standards should not be part of a special diversity course but be intentionally embedded into every course and in every experience in the program.

With the increasing diversity of students in the United States and the lack of racial diversity of our principals, we cannot leave to chance that a leader will come to the role with the worldview and critical consensus needed to understand the lived experiences of others and thereby meet the needs of diverse learners. One promising opportunity was a commitment of the principals' district to cultural proficiency and racial equity for close to two decades. All of the principals' mentioned how the school district supported their work by creating spaces for conversations, training, tools, and staff to support the implementation of cultural proficiency in their schools. It is critical that leaders have formal and informal opportunities to engage in this work including support from the district as they work to interrupt institutional barriers.

RQ 2 How do principals categorize their cultural proficiency and equity stance? What shaped their approach to equity and cultural proficiency?

Principals in the study were consistent in how they categorized their cultural proficiency on the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) sort. On the inventory, all identified themselves as at the adaptation level. Adaptation is defined as the ability to respond and adjust behaviors in culturally responsive ways. The leaders all described how they used diversity as a way to learn from their students and families so that they were better able to serve them. Ms. Garrett is an example of how a principal demonstrates adaptation. Her efforts to work with her PTA and staff to acknowledge the changing demographic and model ways in which they could make the new families feel welcomed in the schools. They also shared how it was important for staff to see students through this lens, because this is part of the whole child. Not seeing who a

child was culturally did not embrace their full humanity. These results closely align with Pon (2009) and Gorski (2019) who describe cultural proficiency, as a form of racism because it makes people of color the “other.” Cultural proficiency is also a safe way to engage staff who are most resistant to more difficult conversations involving racism and injustice. Budiman (2020) found that 64% of U.S. adults say the prospect of a nation in which Black Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans make up a majority of the population is neither good nor bad for the country. Most people view the demographic changes positively or indifferently. This seems aligned with the participating principals as they, like most of the country, have a positive view of diversity.

The principals were split when it came to identifying their equity stance. Half of the principals identified their stance on equity as an ongoing equal opportunity. These included Ms. Rene, Mr. Calvin, and Ms. Lee. This stance, equity as an ongoing equal opportunity, guarantees that each student will have access to all academic programs regardless of past performance. This is the second stance on a 5-stance scale. These principals see equity as access which does not achieve the goal that schools should guarantee that each student will demonstrate performance that meets or exceeds a common high level. The remaining three principals (Mr. Anderson, Mr. Garrett, and Ms. Grant) identified their equity stance as equity as a personalized opportunity. This stance states that schools should guarantee each student will receive an academic program that is well-designed to meet the student’s unique needs. This is the third stance along the 5-stance scale. This stance moves beyond students merely having access to courses and creates individual opportunities to learn. While this stance provides each student with a learning experience that meets their individual needs, this practice still falls short of guaranteeing that each student will demonstrate performance that meets or exceeds a common high level. The

responses from the principals in this study on their equity stance reflect the complexity of racial equity work. While an appreciation for diversity is an opportunity to expand your understanding of others and what they bring to learning spaces, it does not require the deep self-examination that racial equity work requires. Equity requires individuals to reflect critically on their worldview. This includes their racial identities and racialized experiences and their role in implementing practices that have created barriers for students of color. This work is personal and challenging particularly if staff or community members do not share their values (Brooks et al., 2007; Marshall & Hernandez, 2004). Where each participant fell on the continuum of equity stances is the appropriate stance for their work at this time, but over time, they will have to push their practices further along the continuum to fully achieve equity in terms of academic outcomes. If these leaders remain at the same stance for long periods of time, they run the risk of staff feeling they have been doing the same thing for years no change; they have not moved to layer on the next stance which will force the work to go deeper.

Moyer and Claymer (2009), Pon (2009), and Gorski (2016) warned that cultural proficiency initiatives are grounded in providing comfort to those least comfortable with the work. Cultural proficiency is an easier conversation that addresses injustice. This could explain why there was a discrepancy between the ratings on the IDI survey and the equity stance continuum. It is much easier for leaders to engage their staff and communities in conversations that focus on diversity rather than equity.

The study took place in one of the most diverse school districts in the nation. Appreciating diversity is a passive act in the area of the country where the study took place where there are many ethnic festivals and celebrations. Appreciating diversity does not require an individual to do deep reflection or challenge their worldview. Racial equity, on the other hand,

requires staff and community to recognize the harm and the privilege that has been denied or provided access to people based on their race. Racial equity is a call to action and requires deep, critical reflection and action. It is easier to think that one is a good person and to cause harm than to reflect on the mostly unintended harm educational policies, practices, and beliefs have inflicted on children of color. The leaders in this study all had high levels of cultural proficiency which makes sense as their school district has one of the most diverse student bodies in the nation. The principals higher levels of cultural proficiency could be as a result of almost two decades of focus they district has engaged in on cultural proficiency and equity.

The racial equity aspect of the principals' work aligns with their level of cultural proficiency. In the adaption level of cultural proficiency focuses on adjusting behaviors and the individual and collectively. The equity stances identified by the principals were equity as an equal opportunity and a personalized experience which fell short of the highest stance where students would have equitable achievement outcomes. The principals in this study adapted to the diversity in their schools by ensuring that students were in spaces that they had been denied access to. Through this lens, the principals increase diversity through equal opportunity and personalized experiences. This is where cultural proficiency is not enough to produce equitable outcomes. Providing equal opportunities and personalized experiences does not guarantee that students of color will achieve at the same level as their White peers. Principals in the study must move their racial equity work to focus on equalization which guarantees that each student will reach a common standard and, ultimately, equal results. Recognizing and celebrating differences serves as an entry point to deeper racial equity, but the goal of schools is to educate students who have attained mastery of a set of predetermined standards.

Khalifa (2018) explained that culturally responsive leaders transform their schools by critically reflecting on their own personal worldview and privilege. They can identify and understand the oppressive context students face. They are courageous in creating opportunities for staff to critically reflect on their roles in creating oppressive conditions for students and develop responses that are anti-oppressive. Principals need support and ongoing coaching so that they can continue to develop their equity stance to remove the predictability of student outcomes by race. Support for leaders could come in the form of having clear evaluation standards that communicate the expectations for leading cultural proficiency and racial equity in the district. To operationalize the work throughout the district, principals need supervisors who are grounded in culturally responsive leadership. They also need standards that can guide coaching and support to ensure that they are implementing practices that create equal outcomes for students of color. Districts can also create and encourage professional learning communities or communities of practice that allow leaders to reflect on and speak openly about the challenges they face in creating equitable schools.

RQ 3. How does the level of a principal’s cultural proficiency and equity stance influence their leadership of equity?

Principals in this study addressed institutional barriers for access and opportunity for students of color by displaying vulnerability along with questioning and counter storytelling. Many of the leaders employed vulnerability as a strategy. The use of vulnerability to address barriers varied from leader to leader. Ms. Grant showed vulnerability several ways. First, she had an open conversation with a Black staff member during a staff meeting. This indicated she was intentional about being vulnerable and not having all the answers. Ms. Grant’s actions reflected resonate leadership because she was able to read the room during a staff meeting and empathize

with the staff member even though, as a White woman, she did not experience the world in the same way. Ms. Rene demonstrated vulnerability in writing a reflection for the staff newsletter on her feelings after George Floyd was murdered and using her story at a teen mother as a counter story. Ms. Lee showed vulnerability when she decided that she was going to wait and see how the positive behavioral interventions program would play out during her first year. Uniquely, both Mr. Anderson and Ms. Rene, as people of color, had to be vulnerable in leading this work because of the perception that cultural proficiency and racial equity were only important because they were members of a minority group. It is interesting to note that neither of the White male principals in the group described specific instances of vulnerability as part of their practice, they also reported using questioning and counter storytelling. Perhaps, as White men they are positioned, possibly because of how we are socialized, to lead the work in ways that White women and people of color cannot. In these ways, race and gender had implications for how the work was received by staff. Is particularly true of the pushback that Ms. Rene received from her staff in protest to her pushing them to address the inequities in the school. And Ms. Grant was publicly called out by an African American staff member while leading the work in her school. Mr. Anderson, Mr. Garrett, and Ms. Lee also experienced pushback in that staff did not think conversations about cultural proficiency were necessary. Rather the staff felt they had already done the work so they could check it off as done. Being a member of an oppressed group appears to increase the likelihood of getting resistance in leading cultural proficiency and racial equity work in schools. This is an example of culturally responsive leadership, as describe by Khalifa (2018), in that leaders have to understand the oppressive context of their students. In this case, the principal created space for staff to have these conversations.

The perception that this work is being “pushed” on them by people of color corresponds with two tenets of CRT: the critique of liberalism and the permanence of racism. DeCuir and Dixon (2004) identified three components of the critique of liberalism: colorblindness, neutrality of the law, and incremental change. By pretending that color doesn’t matter, staff absolved themselves of the responsibility for the predictable academic outcomes for students of color. The permanence of racism simply contends that racism is built into daily life of the United States. The permanence of racism paints a picture of underperformance of students of color as normal. Left unexamined, staff can assume that they have no agency in interrupting these patterns.

Identifying Institutional Barriers

To address institutional barriers in their schools, all principals used questioning as an interruption strategy. Mr. Garrett used the strategy as a new principal to push staff to critically reflect on inequitable practices. In this way, he could take an inquiry stance as opposed to being perceived as judgmental. Mr. Calvin used questioning to change the school culture by having his staff reflect on how they spoke to the students of color. Ms. Lee questioned a staff member when she was unable to see beyond what she perceived as bad behavior to see the student’s giftedness. Thus, this principal created an opportunity to expand the staff member’s lens and, subsequently, her worldview. In contrast, Ms. Rene questioned herself when she realized that she was the barrier to one of her African American students enrolling in a higher-level math class as a result to being overly focused on the data rather than the needs of the student. Mr. Anderson focused his questioning on the meaning of discipline to engage staff in reflecting on their responsibility to use it as an opportunity for students to learn. Ms. Grant questioned PTA members to challenge them to think about how they could create a welcoming environment to diverse members of the community by communicating that they were welcomed in the organization. The literature

confirmed the use of courage which calls on principals to be vulnerable and use their power to push colleagues and staff to identify solutions through critical self-reflection on their role in perpetuating oppressive systems (Delpit 1988; Gooden & Dantley 2012; Khalifa, 2018; Moffitt 2007;).

Delpit (1988), Solorzano (1998), Delgado and Stefancic (2001), DeCuir and Dixson (2004), and Khalifa, (2016) all describe counter storytelling as an opportunity for people to experienced racism. It provides an alternative explanation that often silences people of color and maintains the dominate narratives to provide simple explanations about inequities in our society. Principals in this study employed counter storytelling by using questioning to interrupt the simple explanations that created barriers for students of color. Delgado and Stefancic (2000) identify counter storytelling as writing or voices aimed to counter or interrupt accepted premises or myths—especially ones held by the majority. Five out of the six principals employed counter storytelling as a strategy to push staff and community members to critical thinking. Mr. Anderson provided his staff with what he called alternative images of students to provide staff with information they may not have known. Ms. Rene referred to being the bridge or mediator between her staff, students, and parents. In this role, she could fill in gaps to create understanding. Mr. Garrett and Ms. Lee used counter storytelling to present a more well-rounded portrait of students who were being denied access to accelerated math courses. When teachers in her building used being in a pandemic as the excuse for failing to engage with students at the same level as during pre-pandemic period, Ms. Grant reminded them that there were still students in school that were above, below, and on grade level even though they were not physically in the building. Mr. Calvin used counter storytelling to remind staff about the perils that the mostly Latino students and families endured to get to this country so that they could be

educated. Research supports the idea that counter storytelling serves as a deconstructive function for reframing biases about the “other” and give voice to those who have traditionally been marginalized (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Delpit 1988).

Identifying Barriers

All principals in this study identified both student and adult behavior as an entry point to their equity work. For two, the entry point was using their power to address adult behaviors that excluded minorities from being active participants in PTA events, in one case, and for interrupting staff’s belief that cultural proficiency was a one and done conversation and, in the other case, racial equity work was only for schools with larger populations of minority students. Four principals used their power to address how students were inequitably disciplined. In one case, it involves the process of publicly shaming students with behavior charts posted in classrooms and excluding the few African American males in the school from celebrations. The practice of sending students out of the classroom was another practice mentioned by one participant. In this case, staff wanted the principal, rather than the teacher, to deal with all minor and major infractions of the rules. The principal at James Peck Elementary School addressed how staff talked to children when they made a mistake. One principal had to address the idea of students having a second chance when they misbehaved.

All the principals used their positional power to interrupt institutional barriers that their students of color encountered. Mofitt (2007) suggested that the use of power is how leaders influence what happens in organizations. Based on the sorting activities, principals in this study all self-reported high levels of cultural proficiency and average equity stance. Singleton and Linton (2006) found that leaders need to be able to tap into their passion for this essential work of equity in schools. According to Goleman (2013) and Venera (2019), employing vulnerability,

questioning, and counter storytelling are how principals create safety and trust to then push staff to interrupt institutional barriers. Counter storytelling is one of the tenants of CRT most often used to interrupt Whiteness as property. CRT identifies Whiteness as property which is the premise that all actors socially regarded as 'White' receive systemic privileges just by virtue of wearing the White outfit, whereas those regraded as nonWhite are denied those privileges (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). This is most often masked by educators and other adults when they state that they do not see color. While the principals in the study did not name the tenants of CRT, they were able to address them as they interrupted institutional barriers to students of color in their schools. The combination of lived experience, observed experiences of others, and ongoing professional learning opportunities provided a solid foundation to increase these principals' ability to identify the inequities in their schools.

To address the structural racism that creates institutional barriers for students of color, the principals had to employ what Goleman et al. (2002) and Goleman (2013) identified as both feeling and thought. Heto and Indangasi (2020) maintained that society needs leaders who possess heartset, mindset, and skillset that enable them to embrace their humanness and lead with humanity. In addition, the more emotionally demanding a task, the more the leaders need to be empathic and supportive. Resonate leadership style is best suited for engaging staff in cultural proficiency and racial equity work. Boyatzis and Mckee (2005) describe resonant leaders as those who can demonstrate competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Cultural proficiency and racial equity work are stressful because they challenge how one was socialized to view the world. Leaders need to relate to their followers in order to foster the conditions for critical reflection and their role in maintaining or interrupting institutional barriers. Each of the leaders in this study balanced heartset, committing

to seeing the humanity in each student, mindset, identifying structures and practices that needed to be changed, and skillset, identifying the strategies that could move the staff in the right direction.

Many things have changed in the 37 years since I graduated high school where I lived between the worlds of segregation and desegregation. There are increasingly more spaces for student voices to guide school improvement in the use of restorative practices. Restorative practices are processes that proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing (Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools a Guide for Educators, 2014). Students have agency to speak up against social inequities, but the blurred lines of access and full inclusion are still present. There is definitely more work to be done.

There is a focus in the district to be more inclusive by examining procedures to create access and improved opportunities for students of color, but much of this is dependent on those who lead this work in schools across the country. So, while we've made some progress, the progress is always determined by who sits in the principal's office. The leaders that our students need are those who can constantly reflect on their identity, their power, and level privileges, and how they contributed to oppressive systems. The leaders that our students need are ones who are courageous enough to push their staff to educate every student and to critically reflect on themselves and how they have contributed for or against creating oppressive school environments. We need leaders who are not afraid to push staff and do the work that is needed to foster schools where children of color can be as successful as their peers.

Implications

In this section I will discuss the implications for practice that could support principals in leading in diverse schools that will better serve students of color. Implications for future research will also be discussed and provide recommendations for future research to improvement preparation programs and district support for developing the cultural proficiency and racial equity lens in principals.

Implications for Practice

We are at another critical junction in education in the United States. Our student demographics continue to become more diverse, while our teachers and leaders are largely White and middle class. By no means am I suggesting that being racially, ethnically, or culturally different from the students in a building means one cannot foster an inclusive school culture. It does, however, require institutions that prepare teachers and leaders to examine their own world views to advance cultural proficiency and equity stance so they can develop preparation programs that prepare educators and leaders who know how to lead this work. This study and its findings are aligned with the research on cultural responsiveness and CRT as well as how principals interrupt institutional barriers for students of color. The principals of these six schools reflected on how they came to lead for cultural proficiency and racial equity and the ways in which they interrupted the barriers for students in their schools. My goal as a researcher was to explore the link between principals' knowledge of their level of cultural proficiency and their ability to identify and address institutional barriers. I also wanted to explore how they interrupted inequitable practices to open access and opportunity for their students of color. While each principal addressed inequities in different ways, their experiences can serve as a blueprint for other leaders as they set out to foster inclusive school environments for students.

It was clear that five out of the six principals in the study reported their leadership programs did not address cultural proficiency and racial equity. This aligned with the research on teacher and principal preparation programs. Educational and leadership preparation programs should infuse critical reflection as a part of the programs to support our teachers and leaders to reflect on their worldviews and how these views impact students and their leadership decision making. The lenses of cultural proficiency and racial equity provide leaders with a better understanding of how their policies, practices, and procedures create oppressive systems that negatively impact their students of color.

All principals in the study rated themselves at the top level of the IDI survey but were lower on the equity stance continuum. These results were consistent with Gorski's (2016) and Pon's (2009) works that describe cultural proficiency as an easier conversation than equity. As such, cultural proficiency does not help schools move to the heavier lift of ensuring equitable outcomes for students.

At the school district level, each of the principals stated their appreciation that the school district identified cultural proficiency and equity as a core value. As mentioned by the two African American principals in the study, the district provided them with support from senior leadership when there was resistance from staff. Each principal also talked about the support that the system provided them in doing the work. Support included professional learning, study circles, tools, and direct support from specialists as well as when their supervisors provided space to talk about race and culture at meetings. Many of the principals identified the school improvement process as the vehicle that ensured the work permeated all aspects of the school. Principals indicate that, while they appreciated that the system had equity as a core value, they did not all feel that the current senior leadership team talked about racial equity enough. One

principal suggested to move the conversation away from data and use it as an opportunity to hear stories. It has been my experience in this work that data is not what motivates principals to do more than move the numbers. What I have found that moves them is hearing student voices focused on their school experiences. This connects back to heartset and mindset discussed in an earlier chapter. The data is technical, and it communicates the academic attainment of students, but it does not address the lived experiences of students that enable leaders can make decisions that are responsive to the needs of their students.

Five of the principals in this study focused on student behavior for their initial cultural proficiency/racial equity work. This suggests that this is one of the most observable ways in which to see inequities play out in schools. Often cultural proficiency and equity work is framed through the lens of student outcome data, but if students are removed from the classroom and miss instruction it becomes more difficult for them to achieve academically as they are constantly trying to catch up. When students are repeatedly excluded from instruction, there is a cumulative impact on their opportunities to learn. Identifying practices to address the inequities in discipline may serve as a tangible first step to fostering equitable schools. This may serve as a tangible entry point for leaders to begin interrupting institutional barriers for students of color to have access and opportunities to learn.

Implications for Further Research

The implications for further research include examining how central office leaders leverage cultural proficiency and racial equity in their roles as they coach and support school principals. Central office leaders are most commonly pulled from the ranks of principals and teachers. As such, their preparation is no more sufficient to enact the core value of equity than that of their school-based peers. Central office leaders need opportunities to develop their

cultural proficiency and racial equity lens as the decisions they make impact stakeholders within and outside of the school district. There is little research on how principals develop their ability to lead for cultural proficiency and racial equity and even fewer studies to guide central office leaders in this process. Leaders at every level of an organization must have the knowledge and skill to implement the vision for equity otherwise the effort to create equitable outcomes in our schools will continue to go unrealized.

Another implication of this study is the need to further examine how White and Black staff members respond differently to the work of cultural proficiency and racial equity and whether race and gender contribute to the differences. The racial make-up of study participants did not reflect a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, but the degree of resistance the African American female principal received from her staff was notable. Further study is needed to examine if such resistance is typical for leaders from other racial and ethnic groups. This could provide guidance on how to differentiate support for leaders implementing the work in schools. A final area for future research is to examine the role of the superintendent and cabinet in communicating and implementing cultural proficiency and racial equity throughout a school system.

Conclusions

This study provided a window into how other leaders foster inclusive environments by leveraging their cultural proficiency and racial equity lens. During the course of the study, I analyzed state survey data, collected demographic information, conducted semi structured interviews, reviewed artifacts, and conducted a focus group. The data gleaned from these activities provided me with insight on how leaders tackle the very difficult work of interrupting longstanding institutional barriers. While each of the leaders came to their work as leaders of

cultural proficiency and racial equity through a variety of lived experiences, they all used the lens to address the institution barriers that faced their students of color and their families.

Leading for cultural proficiency and equity is challenging work, and this study provided insight into the lived experiences of six principals trying to improve teaching, leading, and learning in their building to provide opportunities for students of color to grow academically and social emotionally. The research provided many insights. First, it indicated the factors and experiences that influenced the principals to lead using the lens of cultural proficiency and racial equity. Second, the participant's leadership preparation programs did not provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to lead this work. Third the data also revealed that participants ranked their cultural proficiency higher than their equity stance. Fourth, participants all used a combination of vulnerability, questioning, and counter storytelling to interrupt institutional barriers. Fifth, participants all entered their cultural proficiency/racial equity work by addressing either student discipline practices or behaviors and mindsets. Finally, it is clear that there is not enough being done to prepare teachers and leaders to develop their cultural proficiency and equity lens to understand the ways in which students from different backgrounds experience school which may be very different from their experiences. A stronger commitment to this work will help principals to operationalize and make meaning of the PSEL standards to foster the condonations student need in order to be successful in school.

My positionality as a researcher played out in several ways during the duration of this study. The first challenge was that in my role in the Equity Office I have deep insight into the commitment to the work of equity in the schools of many principals in the district. I know for some principals the work is merely a checklist, while others embed equity into every aspect of their school culture. Entering the research with this bias, I knew it was critical that I use a

standardized tool to select schools to avoid selecting principals with whom I had a strong working relationship. Using the State School Survey removed this bias. As it turned out, I had worked closely with all six of the study principals in various capacities over the years, but because they were selected using a common criterion, their selection was solely based on student and staff responses on the survey. Using the State School Survey also reduced some of the assumptions I had about the schools when I initially saw the list. Some would have been ones that I would have selected, but there are two I would not have considered.

My strong relationship with the principals helped to foster the conditions that enabled them to share their lived experiences about leading cultural proficiency and equity in their schools. The depth of each principal's reflections of the challenges and successes of their work went far beyond my expectations. I selected the most salient data to answer my research questions and will use the remaining data for future articles and presentations. In reflection, the professional relationships that I had developed throughout my tenure in the district resulted in their trusting me to openly share their lived experiences for the study. This phenomenological study provided a deep exploration of the link between principals' level of cultural proficiency and equity stance align with their ability to identify and address institutional barriers to interrupt inequitable practices to allow for access and opportunity for their students of color.

Epilogue

I have a colleague who says that I make the work I did as a principal to transform my school from a place that could be described as “the haves and the have nots to a school where students, staff, and teachers lived under the motto of “one band, one sound” look easy. He always pushes me to reflect on how it happened. This research is the answer to his inquiry. This study provided me with the opportunity to reflect on my equity leadership as well as gave me a

window that leaders do not often have—to look at how others lead this work in a range of schools. As the Director of Equity for my district, I was able to see the impact on the work of my team and opportunities to deepen the work in the district. The data on the gap between how principals rated themselves on the IDI survey and the equity stance provided me with affirmation that people are more accepting of cultural diversity but are challenged by racial equity for an assortment of reasons. The use of the Equity Stance continuum has possibilities for calibrating a principal's equity leadership and then coaching them to improve on the continuum as demonstrated by the equitable results of students.

Conducting my research during COVID-19 presented a challenge in that it forced me to examine and evaluate my procedures during the time that I was focused on writing Chapters 1 and 2. As I began to draft Chapter 3, I realized that I needed to rethink some aspects of my methodology. The demographic survey and the collection of artifacts could remain the same, but I had to rethink the implementation of the interviews, focus groups, and the sorting activities. I decided to use Zoom for the interviews and focus groups. One day when talking to friends about what software to use for transcribing the interviews, they told me that Zoom could transcribe the conversations. This saved me a great deal of time as everything I needed was contained in Zoom. Shortly before my pilot interviews, I realized I had not figured out how to do the IDI and Equity Stance sorts. Then I realized, as I was facilitating a training and using the whiteboard app Jamboard as a tool for the participants to do a sorting activity, that I could create a Jamboard for the sorts for my interviews. Technology made the interviews much easier to schedule for my participants as they could do them from anywhere. In reflection, all the participants were comfortable engaging in the interviews online. What was a challenge during the study was trying to get all the participants to the 30-minute focus group that took place the week before school

ended. I had three participants canceled because of emergencies. I offered them the opportunity to respond using a Google form, but the end of the school year is intense for principals, particularly after this year, so even with a reminder I was unable to get that data from the three principals who were unable to attend. What was interesting, was how consistent the three participants' responses were to our earlier interviews. I really enjoyed the interview process and the multitude of data it yielded.

This study was not only conducted during the pandemic, but we were also in the midst of the racial reckoning as the result of the murder of George Floyd and the other African Americans who lost their lives at the hands of police officers and vigilantes. The death of George Floyd and the marches it inspired was a common theme with the principals in the study. They spoke about how the murder accelerated the conversation at hyper speed. Some of the principals grappled with their personal feelings about what happened while trying to lead the work. Mr. Anderson reflected how he was still trying to figure it all out, while Ms. Rene used her staff bulletin to openly reflect on her feelings. Still others, like Ms. Lee who read books to build her knowledge, and Ms. Grant engaged in conversations about the events to deepen her understanding of the impact of racism. In addition to the harm taking place in the Black community, there was increased violence of Asian American and Pacific Islanders related to the President's labeling of the virus as Chinese.

This study will not only help principals and school districts gain insight into what culturally responsive leaders do to foster an inclusive school environment, but it also impacted me personally. As I write these last pages of my dissertation, I would be remiss not to reflect on my personal growth. One of the lessons was that of perseverance. Not only was this research study conducted during a worldwide pandemic, racial unrest, and a heated presidential election,

but I lost my mother unexpectedly. She was always my biggest cheerleader and encouraged me to go after my dreams. When she passed, I was in the middle of writing Chapter 2. My mother was not able to pursue higher education, but she pushed her children to get as much education as possible. I can still hear her say, “No one can take your education from you.” Focusing on the dissertation helped me get through one of the most difficult times in my life, and it was only through knowing how proud both of my parents would be to see me accomplish this significant goal that helped me push through.

This study reinforced my initial premise that principals are the gatekeepers of equity in a school building. When I became the Director of the Equity Unit 11 years ago, the previous director focused the work on equitable practices and cooperative learning as the transformative strategy for equity. The former director had never been a principal so she could not bring that lens to the work. My experience as a principal and my interactions with my principal colleagues helped me come to understand the importance of the role principals play. What was interesting was the common experiences of all the principals. The unique experiences expressed by the African American principals in the study made me think about the importance of recognizing and creating affinity spaces for principals of color to address the differences, based on race and gender, in leading this work. These opportunities would help leaders address some of the pushback they receive leading equity work in their buildings. Principals need opportunities to engage in deep conversations about this work and to reflect on the level of work taking place in their buildings. Principals need opportunities to critically reflect on their identity and privilege and to understand the oppression their students experience each day.

The study principals all shared how important it was to them to receive support and clear messaging from the executive staff and their direct supervisors regarding cultural proficiency. It

was important for principals to know that when staff questioned the work, the system supported them. Equity is one of the terms that is used often to express, but it has not always been demonstrated in interactions with their supervisors. Coaching conversations are an effective way for principals to reflect on their work and to help them attain equitable learning outcomes for students. It is important that principals receive direct support and coaching to help them to deepen their equity work and to highlight the efforts that they are making in fostering an inclusive school responsive to the needs of students of color. Coaching questions can be used to help principals move along the Equity Stance continuum to produce equal results in student outcomes. Principals need support in widening their cultural proficiency and equity lens and in addressing the racism that plays out in their schools and communities.

Table 20

Questions to Accelerate Growth

Equity Stance	Questions to Accelerate Growth
Initial Equal Opportunity	How will this opportunity create the conditions for this group of students to have access to additional educational opportunities?
Ongoing Equal Opportunity	What scaffolds will be provided to this group of students to ensure they are successful in meeting standard?
Personalized Opportunity	How will you ensure that these students will not be tracked because of this opportunity? Is there a chance that this opportunity may limit access to other programs?
Equalization of Opportunity	How are students being provided with choice and agency in how they will demonstrate their understanding?
Equal Results	What mechanisms both monitoring and providing support are in place to ensure this success can be replicated?

As the district level, it is important to reinforce the idea that equity is not training, engaging in conversations, participating in a book study, or just the latest fad in education. Rather the work should lead to equitable student learning outcomes that are not predictable by race and socio-economic status. The principals' responses to the Equity Stance sort elevated the

importance of making sure that leaders are focused on student outcomes and not just engaging in activities for the sake of the activities. The work is about educating children and giving them what they need so that they can determine their destiny. Our students deserve leaders who are centered in their belief that every child matters and who have a laser-like focus on ensuring that their school are fostering inclusion and producing equitable outcomes for each student.

This study has changed my leadership by helping me to articulate the ways in which principals go about the work of leading for equity. I now focus on equity because the research and the lived experiences of the participants in this study confirmed that equity is more challenging to attain than cultural proficiency. This research has refined the way in which I have been coaching the leaders that I work with to help focus their work on equitable outcomes. I have also been able to use my research in my role as the Director of Equity to make suggestions on the strategic plan and in some work that I have done to consult with other districts. I have also begun early planning of creating a leadership institute at the Sandy Spring Slave Museum where I serve as a board member. The institute would use the historical artifacts to assist leaders in using lessons from the past to ground their equity work in their own spaces.

This experience has allowed me to close out a 30-year career in public education by connecting the dots from my public-school experiences and my tenure as an elementary school teacher, Reading Recovery teacher, staff development specialist, principal, and central office director. I have seen at each of these levels, how you can educate every child. When I reflect on my career, I have been fortunate to have principals and directors who were grounded in serving every student. They are the reason that I now know that leaders make a difference. I also know and appreciate that the leaders that our children need are those who celebrate their diversity and foster conditions to ensure the children are included and achieve equitable learning outcomes.

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APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Gender

- Female
- Male
- Non-Binary

What is your age?

- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 years or older

Race/Ethnicity

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic/ Latino
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Two or more races
- White

What is your highest level of education?

- Bachelor's
- Master's
- Doctorate

What certifications do you have?

[short answer]

How many years have you been an educator?

5-9

10-19

20-29

30-39

40-49

50 or more

How many years have you been an administrator?

1-9
10-19
20-29
30-39
40 or more

What was your teaching background?

- Early childhood
- Elementary School
- Middle School
- High School
- College/University

Where did you receive your administrative leadership certificate/masters?
[Type in School Name]

Did your administrative leadership program have a focus on cultural proficiency and equity?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please describe how these topics were addressed.
[Short answer]

How many students attend your school?
[Type in School Name]

Rank your student demographics from largest (1) to smallest (7)?

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian [fill in]
- Black or African American
- Hispanic/ Latino
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Two or more races
- White

What pseudonym would you like to be called for the purpose of the study?
[short answer]

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Opening Script: You have been selected to participate in this research study because your staff and students rated your school as more favorable in being culturally responsive. Scores between your staff and students very closely aligned. This indicated to me that staff and students have similar perceptions about how the school creates a culturally responsive environment. What I am trying to understand is what you do as a leader to create a culturally proficient and a racially equitable school environment.

1. Why is cultural proficiency and racial equity important for school leadership?
 - a. How do you use these lenses in your leadership?
2. What is the most rewarding aspect of your cultural proficiency/racial equity work?
3. What are the challenges that your colleagues who are principals face leading this work?
4. What experiences helped you to develop your passion to be a leader for cultural proficiency and racial equity?
 - a. What life experience or learning experiences developed your awareness of importance of inclusion and racial equity?
5. What are some of the of the success that you have had in fostering a culture that is more culturally responsive and equitable?
 - a. Can you provide specific example of what you did?
6. What were some of the challenges you faced in fostering a culture that is more culturally responsive and racial equitable?
 - a. Describe some of the specific behaviors or detours you encountered.
 - b. Which staff member or community members were most resistant to the work?
 - c. What was the objectors racial make up?

- d. What were their objections to the work?
7. Where would you place yourself on a scale from one to ten with one being, I engage in cultural proficiency and racial equity work to comply to ten being it is the work that is going to improve outcomes for my students of color and there for improved success for my school?
8. Where would you place yourself on a scale from one to ten when you started cultural proficiency and racial equity work?
 - a. Why did you place yourself there?
 - b. What do you attribute the change between now and when you started to?
9. Where do you see yourself on the scale five years from now?
 - a. What do you envision your next steps that will help you get there?
10. What were some of the cultural proficiency and racial equity issues that were present when you first began the work?
 - a. Can you describe the types of issues that were present in your school?
 - b. How did you know they were issues of cultural proficiency/racial equity and not some other factor?
 - c. How did you develop your lens to see inequities?
11. What were some of the ways that you interrupted these issues?
 - a. Can you give me three issues you addressed?
 - b. What was the outcome of your interruptions?
 - c. How did this interruption impact teacher practice?
 - d. How did this interruption impact students?

12. What advice would you give a new principal about leading their school through the lens of cultural proficiency and racial equity?
13. If you could tell the superintendent what the system could do to enhance your ability to lead for racial equity, what would you recommend?
14. Do you have colleagues who actively disengage in focusing on cultural proficiency and equity work?
 - a. What is their rationale for their stance?

APPENDIX C: INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT INVENTORY CATEGORIES*

15. **Denial:** avoidance of differences

16. **Statement:** In my school, we spend our time focused instruction.

17. **Polarization:** being judgmental about difference

18. **Statement:** In my school, community there are students and families that are more prepared for school than others. We do what we can to fill in the gaps.

19. **Minimization:** focuses on universalism or the common experience

20. **Statement:** In my school, a student's background doesn't matter. We provide a strong instructional program for everyone.

21. **Acceptance:** an appreciation of difference

22. **Statement:** In my school, we talk about our diversity and celebrate our diversity through assemblies, cultural nights, and monthly recognitions. We see our diversity as a strength.

23. **Adaptation:** the ability to respond and adjust behaviors in culturally responsive ways

24. **Statement:** In my school, we see diversity as a strength and intentionally plan to create an academically and socially emotionally inclusive school environment. We also monitor our success using various measures.

*Taken from Bennett, M. J. (1986). A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10(2), 179–196.

APPENDIX D: EQUITY STANCE (NEWLIN, N.D.)

1. Identify the equity stance that most reflect how you approach equity in your school.
 - a. **Stance A: Equity as Initial Equal Opportunity** — Schools should guarantee each student will receive the same initial educational opportunity, and that each student’s response to this initial opportunity will be used to determine the kind of academic program he/she receives going forward.
 - b. **Stance B: Equity as Ongoing Equal Opportunity** — Schools should guarantee that each student will have easy access to all academic programs every year, regardless of past performance levels or other factors.
 - c. **Stance C: Equity as Personalized Opportunity** — Schools should guarantee each student will receive an academic program that is well-designed to meet the student’s unique needs.
 - d. **Stance D: Equity as Equalization of Opportunity** — Schools should guarantee that each student will receive an academic program that is well-designed to enable him/her to demonstrate performance that meets or exceeds a common high level within a reasonable length of time.
 - e. **Stance E: Equity as Equal Results** — Schools should guarantee that each student will demonstrate performance that meets or exceeds a common high level.

APPENDIX E: HOOD COLLEGE IRB APPROVAL LETTER



February 8, 2021

Mr. Troy Boddy
401 Rosemont Ave.
Frederick, MD 21701

Dear Mr. Boddy,

The Hood College Institutional Review Board reviewed your revised proposal for the study entitled “*Culturally Responsive Leadership: Fostering the Environment for Inclusion and Equity*” (Proposal Number 2021-8). The committee approves this study for a period of 12 months. This approval is limited to the activities described in the procedure narrative and extends to the performance of these activities at each respective site identified in the IRB research proposal. This approval does not authorize you to recruit participants or conduct your study on site at other institutions. Should you decide you would like to systematically recruit participants and/or conduct your study on location at other institutions or facilities you will need to receive IRB approval from those organizations *prior* to any recruitment activities or data collection.

In addition, due to the current COVID 19 precautions, Hood’s IRB is restricting all in-person (e.g. face-to-face) data collection with participants at this time. You may only recruit participants and collect data online. You are not authorized to meet with your participants for the purpose of data collection until notice from this IRB. In accordance with this approval, the specific conditions for the conduct of this research and informed consent from participants must be obtained as indicated.

All individuals engaged in human subjects research are responsible for compliance with all applicable Hood Research Policies:

<https://www.hood.edu/sites/default/files/Hood%20IRB%20Policy%20revised%20September%202013.pdf>.

The Lead Researcher of the study is ultimately responsible for assuring all study team members review and adhere to applicable policies for the conduct of human sciences research.

The Hood College IRB approval expiration date is February 8th, 2022. As a courtesy, approximately 30-60 days prior to expiration of this approval, it is your responsibility to apply for continuing review and receive continuing approval for the duration of the study as applicable. Lapses in approval should be avoided to protect the safety and welfare of enrolled participants.

No substantive changes are to be made to the approved protocol or the approved consent and assent forms without the prior review and approval of the Hood IRB. All substantive changes (e.g. change in procedure, number of subjects, personnel, study locations, study instruments, etc.) must be prospectively reviewed and approved by the IRB before they are implemented.

Sincerely,

Diane R. Graves, PhD
Chair, Hood College Institutional Review Board

Hood College • 401 Rosemont Avenue • Frederick, MD 21701-8575 • www.hood.edu • Tel. 301-663-3131

APPENDIX F: INVITATION LETTER

Dear Colleague,

My name is Troy Boddy, and I am the director of Equity Initiatives for Montgomery County Public Schools and a doctoral student at Hood College. I am conducting a research study focused on “Culturally Responsive Leadership: Fostering the Environment for Inclusion and Equity.” The purpose of this research is to explore the link between principals’ level of cultural proficiency/ racial equity and their ability to identify and address barriers to interrupt inequitable practices to allow access and opportunity for their students of color. You were selected as a possible participant because your staff and students similarly identified that your school was culturally responsive on the 2019 Maryland School Survey.

As part of the research study, you will respond to a demographic survey and share one piece of evidence or artifact that best represents your cultural proficiency/ equity leadership. You will participate in a semi-structured interview and a focus group to share your lived experiences leading for cultural proficiency and equity. Finally, you will be asked to participate in a 60-minute focus group. The length of time you will be involved with this study is roughly 2 hours and 10 minutes. This will include an hour-long semi-structured interview, an hour-long focus group and 10 minutes to complete a demographic survey.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and anonymous. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. No information will be collected that will identify you personally or your school. All data collected as part of your participation will be destroyed and will not be included in the study’s results if you chose to withdraw from the study. Participation in this study will provide you with valuable information on your leadership around cultural proficiency and equity that can inform your continued growth. In addition, each participant will receive a twenty-dollar gift card.

By completing and returning the survey **[insert link]** you are giving consent for your response to be included in the study. The consent form is attached with this email message and you may print a copy of the consent form for your records if you choose.

The researcher(s) conducting this study is Troy E. Boddy. You may ask any questions you have right now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researchers at (240) 753-8869

If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to speak with someone other than the researcher(s), you may contact Dr. Diane Graves, Institutional Review Board Chair, Hood College, 401 Rosemont Ave., Frederick, MD 21701, graves@hood.edu.

Respectfully,

Troy E. Boddy

APPENDIX G: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GRID

Participant Interview Mr. Anderson			
	2. How do principals categorized their cultural proficiency and equity stance? What shapes their approach to equity and cultural proficiency?	<p>Intercultural Development Inventory Adaptation</p> <p>Equity Stance Categories Equity as Personalized Opportunity</p> <p>4. What experiences helped you to develop your passion to be a leader for cultural proficiency and racial equity?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>So</u> I think um yeah I <u>I</u> don't know I mean, I think that as just a teacher in general, I always found myself advocating for my kids that people believed in the least which is probably why I got the quote naughty on unquote kids. • Because you know I love them regardless, and I really did always see the good in my kids, so I think, as I sort of moved into <u>leadership</u> I just took a much bigger look at that and thought, how can we possibly be overlooking like just huge groups of children. • And <u>so</u> I became more aware of my language, actually through even just through the leadership development program like saying things like my and how some people might hear that, like my kids or my ap. • And <u>so</u> I do I have conversations with people, and I say, does it, are you Okay, if I refer to you as like my friends well because I mean it more in a like we are partnership not you belong to me. 	

APPENDIX H: CODE BOOK

① Historical Foundations [a Priori]

Nativism a	Assimilation b	Pluralism in-group c
Multicultural Education d	Diversity e	CRT f
Cultural Proficiency g	Equity h	Anti- Racism i

- ② Kalifa [theoretical coding]
 a) articulate one's own Privilege
 b) identify and understand oppressive context
 c) Interruption of inst. barriers
 - Push others to critically reflect
 - responsive school stixct

③ CRITICAL RACE THEORY

- a) Whiteness as property
 b) Interest conversion
 c) Permeance of Racism
 d) Critique of liberalism
 e) Counter story telling

④ Terms [a Priori]

- a) Colorblind h) OPP 2 learn m) oppress
 b) Cult. blind i) Equity lens
 c) Cult Competence j) Equity
 d) Cult Inequality k) opp group
 e) Cult. Proficiency l) Soc. Just
 f) Cult Resp n) Sel
 g) Cult

⑤ Lit Review [a Priori]

- a) School Culture
 b) Power/Influence
 c) Emotional Intel
 d) Resistant leaders
 • in tune to what is happening @ them
 • Empathic
 • Supportive
 e) Awelng Conscioensness
 f) Courageous Conversations

⑥ [Process] IDI

- a) denial
 b) Polarization
 c) minimization
 d) Acceptance
 e) adaptation

⑦ [Process] Equity Stance

- a) initial Equal Opport
 b) ongoing Equal Opp
 c) Personalize Opp
 d) Equalization of Opportunity
 e) Equal Results

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW SUMMARY GRID

Research 1: What influenced principals to lead through the lens of equity and cultural proficiency?						
1. Why is cultural proficiency and racial equity important for school leadership? a. How do you use these lenses in your leadership?	1	2	3	4	5	6
a) Patterns in how principals responded based on their demographic profile.						
c) Historical Foundations [a Pori] ORANGE	H C h	H I	E G E F g	h	E G h	g 2H/I- making sure that every student is getting/receiving instruction. To make sure that every student feels safe and that every student is getting their emotional needs (SEL) met in the school building and that does not look the same for every child. It doesn't look the same for every adult. 2L- Even for our teachers and their SEL needs leaders have to be mindful and listen. 2H- So that we can guide professional development so that instruction can be accessed for students. 4h-If we don't start from elementary and in teaching and creating an atmosphere where students first learn to love themselves and value why they bring to the table and then otter's being able to value them then you can forget it. 1h-Everybody is entitled to the same educational opportunities and they aren't provided them right and knowing where people come from shouldn't cloud our judgements on what they're capable of and I think sometimes really well meaning people. 1c/h- When I got to my school the staff said they had high expectations but when you sort of asked them the why behind that there was a little bit more of a struggle like why do I think that. Why do I feel that and so

APPENDIX J: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Question 1: Do you ever feel isolated while leading this work? If so, what do you do to address your sense of isolation?

Question 2: What role does race, and gender have in leading cultural proficiency and racial equity work in your building?