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Microaggressions in K-12 Schools: A Call for Culturally Proficient Leadership

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the faculty of the

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Doctor of Organizational Leadership

by

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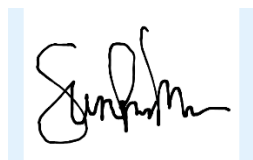
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	xi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	xiii
DEDICATION .....	xiii
ABSTRACT .....	xiiv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Background .....	1
Race and Racism in America.....	3
Microaggressions and Race .....	7
Educational Equity .....	10
Statement of the Problem .....	12
Theoretical Framework .....	12
Purpose of the Study.....	13
Research Questions .....	14
Overview of Methodology .....	14
Researcher Positionality .....	15
Bounds of Study .....	16
Significance of Study .....	17
Summary .....	22

Organization of this Study .....	22
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	23
Theoretical Framework .....	23
Culture Defined .....	25
Barriers to Cultural Proficiency .....	25
Microaggressions.....	28
Origins of Microaggressions .....	28
Racial Microaggression.....	31
Microaggressions in the Classroom .....	33
Deficit Thinking .....	36
Teacher Expectations.....	39
Culturally Responsive/Relevant Pedagogy .....	42
Culturally Proficient Leadership .....	42
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	45
Purpose of the Study.....	45
Research Questions .....	45
Research Design .....	46
Setting.....	49
Researcher Positionality .....	50
Research Questions .....	50
Participants .....	52

Data Collection.....	53
Data Sources.....	55
Focus Groups.....	55
Online Survey.....	55
Documents.....	55
Validity .....	56
Reliability .....	56
Data Analysis.....	57
Delimitations .....	57
Trustworthiness .....	58
Conclusion.....	59
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS .....	60
Participants .....	60
Organization .....	60
School Leaders .....	61
Data Sources.....	61
Online Survey.....	61
Focus Groups.....	63
Documents.....	65
Analysis .....	66
Research Questions .....	68

Major Findings .....	68
Major Finding No. 1:.....	69
Self-Awareness .....	69
School Improvement Strategies.....	69
Expectations and Accountability .....	70
Staffing and Support.....	71
Parent Engagement.....	71
Response to Inequity .....	72
Major Finding No. 2.....	73
Microaggressions.....	74
Managing the dynamics of difference. ....	76
Policies and Practices. ....	78
Barrier: A Sense of Entitlement.....	79
Whiteness, White Privilege, White Fragility.....	79
Deficit mindset .....	80
Major Finding No. 3.....	81
Valuing Diversity.....	81
Surface-level Culture.....	83
Major Finding No. 4.....	84
Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge .....	84



Ethos of Organization.....	84
Professional Development.....	87
Mindset and Beliefs.....	88
Summary .....	89
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION .....	91
Awareness.....	93
Privilege and Entitlement .....	95
Disconnection of Theory to Practice .....	96
Participant Factor .....	98
Implications, Recommendations, and Research.....	102
Implications for Practice .....	103
Recommendations for Immediate Internal Changes .....	104
Recommendations for Future Research .....	105
Conclusion.....	106
REFERENCES.....	109
APPENDICES.....	125
Appendix A: The Cultural Proficiency Framework .....	125
Appendix B: 2016 State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce Report.....	126
Appendix C: Request to Use Research.....	127
Appendix D: SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR SCHOOL LEADERS (SASL) .....	129
Appendix E: Guiding Questions for Focus Groups.....	131

Appendix F: INITIAL INVITATION STATEMENT .....	132
Appendix G: INVITATION LETTER FOR GROUP .....	133
Appendix H: INFORMED CONSENT .....	134
Appendix I: Hood College IRB Application .....	136
Appendix J: Research and Data Collection in Inspirational School District .....	137

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1    Microaggressions in the Classroom	34
Table 2    Demographic Data for Participants of the Online Survey: Race	62
Table 3    Demographic Data for Participants of the Online Survey: Gender	63
Table 4    Demographic Data for Participants of the Online Survey: School Level	63
Table 5    Demographic Data for Focus Group Participants	64

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1 The Compass: A Navigational Tool for Understanding Multiple Perspectives	16
Figure 2 The Four Interrelated Tools of The Cultural Proficiency Framework	24
Figure 3 Professional Standard for Educational Leaders (PSEL), Standard 3	50
Figure 4 Data Analysis Matrix: Focus Groups, Round 1	66
Figure 5 Data Analysis Matrix: Triangulation of Data with Research Questions	67
Figure 6 Conceptual Framework	92

## DEDICATION

This body of research is dedicated to the vast array of students and families I have had the privilege to serve over the last nineteen years. They all have made me a stronger leader and better person. Through their eyes, I have gained a more informed multicultural perspective that values the beautiful tapestry of humanity that connects us all together. I will continue to be an advocate for those who are often mistreated as the least, lost, and left out.

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To my daughter, Sydney Eliana, I thank you for your unconditional love and apologize for all of the missed events and delayed phone calls. You have come into your own unique excellence and elegance and I am extremely proud to be your mother.

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## **ABSTRACT**

School districts operate within and contribute to the larger societal norms that systemically perpetuate inequitable academic and social emotional outcomes for students of color that often manifest in the form of microaggressions. Microaggressions in the classroom can be extremely damaging overtime, negatively impacting academic performance and related school behaviors by creating emotional turmoil and depleting psychological resources. Students of color describe racial microaggressions as patterns of being overlooked, under-respected and devalued because of their race. There is an urgent need to reverse unrelenting inequities within K-12 schools. School Leaders are the front-line of this work and are responsible for managing the dynamics of diverse school communities to ensure respect, support, and equitable outcomes for students, their families, and staff. The questions explored were: How are school leaders aware and understanding of the barriers to cultural proficiency that can lead to microaggressions in schools? In what ways do school leaders manage the dynamics of difference and embrace racial and cultural diversity to address microaggressions in schools? How do school leaders value the diversity of race and culture to prevent microaggressions in schools? How are school leaders and the school district institutionalizing the guiding principles of cultural proficiency to inform microaggressions in schools? A conceptual framework was used to guide the study and answer the questions. The overall findings show: (1) School leaders demonstrated a high level of self-awareness and understanding of the barriers to cultural proficiency; however, they were inconsistent in transferring the knowledge to their school leadership practices. (2) School leaders encountered a myriad of barriers to cultural proficiency under the themes of microaggressions, deficit thinking, whiteness, and entitlement while managing the dynamics of difference across their school communities. (3) School leaders communicated a surface level value of race and culture through school policies and practices. (4) School leaders expressed a disconnect between theory and practice within schools and across the district.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Across the nation, children of all backgrounds are experiencing a time in which discussions about race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and culture are at the forefront of their everyday lives. Many avoid these discussions because they fear that conversations about race, bias, and racism lead to feelings of anger, guilt, discomfort, sadness, and at times disrespect.

The current state of our Union, however, no longer allows for these tough conversations to be ignored (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016).

This chapter provides the background and historical context for the problem microaggressions in K-12 schools present and the need for culturally proficient leadership as a response to the inequities created in a microaggressive learning environment. Systems of oppression in the United States which inform the worldview of school staff to either interrupt or perpetuate microaggressions is introduced as well as other barriers to cultural proficiency. Finally, an overview of the study design is shared.

### **Background**

School leaders make a commitment to the academic success and well-being of each student in their care regardless of their race, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, and religion. School leaders commit to striving for equity educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to ensure the academic success and well-being of the students in their care. In addition, school leaders accept the responsibility of cultivating an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student. Last, school leaders are responsible for developing the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student's academic success and well-being. Similar to the oath of a doctor or attorney, school leaders have a moral obligation to students, families, and communities across the district was instantly elevated. As powerfully stated by Fullan (2003, p.29), moral purpose of the highest order is having a system where

all students learn, the gap between high and low performance is greatly reduced, and what people learn enables them to be successful citizens and workers in a morally based knowledge society.

Many large urban school districts have K-12 school communities populated with 70% or more students of color and 70% or more White middle-class teachers. There is a likelihood that students and staff have experienced some form of racism and cultural bias schools. Most often these experiences of racial and cultural bias are covert, in the form of microaggressions which are like an annoying plumbing issue, the slow drippings of insulting remarks, slights, and occasional not so funny jokes that target persons of color and other persons who have been marginalized by society. At times microaggressions can be so subtle that a person who experiences one begins to ruminate, asking herself if she really experienced what felt like a Muhammad Ali punch to one's psyche. The first time the comment is ignored in disbelief. The second time, one scans the rooms to see if anyone else heard the remarks. By the third experience, it is confirmed that a pattern of racial or cultural bias has occurred.

Imagine a child who encounters the uncomfortable feeling of being judged by the color of their skin or the origin of their culture. I experienced my first microaggression when I was seven years old, temporarily separated from my grandmother in a department store in the rural south. Looking around for help, I encountered an older White woman whom I thought would be loving and kind similar to my grandmother. Instead of extending support to reunify a lost child, the woman scolded me with her face, clutched her purse tightly, and scurried away as if I had assaulted her. Early on, children notice differences and mentally organize these observations into categories as a way to make sense of their ever-changing world (Rollins & Mahan, 2010). The look of sadness on my grandmother's face when I asked why the woman would think I wanted to steal her purse was never forgotten. In her silence, I found my answer and lost a little bit of my childhood. Attitudes of 'us and them' are learned and reinforced in moments such as this.



Many years later, witnessing children in schools having their innocence snatched away by teachers who put their fragility ahead of student well-being is a problem to be addressed. Black children are afforded the privilege of innocence to a lesser extent than children of other races (Goff et al., 2014). Those four words, I don't feel safe, have become code words for I want this child removed from my classroom. Most often, the student to be removed is a male child of color (African American, Asian, Hispanic, or Native American) and the teacher is a White female. In these moments when teachers draw a line in the sand, draped in what Peggy McIntosh's (1988) landmark article regarded as white privilege, school leaders are forced to make the decision of moving the student to a new classroom or have him stay put. Neither solution is optimal – approving a classroom change fuels the teacher's privilege which she will continue to yield by encouraging others to use those four words, "I don't feel safe". Or, if the school leader takes a stand and denies the teacher's request to remove the student, will the student suffer the consequences? Reflecting on his research contribution to *The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children* (2014), Goff stated, "Children in most societies are considered to be in a distinct group with characteristics such as innocence and the need for protection. Our research found that Black boys can be seen as responsible for their actions at an age when white boys still benefit from the assumption that children are essentially innocent." More examples of microaggressions in schools as shared by school leaders during focus group sessions are discussed in Chapter 4.

### **Race and Racism in America**

The United States has a documented history of racism, sexism, and classism that has prevented certain groups from receiving equal treatment and opportunities in both education and larger society (Great Schools Partnership, 2014). History professor and the founding director of the Anti-Racist Research and Policy Center at American University, Ibram X. Kendi (2016) posits that racial discrimination led to racist ideas which led to ignorance and hate, that this is the causal relationship

driving America's history of race relations. To understand how racial inequality has led to inequities in education, it is important to briefly review the impact of race in America. In 2004, The National Academies of Science, Engineering, Medicine, and Research Council formed an interagency research panel to give the policy and scholarly communities new tools for assessing the extent to which discrimination continues to undermine the achievement of equal opportunity. The following is an excerpt of how the panel of researchers described the concept of race:

The concepts of "white" and "nonwhite" were defined in laws and customs to exclude people from white status if they had even a small amount of nonwhite blood. The social meaning given to racial classifications activates beliefs and assumptions about individuals in a particular racial category. Further, as a social-cognitive construct, the meaning of race in the United States has changed and will likely continue to change over time with changing sociopolitical norms, economic patterns, and waves of immigration. - National Research Council, 2004

Racial inequality is the result of hierarchical social distinctions between ethnic groups within a society and often are established based on characteristics such as skin color and other physical characteristics or an individual's place of origin or culture (Ford, 2014). Historically, the U.S. education system has transmitted a hierarchy that prioritizes and enforces majority culture (Bell 2004). For example, in the eighteenth century, Native American and Mexican schools were Americanized, which involved stripping Native Americans and Mexicans of their language, culture, and clothing to be replaced with English, European clothing, and Eurocentric cultural values (Ferg-Cadima, 2004). With the urbanization of school following the Great Migration to the North, educators were encouraged to use curriculum and pedagogy to assimilate all students to white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant ideals (Gerstle, 2001). According to Jacobson (2006), Anglo-Saxon Protestant Whites were in power, and felt that the status quo could be best achieved through the standardization of education. Today, school leaders can play an important role in compensating for the inequalities caused by forced

assimilation in American public schools. However, education systems that fail to provide equal opportunities to all students can end up reinforcing, rather than helping to reduce, social inequalities that may threaten social cohesion (OECD, 2018). An inequitable education experienced from Kindergarten to Grade 12 can negatively impact higher education and career opportunities. The potential long-term effects of the prolonged gaps in educational attainment can lead to negative impact on future wages and way of life.

Social and racial inequity is at the heart of deficit paradigms. How people view and treat others, through prejudice and other forms of discrimination, frequently hinders or denies opportunities for disenfranchised individuals (Shapiro, 2005). The exposure to varying worldviews regarding race and culture in the home and social environments lead to children beginning their formal schooling with different levels of skills (Downey et al., 2004). Professors of education at University of California, Riverside and San Jose State University, Kohli et al. (2017) suggested schooling in the United States has a history driven by racialization and racism and that students of color have been subjected to institutionalized conditions that contradict their interests and their humanity. Accordingly, institutional racism and white privilege are the necessary beginning points for a discussion of microaggressions. White privilege is defined as, “a system or institution that directs benefits in one direction while denying those same benefits in other directions is inherently unjust, and any unjust system must lead to unearned privilege” (Neville et al., 2011, p. 260).

In the foreword of *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Classrooms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Howard, 2019), Geneva Gay, a seminal researcher of culturally responsive pedagogy wrote:

Achievement gaps in the quality of experiences and outcomes at all levels of U.S. public education is relentless and extensive. The victims are obvious, the causes are complex and debatable, and efforts toward remediation are still producing uneven results. Few if any

educators would disagree that students of color are the most negatively affected by disparities and any qualities and educational opportunities and outcomes. But this is where the consensus ends reasons for these disparities and strategies for overcoming them are highly divergent and often contentious. A critical issue often absent from these debates is a thorough analysis of race, racism, and culture as causes and potential solutions.

Aligned with Gay's (2019) proposition of race, racism, and culture being absent from the debate regarding potential causes of inequalities in education, this study posits that microaggressions rooted in racial and cultural biases lead to negative educational outcomes for students in K-12 schools. During elementary school, African Americans experience institutional and individual racism. In one longitudinal study 92 percent of Black children aged ten or younger, experienced racial discrimination led to emotional and mental harm and increase aggression and delinquency (Brody et. al 2006). Hispanic children also experience racial discrimination primarily attributed to ethnicity, English language proficiency, and phenotypic traits (Araujo and Borrell, 2006). Dulin-Keita, Hannon, Fernandez, and Cockerham (2011) conducted a study that examined whether children of marginalized racial/ethnic groups have an awareness of race at earlier ages than youth from non-marginalized groups, data were collected for non-Hispanic black, non-Hispanic white, and Hispanic children aged 7 – 12 using face-to-face interviews (n = 175) to assess whether children could define race and ethnic identity. Also, racial discrimination and self-esteem were measured. Dulin-Keita et al. (2011) found that Non-Hispanic black children were able to define race more accurately, but overall, Hispanic children encountered more racial discrimination, with frequent reports of ethnic slurs. Additionally, after accounting for ethnic identity, perceived racial discrimination remained a salient stressor that contributed to low self-esteem.

## **Microaggressions and Race**

According to Derald Wing Sue, professor of counseling psychology at Columbia University and seminal researcher of microaggressions, most Americans avoid overt acts of racism and exhibit politically correct behaviors (2010). In other words, thoughtful and deliberate behaviors are guided by beliefs that equality is central to justice, all individuals are entitled to equal respect, and all human persons are equal in fundamental worth or moral status. However, in two behavioral studies investigating the relationship between implicit race attitude and social trust, Stanley et al. (2011) found that the extent to which an individual invests in and trusts others with different racial backgrounds is related to the magnitude of that individual's implicit race bias. More specifically, the core dimension of social trust can be shaped by subconscious attitudes and negative feelings toward groups when engaging in more spontaneous behaviors (Stanley et al., 2011).

Microaggressions are the interactive form of implicit bias and in schools can manifest through low expectations for academic performance, poor assumptions of teachers regarding students' abilities, denied access to rigorous curriculum, and missed opportunities for advancement. According to Zaretta Hammond, an educator and author who married neuroscience with culturally responsive teaching to focus on the cognitive aspects of teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students, "When teachers frame student differences as deficits rather than as assets, a microaggression is ignited for the student" (2015). For instance, failing to learn to pronounce or continuing to mispronounce the names of students after they have requested the correct pronunciation. Or making a joke of a person of color's name, stating that it has too many letters in the alphabet and suggesting the student select a new name. In another example of schools where racial and cultural differences as deficits, assumptions were made about students' academic abilities which led to lessons and learning tasks planned at lower instructional levels and opportunities enrichment not offered to students of color. Further, multiple schools filled with lowered expectations for students of color led to a larger school system where

student outcomes continued to be predictable by race and culture. Examples such as these experienced by students of color over the course of their K-12 career could lead to a subtractive education, damaged self-esteem, depression, chronic stress, or other harmful effects. Socially marginalized students are likely to encounter more obstacles to school achievement than those who think, behave, and express themselves in ways that approximate school and mainstream cultural norms (Borck, 2020).

After being called a racist by the parent of one of her students, Melissa Summer, a White middle class kindergarten teacher in an urban school detailed her racialized awakenings and demonstrated how everyday conversations and actions of individuals like her and other well-intentioned teachers unknowingly contributed to and maintained racism and other types of oppression in schools (Summer, 2014):

- “Have you ever seen skin so black?” - The unstated suggestion is that darker skin was less desirable.
- “I wish I could take him home with me!” - While seemingly good-natured, the context in which this comment was made conveyed condescension. The implication was that the student’s family was inferior and unable to meet his or her needs.
- “They can’t \_\_\_\_.” - This common symptom of a deficit-based perspective formed a recurrent theme of conversations in our teachers’ lounge.
- “We don’t see the color of their skin. We love them all the same.” - Colorblindness perpetuates racism, thus causing much more harm than good (Boutte et al. 2011).

As explained in a strategic planning document created by Winston-Salem State University (2016): The terms equality and equity are often used interchangeably; however, they differ in important ways. Equality is typically defined as treating everyone the same and giving everyone access to the same opportunities. Meanwhile, equity refers to proportional

representation (by race, class, gender, etc.) in those same opportunities. To achieve equity, policies and procedures may result in an unequal distribution of resources.

The culturally incompetent worldviews of teachers such as Ms. Summer (2014) illustrate overarching barriers to cultural proficiency such as lack of awareness, sense of entitlement, resistance to change, and institutionalized systems of oppression. Inequities shaped by factors such as race, gender or socio-economic status can create inefficiencies that hinder economic growth, as they lead to significant misallocations of skills and talent. An inequitable education experienced from K-12 can negatively impact future higher education and career opportunities. Because of differences in family and social environments, children begin formal schooling with different levels of skills (Downey, Hippel and Broh, 2004). Schools leaders must address disparities of the educational experience students of color face. But education systems that fail to provide equal opportunities to all students can end up reinforcing, rather than helping to reduce, social inequalities that may threaten social cohesion (OECD, 2010). The potential long-term effects of the prolonged gaps in educational attainment can lead to negative impact on future wages and way of life.

Conversely, curriculum content that is culturally relevant, intelligible, and meaningful for students impacted by poverty, improves their educational outcomes, sense of self efficacy and self-determination, and future life chances (Paris et al., 2017). Cross et al. (1989) described cultural competence as set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals; enabling effective cross-cultural situations. School leaders are responsible for eliminating educational inequalities and should display, at a minimum, leading from a place of cultural competency. Demonstration of cultural competence includes modeling practices and establishing school policies that demonstrate value of all students regardless of race, gender, language, physical or emotional ability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic factors. Further, school districts must be diligent about studying, evaluating, and disaggregating their student demographics,

proactively and aggressively advocating for underrepresented students from such groups (Ford, 2014). By disaggregating student performance outcomes as part of the regular data review process, essential factors to a students' identity such as race, multilingualism, gender, etc. stays at the forefront of strategic conversations and sometimes courageous. In his book, *Equity 101*, author Curtis Linton stated, "Equity is about the 'tomorrows' for our students and children (2011, p.149).

### **Educational Equity**

According to John Singleton, the seminal researcher who taught educators across the country how to have 'Courageous Conversations About Race' in our schools said, educational equity is about raising the achievement for all students while narrowing the gaps between the highest and lowest performing students and eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories (Singleton, 2015). Further, educational equity is driven by a perspective that commands all students having access to quality teaching, instructional resources, and rigorous schooling experiences regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, LGBTQIA, or family income. Biases of school staff related to any student demographic can manifest through low expectations for academic performance, poor assumptions about language abilities, and, on occasion, blatant racism negatively impacting mental, physical, social and academic well-being of students. According to Sue and Constantine (2007), there is a preponderance of evidence documenting that people are averse to understanding how our beliefs and actions contribute to the oppression of others; this is particularly significant for white Americans. Because egalitarian values of white Americans operate on a conscious level and anti-minority feelings are less conscious, these values serve to protect them from the truth of their complicity in denying their own racism (Watts, 2007). Thus, many white Americans find it difficult to realize that they may hold unconscious racial biases, prejudices, and stereotypes that unintentionally make their appearance in interracial encounters (Sue et al. 2007). Teachers must see, view, and understand that each student



or group of students is as equal and as important as those students who most resemble the teachers (Gardiner et al., 2009). According to Gay (2019), sometimes the obvious is difficult for educators to see and concede, especially when it involves sensitive issues such as race and racism.

Equity is not a guarantee that all students will succeed; rather, it assures that all students will have the opportunity and support necessary to succeed (Singleton, 2015). School leaders have a responsibility to interrupt patterns of inequity to ensure a positive educational experience and reduce the predictability of academic outcomes based on socioeconomic status, race, gender, language, and differing abilities. Standards and educational leadership practices are often focused on managerial, instructional, and participatory leadership and within these areas of competence, school leaders and their staff need to be knowledgeable about diversity to provide education that is culturally sensitive to difference, is free from discrimination and prejudice, and promotes educational equity (Gardiner and Enomoto, 2006). However, for some, the greatest challenge in creating equitable schools lies in helping school leaders and teachers to see the role they play in the perpetuation of educational inequities (Singleton, 2015). An intended outcome of this action research study was to prompt a call for school leaders to confront the bias in their schools and operationalize culturally proficient leadership practices. When equity is truly operationalized in schools, instruction, intervention, support, and push are matched with students' needs as an automatic response, not a mandated process that breeds reluctance and resistance. Culturally proficient educational leaders are committed to educating all students to high levels through knowing, valuing, and using the students' cultural backgrounds, languages, and learning styles within the selected curricular and instructional contexts (Lindsey et al., 2009). Leadership is not mobilizing others to solve problems we already know how to solve but helping them to confront problems that have not yet been addressed fully (Fullan et al., 2004). Culturally proficient leaders encourage staff to be sensitive and knowledgeable about the

communication styles, backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and learning needs of students and families (Gardiner et al., 2009).

### **Statement of the Problem**

This research is in response to the urgent need to reverse unrelenting inequities within K-12 schools. School districts operate within and contribute to the larger societal norms that overall perpetuate racism and other inequitable outcomes for students of color. Barriers to cultural proficiency such as systems of oppression, privilege, entitlement, an unawareness of the need to adapt, and resistance to change consistently create racially predictable and persistently inequitable outcomes.

While individual racial microaggressions may not seem significant, there can be a negative impact from cumulative experiences with this covert form of racism. Experiencing microaggressions can result in children shifting their self-perceptions, worldviews and believing that their culture or aspects of their identity are inferior or an inconvenience (Kohli & Daniel G. Solórzano, 2012). Microaggressions in the classroom can be extremely damaging overtime, negatively impacting academic performance and related school behaviors by creating emotional turmoil and depleting psychological resources. Ferguson (2001) notes that educators who devalue ethnic and cultural differences view their students as “culturally disadvantaged” simply because of their ethnicity, which has a devastating effect on students’ willingness to learn. Students are less likely to have a sense of belonging and feel connect in classrooms and other learning spaces where they do not feel seen, heard, or valued by school staff.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical underpinnings of this study were shaped by the seminal work of Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, (1989), *Towards a Culturally Competent System of Care*, Volume 1. Their monograph originally written to respond to the needs of children with severe emotional need, developed a plan to assist States and communities in providing appropriate care that quickly became a

guide for cultural competency. In addition, Cross et al. (1989) established the essential terminology that is used in research and practice: cultural competence continuum, cultural destructiveness, incapacity, blindness, precompetence, competence, and proficiency. When the research team of Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, Terrell, and Lindsey (2019) updated Cross et al.'s trailblazing work, they pushed school leaders to move beyond the standard of competency to work towards proficiency. The four tools of cultural proficiency are:

1. Barriers to cultural proficiency
2. Guiding principles of cultural proficiency
3. Cultural proficiency continuum
4. Essential elements of cultural proficiency (Lindsey et al. (2019)

These four interrelated tools make up The Culturally Proficiency Framework. This framework provided the basic infrastructure for the research design and influenced decisions made regarding data collection and analysis for this dissertation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

School leaders have the privilege and responsibility to create the conditions that enhance students' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach all while promoting positive community relations (Lindsey et al., 2019). The principal serves as a catalyst to guarantee that the school embraces and affirms multicultural aims, objectives, curricular content, assessment content, and that pedagogy are implemented (Gardiner, Canfield-Davis, and Anderson, 2009). Critical work for principals, starting at the preschool level, is to establish a school climate and culture that recognizes and affirms diversity. Specifically, principals are responsible for teaching anti-racism and implementing equality of opportunity and outcomes (Hondo, Gardiner, and Sapien, 2008). Unless school leaders engage in conscious acts of reflection and reeducation, they will easily repeat the process with our children (Tatum, 1997). The purpose of this research was to gain insight into

barriers, such as racial and cultural microaggressions, school leaders faced in leading diverse school communities. Further, it was the desired outcome that participation in this study would inspire participants to take some action to become a more culturally proficient school leader.

### **Research Questions**

1. How are school leaders aware of and understanding of the barriers to cultural proficiency that can lead to microaggressions in schools?
2. In what ways do school leaders manage the dynamics of difference and embrace racial and cultural diversity to address microaggressions in schools?
3. How do school leaders value the diversity of race and culture to prevent microaggressions in schools?
4. How are school leaders and the school district institutionalizing the guiding principles of cultural proficiency to inform microaggressions in schools?

### **Overview of Methodology**

This qualitative study examined principals' and assistant principals' awareness and understanding of the barriers to cultural proficiency such as microaggression in K-12 schools. In addition, a desired outcome of the study was to inspire school leader participants to reflect on their practices to become more culturally proficient school leaders. Qualitative research was determined to be the best method for this study because of its ability to feature rich data with a strong potential for revealing complexity (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). A hybrid qualitative approach of action research and phenomenology was used. Action research is a type of research in which educators inquire to their teaching practices, examine the results of these inquires, and learn how to effect positive change in classroom environments (Crothers, 2019). Phenomenological research focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience (Patton, 2015).

The participants in this study were elementary, middle, and high school principals and assistant principals who work in a large urban mid-Atlantic school district where less than 30% of the student population is white, yet nearly 60% of the organization's workforce is white. Participants could either respond to an anonymous online survey and/or attend a confidential in-person focus group. In the end, n=97 school leaders completed the survey and n=15 school leaders participated in one of four focus group sessions. In addition, all but one of the n=15 focus group participants completed a post-assessment. Finally, the organization's vision/mission/core statements and diversity policies were reviewed to assess the ethos of the school system and identify the district's role in supporting cultural proficiency standards and practices in schools. With the Cultural Proficiency Framework in mind, I designed a school leadership self-assessment which allowed me to identify barriers to cultural proficiency and measure where the participants are on the cultural proficiency continuum. The focus groups were structured around the essential elements of cultural proficiency. And, the guiding principles of cultural proficiency aided in building awareness of barriers, such as microaggressions, and the need for culturally proficient leadership to ensure student success. I used methodological triangulation with the survey, focus group transcripts, post-assessment, and organizational documents to conduct a cross-data validity checks (Patton, 2015, p. 316).

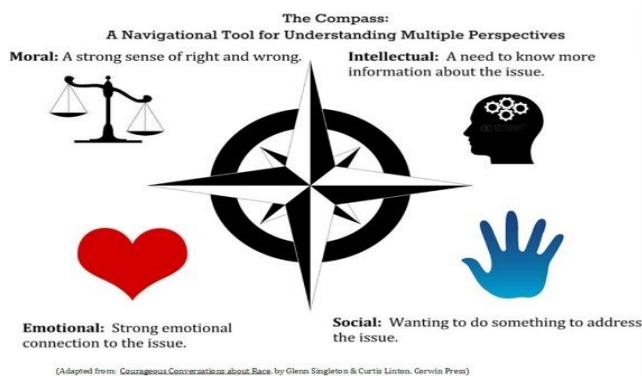
### **Researcher Positionality**

During my early years as a school leader, I faced microaggressions daily. For example, when I presented a required progress update for my work, a senior leader within the organization would frequently say, "You are so articulate," with a great surprise in her voice. Initially, the comments were enigmatic given the stringent requirements it took to secure my leadership position. Then I quickly realized like a slip too long for the hem of a dress, her implicit bias was showing, the belief that persons of color are less intelligent. In other instances, I would be repeatedly told to "sit there and be a pretty face" in meetings with families of color and endured remarks from staff such as, "I'll be here

much longer than you.” Having adopted a strong voice to ensure that others did not endure similar racially charged and culturally destructive behaviors, I set out to become an equity warrior. In the *Handbook of Urban Leadership* (2015), former New Jersey school superintendent, Larry Leverett, described equity warriors as people who, regardless of their role in a school or district, passionately lead and embrace the mission of high levels of achievement for all students, regardless of race, social class, ethnicity, culture, disability or language proficiency. Using *The Cultural Proficiency Framework* allowed me the space to navigate in and out of what Singleton and Linton (2006) refer to as The Compass, the four primary ways people deal with racial information (moral, emotional, intellectual, and social justice quadrants). *The Compass: A Navigational Tool for Understanding Multiple Perspectives* (Singleton and Linton, 2006) is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

### *The Compass: A Navigational Tool for Understanding Multiple Perspectives*



### **Bounds of Study**

All studies have boundaries guiding what gets included and excluded from the research. This study has several bounds. First, participants were all principals and assistant principals employed in the same mid-Atlantic school district, self-selected to participate in this research study. Participants, all of whom were invited to participate, were motivated to learn about microaggressions, culturally proficiency tools, and share their experiences with both. Thus, individuals’ ability to decide whether to

participate reduced the randomness of the sample population. Moreover, as a peer to many and a potential supervisor to other school leaders in this study, my position may have had a coercive effect in influencing participation. Sample size comprised 113 participants from one school system and no high school level leaders joined the focus groups. Although not the intention of this exploratory action research, the validity, utility, and generalizability of the study results and findings is limited by the small sample size. The time for the study was limited by self-imposed constraints and the data collection period took place in less than one full school year. Having a shorter time frame for the collection of data may have limited the time for additional participation and opportunity to produce noticeable or desired effects.

As a school leader within the district, I am a major stakeholder. I have witnessed microaggressions first-hand as well as acted as counsel for others who have experienced microaggressions and other biases with the organization. I came across a plethora of microaggression research regarding medical students, social workers, and university level students and faculty. While there was existing research for K-12 schools, I felt the need to further elevate the issue of barriers such as microaggressions and the importance of culturally responsive teaching and culturally proficient leadership. The foundation for whom a child is to become begins with their early experiences in school. Hence, I have strong opinions regarding barriers to cultural proficiency, specifically racially motivated microaggressions, and I actively promote culturally proficient leadership.

### **Significance of Study**

This research was conducted in response to the urgent need to reverse unrelenting inequities within America's public-school systems. For example, in the four-year graduation rate statistics for the mid-Atlantic school district modeled in this study reported that in 2018, 75.8% Hispanic/Latinx students graduated from high school in a four-year period as compared to their African American (89.5%) and White (94.9%) peers. The National Center for Statistics (2019) reported 2016-2017 four-

year high school graduation rates as 80% Hispanic/Latinx, 77.8% Black/African American, and 88.6 % White. Public-school districts operate within and contribute to the larger societal norms that have consistently created racially predictable and persistent inequitable outcomes. It is important for teachers and school leaders to be culturally and linguistically responsive and knowledgeable about the relationship between culture, teaching, and learning in all academic areas (Rueda & Stillman, 2012). This study sought to provide school leaders with information that could reduce the predictability of student outcomes as related to race, ethnicity, cultural, socioeconomics, gender, language, and abilities. Studying the lived experiences and perceptions of principals and assistant principals across K-12 schools provided data regarding barriers to cultural proficiency and the residual impact on student learning and achievement. The findings can assist current and future school leaders to reflect on their personal, professional, and institutional leadership experiences to assess their level of culturally proficiency.

Cultural and linguistic diversity have been hallmarks of American classrooms (Murry et al., 2020) which presented challenges for schools that did not have an awareness race and culture different from the commonly established Eurocentric middle-class ideology and therefore not versed in managing the dynamics of difference. This study provided significant literature for culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy which has been an emergent and evolving response to: (a) changing student demographics, (b) comparatively unchanging teacher demographics, (c) the persistence of technocratically-sustained, deficit perceptions among teachers who are not cross-culturally proficient, and (d) the immutability of low and technocratically tolerated, academic achievement among students of color (Crego-Emley & Treuhaft-Ali, 2017). This studied explored the barriers to cultural proficiency such as microaggressions rooted in racial and cultural biases.

Students are more like to flourish through the experience of quality of instruction that include culturally responsive pedagogy. High quality teaching relies on an environment that fosters the



ongoing learning of the instructor (Nuri-Robins et al., 2012) and the willingness to engage in the deep introspection of self required of cultural proficient educators. By implementing culturally responsive pedagogy, schools become more insightful regarding how staff perceptions drive expectations, instructional rigor, relationships, and relevancy of learning for students. Being knowledgeable of how perceptions could positively affect student outcomes as school leaders to hone their school improvement strategies and ultimately reduced the pervasive achievement, learning, and opportunity gaps.

According to Mutekwe (2014), the notion of learning equity viewed as a process of empowering all learners by affording them not only equality of educational opportunity but also ensuring that they receive fair treatment in their educational institutions. As a result of this study, school leaders could begin to establish parity in the teaching and learning processes regardless of the diversity of the learners in terms of race, sex, gender, religion, social class, ethnicity, disability, culture or creed (Eisner, 2005). This study provided strategies for promoting learning equity in the classrooms, integrating all of the learners. Further, it challenged school leaders to consider adopting equity pedagogies to reduce microaggressions, stereotype threats, and other barriers to cultural proficiency stemming race and culture. Race and institutionalized racism are significant factors that influence and mediate the interactions of students and teachers from different ethnic, cultural, language, and social class groups (Howard, 2016) . Cultural proficiency provides a comprehensive, systematic structure for school leaders to identify, examine, and discuss educational issues in our schools (Lindsey, Karns, and Myatt, 2010).

### **Definition of Key Terms**

- **Achievement Gap** (Nuri-Robins et al., 2011): A discrepancy of access and academic success that exists among certain socioeconomic groups and ethnic castes in schools.

- **Awareness** (Smedley et al., 2001): The realization that current policies and practices are not serving all students equitably.
- **Bicultural** (Lindsey et al., 2018): Effectively functioning in two cultural worlds in which people from each cultural world know they are part of the other and respect their biculturalism.
- **Culture** (Cross et al., 1989): An integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group
- **Cultural Competence** (Cross et al., 1989): A set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals; enabling effective cross-cultural situations
- **Cultural Proficiency** (Lindsey et al., 2018): A model for shifting the culture of a school or district; it is a model for individual transformation and organizational change.
- **Culturally Proficient Leadership**(Quezada et al., 2015): Culturally proficient leaders find ways to meet the needs of all students, paying particular attention to linguistically and culturally diverse students.
- **Culturally Responsive Teaching** (Hammond, 2015): The process of using familiar cultural information and processes to scaffold learning - communal orientation and focused on relationships.
- **Deficit Thinking** (Valencia, 2010): An ideology used within the field of education and in schools to explain academic performance as a result of deficiencies within an individual and group.
- **Equity** (Nuri et al., 2011): Recognizing that people are not the same but deserve access to the same outcomes.

- **Macroaggressions** (Linsey et al., 2018): The bold, blatant comments, policies, and practices that are obviously wrong and offensive.
- **Microaggressions** (Sue et al. 2007): The everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.
- **Microassaults** (Sue et al., 2007): Represent the more overt forms of discrimination and can manifest in verbal or nonverbal attacks, as well as avoidant behaviors.
- **Microinsult** (Sue et al., 2007): A rude or insensitive behaviors or statements that degrade a person's racial heritage or identity.
- **Microinvalidation** (Sue et al., 2010): Occur when a person negates or denies the thoughts, feelings, or experiences of a person of color.
- **Race** (National Research Council,2004): There is no single concept of race. Rather, race is a complex concept, best viewed for social science purposes as a subjective social construct based on observed or ascribed characteristics that have acquired socially significant meaning.
- **Racial Discrimination** (National Research Council, 2004): a social science definition of racial discrimination that has two components: (1) differential treatment on the basis of race that disadvantages a racial group and (2) treatment on the basis of inadequately justified factors other than race that disadvantages a racial group (differential effect).

**School Leaders** (National Association of Elementary School Principals): a principal, assistant principal, or other individual who is an employee or officer of an elementary school or secondary school, local educational agency, or other entity operating an elementary school or secondary school; and responsible for the daily instructional leadership and managerial operations in the elementary school or secondary school building.

## **Summary**

Microaggressions as a by-product of racial bias, the harm they cause, and the challenges microaggressions create in schools was introduced in Chapter 1. In addition, a synthesis for the intersection of racial inequality and educational inequality provided a background of systemic barriers biased worldview was presented. And, the role of school leader was established as the guiding authority who has the responsibility to interrupt patterns of inequity to ensure that all students are afforded the instruction, opportunities, and care to be successful.

## **Organization of this Study**

The remaining chapters provide details and examples of microaggressions in schools to increase school leaders' awareness and deepen their understanding of the harmful outcomes that students experience as a result of microaggressions. A review of the literature is provided in Chapter 2; my methodology for the study is outlined in Chapter 3; a presentation of findings is communicated in Chapter 4; and Chapter 5 includes a discussion of my interpretation of the findings, along with implications for practice and research, as well as recommendations for next steps in the work.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose for this qualitative study was to gain insight on barriers, such as racial and cultural microaggressions, school leaders face in leading diverse school communities. For this literature review an extensive examination of peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, and other periodicals was completed. The periodicals were carefully reviewed for empirical data, best practices, and strategies, while at the same time, paying attention to the emerging common themes. This literature review documents important research that was essential to understanding the impact of microaggressions in K-12 schools and necessary classroom and leadership practices to address them. The chapter is divided into the following sections: theoretical framework, barriers to cultural proficiency, microaggression, deficit thinking, culturally responsive teaching, and culturally proficient leadership.

### **Theoretical Framework**

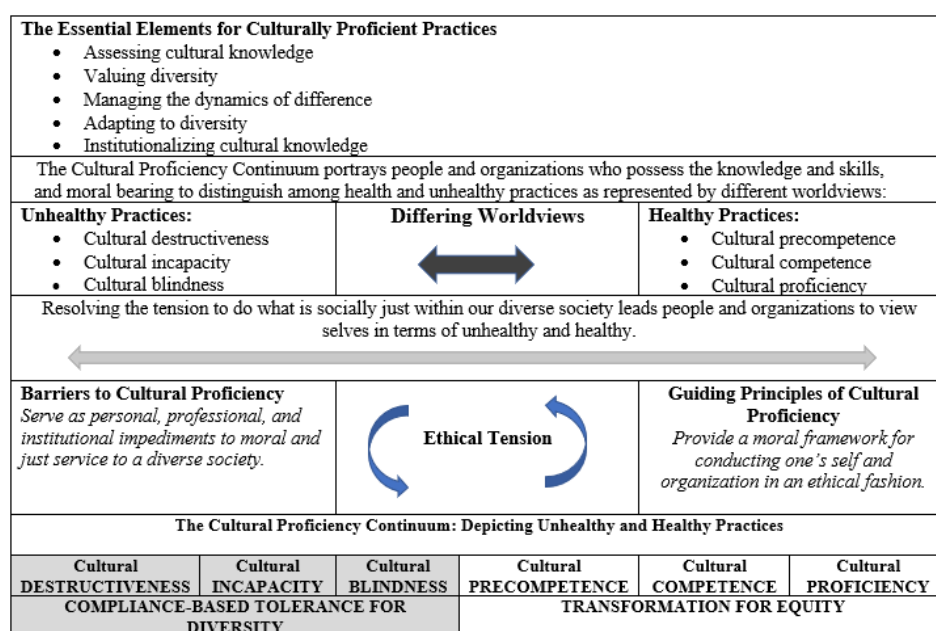
The theoretical underpinnings of this study were shaped by the seminal work of Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, (1989), *Towards a Culturally Competent System of Care*, Volume 1. Their monograph originally written to respond to the needs of children with severe emotional needs and develop a plan to assist States and communities in providing appropriate care that quickly became a guide for cultural competency. In addition, Cross et al. (1989) established the essential terminology that is used in research and practice: cultural competence continuum, cultural destructiveness, incapacity, blindness, precompetence, competence, and proficiency. In addition, an update to Cross et al.'s (1989) trailblazing work was established by the research team of Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, Terrell, and Lindsey (2019) that pushed school leaders to move beyond the standard of competency to work toward proficiency. Permission to use the framework was obtained from Randall B. Lindsey on behalf of his research partners (see Appendix C). According to Lindsey et al. (2019), the four tools of cultural proficiency are:

1. Barriers to cultural proficiency
2. Guiding principles of cultural proficiency
3. Cultural proficiency continuum
4. Essential elements of cultural proficiency

As shown in Figure 2, these four interrelated tools are the theoretical framework that provided the infrastructure for the research design and influenced decisions made regarding data collection and analysis. A full version of *The Cultural Proficiency Framework* (Nuri-Robins et al., 2012) is presented in Appendix A. The school leadership self-assessment allowed me to identify barriers to cultural proficiency and measure where the participants are on the cultural proficiency continuum. The focus groups were structured around the essential elements of cultural proficiency. The guiding principles of cultural proficiency aided in building awareness of barriers, such as microaggressions, and the need for culturally proficient leadership to ensure student success.

Figure 2

*The four interrelated tools of The Cultural Proficiency Framework*



## **Culture Defined**

Culture is a multifaceted concept that has psychological, physical, and environmental dimensions. For the purpose of this study, culture was defined as reflecting a belief system and behaviors informed by ethnicity, as well as other sociological factors such as gender, age, sexual orientation, and physical ability (Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, and Terrell, 2012). It is possible to be a member of more than one culture. Culture is not bound exclusively by one's race, ethnicity, or place of origin, but rather is shaped by a myriad of factors (Howard, 2019). Howard (2019) also suggests that a narrow view of culture does not recognize how geography, immigration status, generation, social class, gender, family history, migration patterns, language, and religious affiliations all have major influences on how culture is developed. In the United States, persons who are not part of the dominant culture must be bicultural—English language learners, immigrant students, students from families of extreme poverty or from marginalized ethnic groups, must know norms, values, and cultural expectations of both their native and mainstream cultures in order to survive (Nuri-Robins et al., 2012). Concha Delgado Gaitan (2012), an ethnographic researcher and professor of sociocultural studies in education at the University of California, Davis stated that educators are culture bearers who bring into classrooms a multitude of ideas, beliefs, and knowledge based on their own experiences. Further, Concha Delgado Gaitan (2012) found that it is important for educators to clarify their own cultural heritage and experiences before they embark in the education of others. It is important that educators understand how their own culture intersects with the experiences of their students' cultures.

## **Barriers to Cultural Proficiency**

According to Lindsey et al. (2019), cultural proficiency is a mindset, a worldview, a way a person or organization makes assumptions for effectively describing, responding to, and planning for issues that arise in diverse environments. For schools and school districts, cultural proficiency serves as the tipping point from viewing cultural differences as deficit-based to learning how to value cultural

differences as an asset upon which educational experience is built (Lindsey et al., 2019). Dr. Geneva Gay, an internationally respected professor and seminal researcher of culturally responsive teaching found that racism, homophobia, classism, and other forms of inequity and oppression are still rampant [in society and school systems] (2018). Likewise, Fergus (2016) found the work to address disparities involving race, ethnicity, language status, gender and gender expression, special education status, sexual orientation, and free/reduced eligibility status is complex due to the interweaving histories of oppression which have sustained school-based disparities. One possible response is to address the disparities between children of color and non-children of color by adopting culturally proficient teaching and learning practices. Culturally proficient classrooms where teachers and schools provide an environment of respect and reciprocity of ideas offer a solution to the eliminating the disparities that occur in schools. Employing cultural proficiency practices is a model for shifting the culture of a school or district; it is a model for individual transformation and organizational change (Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, Terrell, & Lindsey, 2019). Culturally proficient leaders address issues that emerge when cultural differences are marginalized. They foster policies and practices that provide opportunities for effective interactions among students, educators, and community members (Lindsey et al., 2019). The chief barriers to cultural proficiency are resistance to change, a lack of awareness of the need to adapt, a sense of entitlement by which teachers assume Eurocentric middle-class pedagogy and curriculum are best, and institutionalized systems of oppression. Persons unaware of the need to adapt believe that the only ones who need to change are the “others,” the ones who are “not like us” (Nuri-Robins et al., 2012). Examples of language commonly heard in the teacher’s lounge, heard at meetings, and read on social media are demeaning for people of color include:

- I don’t see color.
- All lives matter.
- I’m not racist, I have [fill in the blank with a race] friends.



- There's one race—the human race.

All of those seemingly benign statements contain a virulent, embedded erasure of the lived experiences of our students, our friends, and our colleagues (Peeples, 2018). Repeating such statements hurt students and can be offensive to staff because they reflect a willful blindness to the damage they do. Privilege is problematic: (a) when it skews our personal interactions and judgments; and (b) when it contributes to or blinds us to systemic barriers for those who do not possess a certain privilege, thereby creating or perpetuating inequity (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019). When one recognizes one's entitlement, one has the ability to make constructive choices that benefit the education of children and youth (Lindsey et al, 2019). Systems of oppression include institutionalized racism, sexism, ableism, and heterosexism, where no overt rules or policies are in place, but members of certain groups are marginalized or experience subtle but profound discrimination (Nuri-Robins et al., 2012). In the seminal work of Paulo Freire's (1970, p. 70) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he states:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence...the interests of the oppressors lie in changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated.

The significance of Freire's (1970) compelling words underscores the deeply rooted systemic history of marginalizing students and their contributions. Marginalizing others signifies a monocultural

perspective that advances a dominant Eurocentric culture for learning, behaving, and interacting in school.

The leading barriers of cultural proficiency are resistance to change, a lack of awareness of the need to adapt, a sense of entitlement, and institutionalized systems of oppression. Those who are privileged, but who are unaware of the need to adapt believe that the only ones who need to adapt are the “others,” the ones who are “not like us” (Nuri-Robins et al., 2012). Privilege is problematic: (a) when it skews our personal interactions and judgments and (b) when it contributes to or blinds us to systemic barriers for those who do not possess a certain privilege, thereby creating or perpetuating inequity (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019). When one recognizes one’s entitlement, one has the ability to make constructive choices that benefit the education of all children and youth (Lindsey et al., 2019). Systems of oppression, perpetuated by the privileged, include institutionalized racism, sexism, ableism, and heterosexism, where no overt rules or policies are in place, but members of certain groups are marginalized or experience subtle but profound discrimination (Nuri-Robins et al., 2012).

## **Microaggressions**

### **Origins of Microaggressions**

While conducting an experiment on the effects of racism in television, Dr. Chester Pierce (1978), professor at Harvard Medical School and founding president of the Black Psychiatrists of America, coined the term “microaggression” to describe the subtle racial putdowns that degrade physical health over a lifetime. Having experienced the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement and the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Dr. Pierce was highly concerned about the harmful effect of the persistent presence of stigmatizing representations of Black people in television commercials, “carrier” of demeaning messages that undermined the mental health of vulnerable young black children in particular. Further, determined to prevent what he would eventually call microaggressions

from occurring, Dr. Piece became involved with a new television project in 1969, *Sesame Street*, as a senior advisor. *Sesame Street* was originally conceived as a novel way of bringing remedial education into the homes of disadvantaged children, especially children of color; however, Pierce, saw the potential to directly counter and counteract the racist messages prevalent in the media of his time (Harrington, 2019).

Similar to Pierce's research interests, Jackson, Knight, & Rafferty (2010), conducted a study of Race and unhealthy behaviors: chronic stress, the HPA axis, and physical and mental health disparities over the life course. The Jackson et al. (2010) study explored the physical health disparities among racial groups given the strain of living under inhospitable environmental conditions, the inequities associated with inhospitable environments—inequalities in employment, income, and educational opportunities that favor non-Hispanic Whites over Blacks. Jackson et al. (2010) concluded that living in chronically stressful environments, leading to unhealthy behaviors can combine with negative environmental conditions to eventually contributed to morbidity and mortality disparities among social groups.

Sue et al. (2007) wrote the seminal work upon which contemporary research on microaggressions is based. They identified three major classes of microaggressions (Keels, Durkee, & Hope, 2017). The first class of microaggressions is microassaults, which are explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by verbal and nonverbal behaviors meant to hurt the intended victim through name calling, blatant isolation of the individual, or purposeful discriminatory actions. The second class is microinsults, which are characterized by more indirect verbal and nonverbal behaviors that convey stereotypical beliefs. Microinsults also include rudeness and insensitivity regarding a person's racial-ethnic heritage or identity. The third class is microinvalidations, which are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a racial-ethnic minority individual (Keels et al., 2017). Microaggressions cut across all social identities

including race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability status, socioeconomic class, and other important social dimensions (Portman et al., 2013).

According to Sue et al. (2007), microinvalidations are perhaps the most insidious form of microaggressions because they exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of people of color. Potentially the most detrimental of the three forms, microinvalidations directly attack the racial reality of persons of color and attempt to replace it with the racial reality of white Americans, oftentimes with damaging consequences to the targets. Students of color often report, for example, that their white peers and teachers chastise them for “bringing race into everything” (e.g., “Why does everything have to be about race?”). When Asian American and Latino/a American students who are born and raised in the United States and who are complimented for speaking good English or repeatedly asked where they were born, the impact of these inquiries or statements is to negate their U.S. heritage and tell them that they are aliens in their own country (Sue & Constantine, 2007). When students of color are told, “I don’t see color,” or “We are all human beings,” the effect is to dismiss and negate their experiences as racial-cultural beings (Sue, 2003). When students of color attempt to point out instances of differential treatment in the classroom and are told, “Don’t be so oversensitive” or “Don’t be so petty,” their racial experiences are nullified or diminished.

While some people may believe that microaggressions are brief and harmless, many studies have found that microaggressions have a significant negative impact on people’s mental and physical health. What Sue (2010) called “well-intentioned” individuals, persons who are often unaware of how their actions have a harmful impact, can create barriers in the form of microaggressions. According to Sue (2010), the most detrimental forms of microaggressions are usually delivered by person who have engaged in harmful conduct toward a socially devalued group. For instance, Nadal et al. (2014) found

that the more racial microaggressions that people of color experience, the more likely they are to also report depressive symptoms and a negative view of the world. In another study, LGBT participants reported that when they experienced microaggressions, they felt depressed, anxious, and even traumatized (Nadal et al., 2011). An additional study found that when college students experience microaggressions, they also binge drink or develop other alcohol-related issues (Blume et al., 2012).

Typically, microaggressions are directed at the marginalized, historically underrepresented, and usually most vulnerable persons in our society (Berk, 2017). The power of racial microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator and, oftentimes, the recipient (Sue, 2005). However, the target may sense that something is happening but be unable to identify or articulate it. These microaggressive exchanges can be so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed as being innocuous.

### **Racial Microaggression**

When racial microaggressions occur, they present challenge for teachers and students alike. Microaggression research is directly connected to research regarding racism in America and began with a specific examination of race-related slights and indignities Black Americans experienced on a daily basis (Wong et al., 2014). The historical reference of racism in the United States is described as a mental and public health illness in which skin color determines whether one is expected to operate from an inferior or superior vantage point (Pierce et al., 1978). An updated definition stated racism as the inability or refusal to recognize the rights, needs, dignity, or value of people of particular races or geographical origins. More widely, the devaluation of various traits of character or intelligence as 'typical' of particular peoples (The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 2016). With respect to racism, the greatest challenge society and the mental health professions face is making the invisible visible (Sue, 2004). Psychiatrist and Harvard University professor Chester Pierce, whose early research focused on the interracial actions between African Americans and white Americans, is

credited for coining the term “microaggression” in the 1970s. Pierce et al. (1978) initially characterized microaggressive acts as interracial encounters carried out in automatic, preconscious, or unconscious fashion and stemmed from the mental attitude of presumed superiority. In a later study, Pierce expanded the definition of microaggressions to subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are “put downs” of blacks by offenders (Pierce et al., 1978). Then, in an article, “Law as Microaggression,” published in the Yale Law Journal, Davis (1989) defined microaggressions as stunning automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority. Racial microaggressions matter because they provide a framework for people of color to “name” the pain caused by everyday racism so that it cannot be dismissed (Freire, 1970, p.70).

There is a legitimate fear of being called racist. Because most individuals are concerned about how they are perceived by others, it goes without saying that we present ourselves to others in the most favorable light possible. This is especially true on topic relating to race. Further, many of us have a fear of realizing our racism. For many of us, the full realization that we are not free of biases, stereotypes, and discriminatory actions assails our self-concept of being bias-free and a belief in our own “goodness” (Sue & Constantine, 2007). Although the fear of appearing biased affects honest racial dialogue, the most threatening realization of many is that we are indeed racist (Sue & Constantine, 2007). When situations arise that may result in self-disclosure about biases toward others, or when they become aware of their hidden negative attitudes towards people of color or experience strong feelings of aversion toward a particular group, white Americans are likely to experience great discomfort and dissonance (Sue & Constantine, 2007).

## **Microaggressions in the Classroom**

In the classroom, students of color describe racial microaggressions as recurring patterns of being overlooked, under-respected, and devalued because of their race. According to LeMire, Melby, Haskins, and Williams (2012), failure to align instruction in a way that may be beneficial to a given student could lead to a sense that the educational process does not value him or her. Further, the inability of the student to reach a valuing state could have substantial negative consequences and may cause the student to affectively shut down (Hackenberg, 2010). Implicit biases of school staff can manifest through low expectations, poor assumptions, and in rare occasion blatant racism (Sue, et al., 2007). Phrases such as, “Are you sure you belong here?” to an African American student sitting in an advanced placement course or, “You speak English so well,” to an Asian student born in the United States are common examples of microaggressions that regularly occur in classrooms. These negative teacher to student experiences may increase tension in the classroom and cause feelings of discomfort when students are singled out based on race, disability, language, gender, or socioeconomic status (Darvin, 2018).

Microaggressions in the classroom come in many forms: teacher to student, student to teacher, or student to student (Portman et al., 2013). Table 1, Microaggressions in the Classroom, presents examples of how racial and cultural biases manifest in classrooms. Microaggressions have a negative effect on classroom climate as they can lead to awkwardness, feelings of discomfort, or even hostility. Other persons in the class pick up on the improper behavior and either join, come to the classmate’s aid, or their empathy for the target led them to suffer silently along with the target. The impact on those who are the subject of microaggressions can result in feelings of inferiority; uncomfortableness; contributions or opinions minimized, ignored, or not granted validity; not belonging; or feeling unwelcomed.

Table 1

*Microaggressions in the Classroom*

Microaggression	Example
Pronouncing the names of students after they have corrected you time and time again	"Is Jose Cuinantila here?" "I am here, but my name is Jesus Quintanilla."
Scheduling tests or project due dates on religious or cultural holidays	"It has been pointed out to me that I scheduled an assessment during Rosh Hashanah, but we're ok because I don't see any Jewish students in the class."
Setting low expectations for students from particular groups, neighborhoods, or feeder patterns	"Robert lives in the apartments; he's going to need a lot of support."
Calling on and validating one gender and ignoring the other	"Let's call on Mary, I know she has the answer."
Using inappropriate humor in class that degrades students from different groups	"I bet your family likes to put salsa on everything, even pancakes!"
Expressing racially charged political opinions in class assuming that the targets of those opinions do not exist in class	"I think illegal aliens are criminals and need to be rounded up and taken back to their country."
Hosting debates in class that place students from groups who may represent minority opinion in class in a difficult position	"Today we are going to debate whether slavery was good for the economy or not. I expect the three African American students and a few of you to discuss the benefits of slavery."
Assuming that all students are from the United States and fully understand the English language and culture	"What do you mean you have never seen the Brady Bunch. Where are you from?"
Asking students with disabilities to identify themselves in class	"This is the last time I am going to ask; anybody with a disability who needs extra help, raise your hand!"
Ignoring student-to-student microaggressions	"Don't be retarded! That party this weekend was so gay."
Making assumptions about students and their backgrounds	"You're Latino and you don't speak Spanish. You should be ashamed of yourself!"
Assuming students of color, English learners, or students with disabilities are not proficient in content areas	"My students cannot do this assignment, it's too hard for them..."
Complimenting non-Caucasian students on their use of 'good English'	"Ivan, you are so articulate. I did not know you could speak English so well."

Nevertheless, microaggressions can be extremely damaging to students of color because, overtime, microaggressions negatively influence academic performance and related school behaviors by creating emotional turmoil and depleting psychological resources (Sue, 2005). Because culture strongly influences the attitudes, values, and behaviors that students and teachers bring to the instructional process, it likewise has to be a major determinant of how the problems of underachievement are solved (Gay, 2002). Microaggressions experienced in the classroom can cause feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability, diminish self-esteem, and decreased effort. The emotional



impact of microaggressions committed in the classroom may lead to lower academic performance, disengagement, and misbehaviors, thereby hindering student success (Darvin, 2018). Part of becoming a more culturally responsive teacher or culturally proficient school leader involves effectively recognizing and responding to microaggressions in the classroom and in daily interactions across the school community. The knowledge that teachers need to have about cultural diversity goes beyond mere awareness of, respect for, and general recognition of the fact that ethnic groups have different values or express similar values in various ways (Gay, 2002). Thus, it is important for teachers to acquire a knowledge of culturally responsive teaching to make learning more interesting and engaging for ethnically diverse students.

According to Kleinfeld (1972), teachers may do substantial damage to students when their sympathy may be excessive and their intellectual interests in a marginalized culture may be unintentionally pursued at the students' expense. For example, Budai (2009) found that students labeled as low achievers typically receive differential treatment in the classroom. Teachers usually call on these students less often and wait a shorter period of time for them to respond than they do for high achievers. Culturally responsive teaching involves using the cultures, experiences, and perspectives of African, Native, Latina/o, and Asian American students as filters through which to teach them academic knowledge and skills. In addition, it is essential for educators to understand the unequal distributions of power and privilege and be willing to teach students of color cultural competence about themselves and each other (Gay, 2002). According to Gay (2003), our beliefs about the necessity of culturally responsive teaching are based on the premises that: (a) multicultural education and (b) educational equity and excellence are deeply interconnected. Gay (2003) goes on to say that teacher accountability involves being more self-conscious, critical, and analytical of one's own teaching beliefs and behaviors. Finally, Gay (2003) states that teachers need to develop a deeper knowledge and consciousness about what is to be taught, how, and to whom.

## **Deficit Thinking**

When teachers frame student differences as deficits rather than as assets, a microaggression is ignited for the student (Hammond, 2015). Microaggressions in the classroom come in many forms: teacher to student, student to teacher, or student to student (Portman, Bui, Ogaz, & Trevino, 2013). For students, microaggressions in the classroom can result in feelings of inferiority, uncomfortableness, minimized contributions or opinions, being ignored or not granted validity, not belonging, and feeling unwelcomed. Race is a necessary component of personalization because “teachers [who] ignore the racial component of students’ identity are in effect treating their students as incomplete beings, and student performance can suffer as a result” (Milner, 2010).

Ferguson (2001) notes that educators who devalue ethnic and cultural differences view their students as “culturally disadvantaged” simply because of their ethnicity, having a devastating effect on students’ willingness to learn. This type of deficit thinking typically describes of behavior in pathological or dysfunctional ways – referring to deficits, deficiencies, limitations, or shortcomings in individuals, families, and cultures (Valencia, 2010). Likewise, Dr. Donna Y. Ford, a professor of special education at Vanderbilt University whose research focuses on increasing the representation of culturally diverse students in gifted education and advanced placement classes, described deficit thinking as a type of blaming the victim that views the alleged and imagined deficiencies of culturally different students as the primary reason for their school problems and academic failures.

Microaggressions are barriers to cultural proficiency and a form of deficit thinking that endangers a positive learning environment. Deficit thinking and teaching is countered by an asset-based mindset and culturally responsive teaching or pedagogy. To counter deficit thinking, culturally responsive teachers envision their students as being filled with possibilities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Further, culturally responsive teachers use the dimensions of caring, communication, curriculum, and instruction to validate and affirm the importance of their students’ identities. According to John

Singleton, who has been most widely identified with the concept of courageous conversations about race:

If a school is truly equitable, all children arrive each day at a clean, well-resourced, and inviting environment in which the educators are sure of their capabilities, excited about teaching and learning, and steadfast in their resolve to dismantle barriers, such as harmful stereotypes and labels, that block children's freedom to learn (Singleton, 2015, p. 234)

Moreover, Richard Valencia, Professor of Educational Psychology whose scholarly specialization is racial/ethnic minority education, with a particular focus on Mexican Americans, defined deficit thinking as an ideology used within the field of education and in schools to explain academic performance as a result of deficiencies within an individual and group (2010). A deficit ideology discounts the presence of systemic inequalities as the result of race-based processes, practices, and policies and places fault in a group for the conditions they find themselves experiencing (Fergus, 2016). For example, a teacher who says, "These kids can't read because they don't have anyone to help them with their homework." Further, teachers communicate deficit perspectives when they define "students by their weaknesses rather than their strengths" (Gorski, 2008, p.34). For instance, in response to an inquiry of why a student was not afforded the same opportunity as her peer, the teacher stated, "She is a newcomer still learning English and the math will be too hard for her."

In her book *What Keeps Teachers Going*, Professor Emerita of Language, Literacy and Culture at the School of Education, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Sonia Nieto (2003) stated that a successful teacher is one who places a high value on students' culture, race, language, gender, experiences, families, and sense of self. These teachers sustain high expectations of all students, especially for those on whom others may have given up. Barriers to cultural proficiency in schools, such as microaggressions, may manifest in the form of an ascription of intelligence or beliefs that ethnic students are not citizens. In addition, pathologizing cultural values and communication by

acting as if persons of color are abnormal. Students of color are often underestimated which results in less rigorous instruction, reduced workload, multiple doses of remedial support, and they are not permitted to enroll in advanced courses. The harmful impact of encountering cultural barriers over and over can lead to a damaged self-esteem, an altered sense of self, reduced motivation, fear of taking intellectual risks, added stress, depression, and possible health issues. As well as a lack of robust education. In addition, the barriers of cultural proficiency can cause strained relationships with teachers and staff, issues with socialization and behavior, gaps in learning, or an overall unhealthy school experience. Nieto and Bode (2012) stated, teachers are the products of educational systems that have a history of racism, exclusion, and debilitating pedagogy. The authors went on to say, as a consequence, their practices may reflect their experiences, and they may unwittingly perpetuate policies and approaches that are harmful to many of their students (Nieto and Bode, 2012).

According to Sonia Nieto (1992), multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students that challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society, and accepts and affirms the pluralism (e.g., ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers represent. Multicultural education not only affirms issues of identity and difference but also assertively confronts issues of power and privilege in society. This means challenging racism and other biases as well as the inequitable structures, policies, and practices of schools and, ultimately, of society itself (Nieto and Bode, 2012). In *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, Nieto and Bode (2012 p. 4) stated, “Multicultural education is approached as if it were divorced from the policies and practices of schools and from the structures and ideologies of society.” This kind of thinking often results in misguided practices such as a singular focus on cultural artifacts like food and dress, or on ethnic celebrations that exaggerate exotic attributes of groups. It can

become “fairyland” multicultural education, disassociated from the lives of teachers, students, and communities.

Students bring with them a set of values and beliefs, or their “funds of knowledge” from their homes and neighborhood cultures that may complement or clash with the school culture and may legitimize the social, economic, political, and cultural hegemonic values of the dominant society (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Thus, the acts of other terms such as culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), culturally responsive instruction (Au, 2007), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) promote social justice through a focus on equality and celebration of diversity.

### **Teacher Expectations**

One of the effects of microaggressions is low expectations. According to Budai (2009), teachers make inferences about students' future behavior or achievement can lead to confirmation of the teacher's expectations. In the wonderfully complex and dynamic world of education, teachers' perceptions and expectations of their students can have an enormous impact on the quality of teaching each student receives (Budai, 2009). The seminal work of Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968) demonstrated that teacher expectations influence student performance, describing the phenomenon as the “Pygmalion Effect.” During the infamous Pygmalion Effect study (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), the researchers manipulated teachers' beliefs of students' abilities by providing false information regarding students' performance on a nonexistent test and found significantly greater school-year gains among the students who were falsely identified to teachers as ‘growth spurters’, meaning that they facilitate the growth spurts of their students (Gershenson, et al., 2015). Conversely, Rosenthal & Babad (1985) found that when teachers expect certain behaviors of students, they are likely to act in ways that make the expected behavior more likely to occur. Hence, there is concern that teachers have

significantly lower expectations for the educational attainment of students of color and the socioeconomically disadvantaged (Boser, Wilhelm, & Hanna, 2014).

During a similar study, Brophy and Good (1974) explored relationship between teachers and students, particularly individual differences in students and teacher expectations and attitudes based on these differences. Partially as a result of such efforts, investigators have recently recognized the active role played by students in the teaching situation (Weinstein, 1982). In other another study related to the Pygmalion Effect, Jamieson, Lydon, Stewart, & Zanna, (1987) stated, the expectation that a teacher has about a particular student's ability sometimes acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy, bringing about the very level of academic attainment for that student that was originally expected. In a related study regarding teacher expectations, Jussim et al. (1996) show that teacher expectations predict student achievement mainly because the expectations are accurate, although they do lead to small self-fulfilling prophecies and biases. Their quest was to identify conditions under which self-fulfilling prophecies might be considerably more powerful (Jussim et al., 1996). The reported results indicate that teacher expectancy effects are more powerful among girls, students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, or African-Americans. Further, teacher expectations influence the standardized test scores of African Americans ( $\beta = .37$ ) more strongly than the scores of European American students ( $\beta = .14$ ).

In a research study which investigated the extent to which self-fulfilling prophecies and self-verification occurred among 108 teachers and 1,692 students in 108 sixth-grade public school math classrooms, Madon et al. (2001) found that teacher ideologies and beliefs about the student population they served had a positive or negative effect on the student outcomes via the actions and behaviors teachers chose to employ in the classroom. Likewise, Fergus, an applied researcher of educational policy and outcomes with a specific focus on Black and Latino boys' academic and social engagement outcomes, found that teachers demonstrated bias-beliefs such as colorblindness, racial discomfort, and

deficit thinking a greater frequency when there was a lesser degree of teacher self-efficacy (2016). Fergus (2017) further noted bias-beliefs regarding school policies and practices. Therefore, it is important for school leaders who have authority over policies and practices which communicate a school's culture of beliefs and values, to interrupt the bias-beliefs that can lead to negative outcomes for students.

Positive expectations influence performance positively and negative expectations influence performance negatively. Academic achievement statistics demonstrate that not much has changed in the last 50 years. According to Rochmes's (2017) research, teachers and school leaders are among key adults who can transmit attitudes about inequality—including stigmatizing stereotypes about different students' potential to succeed and positive attitudes about students' potential—to the children they are in contact with in their daily work. Educators' perceptions and attitudes about inequality may directly and regularly influence the children they teach, conveying anything from a disregard for the ideals of social justice, to a resigned complacency with the status quo, to a sense of empowerment and invigoration to make a difference (Rochmes, 2017).

According to Darling-Hammond's (2000), schools can make a difference and a substantial portion of that difference is attributable to teachers. In another study regarding teacher expectations, (Sorhagen, 2013) used prospective longitudinal data to examine the associations between first-grade teachers' over- and underestimation of their students' math abilities, basic reading abilities, and language skills and the students' high school academic performance, with special attention to the subject area and moderating effects of student demographic characteristics. Teachers' inaccurate expectations in first grade predicted students' math, reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and verbal reasoning standardized test scores at age 15. Significant interactions between students' family income and teachers' misperceptions of students' math and language skills were found, such that teachers' over- and underestimation of abilities had a stronger impact on students from lower

income families than on students from more affluent homes. In contrast, the effects of teachers' misperceptions of students' basic reading abilities on performance at age 15 did not differ by income. These results have implications for understanding the complexities of self-fulfilling prophecies and for understanding the achievement gap between students from disadvantaged and advantaged homes. Teacher effects appear to be sustained and cumulative; that is the effects of a very good or poor teacher spill over into later years, influencing student learning for a substantial period of time, and the effects of multiple teachers in a row who are similarly effective or ineffective produce large changes in students' achievement trajectories (Darling-Hammond, Wei, & Johnson, 2009).

### **Culturally Responsive/Relevant Pedagogy**

The terms culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant teaching, and culturally responsive pedagogy are used as synonymous in this study. Culturally responsive teaching develops the natural diversity and fluidity of competence among a diverse student population by accessing their funds of knowledge or taking an asset-based approach to teaching (Gay, 2018). In a study wherein asset-based practices were applied to examine how teachers' asset-based pedagogy beliefs and behaviors are associated with Latino students' ethnic and reading achievement identity, Lopez (2017), found that teachers' critical awareness moderates their expectancy, resulting in higher achievement; and teachers' critical awareness and expectancy beliefs were found to be directly associated with teachers' behaviors, which were in turn related to students' ethnic and achievement identities. When applied, these positive, value-add approaches to teaching and learning are a welcomed departure from the traditional starting point of contemplating, "What we are to do with these poor children of color?" approach.

### **Culturally Proficient Leadership**

It is important for school leaders to consistently model socially competent attitudes, values, and dispositions by: (a) demonstrating interactions that are shaped by understanding; and (b) embracing



the principles of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy (Bakken & Smith, 2011). Schools that do not convey positive messages and welcoming sentiments that are relevant to the populations they serve risk creating barriers to student success (Marrero, 2016). Manifested in a school setting, microaggressions take shape through low expectations for achievement, lack of access to rigorous curriculum, and lost opportunities to participate in enrichment programs. In addition, the long-term impacts of microaggressions can be damaged self-esteem, an altered sense of self, reduced motivation, fear to take intellectual risks, stress, depression, or school anxiety. Microaggressions are often the underlying cause of issues with socialization, behavior, academic performance, and an overall negative school experience. For schools and school districts, cultural proficiency serves as a tipping point from viewing cultural differences as deficit-based to learning how to value cultural differences as assets upon which educational experiences are built (Lindsey et al, 2019). Achieving equity for all students must be a moral imperative and it serves as a central and essential component of any attempt to eliminate racial achievement disparities (Singleton, 2015).

Leadership is often regarded as the single most critical factor in determining the success or failure of an organization (Bass, 1990). School leadership is of central importance in what happens in schools (Rigby & Tredway, 2015). School leaders are entrusted with the education, safety, care, and respect of children and youth from diverse backgrounds. School leadership requires a clear vision for school improvement, outlining a plan for student achievement in which all stakeholders see themselves and understand their role in achieving the mission. Providing a high level of care and a quality education for all students requires that school leaders have a full understanding of the multicultural tapestry of their school communities. Further, leading a school requires a commitment self-awareness, an appreciation of multiculturalism, and an understanding of the environmental or institutionalized factors that influence success. When one considers the racial identities of PK-12 teachers, the majority of whom are White and enact heteronormative teaching practices, we see how

they have the power to (re)name and impose what they consider to be normal American superiority, and moreover, on the assumption of the inferiority of people of color (Marrun, 2018). School leaders need to leverage the skill and will of others to accomplish the organizational mission. The leadership and decision-making provided by a school principal is proximate and tied directly to outcomes in her school (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012).

Cultural proficiency is about serving the needs of all students, with a laser-like focus on historically underserved students (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2016). Cultural proficiency starts with a commitment to examining one's own values, assumptions, and behaviors to ensure that the needs of all students are met (Robles, 2019). Culturally proficient leaders display personal values and behaviors that foster policies and practices that provide an opportunity and enable them to engage in effective interactions among students, educators, and communities they serve (Lindsey et al., 2019). Culturally proficient leaders address issues that emerge when cultural differences are marginalized in schools and organizations.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter focuses on the methods and procedures that directed this study. It details the purpose of the study and the research questions that provided a lens for data collection and analysis throughout the study. The sample population, data collection, and data analysis techniques will also be discussed in this chapter.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to gain insight on barriers, such as racial and cultural microaggressions, school leaders faced in leading diverse school communities. Further, it was the desired outcome that participation in this study would inspire participants to take some action to become a more culturally proficient school leader. School leaders have the privilege and responsibility to create the conditions that enhance students' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach all while promoting positive community relations (Lindsey et al., 2019). The principal serves as a catalyst to guarantee that the school embraces and affirms multicultural aims, objectives, curricular content, assessment content, and that pedagogy are implemented (Gardiner, Canfield-Davis, and Anderson, 2009). Critical work for principals, starting at the preschool level, is to establish a school climate and culture that recognizes and affirms diversity. Specifically, principals are responsible for teaching anti-racism and implementing equality of opportunity and outcomes (Hondo, Gardiner, and Sapien, 2008). Unless school leaders engage in conscious acts of reflection and reeducation, they will easily repeat the process with our children (Tatum, 1997).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study were influenced by essential elements, one of the four tools within The Cultural Proficiency Framework. The essential elements for cultural proficiency are (Nuri-Robins et al., 2012):

- Assess Culture: Identify the cultural groups present in the system

- Value Diversity: Develop an appreciation for the differences among & between groups
- Manage the Dynamics of Difference: Learn to respond appropriately to the issues that arise in a diverse environment
- Adapt to Diversity: Change & adopt new policies & practices that support diversity & inclusion
- Institutionalize Cultural Knowledge: Drive the changes into the systems of the organization

The final research questions were:

1. How are school leaders aware of and understanding of the barriers to cultural proficiency that can lead to microaggressions in schools?
2. In what ways do school leaders manage the dynamics of difference and embrace racial and cultural diversity to address microaggressions in schools?
3. How do school leaders value the diversity of race and culture to prevent microaggressions in schools?
4. How are school leaders and the school district institutionalizing the guiding principles of cultural proficiency to inform microaggressions in schools?

## **Research Design**

This qualitative study examined principals' and assistant principals' awareness and understanding of the barriers to cultural proficiency such as microaggression in K-12 schools. In addition, a desired outcome of the study was to inspire school leader participants to reflect on their practices to become more culturally proficient school leaders. Qualitative research was determined to be the best method for this study because of its ability to feature rich data with a strong potential for revealing complexity (Miles et al., 2014, p. 11). A hybrid qualitative approach of action research and phenomenology was used.

The participants in this study were elementary, middle, and high school principals and assistant principals who work in a large urban mid-Atlantic school district where less than 30% of the student population is white, yet nearly 60% of the organization's workforce is white. An invitation to join the study was extended to n=400 school leaders across the district which included participation by anonymous online survey and/or attending a confidential in-person focus group. In the end, n=97 school leaders completed the survey and n=15 school leaders participated in one of four focus group sessions. In addition, all but one of the focus group participants completed a post-assessment. Finally, the organization's vision/mission/core statements and diversity policies were reviewed to assess the ethos of school system and identify the district's role in supporting cultural proficiency standards and practices in schools. With the Cultural Proficiency Framework in mind, I designed a school leadership self-assessment which allowed me to identify barriers to cultural proficiency and measure where the participants are on the cultural proficiency continuum. The focus groups were structured around the essential elements of cultural proficiency. And, the guiding principles of cultural proficiency aided in building awareness of barriers, such as microaggressions, and the need for culturally proficient leadership to ensure student success. I used methodological triangulation with the survey, focus group transcripts, post-assessment, and organizational documents to conduct a cross-data validity checks (Patton, 2015).

Qualitative research was determined to be the best method to study principals' and assistant principals' awareness and understanding of barriers to cultural proficiency such as microaggressions in K-12 schools. A hybrid qualitative approach of action research and phenomenology was used. Qualitative data that have an emphasis on peoples' lived experiences can connect meaning to the social world around them (Miles et al., 2014). Likewise, Creswell (2014) states that qualitative research is employed when researchers seek to understand phenomena using answers to 'how' questions, taking a transformative worldview approach that is intertwined with social justice issues.

According to Mertens (2010), transformative researchers typically seek to advocate for marginalized peoples and historically underrepresented groups to address important social issues such as inequality, oppression, or alienation hoping to advocate for change. In studying these diverse groups, the research focuses on inequities based on gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class that result in asymmetric power relationships. Further, transformative research uses a program theory of beliefs about how a program works and why the problems of oppression, domination, and power relationships exist (Mertens, 2010).

According to McNiff and Whitehead (2010), action research is about two things: action (what you do) and research (how you learn about and explain what you do) with the intent of improving practice. Oral history documents the past, while action research envisions and works for a better future (Miles et al., 2014). From the American Civil Rights Movement in which the exclusion of disadvantaged students as a consequence of curriculum and teaching practices was studied through President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society Program, to climate change loss of biodiversity and the environmental degradation and intergenerational injustice caused by unsustainable use of the Earth's resources researched by the Green and Global Movements, action research initiatives have been used to connect ordinary people (e.g., teachers, students, principals, and members of school communities) with the social movement changing the communities and societies around them (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014). Action research focuses on improving learning, not behaviors. The action research process is what Dick (2002) refers to as the use of a cyclical or spiral process in which the researcher alternates action with critical reflection.

There is a vast array of action research methodologies that lend themselves to support social and educational research. According to Crothers (2019), being able to systemically investigate, gain better insights into what does and does not work in the classroom, and act on the research gives teachers confidence by improving their skills and validating reasons for the classroom decisions they

make. Crothers' (2019) sentiment regarding teachers engaging in action research is also applicable to principals and assistant principals who serve as the highest authority in school-based leadership.

School leaders are held accountable for the daily work and actions of teachers and other school staff.

Given my desire to grow my own practice as well as encourage the culturally proficient leadership of other school leaders, I engaged in action research with the desire of growing my own practice as a school leader, as well as others. The action research process for this study entailed a cycle of planning, action, observation, and reflection.

### **Setting**

The setting for this qualitative action research study was a large mid-Atlantic school district referred to by a pseudonym, Inspiration School District (ISD). More than 70% of the student population were students of color who represented 150 countries and languages. Regarding the ISD hiring trends for school leaders and teachers, the dominant employee profile was 60% White female school leaders and 80% White female teachers. The following statement summarizes the ISD organizational mission: 'ISD is committed to educating our students so that academic success is not predictable by race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language proficiency or disability; we will continue to strive until all gaps have been eliminated for all groups'.

A state governing board had oversight of the Inspiration School District with the expected adherence to the nationally adopted Professional Standards for Education Leaders (PSEL). As presented in Figure 3, PSEL Standard 3 called for equitable and culturally responsive leadership in all school leadership through guiding expectations.

Figure 3

#### *Professional Standard for Educational Leaders (PSEL), Standard 3*

##### **Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness**

Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being. Effective leaders: a) Ensure that each student is treated fairly, respectfully, and with an understanding of each student's culture and context. b) Recognize, respect, and employ each student's strengths, diversity, and culture as assets for teaching and learning. c) Ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic and social support, and other resources necessary for success. d) Develop student policies and address student misconduct in a positive, fair, and unbiased manner. e) Confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status. f) Promote the preparation of students to live productively in and contribute to the diverse cultural

## **Researcher Positionality**

As a stakeholder, I sought to systematically study the practices of other school leaders with the goal of bringing awareness to microaggressions in schools that target students. My relevant demographic profile was summarized as: African American, female, parent, and social justice advocate and activist who has served 20 years across the K-12 spectrum as a classroom teacher and school leader. Over the course of my career with ISD and in life outside of the organization, I experienced racially motivated microaggressions that attempted to devalue my skills, abilities, and intelligence based on a deficit worldview.

Building awareness of microaggressions, biases, discrimination, altered expectations, and other synonymous terms that impact the educational experience for children and youth is a personal mission which motivated desire to engage in this research. Through reflexivity, researchers acknowledge the changes brought about in themselves because of the research process and how these changes have affected the research process (Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas, & Caricativo, 2017). The impact of this study will be discussed in Chapter 5.

## **Research Questions**

The overarching question that guided this action research study was: How do I build awareness of microaggressions in the classroom and communicate the need for culturally proficient leadership in K-12 schools? The following research questions guided this study:

1. How are school leaders aware of and understanding of the barriers to cultural proficiency that



can lead to microaggressions in schools?

2. In what ways do school leaders manage the dynamics of difference and embrace racial and cultural diversity to address microaggressions in schools?
3. How do school leaders value the diversity of race and culture to prevent microaggressions in schools?
4. How are school leaders and the school district institutionalizing the guiding principles of cultural proficiency to inform microaggressions in schools?

The theory which undergirded this action research was an expansion of Cross's (1989) cultural competence continuum, now referred to as the Culturally Proficiency Framework (CPF) (Lindsey et al., 2019). Permission to use the framework was obtained from the authors (Appendix A, B). The four tools of cultural proficiency, outlined in the Framework, were:

1. Barriers to cultural proficiency
2. Guiding principles of cultural proficiency
3. Cultural proficiency continuum
4. Essential elements of cultural proficiency

These four interconnected tools were the Theoretical Framework that provided an infrastructure for the research design and influenced decisions made regarding data collection and analysis. The school leadership self-assessment allowed me to identify barriers to cultural proficiency and measure where the participants are on the cultural proficiency continuum. The focus groups were structured around the essential elements of cultural proficiency. The guiding principles of cultural proficiency aided in building awareness of barriers, such as microaggressions, and the need for culturally proficient leadership to ensure student success.

## **Participants**

School leaders have the privilege and responsibility to create the conditions that enhance students' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach, all while promoting positive community relations (Lindsey et al., 2019). Through this study, I gained insight into how other school leaders' beliefs, ideologies, practices, and actions influenced their levels of cultural proficiency when encountering microaggressions in their schools, all while building awareness and a sense of urgency to enlist culturally proficient practices.

Through membership of a large school district leadership association, I solicited 400 principals, assistant principals, and principal interns who lead across our 200 schools for their participation in this study. To this study, I brought topical knowledge regarding microaggressions in the classroom, the benefits of culturally proficient leadership, and the action research process. School leaders were invited to share their unique professional and personal experiences of microaggressions, biases, discrimination, variance in expectations, racism, classism, and other "isms" that potentially influence the immediate treatment and long-term education of students. Mutual respect for experience and expertise was the undercurrent to our group interactions. Therefore, no one role was less important than the other, and one cannot replace the other. Some persons had familiarity with one another while others met for the first time. At times, there was hesitation notes; however, I continuously reaffirmed that participation was for research purposes and identities would be protected. At the dialogue continued, the participants relaxed into natural flow of conversation.

The population for this study was 400 school leaders (principals, assistant principals, and principal interns). As a qualitative researcher, I did not seek a specific response rate for the leadership self-assessment, nor did I desire to generalize my research. The historic origin of qualitative research comes from anthropology, sociology, the humanities, and evaluation (Creswell, 2014).

Structured approaches to qualitative studies can help ensure that comparability of data across individuals, times, settings, and researchers, and are particularly useful in answering questions that deal with differences between people or settings (Maxwell, 2013). The five Essential Elements of the Cultural Proficiency Framework guided the focus group discussion . One essential element per session as a theme (Appendix G). The participants were given the opportunity to offer input for the day of week, time, and location for the sessions. For their willingness to participate in this study, light refreshments were supplied during the sessions. No other form of compensation was provided.

### **Data Collection**

I sought approval for this data collection from human participants through the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of Hood College and ISD. While IRB approved a 12 month data collection period; however, the ISD approved data collection period was three months. The final collection period for this study was December 6, 2019 – January 17, 2020. Data collection began with a leadership self-assessment survey delivered through SurveyMonkey, an online-based survey software. While the survey was in progress, school leaders were also solicited to join an in-person focus group.

An email was sent to principals and assistant principals asking them to be a volunteer participant in the study. The email also explained the purpose of the study, the use of the data, and the anonymity of those participating (Appendix E). If they chose to participate, the participants were asked to select their preferred availability date and location to meet for one 60-75-minute focus group session. The responses to my initial email came in quickly with persons stating they wanted to support the study some by survey and others by focus group depending on their schedule. Follow-up email reminders to complete the survey were sent as well as in-person reminders during various ISD school leaders professional learning community opportunities.

Participants received a description of the study, data collection protocols, and consent forms. The required informed consent indicated consent to participate in the study and consent for releases of their responses to be independently transcribed. The focus groups were conducted in-person and recorded using an audio recording application to ensure the consideration of all information for potential themes. A transcription service that employs a standard confidentiality agreement was employed. To protect confidentiality, responses to the leadership self-assessment remained anonymous and participants of the focus groups chose a pseudonym for themselves that was used when we discussed and recorded their experiences. All focus group participants were asked to sign a confidentiality agreement and only direct participants of the group knew participants' real names. I did not use any of the participants' real names to identify them in any written or recorded information. Any potential power imbalance was addressed through the voluntary nature of all participating in the study. The free will of participation was at the discretion of any school leader who wished to participate in the study. No one was encouraged or coerced to take part in the study. All audio recordings of conversations, written reminiscences, and transcripts of our conversations were kept in a secured location. Digital recordings, notes about responses, and drafts of reports and articles were kept on my computers, which are accessible only through username and password entry. The identity of all participants will be protected in any written report or article about this research project.

After each focus group session, I recorded initial observations, related thoughts, and interpretations of what was seen, heard, and inferred during the group discussion. As a member-facilitator of the focus groups, I asked open-ended questions of the participants and allowed them to freely provide their views and then interpreted my field notes on the behavior and activities of individuals at the research site (Creswell, 2014). In addition, throughout this action research study, I collected public documents such as local, state, and federal education policies, mission statements, student performance data, board minutes, and official reports to assess the organizational culture, gage

institutionalize cultural knowledge, or determine the consistency of communication regarding the valuing of diversity. The guiding questions taken from the Essential Elements segment of the CPF (Nuri-Robins et al., 2012) was used for each focus group. The proposed outline for each session can be found in Appendix G.

## **Data Sources**

**Focus Groups.** During four focus group sessions that lasted approximately 75-minutes each, school leaders (n=15) responded to a series of guiding questions intended to spark reflection, dialogue, and awareness. After each session, the participants were invited to complete a post-focus group survey that included descriptive and open-ended questions. All but one school leader turned in the post-assessment.

**Online Survey.** The invitation to participate in this study through an anonymous online leadership self-assessment was answered by school leaders (n=97). The 34-questions-survey contained 32 closed and two open-ended questions. A response to each question was required to move through to the end of the survey. For the two open-ended questions that were strategically positioned at the end of the survey to maintain momentum. Only one participant entered an asterisk to get around the data entry requirement. Participants were asked to attach a frequency rate as a way to assess their leadership actions (most of the time, sometimes, and rarely). The term sometimes denotes that occasionally, or now and then, an action will take place. Whereas, most of the time, denotes consistency, the greater frequency, the likelihood that action will be taken. Culturally proficient leadership requires a "most of the time" frequency of action. It is essential that school leaders use their personal, professional, and institutional lens to reflect on the individual and the collective needs of the school.

**Documents.** The following documents were reviewed and referenced in the findings: Mission/Vision/Core Values Statement, School Leaders Performance Standards, Non-Discrimination,

Equity, and Cultural Proficiency Policy. These documents were selected to identify the school district's role in supporting cultural proficiency standards and practices in schools and gain a better understanding of the organization's ethos.

### **Validity**

Pilot testing or field testing is important to establish the content validity of scores on instruments and to improve questions, formats, and scales (Creswell, 2014). The validity of the instrument focused on alignment to overarching research goals, participant sensitivity, consistency of responses, and difficulty in understanding the questions asked. Members of my doctoral cohort piloted the self-assessment to determine the estimated completion time, structure of questions, and ease of use. Any errors or challenges identified by pilot participants were adjusted prior to the live study.

### **Reliability**

Focus group sessions were audio recorded per participant consent. The audio recordings and notetaking supported accuracy in transcribing the experiences, stories, and information share by participants. Throughout the data collection process, field notes were used to record essential information unavailable through an audio recording such as facial expressions, body posture, and gestures of the respondent. The overall structure for each of the four focus group sessions remained the same. However, the location and day of week varied based on participants' best interests and convenience.

Creswell (2014) states that establishing a trusting relationship with interviewees increases reliability and truthfulness. To create an environment that felt psychologically safe for participants to discuss such heavy topics as race, bias, and microaggression in a highly intimate and reflective manner, I reviewed the goals of my research and assure participants that their identities would be

protected. In addition, I used the opportunity to build further awareness of the cultural proficiency continuum and microaggression terminology.

### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of gathering data from a school leader self-assessment survey, focus groups, post-focus group survey, and organization documents was to triangulate the responses from the four data sources to determine the current perceptions of and the possible gaps within ISD. The data gathered were coded and analyzed using the charting method. According to Saldana (2016), “Charting enables the analyst to scan and construct patterns from the codes, to develop initial assertions or propositions, and to explore the possible dimensions which might be found in the range of codes” (p. 229).

The data obtained through the leader self-assessment, audio recordings, field notes, research memoranda, and qualitative documentation, were analyzed using the Cultural Proficiency Framework, assessing cultural knowledge, valuing diversity, managing the dynamics of difference, adapting to diversity, and institutionalizing cultural knowledge (Nuri-Robins et al., 2012). The data were organized through coding and theme development. The first pass of coding was through the lens of overarching concepts and theory. The second pass of coding revealed commonalities and agreement within and compared across all focus groups and self-assessment respondents. During a third pass at coding, focused on participant reactions and emotions while discussing their lived experiences emerge. The research memoranda were essential to the coding process as previously stated. Repeated listening of the audio recordings while following along with the type transcript further reduced errors of accurately capturing the valuable lived experiences of the school leaders.

### **Delimitations**

For this study, I focused on microaggressions that occur in K-12 classrooms because I am an elementary school leader who works closely with my middle and high school colleagues to ensure the

success of our shared students. While I found the existing research regarding microaggressions that occur on university campuses fascinating, I did not wish to ignore the microaggressions that some students encounter at early ages.

The sample population presented delimitations for this study. The decision to solicit Inspiration School District principals, assistant principals, and principal interns to participate in this study was a matter of time constraints and accessibility. By choosing school leaders as participants, the study excluded teachers and other school staff who have direct contact with students in the classroom where microaggressions can occur. Further, some of the participant knowledge may be secondhand experiences, as those participants are not in the classroom as much as teachers and support staff. I acknowledge that using a convenience sampling method reduces the generalizability. However, as stated earlier, generalizability was not the goal of this study. My hope is that this study yields data that aides in building awareness of microaggressions in K-12 classrooms and the need for culturally proficient leadership across all schools.

Further, the topic is so broad (e.g., macroaggression; microaggression; microassaults; microinvalidation; microinsult; and types of microaggressions: racial, gender, religion, and sexual orientation) that one study cannot cover it all. Having first-hand knowledge of microaggressions fueled by race, much of the literature referenced in this study refers to racial microaggressions. Also, the decision to pair culturally proficient leadership with microaggressions came again from a personal passion for the subject. Using the CPF allowed me to combine my personal passions with my professional responsibility within a scholarly context.

### **Trustworthiness**

Triangulation has been viewed as a qualitative research strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources. It refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton,



1999). Maxwell (2013) refers to triangulation as a collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods. For this qualitative action research study, I used multiple sources of data: observations, audio recordings with accompany written transcription, descriptive statistics, field notes, research memos, and a survey. Triangulation of the many data sources can reduce the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanation (Maxwell, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the research purpose, summary of the literature review, and resultant research questions for this qualitative study. It then discussed the research design, data collection, instrumentation, and procedures. In addition, ethics, validity, reliability, and trustworthiness were presented with the intent to increase the statistical power of subsequent analysis. This chapter also examined research delimitations and the risks and benefits to participants. Chapter Four will present the results of the data analysis. Chapter Five will present a discussion on findings, observations on process, and implications for future study.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The various components of school (staff interactions, curriculum materials, course enrollment, parent engagement strategies, discipline policies, etc.) convey messages regarding core values, belief systems, organizational structures, and priorities of the school community. When racial and cultural differences are framed as a deficit, staff may view students through limiting attributes which, over time, can have a negative impact on academic performance and social-emotional development. For instance, students are narrowly framed by their race, gender, socioeconomic status, language development, culture, family, or a single test score. These biases (implicit or explicit) lead to judgments that manifest in the form of macro-and microaggressions. School leaders are responsible for managing these barriers of cultural proficiency and establishing a culture of care that allows students and staff to thrive.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight on barriers, such as racial and cultural microaggressions, school leaders face in leading diverse school communities. Further, it was the desired outcome that participation in this study would inspire participants to take some action to become more culturally proficient school leaders. This chapter reveals the findings of this study through the analysis of results from an online survey, transcribed focus group sessions, and documents, which are incorporated with the cultural proficiency framework used to analyze the barriers to cultural proficiency that can lead to microaggressions in schools. It is divided into the following sections: participants and documents, analysis, findings, and summary.

### **Participants**

The participants' perspectives were gathered using various data sources to capture the essence of their personal, professional values and behaviors, as well as organizational policies and practices.

**Organization.** The model school district for this study was referred to as Inspiration School District (ISD) to protect the anonymity of its employees, students, families, community partners, and

other affiliates. At the time of data collection, ISD served over 150,000 students across 200 schools and employed approximately 400 elementary, middle, and high school principals and assistant principals who collectively were referred to as school leaders throughout this study. ISD was governed by a school board that provided leadership and oversight by setting goals, establishing policies, and committing resources to benefit their diverse student population. According to its website, the Board's work was guided by its vision, mission, core purpose, and core values. The daily operations of the school district were led by a centralized executive team and each school led by a principal. School leadership teams were provided arms-length guidance by central office; thereby operating within an autonomous environment.

**School Leaders.** In this study, the term school leader is used to describe principals and assistant principals who work in schools and lead the front line work of school improvement. These school leaders (n=400) were invited to join this body of research through mass email, targeted email, professional learning community announcements, and in-person pleas. Two options for participation were given: an anonymous online survey and/or the in-person focus group sessions that included safeguards to protect their identity. It was assumed that all focus group participants also completed the online survey; however, they were not asked to disclose that information. See the data sources section of the paper for more information regarding the study participants.

## **Data Sources**

**Online Survey.** The invitation to participate in this study through an anonymous online leadership self-assessment was answered by school leaders (n=97). The 34-item-survey contained 32 closed and two open-ended questions. A response to each question was required to move through to the end of the survey. The two open-ended questions were strategically positioned at the end of the survey to maintain momentum. Only one participant entered an asterisk to by-pass the data entry requirement. Participants were asked to attach a frequency rate as a way to assess their leadership

actions (most of the time, sometimes, and rarely). The term “sometimes” denotes that occasionally, or now and then, an action will take place. Whereas, most of the time, denotes consistency, the greater frequency, the likelihood that action will be taken. Culturally proficient leadership required a "most of the time" frequency of action. Therefore, using a personal, professional, and institutional lens to reflect on the individual and the collective needs of the school is important for school leaders.

Of the online survey participants 61% (n=59) were female and 39% (n=38) were male. To generalize their identity, the focus group participants' gender was not shared. Concerning race and ethnicity, most online survey participants 53% (n=52) identified as White, followed by 38% (n=37) of participants who identified as Black/ African-American, and 4% (n=4) of participants combined identified as Asian and Hispanic/Latino, and 3% (n=3) preferred not to disclose their race.

Demographic data for the participants of the online survey can be found in the tables below. Table 2 presents the description of race the school leaders self-reported. Table 3 presents the school leaders gender as indicated in the online survey. And, Table 4 presents the various school levels (elementary, middle, or high school) where the school leaders served.

Table 2

*Demographic Data for Participants of the Online Survey: Race*

Description of Race	Percentage	Respondent Totals
White or Caucasian	53.61%	52
Black or African American	38.14%	37
Hispanic or Latino	2.06%	2
Asian or Asian American	2.06%	2
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.03%	1
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.00%	0
Multi-race	0.00%	0
Prefer not to say	3.09%	3
Total Respondent, n=97		

Table 3

*Demographic Data for Participants of the Online Survey: Gender*

Gender Description	Percentage	Respondent Totals
Female	60.82%	59
Male	39.18%	38
Non-Binary	0.00%	0
Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
Total Respondent, n=97		

Table 4

*Demographic Data for Participants of the Online Survey: School Level*

School Level Served ( <i>multiple responses allowed</i> )	Percentage	Respondent Totals
Elementary School	56.70%	55
Middle School	39.18%	38
High School	34.02%	33
Total Respondent, n=97		

**Focus Groups.** During four focus group sessions that lasted approximately 75-minutes each, school leaders (n=15) responded to a series of guiding questions intended to spark reflection, dialogue, and awareness. After each session, the participants were invited to complete a post-focus group survey that included descriptive and open-ended questions. All but one school leader turned in the post-assessment. To avoid a potential imbalance of power, the two school leader groups were held separately, one for principals and one for assistant principals. In the structure of schools within ISD, assistant principals were supervised by principals. To allow for scheduling flexibility, principals were given the option to join one of two sessions that were held on two different days in two separate locations to reduce drive time within the large region of the district. The same options yet different dates were offered to assistant principals as well.

A total of fifteen school leaders committed to participate in one of the four scheduled focus group sessions. In session one, there were four participants: three Black/African American women and one white woman. Session two consisted of five participants: one white woman, two white men, and two Black/African American men. Session three was a small group, four participants were expected; however, two were unable to make it. Of the two participants in session three, there was one Black/African American woman and one white woman. Last, was session four which was composed of two Black/African American women, one Black/African American man, one white man. During session four, one of the African American women remarked that there was significance to the focus group taking place on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday.

The collective composition of the four focus group sessions was 60% Black/African American and 40% white. Concerning years of service, 65% of the online participants indicated 0-10 school leader years of service and the majority of focus group participants indicated 6-15 school leader years of service: 71%. Finally, the school level for which the participants currently or throughout their career have worked, most recorded elementary: 56% of the online participants and 66% (n=10) focus group participants. As shown in Table 5, the demographic data for the focus group participants are presented using their chosen pseudonym. The demographic data includes race, gender, school level, and years of school leader experience.

Table 5

*Demographic Data for Focus Group Participants (race, gender, school level, and years of school leader experience)*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>School Level(s)</b>	<b>Years of School Leader Experience</b>
Agatha	Black/African American	Female	Elementary	11-15 Years
Anna	Black/African American	Female	Elementary	11-15 Years
Bella	Black/African American	Female	Middle	6-10 Years
Boilermaker	White	Male	Elementary	16 or More Years
Brink	White	Male	Elementary & Middle	6-10 Years

Dee	Black/African American	Female	Middle	6-10 Years
Cali	White	Female	Elementary	6-10 Years
Jose	White	Male	Elementary & Middle	6-10 Years
Kane	Black/African American	Male	Elementary	11-15 Years
Liz	White	Female	Elementary	0-5 Years
Lucia	White	Female	Middle & High	16 or More Years
Michelle	Black/African American	Female	Elementary	6-10 Years
Remalle	Black/African American	Female	Middle	11-15 Years
Tracie	Black/African American	Male	Elementary	0-5 Years
VJ	Black/African American	Male	Middle	(not disclosed)

**Documents.** The following documents were reviewed and referenced in the findings:

Mission/Vision/Core Values Statement, School Leaders Performance Standards, Nondiscrimination, Equity, and Cultural Proficiency Policy. First, as expressed by their vision statement, ISD aspires to provide the greatest public education to all students. The ISD mission is for every student to have the academic, creative problem solving, and social emotional skills to be successful in college and career. ISD feels their core purpose is to prepare all students to thrive as exhibited through core value tenets: learning, respect, relationships, excellence, and equity. Second, the performance standards document for ISD school leaders opens with a preamble that includes an organizational culture of respect statement, an equity and cultural competence statement, and an outline of how ISD will monitoring the expectations and practices that all school leaders are expected to follow. Third, the Inspiration School District's Nondiscrimination, Equity, and Cultural Proficiency Policy is framed by the following ISD Board of Education parameters. The Board:

- expects the district to develop and promote a culture of high expectations for all students and staff performance that will eliminate inequities of opportunities, raise the level of achievement for all students, and significantly address achievement gaps.
- expects all students and staff to conduct themselves in a manner that demonstrates mutual respect without regard to an individual's actual or perceived personal characteristics.

- prohibits discrimination, by students and staff, of any kind, directed at persons because of their actual or perceived personal characteristics.
- commits to modelling the expectations in this policy, and expects all Board and ISD reports, presentations, and decision making to take into account the equity implications of this policy.

These documents were selected to identify the school district’s role in supporting cultural proficiency standards and practices in schools and gain a better understanding of the organization's ethos.

## Analysis

Data analysis for this study involved layering the various sources of data under common umbrellas such as theme, research question, and the different components of the cultural proficiency framework which undergirds this study. By layering the focus group responses, online leadership self-assessment, post-focus group survey, and publicly available school district statements and policies, this triangulated data led to the findings and supported the implications to be discussed in Chapter 5. Figures 4 and 5 found below present examples of various matrices that were created to organize the data analysis. Figure 4 presents an excerpt from the first round of analysis conducted for the focus group data. Figure 5 presents a sample of triangulating the three sources of data with the research questions.

Figure 4

### *Data Analysis Matrix: Focus Group, Round 1*

**Focus Group Discussions Data Analysis: Round 1**

Focus Group Question	Initial Descriptive Codes from Surface Analysis	Pattern Variables Data Trends & Themes	Interpretation
<b>FQ1:</b> As a school leader, what does the phrase, “valuing diversity” mean to you?	Recognize Understand Acknowledge Differences Commonalities Respect Celebrate Seeing Inclusiveness All voices Awareness	Recognize; see; aware; acknowledge; understand  Inclusiveness; all voices; viewpoints; perspectives; representation  Value, celebrate; embrace; welcome  Commonalities & Differences	Awareness & Value



Figure 5

*Data Analysis Matrix: Triangulating Data with Research Questions*

Research Question	Data Collection Instrument
RQ1: How are school leaders aware and understanding the barriers to cultural proficiency that can lead to microaggressions in schools?	Leadership Self-Assessment: LSQ2, LSQ3, LSQ4, LSQ22, LSQ34
	Focus Group: FQ3, FQ3a, FQ4, FQ5, PFGQ4
	Document Analysis: Performance Evaluation Standards, Equity and Cultural Competence Statement, Core Values Statement
RQ2: In what ways do school leaders manage the dynamics differences and embrace racial and cultural diversity to address microaggressions in schools?	Leadership Self-Assessment: LSQ5, LSQ7, LSQ8, LSQ9, LSQ10, LSQ11, LSQ12, LSQ13, LSQ14, LSQ17, LSQ18, LSQ19, LSQ23, LSQ24, LSQ33
	Focus Group: FQ4
	Document Analysis: Performance Evaluation Standards, Equity and Cultural Competence Statement, Core Values

Participant statements or stories provided insightful details of the challenges faced by principals and assistant principals in leading diverse school communities; thus, participants' quotations are included herein. The most significant participant quotes were selected to illuminate the energy of the dialogue and sometimes vigorous debate. Included were emotionally charged accounts that left participants feeling vulnerable and exposed. However, the compassion and support of the other participants afforded balance. It was important to have these voices resonate throughout this study to honor the participants' willingness to discuss such sensitive topics and their desire to be heard. Furthermore, the school leaders' narratives underscore the moral imperative of addressing microaggressions and the need for culturally proficient leadership. To offer anonymity and avoid specific information that could be traced back to their identity, each participant self-selected a pseudonym. Also, the identity of the mid-Atlantic school district modeled in this study was not revealed.

The findings emerged from the data collected in pursuit of answers to the research questions. However, the patterns and eventual themes of the data did not provide concrete answers to the research questions. The research questions and major findings of the study are listed below. Afterwards, each major finding will be presented in detail with supporting evidence and examples selected from the sources of data (survey, focus group, and documents). Participant quotes, supporting explanations, and contradictions within the data are provided.

**Research Questions:**

1. How are school leaders aware and understanding of the barriers to cultural proficiency that can lead to microaggressions in schools?
2. In what ways do school leaders manage the dynamics of difference and embrace racial and cultural diversity to address microaggressions in schools?
3. How do school leaders value the diversity of race and culture to prevent microaggressions in schools?
4. How are school leaders and the school district institutionalizing the guiding principles of cultural proficiency to inform microaggressions in schools?

**Major Findings:**

1. School leaders demonstrated a high level of self-awareness and understanding of the barriers to cultural proficiency; however, they were inconsistent in transferring the knowledge to their school leadership practices.
2. School leaders encountered a myriad of barriers to cultural proficiency under the themes of microaggressions, deficit thinking, whiteness, and entitlement while managing the dynamics of difference across their school communities.
3. School leaders communicated a surface level value of race and culture through school policies and practices.

4. School leaders expressed a disconnect between theory and practice within schools and across the district.

**Major Finding No. 1: School leaders demonstrated a high level of self-awareness and understanding of the barriers to cultural proficiency; however, they were inconsistent in transferring the knowledge to their school leadership practices.**

Self-awareness and understanding of how our race and culture impact others is essential to cultural proficiency. Using a Likert scale approach to measure frequency ("most of the time," "sometimes," or "rare"), 97 school leaders agreed to respond to a series of self-assessment questions on an anonymous online survey. The results presented below illustrate their level of self-awareness, school improvement strategies, teacher expectations, recruitment and support, parent engagement practices, and their response to inequity. The analysis revealed that school leader responses were consistent with self-awareness; however, in terms of understanding the impact of barriers, the data were riddled with contradictions.

**Self-Awareness.** In the survey, participants responded to the statements indicating a high degree of self-awareness. For example, "I am aware of my own racial, ethnic, and cultural background and understand how it affects their perceptions and values," 89.69 % indicated they did this most of the time. Then, "I seek opportunities to learn about the cultural practices in my school community (including staff, families, and students)," 84.54 % indicated they did this most of the time. Last, "I regularly reflected on my own bias and how I view and treat people with cultural practices that were different from their own," 85.57 % indicated they did this most of the time.

**School Improvement Strategies.** Also, in the survey, participants responded to statements regarding their school improvement efforts. For example, when asked if they had strategic plans in

place to address all achievement gaps, 74.23% indicated they did this most of the time. In another statement, “Our school reviews curriculum and materials to make sure they are historically accurate, culturally relevant, and anti-bias,” 30.93% participants indicated most of the time. In response to, “Our school regularly examines academic and behavioral data for achievement gaps by race, language, socioeconomic status, and gender,” 74.23% participants indicated most of the time.

And finally, in response to “Behavior expectations and policies have considered the varying cultural expectations and norms among students and families,” 50.52% of the participants indicated most of the time.

**Expectations and Accountability.** Document analysis uncovered the following expectations of the school leader participants of this study: the ability to develop a vision and utilize data for decision making, management of organizational processes, collaboration with stakeholders, and continuous self-reflection. Regarding decision-making, open-ended responses indicated how diversity was valued across their school. For example, one school leader stated, "We use an equity lens when we make decisions and question the impact our decisions will have for all of our students." Another school leader responded, "Attempts to consciously have literature represent our students are made. Discussions about gatekeeping and not creating barriers are frequently held." When asked to identify the barriers to cultural proficiency within their school, one school leader wrote, "Helping staff identify the bias and equity issues currently within our AP & IB classes."

Expectations and accountability have a trickledown effect. ISD has clear expectations for school leaders as indicated above and school leaders have accountability measures for teacher expectations. As previously stated in the Nondiscrimination, Equity, and Cultural Proficiency statement, the Board expects the district to develop and promote a culture of high expectations for all students and staff performance that will eliminate inequities of opportunities, raise the level of achievement for all students, and significantly address achievement gaps. When school leaders were

asked if teacher expectations and evaluations included culturally relevant teaching, with a focus on equity and positive relationships, 65.98% indicated most of the time. In response to, “Instruction across our school reflects culturally relevant lessons that are embedded in day to day teaching,” 30.93% of participants indicated most of the time. And, 44.33% of participants indicated that most of the time, “Instruction across our school reflects differentiation tools to meet the needs of students from varying backgrounds.”

Document analysis of the professional standards for ISD school leaders revealed the following expectations: (1) ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic and social support, and other resources necessary for success; and (2) ensure instructional practice that is intellectually challenging, authentic to student experiences, recognizes student strengths, and is differentiated and personalized.

**Staffing and Support.** The online survey asked school leaders to assess their hiring and staff support practices. For example, In response to, “I actively recruit applicants of diverse cultural backgrounds and ethnicities to work in our school,” 80.41% participants indicated most of the time. And, 32.99% of participants indicated, “Our school has a support system to meet the needs of our staff from diverse backgrounds,” most of the time. Further, an analysis of documents regarding the recruitment of school leader personnel for the school district serving as a model in this study, the following statement was found, "ensure a pool of excellent candidates, the school system seeks internally and externally individuals of diverse backgrounds." Students need to see themselves represented in the adults who teach, lead, and care for them.

**Parent Engagement.** An auditing of the mid-Atlantic school district modeled in this study found a centralized office dedicated to family engagement. Its mission statement pronounced their commitment to providing the services and programs needed to promote positive school cultures and advance the academic, physical, social, and psychological well-being of every student. In the survey,

participants responded to statements regarding parent engagement indicating missed opportunities to enlist parents in the schooling process. For example, the survey item prompting, “School communication with families is available in multiple languages and is sensitive to varying family structures as well as diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds,” 52.58% indicated they did this most of the time. In another example, “I reach out to families from various backgrounds to give feedback and assist in the creation of school policies,” 30.93% indicated they did this most of the time. And finally, when asked to respond to, “Data are disseminated to families with procedures for them to offer support in improving our school for all students,” 31.96% of school leaders indicated they did this most of the time.

**Response to Inequity.** In the survey, participants responded to statements that prompted them to self-assess their response to inequity in their schools. For example, “Our school has clear procedures to report and respond to allegations of inequity,” 41.24% indicated most of the time. Another item, “In our school, issues of inequity are handled in a sensitive and timely manner,” 84.54% indicated most of the time. Last, when prompted, “I openly confront inequitable practices and have policies in place to hold staff accountable for their actions,” 77.32% indicated most of the time.

Given that equity and positive relationships were not a consistent priority among the 97 school leaders who participated in the leadership self-assessment, it was not surprising that nearly 40% of the participants included teacher beliefs and mindset as a barrier to cultural proficiency on the open-ended portion of the questionnaire. In addition to beliefs and mindset, school leaders also listed a lack of awareness and understanding, discomfort with confronting biases and racism, inequitable discipline, low expectations of students, microaggressive behaviors of staff, and the concept of whiteness/white privilege/white fragility as barriers they have faced in leading a diverse school community.

A secondary goal of the action research methodology was to heighten the awareness of racially and culturally based microaggressions in K-12 schools and spark the principals and assistant principals

who participated in the study to take action. When the focus group participants were given a post-focus group survey, 11 of the 15 persons who completed the post-assessment indicated that they increased their awareness; four stated their level of awareness remained the same; and one focus group participant chose not to complete the post-assessment. Further, 86.7 % (13 of 15) of the focus group participants indicated that their perception regarding the need for culturally proficient leadership increased, while two stated their perception remained the same. When asked if culturally proficient leadership was a necessary component of effective school leadership, 15 of 15 participants answered, yes. Going a step farther, 100 % of the respondents felt there was a need for culturally proficient leadership development across the entire school district.

Finally, during the 2020 school year, Inspiration School District included an equity and cultural competence statement in the annual school leaders' performance evaluation handbook. The actual document which was analyzed was not included in the appendix to protect the identity of the school district, its employees, students, and all other affiliates. A document analysis was conducted to triangulate focus group and leadership self-assessment data under the theme of awareness and understanding. The following excerpt was taken from the model school district's equity and cultural competence statement as an affirmation of its commitment to fostering a positive work environment which claimed to recognize the strength in diversity:

- Believes that the inclusion of individuals with a broad range of experiences and backgrounds broadens and strengthens education and contributes to student achievement
- Promotes knowledge and understanding of one's own cultural identity as it influences a culturally competent workplace

**Major Finding No. 2: School leaders encountered a myriad of barriers to cultural proficiency under the themes of microaggressions, deficit thinking, whiteness, and entitlement while managing the dynamics of difference across their school communities.**

This section addresses the racial and cultural barriers school leaders often face in leading their school communities, utilizing the authentic and poignant reflection responses of the principals and assistant principals. This segment presents the participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and opinions in managing the dynamics of difference within their school communities and as a member of a large mid-Atlantic school district. The coding process revealed categories, in which systems of oppression, privilege, and entitlement appeared as significant barriers hindering the success of students and staff. The findings of this study suggest that certain attitudes of cultural blindness and cultural incapacity are evident in the model school district at the heart of this study and have led to microaggressions in schools.

**Microaggressions.** In the following excerpts taken from focus group session, school leaders provide vivid accounts of microaggressions in schools that they either had to address on behalf of someone else or experienced directly themselves as a target.

As part of the focus group instruction, Bella, an African American middle school leader, took a risk and shared her unpleasant experience as a target of a microaggression. "I was told that I was not polished; that I was militant, after interviewing for a higher-level position within the school district. African American administrators are often policed in this county which is very familiar to what our students experience."

Anna, an African American elementary-level leader reflected, "I thought of the kindergarten classroom, which I think is important because it's the beginning of the school system. I won't say school to prison pipeline, but it's the beginning..."

Anna and Jose, a white male school leader with elementary and middle school experience, recalled similar examples of microaggression in the classroom involving primary aged children, one Caucasian boy and one African American. The African American boy who was treated vastly differently for exhibiting the same behavior.



Remalle, an African American middle school leader, was reminded of an experience, “When teachers often are looking at a student and looking at them from a deficit point of view... a student who may [receive ESOL services], but from Russia, the teacher doesn’t appear to have the same mindset as if it’s an ESOL student from El Salvador. Then race does appear to be part of the equation.”

Cali, a white elementary school leader, replied to Remalle adding, “Picking up on that too, that staff piece, where they see an ESOL level one and the assumption they equate to a lack of intelligence, or as opposed to going back to the whole deficit piece... There’s a lot less of that assumption for my children who are Asian and African American receiving ESOL services [compared to Hispanic/Latino students].”

Dee, an African American school leader at the middle school level, explained an example of staff to student microaggression where a parent shared a concern of her child being insulted by staff. "... and so, she says to the little girl, 'Is English your first language?' The little girl was dumbfounded and asked, 'Why would you assume English is not my first language?' To make it worse, the regular teacher came back and told the little girl, 'I don't understand what you are so upset about?'... And so, yes, I had to explain to the teacher that, 'Do you not understand she was born and raised in this country?... made assumptions about where she was from and what language she could or could not speak.'

From her perspective as a white female with five years or less school leader experience, Liz presented one of the negative outcomes when students experience these barriers, "... and my own experience going into classrooms is low expectations. So, I think that's the major microaggression that I see is people assuming what children can do without really getting to know them."

Tracie, an African American elementary school leader, reflected on the lyrics of a hip-hop song to frame a teacher's low expectations, blinded by deficit perspectives. Using a metaphor, they expressed how the teacher focused on the child's presumed deficit--concrete--instead of focusing on the child's persistence--the rose. "I think it was a Tupac quote that said, 'If you see a rose that bloomed in the concrete, you don't ask it why it grew in the concrete. You ask how?... I started thinking about why people would assume that this kid's home life is concrete - because it is different than yours?... [I'm trying to] help folks understand that 'different' can still be equal."

**Managing the dynamics of difference.** I asked school leaders to extend their reflections to think about what role they play in the barriers to cultural proficiency. Managing the dynamics of difference requires school leaders to respond appropriately and effectively to the issues that arise in diverse environments. Some of the participants acknowledged the challenges of shifting mindsets and others focused on the non-negotiables of being a culturally proficient leader.

VJ, an African American school leader with many years of experience stated, "And I know the charge as a leader is to [support teachers], they support the students, but then it's still getting people to look at themselves. It has been challenging."

Cali exclaimed, "... There's no gray area. These are the things we are about. What are the things that don't fit into that?... What does it look like?... What's our response? There's this fear of saying or doing the wrong thing... but as a leader, it's about the things we say."

Agatha added, "... create a culture of schools... your community needs to know what you will and not tolerate and make that clear... building the culture and changing the culture is the role of a leader as much as possible..."

Thinking carefully about the role she plays in microaggressions, school leader Michelle stated, "... being very purposeful in how you address [inequities] and very strategic in how you address

it... shared learning, the shared understanding of what microaggressions are, what cultural proficiency means.”

Remalle spoke about the level of accountability school leaders must be willing to accept. “As we see situations are turning disagreeable, we have to model a level of civility at all times... We have to have those courageous conversations and be prepared... Before we step into the seat as the principal, we have to be already prepared and made up our mind that we are going to lead with a level of integrity... We’re going to let the buck stop at our desk and do our part to make sure that we’re creating this welcoming environment.”

Using herself as an example, Liz discussed how she can leverage her race when it comes to holding staff accountable for doing the right thing on behalf of students. She stated, "... as leaders [we] can't shy away from it because someone might complain about you being too bossy and I have leverage. I'm a white female, I get it and it can come easier for me because people don't think I have an agenda..."

On the contrary, Dee who was not a white female had this to say, “I do have an agenda to make sure that everybody, regardless of who they are in this building feels like they belong in this building and that they are respected.”

Leader modeling quickly became a common topic in terms of shifting mindsets and moving staff towards the healthy practices that lead from mandated tolerance to transformation.

Lucia, a school leader who has served at the middle and high school levels reflected, “At the most basic level, one of my roles is showing people the journey I’m on as a white woman, learning about whiteness, learning about race, learning about anti-racism.”

Tracie replied, "For me, in addition to modeling... we need to keep it on the table, explicitly, to see it in the numbers but to see it also in kids' faces and families' faces. To see it in our behaviors and have those conversations. "

Kane, an African American elementary school leader, spoke about his role in creating environments for people to talk, "... and when we have critical discourse, critical thinking, people will always answer to a room and if we allow it, we will leave a little bit different... you got to have the ability to look through the data and it's got to be safe. You have to feel safe and not like you're calling someone a racist..."

Brink, a white male school leader who selected to participate in the study to better inform his practices in leading a school community with a small percentage of students of color stated, continuing on with sub-theme of managing the dynamics of difference to address systems of oppression and privilege, shared a challenge with a long-standing tradition that began to divide the school community, "In a neighborhood celebrating this tradition, this group of parents never really have a say in this. When you ask what leaders need to do? I think you just need to listen. Listen and allow people to talk. You've got to be able to disrupt."

Anna proclaimed, "So our role as a leader is to be Equity Warriors. I mean we are here for the children and when we see a microaggression, we are to collectively, delicately, carefully, respectfully bring it to the staff members' awareness because it has to change....I'm caring about that little boy's self-esteem. I don't want it to be a pattern. So, when I see something like that, I address it the first time, when then you take a risk as a school leader, 'she's so harsh.'"

Bella added, "... what message is that [microaggression] sending to the kids? I just think people do what they do, and they don't necessarily think about how they can do it differently. And so, I think that is my responsibility..."

**Policies and Practices.** Two school leaders exchanged opinions about how school policies and practices can create a breeding ground for microaggressions to occur.

Regarding a school policy on head covers, VJ had this to share, "... an African American young lady, she wore a bandana for her hair... the teacher blatantly said, 'You don't want to wear that.

Makes it seem like you're affiliated with a gang.' And the girl's response, 'Well, it wasn't red, or it wasn't blue; so, what's the problem?' Then the young lady mentioned a Caucasian girl who had on a red bandana or red scarf on her and nothing was said. So, it's just the double standards that are in place."

Bella added, "... a policy called lineup that would occur every morning where all the kids would sit on the floor and then our staff would yell at them... it was a very negative policy that adversely impacted our Black boys because they were like, 'I'm not sitting down. Or Black girls were like, 'I just got this new outfit' ... it was like an aggressive institutionally racist policy that led to a range of responses... I witnessed throughout that first year from microaggressions like, 'Why do these kids care so much about clothing, what's the big deal... to 'He makes me scared; get him away from me...'"

### **Barrier: A Sense of Entitlement**

**Whiteness, White Privilege, White Fragility.** A prevalent sub-theme in both the self-assessment responses and it came up during the focus groups was the concept of whiteness as a barrier to cultural proficiency.

Anna posed a question to the group, "So for a lot of people, white privilege... I brought it to her attention... So, what can you do when people say, 'I didn't see?'"

Bella shared an emotional reflection, "So for me as a Black woman, the microaggression comes when white women say, I don't support them. 'You're not supporting me.' And I'm like, 'What does that mean?' Like, is my job here to make you feel comfortable when you do something to a Black boy?... maybe it's not a microaggression, maybe it is white fragility. I don't know..."

In speaking of an experience where a white female teacher exhibited a pattern of sending African American male students out of her room, Jose had this to say, "... at certain ages, boys can push or shove when they're in a line, or they exchange words, but all at a young age. I'm talking

about first-graders specifically at this time. So, we're talking about really young ages. And the words used to describe the behavior are aggressive, violent, and very sort of grown-up words... you've always had that."

**Deficit mindset.** According to Hammond (2015), "When staff frame student differences as deficits rather than assets, a microaggression is ignited for the student." The Focus group participant was asked to share their reaction to the quote.

Anna shared experience of attempting to turn a teacher's exhibition of cultural incapacity into a model for valuing diversity, "... Fortunately, I speak Spanish, so I got to do the introduction with the teacher, and in front of the parent and the student, the teacher said with a concerned look on her face, 'Does he speak any English?'... And I said, 'No, not really'... that's thinking as a deficit." Then she offered a different perspective, "We know as administrators, our English language learners pick up English so fast. So, what a celebration when this student comes to your classroom and is fluent in Spanish..."

Michelle shared an instance of teachers attempting to perpetuate a sense of entitlement by giving priority to white students and withholding accelerated curriculum opportunities during a data discussion. "I can see the different data points and I see the colors... I have to have conversations with people where I see Hispanic males and Black males... there is a student above, it can be a white male, white female, where out of four data sets, three of theirs are great, one maybe yellow... they'll be fine in math... the very next row there's a Black or Hispanic male. Everything is blue [highest color of success]... These district assessments are not easy math. Do you see this blue; you see he's a mathematical thinker...? Can you tell me a little bit more about why this child isn't a good fit? For us to still be having those conversations after all the training, it's disheartening at times..."

Speaking to the cultural blindness to cultural precompetence worldview that often manifests through deficit language, Kane reflected, "I think we hide behind language... the culture, there's so many pieces that at the end of it, [there's] a lot of cultures [that] are tied into this correlation a lot of times with certain cultural practices with certain racism, more so for sometimes language, sometimes certain beliefs tend to be... 'I've got five newcomers already; I can't take another newcomer in my class'... When you frame student differences as a deficit, being a newcomer, we will often say that someone is a deficit..."

Tracie concurred, "When you said, 'do you think language is sort of a proxy for race?' Yes, in the sense that I think folks use, our folks are probably thinking staff-wise more about American versus non-American is a proxy for race... I think that is a sense of staff versus our group of kids of color, a community of color..."

Boilermaker, a white male school leader who came to ISD from another region where conversations of race and equity were not prioritized, added, "They make assumptions based on what they think is their reality because they haven't participated in the other reality. That whole inclusiveness... the toughest microaggression I think these kids face is cultural expressions..."

Through the school leader testimonials, it was clear that several principals and assistant principals either observed, was informed of, or had been the target of a racially or culturally motivated microaggression. Unfortunately, there were multiple accounts of teachers and school leaders projecting their unhealthy worldviews within the model school district.

**Major Finding No. 3: School leaders communicated a surface level value of race and culture through school policies and practices.**

**Valuing Diversity.** A short yet significant sentence found in the numerous pages of the ISD document analysis stated, "principals and assistant principals recognize, respect and employ each student's strengths, diversity, and culture as assets for teaching and learning."

During the focus group sessions, participants were asked, “As a school leader, what does the phrase, “valuing diversity” mean to you?”

Cali stated, “... recognizing and understanding that everybody brings something special. The best way to create a community of people is to highlight those unique characteristics plus the commonalities in a school environment.”

Boilermaker responded, "Seeing each person for who they are, their background, their story, their histories, and their contributions to our community."

Kane replied, “... so if we value something, we are aware of it. If we value something, we’re going to embrace it...”

Similarly, one of the open-ended questions included in the anonymous online survey asked, “What is one example of how diversity is valued across your school community?” Here are what a few school leaders had to say:

- Respondent #1: “Our everyday work in greeting students by name and at times in their native language. Valuing our students and recognizing their similarities and differences.”
- Respondent #4: “Cultural Heritage Assembly - Guest speakers from all backgrounds and field trips to enhance cultural experiences.”
- Respondent #6: “PD based on school needs, taking into account community needs”
- Respondent #7: "We have been able to authentically communicate the sociocultural component. Explicit valuing the background and experiences of all our families have included all cultures (and made white families feel a little 'other' which I am okay with). Communicating in Spanish first, having both languages side by side instead of English on top or recorded first, these little things are noticed and appreciated by our families."
- Respondent #8: "Several adjustments to school policies, practices, and structures that reflect the diverse needs and religious sensitivity have been implemented throughout my tenure (i.e.



significant decreases in discipline referral data (primarily African American and Hispanic male students) compared to the years before my tenure; Halloween changed to Fall Festival; De-escalation training provided for all staff; operationalized equity in the areas of staffing, personal relationship building, communication with families, etc."

- Respondent #9: "Ongoing celebrations of diverse cultures and history."
- Respondent #10: "We value giving choice in reading materials throughout different curricula."

**Surface-level Culture.** Additional data culled from the leadership self-assessment further presented the trend of surface-level culture. For example, in the survey when school leaders were prompted by statements such as, "Our school respects holidays in a manner that is sensitive to the religious and cultural practices of students, families, and staff," 85.57% indicated most of the time. In response to, "Artwork and photographs embedded in school communication and school décor reflect the demographics of our students: Most of the time," 72.16% participants indicated most of the time. To, "The books in our school media center reflect our student body and depict varying cultural practices in a positive and anti-biased way," 82.47% of school leaders indicated most of the time. Regarding the statement, "I seek opportunities to learn about the cultural practices in my school community (including staff, families, and students)," 84.54% of participants indicated most of the time. Finally, when asked about "active recruitment of families to volunteer in the school and on committees so that volunteer pools reflect the student body," 44.33% participants indicated most of the time.

According to Zaretta Hammond (2015), surface-level culture consists of observable and concrete elements of culture such as food, dress, music, and holidays. Hammond (2015) went on to state that surface culture has a low emotional charge; therefore, change does not create great anxiety in a person or group. Data obtained through participant experiences revealed a surface level consistency of minimal effort, actions of low hanging fruit. Deep culture strategies that help to govern one's

worldview such as strategies to actively engage parents/families in school improvement efforts were not found to be a priority. A document review of the ISD school leader performance evaluation standards indicated an expectation to understand, value, and employ the community's cultural, social, intellectual, and political resources to promote student learning and school improvement. Besides, school leaders were required to develop and provide the school as a resource for families and the community.

**Major Finding No. 4: School leaders expressed a disconnect between theory and practice within schools and across the district.**

**Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge.** Successful institutionalization of cultural knowledge requires: (1) school leaders modeling and monitoring schoolwide classroom practices, (2) school board members establishing policies from a culturally proficient perspective, and (3) district administrators proposing and implementing culturally proficient policies (Lindsey et al., 2019). The following statement was found upon review of the ISD policy on Nondiscrimination, Equity, and Cultural Proficiency, "... an unwavering commitment that all staff will be culturally proficient and demonstrate mutual respect without regard to any individual's actual or perceived personal characteristics."

**Ethos of Organization.** In the online survey, school leaders were asked to rate the school district's practices regarding race, ethnicity, and culture and their responses indicated: Above Average = 24.74; Average = 65.98%; Below Average = 9.28%. Likewise, a qualitative version of a related question, "How would you describe the ethos or philosophy of this school district as it relates to race, ethnicity, and culture?" sparked a rigorous debate among the focus group participants. Observation of group dynamics noted a change in body language, expression, and tone. The sentiment across the four group varied somewhat; however, many of the focus group participants did not appear pleased with the work that had occurred inside the Inspiration School District. Some participants exhaled a sigh of disappointed with ISD practices, others leaned in as if they wanted to carefully phrase the response

that would come next, while a few praised the efforts of the school district through the lens of comparing ISD to other districts across the nation. The following statements highlight the opinions of offered across the four groups.

Agatha, a school leader who described her tenure as being around for a long time, propped up in her seat as if she had been waiting for the question and responded, "... We tend to play games and say we don't want to hurt people's feelings because everybody gets hurt so easily when we have those courageous conversations. It's hard and it's hard as a leader to provide that consistency when messages from above are so inconsistent."

Remalle, a school leader who had worked with ISD for over 10 years reflected, "I think also the inconsistency in the central office... has had an impact on schools...the one department leading the work in equity and was doing a great job, all of a sudden that was dismantled without any input from schools... a lot of the work that we had worked on with equity and diversity in access to rigor, et cetera, was just undermined and taken away..."

Anna responded, " Because of this Mid-Atlantic school system and the political climate, we do not go deeper because of the eggshells that we have to walk on, the parents that are privileged in [the] community... so whereas we are still surface level [where] I think [we] are very progressive in comparison with some other school districts..."

Liz, a white female felt emboldened to expressed her lived experience in a manner unlike the other school leaders. She provided a very practical perspective in stating, "... there is a disconnect between that training and then implications for frankly keeping your job... teachers can continue to have the same mindset and not change and continue to work in the system and influence the system and even be leaders in the system." Further, Liz expressed, "... as a leader, it's hard to have the impact you may [want] to have because of limitations... the amount of time it would take to prove that someone truly is inequitable or prove someone is racist..."

Dee, an African American school leader added on to Liz's experience, "... when you try to hold people accountable, it can be cumbersome... you have to have specifics... people want to debate it and defend it... However, I think where the struggle comes is the actual implementation of it. It sounds great at the executive level... but when you start talking about the school level, then something gets lost in translation."

Bella and VJ, two African American middle school leaders were in sync with their response, "Surface level. I agree, surface. And that's more or less the show..."

Expressing a point of view in support of the school district's efforts, Tracie, an African American elementary school leader remarked, "...We're a big diverse district; we got a lot going on; we put a lot of pieces in place; we're doing okay... The underlying piece is that we aren't; we aren't meeting the needs of our kids. We're not quite ostriches in the sand, because we have a clear focus on race and socioeconomics in some of the stuff, we're expected to do..."

Lucia, a white female experiences led her to state, "I'm grateful that there is district-wide training on stereotype bias... it's the first step and then after that, you have to avail yourself of [additional professional development]... a room full of likeminded people who want to grow in their understanding... because requiring that training, it just becomes compulsory..."

Similarly, Boilermaker, a white male also in the same focus group with Lucia followed with, "I'm appreciative of it, especially coming from a midwestern state... in terms of the minority students, the difference between the two is... they're still stuck on equal whereas now I hear us talking about what is equity..."

Kane, an African American male who participated in the same focus group with Lucia and Boilermaker gave a heartfelt response, "When you try to help a situation and it causes pain to those you're trying [help understand]... You're trying to create an equitable environment and you're trying to raise awareness... Efforts are being made around his concept of race, but it's

almost as if it segregates first, again, to try to desegregate... I've learned a lot in my district, and I would have never been able to know about how to have courageous conversations, I would never have been able to sit through this [focus group]."

According to Lindsey et al. (2019), institutionalizing cultural knowledge involves incorporating cultural knowledge into the mainstream of the organization, teaching the origins of stereotypes and prejudices, and offering professional learning that integrates information and skills that enable all to interact effectively in a variety of intercultural situations. A document review of the ISD school leader performance evaluation standards found that principals and assistant principals were expected to provide opportunities and structures for staff to learn from each other and design professional learning experiences to improve student learning. In addition, school leaders were to provide explicit structures for staff to reflect on and strategize for student and school-wide progress that all staff is responsible for. The online leadership self-assessment asked school leaders to share how many professional development sessions have they led or offered staff regarding culturally responsive teaching and learning practices. In response to the prompt, "I provide professional development for school staff to examine their cultural awareness and learn culturally relevant educational practices," 41.24% participants indicated most of the time. When asked their comfortableness leading discussions about race, culture, religion, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation with staff and students, 79.38% of the online respondents indicated most of the time.

**Professional Development.** Further, the online leadership self-assessment asked school leaders to share how many professional development sessions they led or offered staff regarding culturally responsive teaching and learning practices. The greatest response was 4-7 sessions led or offered over the last two years with a result of 42.27% of school leaders. The focus group participants were asked the same questions and yielded a different majority: 46.67 percent of school leaders led or offered

eight or more professional learning opportunities that focused on culturally responsive teaching and learning practices.

**Mindset and Beliefs.** Also, on the leadership self-assessment, 36 of the 96 school leaders described the barriers they faced in leading a diverse school community as staff beliefs and mindset. A few responses were highlighted below:

- Respondent #7: "TEACHER BELIEFS! We have staff who consider themselves true equity warriors but do not differentiate and provide rigor or high expectations for all their students. We are very in progress at addressing this, but it is certainly a work in progress."
- Respondent #13: "Staff that are not truly reflective in their practices and not see their own biases towards their work."
- Respondent #17: "Helping all staff to understand their role in making the school a safe and welcoming environment, specifically in changing classroom practices that work with the majority but fail to work for all."
- Respondent #30: "Both in a prior school: Being shut down in administrative meetings within the school building ("We don't need to discuss that." "That is not a problem here."); African-American students and families not being considered in school-based decisions (They don't come to meetings anyway.)"
- Respondent #40: "The biggest challenge as a school leader has been addressing the mindset of staff and even some community members who only know privilege."
- Respondent #41: "Microaggressions from white staff members and their implicit bias towards me as a young black female leader."
- Respondent #50: "Speaking the truth about the school to prison pipeline is a barrier. It is difficult for people to realize/admit that elementary school practices (teachers implicit bias) contribute directly to boys of color "misbehaving" in the middle, high school...mass

incarceration! When they are made to feel like a "bad kid" they live up to that low expectation.

Thank you for doing this research."

- Respondent #70: "As an African American leader it can be difficult being the face of equity. Oftentimes followers perceive your advocacy as a symptom of your color."
- Respondent #76: "white privilege that leads adults to believe that race and equity don't need to be addressed."
- Respondent #85: "Teachers perceiving my value/ investment in this work stems from my race or background and not what is best for students, staff, and families."

The findings indicate that professional development, which is essential to becoming more culturally proficient, has not been a priority across the district. Also, on the leadership self-assessment, approximately 40% of school leaders described the barriers they faced in leading a diverse school community as staff beliefs and mindset. There were a significant number of school leader statements that included concerns of microaggressions in the form of white privilege, low expectations, and discriminatory practices, which references resistance to change. Further, the findings of this study indicate that cultural proficiency training across the district remains at the theoretical level, leaving a disconnect between vision and implementation. In addition, there were inconsistencies regarding where school leaders and their staff were on the cultural proficiency continuum as well as the level of participation in professional learning around race and equity topics.

## **Summary**

The goal of this chapter was to offer organization and insight into the valuable data representing 112 school leader voices across a large mid-Atlantic school district. The leaders took personal and professional risks to communicate their lived experiences of leading diverse school communities. Through their deep and poignant reflections of self-awareness, management of differences, school improvement efforts, and attempts to institutionalize cultural knowledge while

facing microaggressions and other barriers in their schools, common themes of school leaders were found. By triangulating the survey, focus groups, and document review, major findings emerged:

1. School leaders demonstrated a high level of self-awareness and understanding of the barriers to cultural proficiency; however, they were inconsistent in transferring the knowledge to their school leadership practices.
2. School leaders encountered a myriad of barriers to cultural proficiency under the themes of microaggressions, deficit thinking, whiteness, and self-entitlement while managing the dynamics of difference across their school communities.
3. School leaders communicated a surface level value of race and culture through school policies and practices.
4. School leaders expressed a disconnect between theory and practice within schools and across the district.

In Chapter 5, interpretation of the findings, implications of this study, and recommendations for future research will be presented.



## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

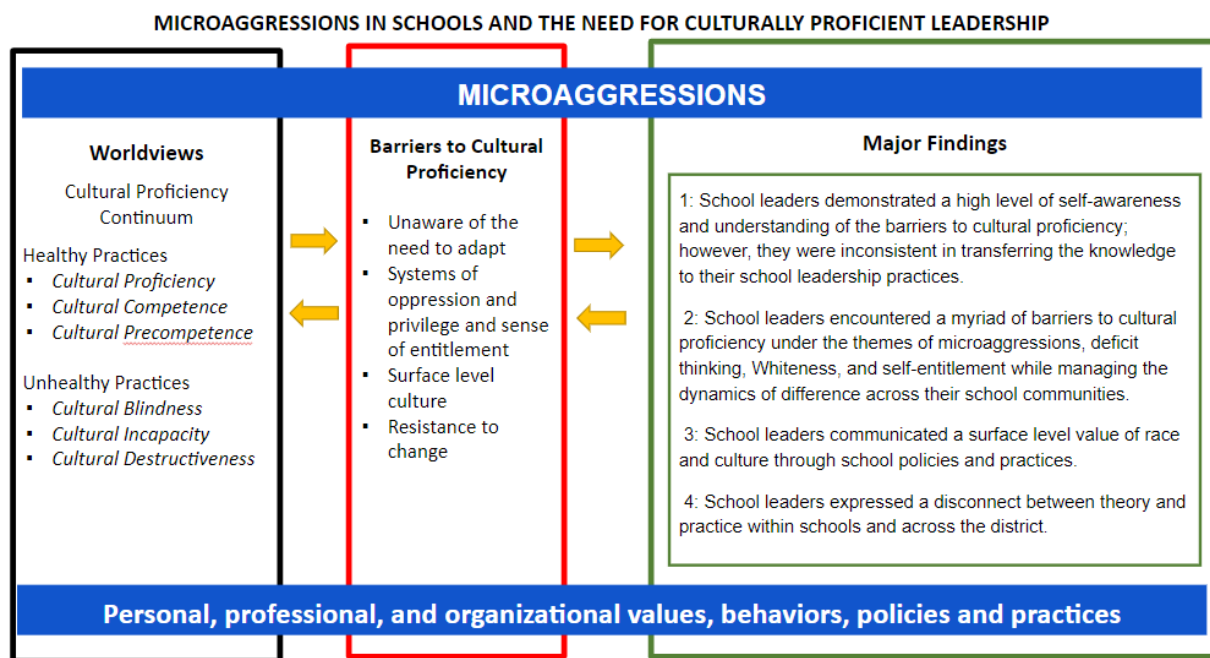
This chapter provides an interpretation of the findings that were presented in Chapter 4, implications for school leaders, recommendations for future practice, research, and policy, and final thoughts on the research process. To provide context, the implications for practice and recommendations for future research are woven into the discussion. A summary of the implications and recommendations is included at the end of this chapter. The significance of this study, examining the barriers to cultural proficiency which can lead to microaggressions in K-12 schools, has tremendous implications for not just Inspiration School District but other school districts big and small. In today's global environment, students must be able to work with people of all races and cultures. To properly teach, guide, and support students, it is essential for the educators themselves to first understand what it truly means to engage with people from many different backgrounds and world views and to work with a diversity of ideas to solve increasingly complex real-world challenges. School Leaders are the front-line of this work and are responsible for managing the dynamics of diverse school communities to ensure respect, support, and equitable outcomes for students, their families, and staff. Through this qualitative, I set out to examine the perspectives of school leaders to gain insight into the barriers they face, such as racial and cultural microaggressions.

A conceptual framework is the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs a body of research—is a key part of your design (Miles et al., 2014). Further, Miles and Huberman (2014) defined a conceptual framework as a visual or written product, one that “explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, concepts, or variables—and the presumed relationship among them” (p. 18). And, Maxwell (2002) explained a conceptual framework as the actual ideas and beliefs that a researcher holds about the phenomena studied. The conceptual framework for this study evolved and was not fully actualized

until the major findings emerged. As shown in Figure 6, my conceptual framework illustrates the belief that a person's worldview spanning from unhealthy to healthy on the cultural proficiency continuum may lead to barriers to cultural proficiency that shape the standards for their personal, professional, and organizational values, behaviors, policies, and practices. It is further believed that this concept is a continuous loop in that personal, professional, and organizational values, behaviors, policies, and practices may create barriers to cultural proficiency that can alter a person's worldview.

Figure 6

### *Conceptual Framework*



According to Lindsey et al. (2012), Cultural Proficiency is the policies and practices in an organization or the values and behavior of an individual, that enable the person or institution to engage effectively with people and groups who are different from them. Cultural Proficiency is an inside-out approach that influences how people relate to their colleagues, clients, and community. Cultural Proficiency is a lens for examining one's work and one's relationships.

## **Awareness**

School leaders demonstrated a high level of self-awareness and understanding of the barriers to cultural proficiency; however, they were inconsistent in transferring the knowledge to their school leadership practices. Based on the qualitative data collected from online surveys, focus group sessions, and document review, I could answer RQ1. The participant responses uncovered that school leader responses were consistent with personal self-awareness and understanding the barriers of cultural proficiency. However, in terms of applying awareness and understanding to school-wide school improvement strategies, teacher expectations, recruitment and support, parent engagement practices, and their response to inequity, the data reflect that school leaders and the district were not consistent in doing so. There was a prevalent theme of being unaware of the need to adapt to meet the needs of culturally diverse school communities.

In the 2016 publication, the State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce reports findings to state that 82 % of elementary and secondary staff in American classrooms were white. Principals represent the most visible form of leadership in schools and workforce data show that K-12 school principals are overwhelmingly white which fails to reflect the diversity within their student populations (Castro, Germain, & Gooden, 2018). Results from the online anonymous leadership survey indicated school leader self-awareness and understanding were in the mid to upper 80<sup>th</sup> percentile for most of the time-frequency. Thus, from a personal stance, school leaders were aligned with the literature. Culturally proficient leaders analyze themselves and their environments so that they have a palpable sense of their own cultures and the cultures of their schools (Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, Terrell, & Lindsey, 2019). The high level of frequency to engage in self-awareness is amplified given that over 60% of school leaders ISD are white women and 74% of the student population is not. This regular evaluation of the impact of one's race and culture ensure that leadership

decisions are aligned with the school improvement goals and district level core values which will lead to equitable outcomes for students.

Contrary to school leaders' self-reflection, there was a gap in implementing these practices across the rest of the school. As recorded through the online leadership self-assessment, 74.23% of schools stated that strategic plans are put in place to address all achievement gaps and 30.93% review curriculum and materials to make sure they are historically accurate, culturally relevant, and anti-bias on a most of the time-frequency. These results are inconsistent with the literature. Linton (2011) found that successful schools made culture, practice, and leadership a priority by engaging in continuous reflection through a personal, professional, and institutional lens. Using a personal lens of equity means considering the personal responsibilities in enacting equity. Further, the personal lens of equity explores personal experience with race and equity and how it influences their work for and with students (Linton, 2011). When one considers the racial identities of PK -12 teachers, the majority of whom are white, and enact heteronormative teaching practices, we see how they have the power to (re)name and impose what they consider normal American superiority, and on the assumption of the inferiority of people of color (Marrun, 2018). In terms of teacher expectations and accountability, school leaders in this study were less likely to hold teachers accountable for delivering culturally relevant instruction and utilizing differentiation tools to meet the needs of students from varying backgrounds, reporting most of the time frequencies in the 30<sup>th</sup> – 40<sup>th</sup> percentiles. On the contrary, document analysis revealed that clear performance standards expectations for school teams. There are written policies and procedures included in the mission, vision, and core values statements for the district. ISD school leaders are expected to: (1) ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic and social support, and other resources necessary for success; and (2) ensure instructional practice that is intellectually challenging, authentic to student experiences, recognizes student strengths, and is differentiated and personalized. Long term, the

evidence suggests it would make a difference to train and hire more diverse teachers. But researchers say there's also something that schools can do immediately, with the teachers they already have, teach them about their biases and stereotypes. It can lead to fairer treatment of students (Miller, 2018). Is this a matter of what gets measured gets done? How can such critical elements of managing the dynamics of difference be viewed as voluntary?

### **Privilege and Entitlement**

The leading barriers to cultural proficiency are resistance to change, a lack of awareness of the need to adapt, a sense of entitlement, and institutionalized systems of oppression. Persons unaware of the need to adapt believe that the only ones who need to change are the “others” – the ones who are “not like us” (Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2012). When one recognizes one's entitlement, one can make constructive choices that benefit the education of children and youth (Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, Terrell, & Lindsey, 2019). Unfortunately, there were multiple accounts of teachers and school leaders projecting their unhealthy worldviews within the model school district. Privilege and entitlement appeared as significant barriers faced by students and staff. The findings of this study suggest that certain attitudes of cultural blindness and cultural incapacity are evident in the model school district at the heart of this study and have led to microaggressions in schools.

A prevalent sub-theme in both the self-assessment responses and focus group discussions was the concept of whiteness as a barrier to cultural proficiency. Privilege is problematic (a) when it skews our interactions and judgments and (b) when it contributes to or blinds us to systemic barriers for those who do not possess a certain privilege, thereby creating or perpetuating inequity (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019). A common scenario among the focus group discussions was a white female teacher exhibiting a pattern of targeting African American male students. For example, 7-year old children described as aggressive, violent, and another very sort of grown-up words that imply criminality. When school leaders take action to uncover the motives behind the adulting of school-age

children, they are often met with tears and accusations of not feeling supported. This type of counter-response is what sociologist, Robin DiAngelo, refers to as white Fragility. White Fragility, a state in which perceived racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation that function to reinstate white racial equilibrium (DiAngelo, 2018).

### **Disconnection of Theory to Practice**

There were written policies and procedures included in the mission, vision, and core values statements for the ISD district. A short yet significant sentence was found during document analysis that expressed an expectation that principals and assistant principals recognize, respect, and employ each student's strengths, diversity, and culture as assets for teaching and learning. This district message aligned with the literature. Students bring with them a set of values and beliefs, or their "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) from their homes and neighborhood cultures that may complement or clash with the school culture, and may legitimate the social, economic, political, and cultural hegemonic values of the dominant society. Thus, other terms such as culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), culturally responsive instruction (Au K., 2007), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) promote social justice through a focus on equality and celebration of diversity. For this study, the focus is culturally responsive teaching. Respondents of the online survey indicated that most sought opportunities to learn about the cultural practices in my school community (84.54%).

According to Zaretta Hammond (2015), surface-level culture is comprised of observable and concrete elements of culture such as food, dress, music, and holidays. Hammond (2015) goes on to state that surface culture has a low emotional charge; therefore, change does not create great anxiety in a person or group. Data obtained through participant experiences revealed a surface level consistency of minimal effort, actions of low hanging fruit. Besides, school leaders were required to develop and

provide the school as a resource for families and the community. Thus, the findings show evidence that the most common responses offered as examples of valuing diversity remained at the surface level. The overall findings for the research question, “How do school leaders value the diversity of race and culture to prevent microaggressions in schools?” demonstrate that school leaders’ value of race and culture through policy and practice is surface level. Deep culture strategies that help to govern one’s worldview such as strategies to actively engage parents/families in school improvement efforts were not found to be a priority. This finding contradicts the literature regarding what is required of culturally proficient leadership. Further, the participant data was not aligned with the document analysis of school leader performance evaluation standards. Located in district standard was an expectation to understand, value, and employ the community’s cultural, social, intellectual, and political resources to promote student learning and school improvement. When on the journey of leading for diversity, the National Association of Elementary Principals recommended that school teams examine their own cultural identity and how it affects relationships with others; become more aware of their attitudes, perceptions, and feelings about various aspects of diversity; and, most importantly, promote an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and respected, the school culture can become a safe and inclusive community (2016).

Despite a centralized office dedicated to family engagement with a pronounced commitment to providing services and programs needed to promote positive school cultures and advance the academic, physical, social, and psychological well-being of every student, the overall lowest results across this study were in the parent engagement category. It was clear that school leaders and their team have not been successful with consistently engaging their parent community. It is imperative that ISD and its school leaders take action to implement, model, and monitor culturally proficient practices. Enlisting parents' involvement in their children's education is widely understood as a key component of educational success. However, schools typically expect parents to engage with the

school system in ways consistent with white, middle-class parenting, and behavioral norms and in ways that are deferential to the school's Agenda (Yull, Wilson, Murray, & Parham, 2018). It is assumed that white, middle-class families engage with their children's education in ways expected and valued by the school, while families of color, particularly Black and Latino families, are often perceived as uninvolved in their children's academic lives (Cooper, 2009).

Nearly 40% of the participants included teacher beliefs and mindset as a barrier to cultural proficiency on the open-ended portion of the questionnaire. In addition to beliefs and mindset, school leaders also listed a lack of awareness and understanding, discomfort with confronting biases and racism, inequitable discipline, low expectations of students, microaggressive behaviors of staff, and the concept of whiteness/white privilege/white Fragility as barriers they have faced in leading a diverse school community. Therefore, when answering the question, “How are school leaders aware and understanding the barriers to cultural proficiency that can lead to microaggressions in schools?”, the data demonstrate that overall, school leaders are not truly aware, nor do they understand the barriers to cultural proficiency that can lead to microaggressions in schools. Hence school leaders’ self-awareness and understanding of the impact barriers such as microaggressions have in their schools is absent.

### **Participant Factor**

In Chapter 3, I acknowledged my researcher positionality as a school leader who has insight into the people, practices, and performance of the mid-Atlantic school district that serves as a model in this study. I believe my position as an insider unintentionally influenced participant behaviors by way of familiarity, trust, and comfort. While I made a conscious effort to limit my researcher bias, the nature of human connection and relationship increased the likelihood that I was not successful in remaining neutral during the data collection and analysis process. Given the sensitive and typically unpopular topics of race, bias, and more directly microaggressions, asking school leaders to engage in



a highly reflective self-assessment of their leadership was a big ask. In asking school leaders to be vulnerable and risk revealing their flaws, I was surprised by a large number of participants both online and in persons who were willing to do so. This implicates that school leaders experienced psychological safety in responding to a survey about their leadership practices given assurance of their anonymity.

With the level of anonymity slightly reduced through an in-person focus group with colleagues in the same district, I was further surprised by the number of participants willing to participate in the focus groups. The level of interest exceeded the number of potential participants that I would have been able to manage as a single facilitator. But as it turned out, scheduling conflict and other timing issues led to some who initially expressed wantonness to participate in the focus groups were not able to. An unexpected finding serving as evidence that these types of conversations are desired across the school district. Moreover, I received two requests to discuss my research. In the end, I accepted one invitation to facilitate a focus discussion about microaggressions in classrooms and implications for our work as school leaders to create emotionally and academically safe environments where students feel truly known and valued, as a result of positive adult/student relationships.

Having been the target of several microaggressions throughout my school leadership experience, I am well aware of the negative impact repeated microaggressions cause. Therefore, I was not expecting the participants of this study to be forthcoming about their personal experiences with barriers of cultural proficiency that can lead to microaggression. What I found was an evident desire to release the sting, discomfort, or pain caused by the macro- and microaggressive behaviors. Further, school leaders in this study related their adult experiences to the collateral damage their students might encounter. Questioning oneself, the beginnings self-doubt, and the hardening of one's spirit were an undercurrent thread to school leaders' comments, responses, and stories. Being the target of one or feeling helpless as you repeatedly witness innocent children as targets of microaggressions stemming

from limited mindsets and ignorance to difference can wear a person down over time. The slow dripping of bias, implicit or explicit can lead a school leader to question whether or not the job is truly worth it. This I know first-hand as someone who has considered leaving it all behind. This study has reignited my sense of social justice and reminded me of why I became a school leader over a decade ago. For my colleagues in this work, the practical implications include a reduced number of teachers and school leaders entering the profession. Also, coming up against barriers to cultural proficiency time after time can wear on students, school leaders, and other school staff, leading to a sense of defeat and stress that can further lead to physical and mental health issues. A future research opportunity could be the connection of medical research on microaggressions to PK-12 schooling experiences. Another potential study related to impact could entail studying the psychological and physiological effects of microaggressions on school leaders.

A second participant factor that caught me by surprise was the number of Caucasian school leaders who immediately contacted me about my study to participate online, express an interest in the focus groups, or to simply offer congratulations on the doctoral journey. As an added layer, these were school leaders who I have met over the years, but not in my direct path. Perhaps my surprise speaks to my implicit bias where I assumed a higher number of African American school leaders and a greater response from Caucasian school leaders who I regularly interact with. Ultimately, I have no way of knowing who the 97 school leaders were to take enough interest in this study and/or me to bare their leadership souls because I followed a strict anonymity protocol. I am both humbled and intrigued. In addition, I am reflecting on my cognitive dissonance that can lead to a barrier of cultural proficiency with my colleagues and friends. The willingness of school leaders to openly speak about their experiences of barriers to cultural proficiency and their leadership practices has been a pleasant surprise and affirmation of humanity that threads through all of us, across all races, cultures, genders, religious beliefs, etc.

A third participant factor that emerged was an unexpected finding around group dynamics. It was evident some school leaders' participation in the study led to an energizing, self-actualizing, or long-awaited opportunity to give a voice to what they had been experiencing in isolation. In one of the sessions, the largest the most diverse of the four (in terms of gender, race, age, and school leader experience) there were moments of tension between participants as they share their points of view. As professionals there was respect was maintained by all and as the researcher and facilitator, I was sure not to create a situation or allow a situation to be created where the participants would shut down, however, I did want to balance the authenticity of the conversations playing out. An example of this was when to school leaders of a different race in different gender and of different ages shared similar experiences of Microaggressions occurring for young children as a target in a green that the teachers' actions were inappropriate but where they differed was how they would manage the dynamics of those sensitive situations one school leader an African-American female. Stated that she could not allow that situation to occur and would take the risk of losing a relationship with the teacher to protect the child. The white male school leader who was newer in his career chose to preserve the relationship with the teacher at the expense of the child. For him, he felt like forging relationships with the teacher before having a courageous conversation was more important whereas the African American female school leader felt that there was no time to wait and a child should not be a sacrifice for the sins of the adult. The implications of this are that their schools and school leaders who are experiencing these situations regularly, however, the outcomes are varied which could mean that they are several school leaders who are being misunderstood or improperly labeled or receiving a bad reputation from disgruntled teachers and some children are not being cared for who are not being served who are missing opportunities and who are being harmed. Again, an area of research could be to examine school leader outcomes or school leaders' actions in managing the dynamics of difference based on race age gender sexuality years of the experience school population, etc.

Last, of the participant factors, observations of focus group participation revealed a slight hesitation in sharing experiences or responding to sensitive questions. For example, when it was asked what the ethos of the school district in terms of race and equity or some other question was that had the school district at the center, some school leaders were hesitant to express any opinions that might cast the district in an unfavorable light. Yet the inner struggle to speak openly or not was visible. For those who were willing to speak their truth, they forged a path that somehow allowed the hesitant school leaders to eventually share their authentic thoughts. Another factor that could have cast a level of intimidation of the focus group participants was their consciousness of the session being recorded. Overall, all of the focus group participants reached a personal stage of willingness to speak up and share their experiences especially after someone else voiced a shared perspective first. The body language that I observed was participants trying to quietly check each other's reactions and responses to what was said, especially for the participants who were meeting for the first time. In one session, a participant asked me if they thought that it would be OK to have shared so much in front of an unknown colleague. They wanted to know if the other school leader(s) could be trusted not to reveal their identity, although I communicated over and over that their identity would be fully protected. The interesting pseudonyms each focus group participant chose added another layer of anonymity reinforcement.

### **Implications, Recommendations, and Research**

The chief barriers to cultural proficiency are resistance to change, a lack of awareness of the need to adapt, a sense of entitlement, and institutionalized systems of oppression. Implicit biases of school staff can manifest through low expectations, poor assumptions, and in rare occasion blatant racism (Sue, et al., 2007). In the classroom, students of color describe racial microaggressions as a pattern of being overlooked, under-respected, and devalued because of their race. Therefore, Singleton (2015) offers that, equity is not a guarantee that all students will succeed; rather, it assures that all

students will have the opportunity and support necessary to succeed. The following implications, recommendations, and suggestions for future research are all intended to manage the numerous inequities that occur in schools.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrated that Inspiration School District had not been able to progress past the awareness stage of the cultural proficiency continuum and the level of accountability for school leaders is moderate at best. As a result, students continue to experience the harmful effects of microaggressions, internalizing the feelings of inferiority based on unfair treatment from the trusted adults they look to for instruction, support, guidance, and care. The long-term impact of enduring microaggressions for these children is that some will become less confident adults who continuously question their skills, abilities, or sadly, their value.

### **Implications for Practice**

There were key school practice areas that emerged from the data that inform school leaders and the district's current progress which included: implementation and provide a roadmap for future practice and research; inconsistent in transferring the knowledge to their school leadership practices; the presence of microaggressions, deficit thinking, whiteness, and entitlement; demonstration of surface level value of race and culture; and a disconnect between theory and practice within schools and across the district. Based on the data, I calling for the Inspiration School District to take action to address the inequities that are occurring across the school system. I begin with the following considerations for current practices:

- The student academic and behavior outcomes for ISD continue to be predictable by race, therefore, it is imperative that all school leaders manage their daily school operations of school leadership through a lens of race and culture.
- Engaging school staff, students, and parents in authentic conversations of race and culture to understand and address the difficulties students of color and their families often face as a result

of the institutionalized racism and the ever-present systems of oppression is essential and cannot be viewed as optional.

- Consistency of holding all ISD staff accountable for cultural proficiency practices must be measured and monitored on a regular basis, including statements of impact indicated in performance reviews.
- A mechanism for targets and witnesses of microaggressions to report their experiences and receive school or district level support is required.

### **Recommendations for Immediate Internal Changes**

Although ISD has a centralized department dedicated to equity initiatives, the efforts in general have not been effective in preventing the barriers of cultural proficiency from invading the schools and causing harm to students. ISD is strongly urged to invest in mandatory system-wide cultural proficiency training and professional development for all employees. I further urge ISD to engage external experts with proven research-based results and positive outcomes in school districts similar to Inspiration School District. In addition to enlisting the expertise of an objective outside consultant, below are some internal actions that can take effect immediately.

It is recommended that Inspiration Public School take immediate action to:

- Create a system of accountability to hold all ISD employees accountable for implementing culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally proficient practices. Just as some school districts institute a required number of reading, special education, or ESL education hours to maintain a teaching license, school district can require the same for cultural proficiency. In order to be awarded and maintain a valid license, all states should require a minimum number of professional learning, graduate, etc. hours in cultural proficiency for all school staff.

- Review all policies for parent engagement, implement a mechanism for soliciting parent input in multiple languages, and find an appropriate way to engage the parent community in reviewing school policies and procedures that directly impact their children.
- Model reflection of one's racial and cultural identity and the impact it has within the school setting for students, parents, and colleagues. For example, school leaders can begin by creating a visual presentation of their racial autobiography and share honest reflections of how their experiences with race have impacted their lens as a leader.
- Utilize Singleton's (2015) Courageous Conversations About Race protocol and establish safe spaces for dialogue in all schools and offices.
- Engage in authentic community conversations to deepen their knowledge of racial and cultural diversity and engage in a two-way dialogue with students and families.
- Enact required monthly professional development on cultural proficiency topics.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

If this study were to be replicated, I would suggest expanding the participants to include district level leaders and all classroom teachers. In addition, persons who are responsible for developing curriculum, training roles, and all who have direct interaction with parents be included in a variation of this study. Further in a study dedicated to students only, I recommend researcher study elementary, middle, and high school levels students to offset the saturated body of research that focused on higher education students. In addition, I recommend replicating this study with a larger sample size that includes races other than Black/African American and white. And to solicit the participation of more high school level school leaders.

I would recommend further exploration of some of the specific themes and patterns that emerged from the data collected in this study. For example, a study that focuses on the prevalence of whiteness and white fragility within an organization such as ISD that employs 80% white female

teachers with a population of 72% students of color. In addition, an expansion of the other types of microaggressions such as language and gender. Further research on the high rate of awareness, yet low rate of equitable leadership is needed to support identification of solutions.

### **Conclusion**

Data representing 113 accounts of school leaders' lived experiences provided invaluable evidence for understanding the barriers to cultural proficiency. The vivid school leader narratives were instrumental in illustrating the importance of this topic. Serving as a backdrop to schools and school leaders was a large school district that made an effort to scale up culturally proficient leadership across the system. The findings revealed several inconsistencies between expectations and actions or theory and practice. Manifested in a school setting, microaggressions take shape through low expectations for achievement, lack of access to a rigorous curriculum, and lost opportunities to participate in enrichment programs. Also, the long-term impacts of microaggressions can be damaged self-esteem, an altered sense of self, reduced motivation, fear to take intellectual risks, stress, depression, or school anxiety. School leaders have a responsibility to interrupt these patterns of inequity to ensure a positive educational experience and reduce the predictability of academic outcomes based on socioeconomic, race, gender, language, and differing abilities. However, for some, the greatest challenge in creating equitable schools lies in helping school leaders and teachers to see the role they play in the perpetuation of educational inequities (Singleton, 2015).

The critical work for principals, starting at the preschool level, is to establish a school climate and culture that recognizes and affirms diversity. The role of principal is to act as a catalyst to guarantee the school embraces and affirms multicultural aims, objectives, curricular content, assessment content, and pedagogy are implemented (Gardiner, Canfield-Davis, & Anderson, 2009). The findings of this study indicated that cultural proficiency training across the district remains at the theoretical level, leaving a disconnection between vision and implementation. In addition, there were



inconsistencies regarding where school leaders and their staff were on the cultural proficiency continuum as well as the level of participation in professional learning around race and equity topics. Multiple implications to practice and recommendations for practice and future research were offered. However, the greatest requirement in eliminating barriers to cultural proficiency that can lead to microaggressions in schools is dismissing the notion that engaging in culturally responsive and relevant teaching practices is optional and that culturally proficient leadership is voluntary. There must be an accountability metric that is regularly reviewed. Cultural proficiency must become the load-bearing wall, the NorthStar, the thread across every action within a school system that holds it all together. According to Lindsey et al. (2019), institutionalizing cultural knowledge involves incorporating cultural knowledge into the mainstream of the organization, teaching the origins of stereotypes and prejudices, and offering professional learning that integrates information and skills that enable all to interact effectively in a variety of intercultural situations.

An underlying goal of this study was to heighten the awareness of racially and culturally based microaggressions in K-12 schools and spark school leaders to take action. When the focus group participants were given a post-focus group survey, 11 of the 15 school leaders indicated an increased level of awareness. Also, 13 of 15 focus group participants indicated that their perception regarding the need for culturally proficient leadership increased. Finally, 100% of the online and focus group participants indicated agreement with the need for culturally proficient leadership development.

Inspiration School District must take the first step of cultural proficiency which, is to know thy self. This research study revealed serious gaps in the school district's practices that led to a harmful impact on students, their families, and staff. There was some indication of schools working tirelessly to educate, protect, and advocate for students and their families. Yet, there was an equal if not larger number of persons who used their power to hold on to the comfort of a status quo. Deficit mindset, the presence of whiteness, resistance to change, and entitlement were found as a terrible plague spreading

like sickness through schools. The findings of this study must sound an urgent call to be actively, conscious equity warriors who will draw a direct line of accountability to every school and office to do the morally just work that honors and uplifts each student, parent, and employee of the school system. For at this time, all are not well.

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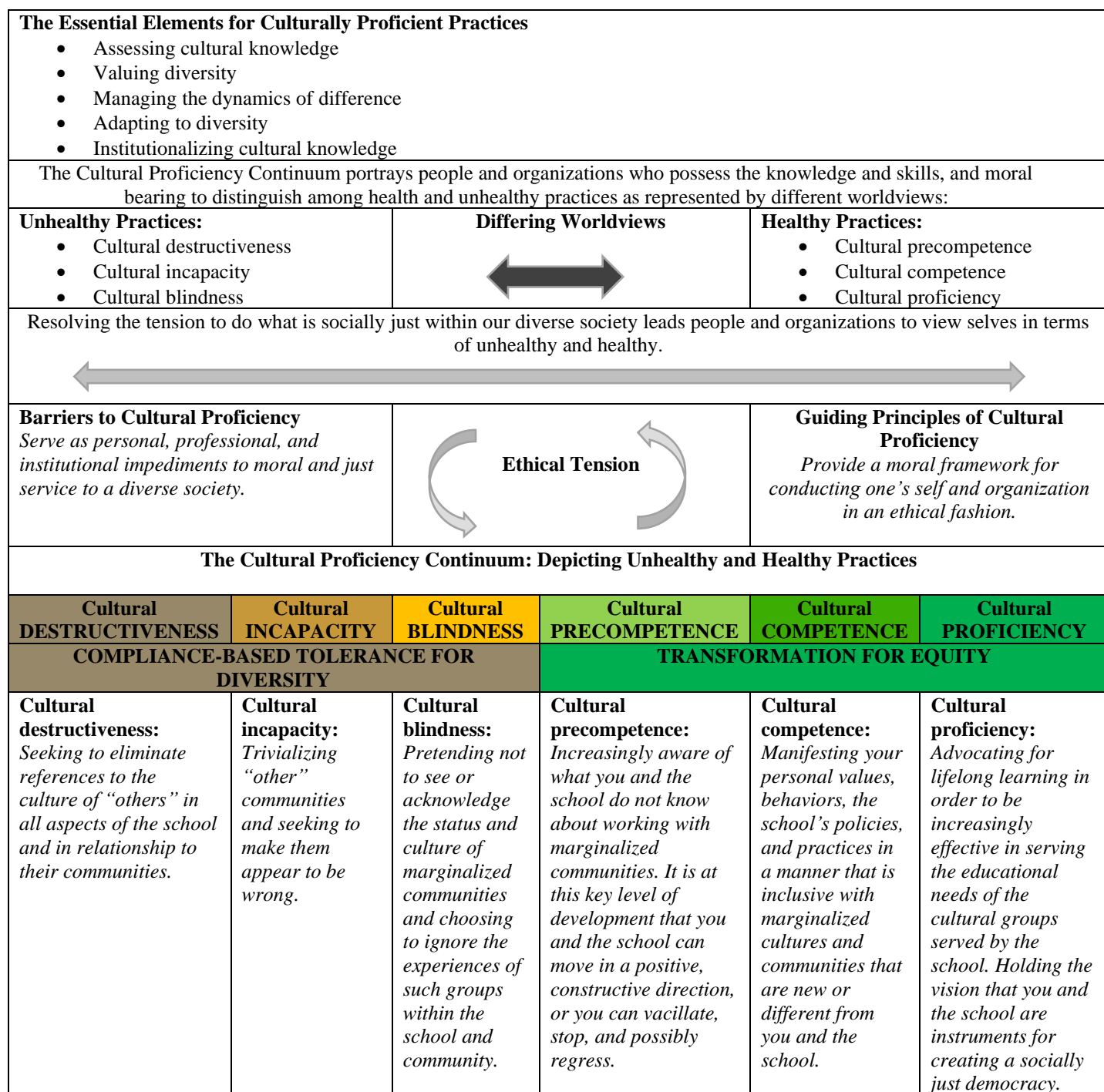


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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: The Cultural Proficiency Framework



(Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2012)

## Appendix B: 2016 State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce Report

### Summary of Findings:

#### ***Elementary and secondary school educators in the United States are relatively homogenous racially.***

- The elementary and secondary educator workforce is overwhelmingly homogenous (82 percent White in public schools).
- Over time, educator diversity has increased. In the 1987–88 school year, 13 percent of public-school teachers were teachers of color compared to 18 percent in the 2011–12 school year.
- While the proportion of all teachers of color has increased over time, this trend is not the result of increases in the proportion of teachers in all non-white racial and ethnic categories. For example, the proportion of teachers who were black decreased slightly over this time period.
- Education leaders are also predominantly white. In the 2011–12 school year, only 20 percent of public-school principals were individuals of color.

#### ***Diversity decreases at multiple points across the teacher pipeline in which teachers progress though postsecondary education, teacher preparation programs, and retention.***

- Bachelor's degree students are less diverse than high school graduates. In 2011–12, while 38 percent of bachelor's degree students were students of color, 43 percent of public high school graduates were students of color.
- A large majority of education majors and, more specifically, students enrolled in teacher preparation programs, are white. In the 2012–13 school year, 25 percent of individuals enrolled in a teacher
- preparation program based in an institution of higher education (IHE) were individuals of color. In comparison, 37 percent of all individuals (regardless of major) in those same institutions were individuals of color.
- Like completion rates in other fields of study, bachelor's degree completion rates for students who major in education are lower for black and Hispanic students than for white students.
- Seventy-three percent of bachelor's degree students majoring in education completed a bachelor's degree six years after beginning postsecondary education. Forty-two percent of black bachelor's
- degree students majoring in education completed a bachelor's degree six years after beginning postsecondary education. Forty-nine percent of Hispanic bachelor's degree students majoring in education completed a bachelor's degree six years after beginning postsecondary education.
- Teacher retention rates are higher among white teachers than for black and Hispanic teachers.

#### ***Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and alternative routes to teacher certification tend to enroll a more racially diverse population of teacher candidates.***

- Two percent of individuals who are preparing to be teachers are enrolled at HBCUs, but 16 percent of all black teacher candidates attend HBCUs.
- Alternative routes to teacher certification tend to enroll more racially diverse populations of candidates than traditional teacher preparation programs. Forty-two percent of teacher candidates enrolled in an alternative teacher preparation program not based in an IHE were individuals of color. Thirty-five percent of teacher candidates enrolled in an alternative teacher preparation program based in an IHE were individuals of color. Fewer teacher candidates enrolled in a traditional teacher preparation program (26 percent) were individuals of color.

Source: <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/highered/racial-diversity/state-racial-diversity-workforce.pdf>

## Appendix C: Request to Use Research

Randall Lindsey <randallblindsey@gmail.com>

Sun 7/7/2019 7:46 PM

**[CAUTION - External Email]** This email originated from outside of Hood College. DO NOT click on links or open attachments if you do not recognize the sender.

Hello Sundra,

On behalf of my friends, colleagues and co-authors, we are delighted for you to use the Cultural Proficiency Framework to support your dissertation study. If there is any particular table or figure you need from our books, let us know and we will see if we can provide it. Otherwise, normal citations suffice.

Noting your address, by chance do you know two of our friends - Toby Heusser and/or Eric Phillip? If not, you could/would be wonderful resources to one another.

All the best to you! Keep us informed as to how we might support your study.

Randy

From the desk of:

Randall B. Lindsey

---

Dear Drs. Randall, Randall, Nuri-Robins, and Terrell,

I am writing to request your permission to use *The Cultural Proficiency Framework*. I am a doctoral candidate at Hood College in Frederick, MD conducting an action research study on the microaggressions in the classroom and the need for culturally proficient school leadership. My research goal is to build awareness of microaggression in the classroom and the need for culturally responsive leadership in mine and neighboring school districts.

I have found your collective work to be informative, resourceful, and instrumental throughout my scholarly research. With your permission, I would like to use your research as the theoretical framework for my study.

I look forward to your response. I would also appreciate any added advice or research articles that you feel would be helpful for my study.

Respectfully,  
Sundra E. Mann  
Doctoral Candidate  
Doctoral Program in Organizational Leadership  
Hood College  
[www.hood.edu](http://www.hood.edu)

.....

Re: Request Permission to Use Self-Assessment for School Administrators - Doctoral Research

Kristen Davidson <kristen.davidson@colorado.edu>

Yesterday, 8:58 PM

Mann Sundra Elizabeth; De La Cruz, Bill <BILL\_DELACRUZ@dpsk12.org>

[CAUTION - External Email] This email originated from outside of Hood College.

Hi Sundra,

Thank you for your interest in this. Your study sounds great and important! I'm cc'ing Bill de la Cruz, who was the lead author of the toolkit and the brains, heart, and soul behind it (as well as in ongoing equity work with school administrators).

Bill: is it ok with you if Sundra uses the self-assessment in the Toolkit with her study participants?

Best,

Kristen

Kristen Davidson, PhD

Research Associate, National Center for Research in Policy & Practice

CU Boulder School of Education | Room 332

@\_kdavidson | she/her/hers Greetings Ms. Davidson,

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I am writing to request your permission to use an adaptation of the cultural proficiency self-assessment for school administrators survey instrument. I am a doctoral candidate at Hood College in Frederick, MD conducting an action research study on microaggressions in the classroom and the need for culturally proficient school leadership. I have found the Colorado Department of Education Equity Toolkit for Administrators (2010) to be informative and resourceful. With your permission, I would like to have my study participants complete the self-assessment.

I look forward to your response. I also appreciate any added advice or research articles that you feel would be helpful for my study.

Respectfully,

Sundra E. Mann

Doctoral Candidate

Doctoral Program in Organizational Leadership

Hood College

[www.hood.edu](http://www.hood.edu)

## Appendix D: SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR SCHOOL LEADERS (SASL)

*This self-assessment is intended to raise awareness of the importance of cultural diversity and cultural competence in K-12 schools. It provides concrete examples of the kinds of values and practices that foster such an environment. It will take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.*

*Directions: For items 1 – 30 please click on the box that best matches your level of agreement with the corresponding statement or the appropriate response to match your participant profile.*

<i>Please select the appropriate level of frequency. (Only one response per statement can be selected.)</i>	<b>Frequently or Most of the Time</b>	<b>Occasionally or Some of the Time</b>	<b>Rarely, Minimally, or Not at All</b>
1. I am aware of my own racial, ethnic, and cultural background and understand how it affects my perceptions and values.			
2. I seek opportunities to learn about the cultural practices in my school community, including staff, families, and students.			
3. I regularly reflect on my own bias and how I view and treat people with cultural practices that are different from my own.			
4. Our school regularly examines academic and behavioral data for achievement gaps by race, language, socioeconomic status, and gender.			
5. I provide professional development for school staff to examine their own cultural awareness and learn culturally relevant educational practices.			
6. Strategic plans are put in place to address all achievement gaps.			
7. I reach out to families from various backgrounds to give feedback and assist in the creation of school policies.			
8. Our school has clear procedures to report and respond to allegations of inequity.			
9. Issues of inequity are handled in a sensitive and timely manner.			
10. I actively recruit applicants of diverse cultural backgrounds and ethnicities to work in our school.			
11. Our school has a support system to meet the needs of our staff from diverse backgrounds.			
12. School communication with families is available in multiple languages and is sensitive to varying family structures as well as diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.			
13. Data are disseminated to families with procedures for them to offer support in improving our school for all students.			
14. I actively recruit families to volunteer in the school and on committees so that volunteer pools reflect the student body.			
15. Artwork and photographs embedded in school communication and school décor reflect the			

demographics of our student body and are age appropriate.			
16. Our school reviews curriculum and materials to make sure they are historically accurate, culturally relevant, and anti-bias.			
17. Instruction across our school reflects culturally relevant lessons that are embedded in day to day teaching, rather than isolated units.			
18. Instruction across our school reflects differentiation tools to meet the needs of students from varying backgrounds.			
19. The books in our school library reflect our student body and depict varying cultural practices in a positive and anti-biased way.			
20. Our school respects holidays in a manner that is sensitive to the religious and cultural practices of students, families, and staff.			
21. Teacher expectations and evaluations include culturally relevant teaching, with a focus on equity and positive relationship.			
22. I openly confront inequitable practices and have policies in place to hold staff accountable for their actions. I encourage staff to do the same.			
23. Behavior expectations and policies have considered the varying cultural expectations and norms among students and families.			
24. I am comfortable leading discussions about race, culture, religion, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation with staff and students.			
25. How many years have you been a principal, assistant principal, or principal intern? 0 – 5 years; 6 – 10 years; 11 – 15 years; 16 or more years			
26. Indicate all school levels you have served as a principal, assistant principal, or principal intern. Elementary School      Middle School      High School			
27. In the last two school years, how many professional development sessions have you led regarding culturally responsive teaching and learning practices? 0 – 3 sessions; 4 – 7 sessions; more than 8 sessions			
28. In the last two school years, how many professional development sessions have you participated in to inform your own practices as a school leader? 0 – 3 sessions; 4 – 7 sessions; more than 8 sessions			
29. How would you rate your school district's practices (scale of 1 – 5 with 1 = low; 5 = excellent)? a. assessing culture: identifying the cultural groups present across the district b. valuing diversity: developing an appreciation for differences among and between groups c. managing the dynamics of difference: responding appropriately and effectively to issues that arise in a diverse environment d. adapting to diversity: change and adopt new policies that support diversity and inclusion e. institutionalized cultural knowledge: drive the changes into the systems of the district			
30. How would you describe your race/ethnicity? Caucasian   Asian   Hispanic/Latino   Black/African/African American   Multiracial   Chose not to respond			

*Adapted from Equity Toolkit for Administrators for the Colorado Department of Education (2010) and The Cultural Proficiency Framework (Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2012).*



## Appendix E: Guiding Questions for Focus Groups

### Dissertation Research Study Focus Group Guiding Questions

- As a school leader, what does the phrase “valuing diversity” mean to you?
- How would you describe the ethos of this school district as it relates to race, ethnicity, and culture?
- Are you aware of any instances in which microaggressions within a classroom or instructional setting have occurred? If so, can you briefly share if was staff to student, student to staff, or student to student? Given the nine possible themes in front of you, how would you categorize the microaggression? Do you believe there was a connection to race? What is the role of a school leader in this situation?
- *When staff frame student differences as deficits rather than as assets, a microaggression is ignited for the student (Hammond, 2015).*
  - Are you aware of any instances in which student differences have been framed as deficits rather than assets? Can you briefly share the context of the situation (instructional planning; master scheduling or class placement; access to courses; assessment/testing; or some other scenario)? Do you believe there was a connection to race? What is the role of a school leader in this situation?
- *For students, microaggressions in the classroom can result in feelings of inferiority, uncomfortableness, minimized contributions or opinions, being ignored or not granted validity, not belonging, and feeling unwelcomed.*
  - Are you aware of any instances in which students have felt inferior, uncomfortable, minimized, ignored, invalidated, left out, or unwelcomed based on a verbal, behavioral, or environmental experience based on their race? If so, can you briefly share the circumstances? How did staff respond to this situation? What is the role of a school leader in this situation?
- *Race is a necessary component of personalization because “teachers [who] ignore the racial component of students’ identity are in effect treating their students as incomplete beings, and student performance can suffer as a result” (Milner, 2010).*
  - What is the role of a school leader in helping teachers and other school staff to see students’ race as a factor of their identity? What are some actions that can be taken? What type of professional development might the staff engage in?
- Where do you see yourself on the cultural proficiency continuum? Where is your school's leadership team on the continuum? Where is your collective school staff on the continuum (teachers and all other positions together as a whole)?

## Appendix F: INITIAL INVITATION STATEMENT

*(This invitation will appear at the end of the Self-Assessment for School Leaders to guide interested persons to click the link and move forward with participation.)*

### **An Invitation:**

- Would you be interested in building awareness of microaggressions in the classroom?
- Have you directly or indirectly experienced a variance of expectations based on race/ethnicity, gender, religion, language acquisition, or differing abilities?
- Did you feel a need to be more culturally proficient in supporting your school community?

### **What I am looking for:**

- First-hand accounts of macro/microaggressions, biases, discrimination, varying expectations, etc. as it relates to K-12 students.
- A willingness to speak openly in a confidential setting with a small group of colleagues regarding what is going well and what should be improved.
- A desire to act to improve the learning experience for all students.

### **How will you benefit:**

- Learn about action research
- Have an opportunity to share your opinions and views.
- Meet colleagues who share a similar interest in culturally proficient leadership.

*To learn more about how you can participate in this action research study regarding the effects of microaggressions in the classroom on student learning and the need for culturally proficient leadership, click the link below: (link to a confidential participant registration that is separate from the leadership self-assessment survey to the Invitation for Group)*

## Appendix G: INVITATION LETTER FOR GROUP

*(This follow-up invitation will appear upon once the respondents clicks to learn more.)*

### Microaggressions in the Classroom & Culturally Proficient Leadership

Sundra E. Mann is interested conducting action research to build awareness of the effects of microaggressions in K - 12 classrooms on student learning and the need for culturally proficient school leadership. The perspective of school leaders—like you—can offer valuable information about the experience and outcomes of culturally proficient leadership.

Are you interested in participating in this research?

The benefits to you would be

- informing the research base on action research,
- sharing your own experiences and thoughts about action research,
- collaborating with others who have had experience with the process, and
- contributing to the knowledge base for school leaders.

There are no anticipated risks to you as a participant in this research.

Your time commitment would be five hours over the course the 2019-2020 school year.

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

- complete information about your demographic profile (10 minutes)
- participate in a group conversation (60 minutes per session; 5 sessions)

You may also decide to participate in the following optional activities:

review the final report (approximately 30 minutes)

Although we cannot compensate you monetarily, I will shower you with grateful “thank you’s” and a variety of refreshments and tasty treats. I sincerely hope you will find the time in your extraordinarily busy schedule to join me.

## Appendix H: INFORMED CONSENT

### HOOD COLLEGE

#### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

##### Microaggressions in the Classroom and Culturally Proficient Leadership

##### Consent Form

### 1. INTRODUCTION

You are invited to be a participant in an action research study to build awareness of the effects of microaggressions in K - 12 classrooms on student learning and the need for culturally proficient school leadership. You were selected as a possible participant because you have an important perspective of school leadership and the potential effects of microaggressions in the classroom. I ask that you read this document and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. I require that participants in this study be at least 18 years old. The study is being conducted by Sundra E. Mann, doctoral candidate of the Hood College Doctoral of Organizational Leadership Program.

### 2. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of our research study is to explore the action research process and to compare the individual versus the collaborative approach instituted this current year. Results of our inquiry may help others grow in their knowledge of microaggressions in the classroom and culturally proficient leadership practices, whether as participants or supporters of the process. I anticipate that approximately 65 principals, assistant principals, and principal interns will participate in this study.

### 3. DURATION

The length of time you will be involved with this study is about 20 minutes if you chose to complete the leadership self-assessment only. If you continue to participate in the focus groups, the time is approximately five additional hours of total time over five, 60-minute group sessions spread over the 2019-2020 school year. If you decide to review any drafts of the manuscripts, that may take an additional 30 minutes or so of your time. The self-assessment and any other survey will be accessible through a link to an anonymous Survey Monkey instrument.

### 4. PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following things:

- a) You will be asked to complete a 30 question self-assessment through an anonymous Survey Monkey link (15 – 20 minutes).
- b) You might be offered the opportunity to participate in the focus groups (60 minutes per session; 5 sessions).
- c) You will be offered the opportunity to review the final report if you fully participate in the focus group session; however, you will not be *required* to do so (approximately 30 minutes).

### 5. RISKS/BENEFITS

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study. The beneficial outcomes we anticipate are a greater understanding of your thoughts about action research. Study findings could help us, me as an educator

and doctoral scholar, to better understand the effects of microaggressions in K – 12 classrooms, the need for culturally proficient leadership, and the qualitative action research methodology. Although I cannot compensate you monetarily, please know that you have my unwavering gratitude and your participation will help develop a more effective workforce of school leaders.

## **6. CONFIDENTIALITY**

To protect confidentiality, (1) responses to the leadership self-assessment will remain anonymous; (2) should you participate in the focus groups, you will choose a pseudonym for yourself that will be used when we discuss and record your experiences; (3) participants will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement and only we will know real names, and we will not use them to identify you in any written or recorded information; (4) all audio recordings of conversations, written reminiscences, and transcripts of our conversations will be kept in a secured location; and (5) digital recordings, notes about responses, and drafts of reports and articles will all be kept on our computers which are accessible only through username and password entry. Your identity will be protected in any written report or article about this research project.

## **7. VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Hood College or any of its representatives. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without affecting those relationships. If you choose to participate in the study, you can stop your participation at any time, without any penalty or loss of benefits. If you want to withdraw from the study, please tell Sundra E. Mann. Any responses prior to your withdrawal will be destroyed and will not be included in the study results.

## **8. CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

You can ask questions about this research study now or at any time during the study, by talking to Sundra E. Mann at (301) 467-3549. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to speak with someone other than the researchers, you may contact Dr. Ann Boyd, Institutional Review Board Chair, Hood College, 401 Rosemont Ave., Frederick, MD 21701, [boyd@hood.edu](mailto:boyd@hood.edu).

## **9. STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

The procedures of this study have been explained to me and my questions have been addressed. The information that I provide is confidential and will be used for research purposes only. I am at least eighteen years old. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw anytime without penalty. If I have any concerns about my experience in this study (e.g., that I was treated unfairly or felt unnecessarily threatened), I may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board or the Chair of the sponsoring department of this research regarding my concerns.

Participant signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix I: Hood College IRB Application



October 22, 2019

Ms. Sundra Mann  
Hood College  
401 Rosemont Ave.  
Frederick, MD 21701

Dear Ms. Mann,

The Hood College Institutional Review Board reviewed your study entitled "*Microaggressions in K-12 Classrooms and Culturally Proficient Leadership*" (Proposal Number 1920-11). The committee has voted to approve this study. This approval is limited to the activities described in the procedure narrative and extends to the performance of these activities. 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 October 22, 2020. 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 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 at both institutions before they are implemented.

Sincerely,

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

## Appendix J: Research and Data Collection in Inspirational School District

To protect the anonymity of participants and the organization highlighted in this study, a redacted version of the approval request to conduct research will be shared.

### **SUBJECT: *Approved Request to Conduct Research***

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#### **Summary**

Ms. Sundra Mann, Principal, Georgian Forest Elementary School, requests permission to conduct a dissertation research study titled *Microaggressions in K-12 Classrooms and the Need for Culturally Proficient Leadership*. The study has been reviewed and approved by the Office of Shared Accountability and the Chief of Staff in compliance with Regulation AFA-RA, *Research and Other Data*

#### **Background**

The study will explore needs, rewards, and challenges of culturally proficient leadership practices for diverse student populations. Elementary and secondary school-based leaders (i.e., principals, assistant principals, principal interns, and assistant school administrators) from traditional comprehensive schools and alternative school programs will be invited to participate in the study. Participation is voluntary.

#### **Important Dates**

Data collection activities will occur between December 2019 and March 2020. Participants will be asked to complete an online self-assessment questionnaire regarding their perspectives of culturally-proficient school leadership practices. Up to 16 school leaders will also be invited to participate in focus group discussions at times and locations convenient to participants. The focus group discussions will be audio recorded with participants' permission.

#### **Links/Additional Information**

For more information regarding Ms. Mann's research study, please refer to the attached memorandum to the Chief of Staff dated November 21, 2019. If you have questions regarding this request, please