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Equity Requires Action: Principals' Use and Value of Culturally Proficient Educational Practice

Jaime E. Welborn Ph.D.
Saint Louis University, jaime.welborn@slu.edu

Peter Flores III, Ed.D.
Praxis Lead Equity, pflores@praxisleadequity.com

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Equity Requires Action: Principals' Use and Value of Culturally Proficient Educational Practice

Abstract

This quantitative, descriptive study investigated K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding the degree to which they use and value practices related to cultural competence in their roles as school leaders. While an abundance of literature regarding leadership in education, disparities in educational outcomes, and school change exists, inequities in policy and practice perpetuate academic and social setbacks for some of our nation's youth. Using the lens of the Cultural Proficiency Framework, specifically the Essential Elements, this study aimed to address the research questions and add to the literature by examining (1) the school principals' value in using culturally competent practices; (2) the school principals' use of culturally competent practices; and (3) the differences in principals' perceptions across urban, suburban, and rural locale. The study's findings revealed the most important and most frequently used culturally competent practices to school principals were associated with valuing diversity. Conversely, the least important and least frequently used culturally competent practices to school principals were associated with assessing cultural knowledge. Conclusions suggest that applying the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency allows for paradigm shifts to praxis, where theory becomes practice through action towards equity and inclusion.

Keywords

equity, cultural proficiency, educational practice, disparities in education, value diversity, leadership

Author Statement

Dr. Jaime E. Welborn, President of JWE Education Consulting, LLC and Executive Director of Midwest Collaborative for Cultural Proficiency in Schools (DBA), is a former teacher and school administrator. She currently serves as Assistant Professor in Education Leadership at Saint Louis University in Missouri. Dr. Peter Flores III, Founder and Principal Consultant of Praxis Lead Equity, LLC, is a former teacher and school administrator. Both Drs. Welborn and Flores are senior associates of the Center for Culturally Proficient Educational Practice.

Introduction

One of the most critical issues in education is student achievement in public schools across the United States (Barton & Coley, 2009; Chubb & Loveless, 2002; Coleman, 1966; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner IV, 2013; Murphy, 2009). Despite national, state, and local laws, mandates, and school reform initiatives, the disparities in education across cultural diversity of our students prevail. From *Mendez v. Westminster*, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Title I, Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, No Child Left Behind, and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, national assessment data continue to highlight the disparities and educational gaps among and between various racial, ethnic, social class, and ability populations (Ferguson, 2008; Hammond, 2015; Howard, 2006; Jencks et al., 1979; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera, 2008; Wagner, 2008).

When disaggregated data show that groups of students continue to wane decade after decade, it is often of great concern for the students, their families, the school site, the principal, the research community, and beyond. Research has given us evidence that data-based decision-making is key to increasing student outcomes (Bernhardt, 2015; Hyson et al., 2020; Pelusi, 2015; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Schildkamp et al., 2013; Schildkamp et al., 2019), but the question is why we have not actualized positive student outcomes for all. We have reorganized professional learning communities, instituted character education, restorative practices, and intervention models, such as Response to Intervention, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, and Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS); we have enhanced special education models, invested in enrichment programs, afterschool programs, and extracurriculars; we have provided food security, health care services, hired directors and coordinators of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and even spent billions of dollars on professional learning trainings to increase awareness of diversity, bias, and other equity-based practice models. The question remains: What is the catalyst for equitable outcomes in our urban, suburban, and rural public schools?

Educational leaders are called to shift this landscape annually with comprehensive school improvement planning and fundamentally opening access and opportunity for those on the lower end of educational gaps. Numerous scholars (Byrk & Schneider, 2002; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Grissom et al., 2012; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005) have demonstrated the strong effect a school principal has on school policies, practices, and even influencing behaviors, that often act as barriers, but ultimately hold the keys to educational equity. Leithwood et al. (2004) wrote, "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn in school" (p.5). Hattie (2012) found that the school principal/leader has a 0.36 effect size. Urban, suburban, and rural school principals who engage in the work of access and equity and see transformative and organizational change don't just *talk the talk* but also *walk the walk*.

Singleton (2018) wrote, "Systemic equity transformation requires a shift in the organizational culture and climate of school systems, and schools that shift must flow from the highest-ranking leadership to and between staff in all divisions of the district" (p. 30). This notion reiterates the importance of the school site leader. The Conceptual Framework of Cultural Proficiency provides a framework and tools for leaders and staff to acknowledge and overcome barriers by ensuring action is taken in the pursuit of equitable outcomes (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). Praxis allows for the *talk* to become the *walk* through action. Specifically, the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency include five action verbs

school principals can use to transform policies, practices, and behaviors and ultimately change a system where inequities in education no longer exist.

"Culturally competent school leaders understand that effective leadership in a diverse environment is about changing how we work with those culturally different from ourselves. Personal transformation that facilitates organizational change is the goal of cultural competence" (Lindsey et al., 2005, p. 79). School principals who develop the capacity to lead change with a mindset and an inside-out approach to Cultural Proficiency know the importance of assessing their cultural knowledge and valuing diversity throughout the system (Lindsey et al., 2019). "Culturally proficient leaders use the "inside-out" approach of transformational change for the planning process and focus on "doing their own work first" before taking the work outside of the planning team" (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 69). Prominent scholars (Dilts, 1990; Fullan, 1997; Gardner, 2004; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2006; Lindsey et al., 2019; Nelson & Guerra, 2014) have referenced the critical component of reflection of self-identity, experience, and behavior required for change.

Dilts (1990) developed a model including nested levels of organizational change that guide leaders in transforming systems by identifying leverage points for adapting policies, practices, and behaviors that produce or perpetuate inequitable outcomes (Welborn et al., 2022). Dilts's model's leverage point of *identity* references the individual or group's sense of self, answering the question: Who are we? Or Who am I? School leaders who leverage change in this level of Dilts's model first have greater success in transforming the organization's belief systems, capabilities, behaviors, and environment (Garmston, 2004). The approach school principals use in leading policy and practice implementation and organizational change in their schools, matters, especially for those who have been historically marginalized.

The abovementioned introduction and literature review provided a summary of comprehensive consideration of the literature relative to the object of study. The purpose of this study and research questions were designed to fill the gaps in the literature around outcomes related to school principals' use of and value for culturally proficient educational practice and application of the Essential Elements for transformative organizational change. While extensive literature exists regarding educational leadership, student achievement, and organizational change for school reform, further research is needed to investigate the cultural context in urban, suburban, and rural schools and the degree to which school principals value and use culturally competent practices to support change and mitigate the educational gaps that exist between and among the students in their schools.

Conceptual Framework

Cultural Proficiency is a mindset and inside-out approach of "the personal values and behaviors of individuals and the organization's policies and practices that provide opportunities for interactions among students, educators, and community members" (Lindsey et al., 2010, p. 12). The *Cultural Proficiency Framework* is comprised of four tools educational leaders can use for school improvement reform efforts aimed at improving student outcomes for all (Lindsey et al., 2019). Using the Reflection, Dialogue, and Action (RDA) Process, educators can apply the tools to educational practice and policy in efforts to overcome barriers and transform the system so all students thrive (Welborn et al., 2022). The four tools include: (1) *Overcoming the Barriers*; (2) *Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency*; (3) *Cultural Proficiency Continuum*; and (4) *Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency*.

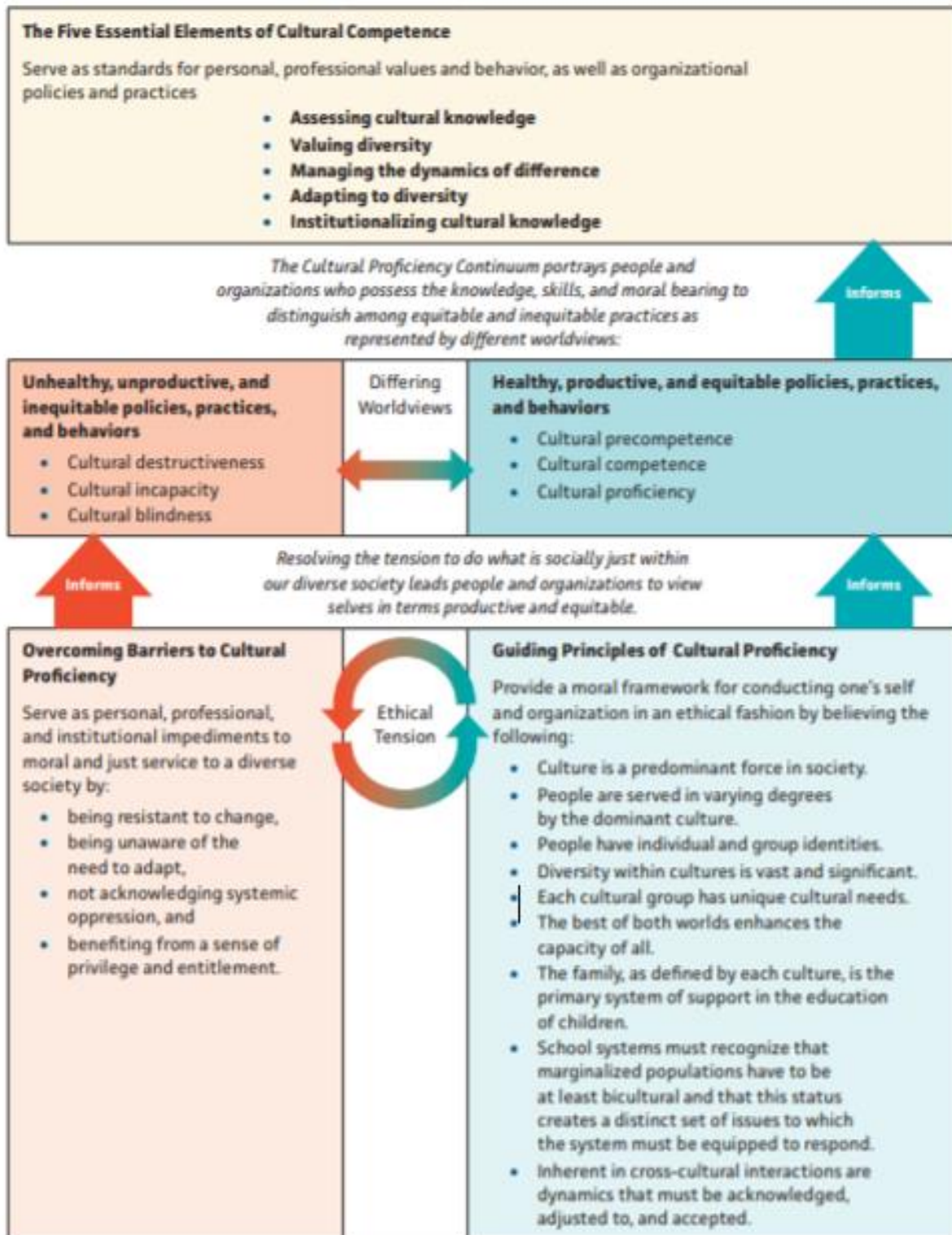
The framework is structured with two of the tools serving as the foundation of culturally proficient educational practice. The tool on the left, bottom side, as displayed in Figure 1, is the negative side. This tool, *Overcoming the Barriers to Cultural Proficiency*, serves as personal, professional, and institutional impediments to moral and just service to a diverse society. Teams work to overcome barriers of culturally proficient practices by understanding how those barriers inform all negative, unhealthy, and inequitable policies, practices, and behaviors in the system (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 20). Conversely, the right side of the framework is positive (see Figure 1). This tool, *the Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency*, provides a moral framework for conducting oneself and organization in an ethical fashion. Teams rely on the guiding principles to counter the barriers and to understand how those beliefs inform all positive healthy, and equitable policies, practices and behaviors, or the change towards increased equity (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 20).

In Figure 1, informative arrows move upward into *The Cultural Proficiency Continuum*. This tool includes six bulleted points, three negative and three positive, that allow educators to use self-reflection and dialogue to distinguish between equitable and inequitable policies and practices in their organizations. The *Continuum* guides educators in a systematic review of policies, practices, and behaviors that produce inequities and deny access to the education the system provides (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 20).

The final Tool of Cultural Proficiency, and arguably the most important for actualizing equitable outcomes, is the *Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency*. This tool guides a team's actions and planning for increasing equity, access, and inclusion by transforming policy and practice (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). Welborn et al., (2022) identified five purposes of applying the Essential Elements: (1) To learn about the change process; (2) To conduct a self-assessment for leading the work; (3) To support change through dialogue; (4) To develop a strategic action plan; and (5) To monitor progress toward equity goals (p. 167). *The Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency* are the conceptual focus of this study and were used as a *priori* themes in the analysis and discussion because of their relationship to the culturally competent practices identified in the data collection survey instrument.

To further explain, the first Essential Element of Cultural Proficiency is *assessing cultural knowledge*. Assessing cultural knowledge is about claiming your differences in cultural identity and behavior. Individuals and team assess culture knowledge by recognizing how their identity and behavior affects others; describing the complex nature of the school's culture and understanding how the culture of the school affects others (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). Once actions are taken to assess cultural knowledge, the focus then moves to *valuing diversity*. This Essential Element is about naming the differences. Individuals and teams who value diversity celebrate and encourage the presence of people from a variety of cultures in all activities. They recognize differences in cultural identities and behaviors are not inappropriate or wrong, but merely an asset, and they also accept that cultures do find some values and behaviors more important than others (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). *Managing the dynamics of difference* is another Essential Element in which individuals and teams learn effective ways to resolve conflict. To ensure praxis and the continuation toward change, once conflict is resolved, leaders apply another Essential Element, *adapting to diversity*. Actions for adapting to diversity relate to changes in the way things are done to acknowledge the complexity of diversity such as developing skills for intercultural communication and implementing cultural interventions to resolve conflicts. The final Essential Element, and one that is often overlooked or abandoned because of the sustainability required is *institutionalizing cultural knowledge*. This action

completes the change process in that the changes are driven in the systems of the organization. Cultural knowledge is incorporated into the organization and becomes the norm. Staff development is ongoing around cultural changes, effects, and conflicts, and *Cultural Proficiency* is embedded in all aspects of the organization (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022).



Source: Adapted from R. B. Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, and Terrell (2009, p. 60).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Given the rationale for this study and the conceptual framework of Cultural Proficiency, the purpose of this study was to investigate K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding the degree to which they use and value practices related to cultural competence in their roles. The following research questions were used as a guide to fulfill the objectives of this study:

1. What do K-12 school principals report regarding their value for using culturally proficient practices?
2. What do K-12 school principals report regarding their use of culturally proficient practices?
3. How do K-12 school principals' perceptions differ across locale?

Research Methodology

To answer the research questions, the researchers employed a quantitative descriptive study methodology using survey research. Descriptive research was best suited for this study to examine and try to make sense of school principals' beliefs regarding their value for and use of culturally proficient practices across urban, suburban, large-town, and rural locales in the United States. Data was collected from a sample of individuals that are presumed to represent the larger population using a questionnaire (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). An analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, with the aim to contribute to efforts to solve the research problem of disparities in student educational outcomes, through the interpretation of the data that were gathered (Leedy & Ormrod).

Population and Sample

The population for this study consisted of United States K-12 public school principals, whose names and email addresses were publicly available in September 2022 through the State Education Departments. The following table shows the states included in the study by Census Region of the United States.

Table 1

Regional States Included in the Study

WEST	NORTHEAST	MIDWEST	SOUTH
Alaska	Connecticut	Illinois	Alabama
Arizona	Maine	Indiana	Arkansas
California	Massachusetts	Iowa	Georgia
Idaho	New Jersey	Kansas	Louisiana
Nevada	Rhode Island	Michigan	Mississippi
New Mexico	Vermont	Missouri	
Oregon	Virginia	Nebraska	
Utah		Ohio	
Washington			

The questionnaire was sent to all K-12 public school principals listed in the State Departments' databases. A total of 383 individuals responded to the questionnaire with 323 indicating traditional public, 27 indicating they serve in a charter school, and 26 classifying their school as *other* than traditional public or charter. Out of the total population, 107 principals identified their school site as existing in an urban area (population equal to or greater than 250,000); 124 as suburban/large city (population 50,000 – 249,999); 40 as mid-size city/large town (population 49,999 – 25,000); and 112 as rural (population 1 - 24,999). As for the location in the United States, 37 respondents served as school principals in the West; 200 served as school principals in the Midwest; 37 served as school principals in the Northeast; and 79 served as school principals in the South Region.

Instrumentation

The researcher developed a three-part questionnaire titled, *Culturally Proficient Educational Practices in Public K-12 Schools across the United States* and utilized it to collect data in this study. Part I of the questionnaire included characteristics of the school administrator and site. Data were collected by role, classification of the school site (public, charter, or other), number of students enrolled, locale (NCES, 2007) of the school site (urban, suburban/large city, mid-size city/large town, rural), and state census region (West, Midwest, Northeast, South).

Part II of the questionnaire collected quantitative data regarding school principals' perceptions of their value for and use of specific culturally competent practices. This part of the questionnaire, including the culturally competent practices, was adapted from the *Cultural Competence Self-Assessment* (Lindsey et al, 2019). "The purpose of the original self-assessment is to provide a baseline of information and a starting point for conversation about becoming culturally proficient" (p. 345). The self-assessment included 31-items divided among the five Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency. The researcher narrowed the 31-item self-assessment down to 22-items to increase response rates, while maintaining the value of the culturally competent practices divided among the action-based Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency.

In addition, Part II included duplicative Likert scales, one for value and one for use of the culturally competent practices. Participants were asked to respond regarding the degree to which they value the practices using the following as the scale: (1) Not Important, (2) Slightly Important, (3) Important, (4) Very Important, (5) Extremely Important. Participants were also asked to respond regarding the degree to which they use the practices with the following as the scale: (1) Rarely, (2) Seldom, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often, (5) Usually.

Part III of the survey collected qualitative data regarding K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding the cultural competence in their schools. The first open-ended question asked, "From your perspective, what policies or practices exist in your school or district that led to equity, access, and inclusion so all students to thrive?" The second open-ended question allowed for participants to contribute any other information regarding culturally competent educational practices at their school sites. The data in Part III were not used for the purpose of this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection in descriptive research should be designed to collect quantitative data with the intent to describe a set of data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The data collection phase of this study

was conducted by distributing the *Culturally Proficient Educational Practices in Public K-12 Schools across the United States* questionnaire to the population of school principals, whose contact information was publicly available or retrievable through the State Departments of Education in September 2022 using Qualtrics. In this data collection process, both quantitative data and qualitative data were collected, but for the purpose of this study and focus of this article, only the quantitative data were analyzed. Data were stored electronically, organized, and protected. Leedy & Ormrod (2019) noted that written questionnaires can be distributed to many people, but questionnaires can have their drawbacks due to the lower return rate (p. 154). The lower return rate serves as a limitation of this study, meaning the findings are necessarily representative of all school principals in the United States. Nevertheless, the use of descriptive analysis procedures allows for seeking an answer to the research questions and larger problem of disparities in educational outcomes in public schools.

The analysis step of this descriptive research study warranted analyzing the quantitative data collected by questionnaire around points of central tendency, amount of variability in the data, and the extent to which variables are associated with one another. “Statistics related to central tendency and variability help us summarize our data” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 323). The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reporting the mean, standard deviation, and variance for the 22 Likert-scale statements on the questionnaire for both the perceived value of culturally competent practices and the reported use of culturally competent practices. Determining the standard deviation and variance allowed the researchers to determine the amount of variability in the data or the amount of dispersion in the data or deviation from the mean. To answer the third question in a descriptive manner, the researcher calculated the mean scores for all survey items associated with value, and then again for use, and compared the most and least valued and used practices clustered by the Essential Elements among the urban, suburban, large town, and rural locales, as shown in *Table 5*. The final step in completing this descriptive study was to interpret the data, answer the research questions, and draw conclusions.

Findings and Analysis

The findings of this descriptive study are organized by research question. *Table 2* highlights the most and least used culturally competent practices, the most and least important culturally competent practices, and then, provides a comparison of perceived use and value and culturally competent practices among the four locales: urban, suburban, large town, and rural. All findings are based upon the perceptions of school principals who participated in this study. It is important to note the data were not analyzed using inferential statistics due to the purpose of the study. The sample size was not large enough to warrant statistical differences between variables. The frequency of use, perception of importance, and comparisons in relation to the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency are presented in detail throughout the analysis. Educational leaders can utilize the concepts presented through these *a priori* themes to promote equity, access, and inclusion work in their schools, organizations, and institutions by utilizing the Cultural Proficiency Framework.

Table 2

Research Questions' Alignment to Findings Regarding Use and Value

Research Questions	Use and Value
(1) What do K-12 school principals report regarding their value for using culturally proficient practices?	Most Important
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting.</i> • <i>I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.</i> • <i>I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings.</i>
	Least Important
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.</i> • <i>I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.</i> • <i>I help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture.</i>
	Most Frequently Used
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.</i> • <i>I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings.</i> • <i>I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting.</i>
(2) What do K-12 school principals report regarding their use of culturally proficient practices?	Least Frequently Used
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture.</i> • <i>I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.</i> • <i>I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.</i>

Urban

(3) How do K-12 school principals' perceptions differ across locale?

Most Valued EE – Valuing Diversity
Least Valued EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge
Most Used EE – Valuing Diversity
Least Used EE – Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge

Suburban

Most Valued EE – Valuing Diversity
Least Valued EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge
Most Used EE – Valuing Diversity
Least Used EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge

Mid-Size City/Large Town

Most Valued EE – Valuing Diversity
Least Valued EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge
Most Used EE – Valuing Diversity
Least Used EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge

Rural

Most Valued EE – Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge
Least Valued EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge
Most Used EE – Adapting to Diversity
Least Used EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge

EE – Essential Element

Research Question 1

The first research question explored K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding their value for using culturally proficient practices. Table 3 includes the descriptive statistical analysis of the data collected from 383 school principals who responded to the questionnaire. The mean was derived from the average using the following scale: (1) Not Important, (2) Slightly Important, (3) Important, (4) Very Important, (5) Extremely Important. The standard deviation and variance values are used to indicate the variability in school principals' beliefs regarding the importance of these practices in their roles.

Table 3

School Principals' Value for Using Culturally Competent Practices (N = 383)

Questionnaire Prompt	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
<i>I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.</i>	3.74	1.18	1.40
<i>I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.</i>	3.85	1.15	1.33
<i>I recognize when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well.</i>	4.22	0.91	0.82

<i>I seek to learn about the cultures of my organization's clients.</i>	4.39	0.82	0.68
<i>I anticipate how my organization's clients and employees will interact with, conflict with, and enhance one another.</i>	4.29	0.81	0.66
<i>I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting.</i>	4.65	0.67	0.44
<i>I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.</i>	4.64	0.72	0.52
<i>I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings.</i>	4.59	0.68	0.46
<i>I work to develop a learning community with the clients (internal and external) I serve.</i>	4.15	0.67	0.45
<i>I teach the cultural expectations of my organization or department to those who are new or who may be unfamiliar with the organization's culture.</i>	4.22	0.89	0.80
<i>I proactively seek to interact with people whose backgrounds are different from mine.</i>	4.22	0.86	0.73
<i>I recognize that conflict is a normal part of life.</i>	4.51	0.76	0.58
<i>I work to develop skills to manage conflict in productive ways.</i>	4.54	0.66	0.44
<i>I help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture.</i>	4.00	0.92	0.85
<i>I check myself to see if an assumption I am making about a person is based upon facts or upon stereotypes about a group.</i>	4.24	0.96	0.92
<i>I accept that the more diverse our group becomes, the more we will change and grow.</i>	4.44	0.79	0.63
<i>I am committed to the continuous learning that is necessary to deal with the issues caused by differences.</i>	4.53	0.74	0.55
<i>I know how to learn about people and cultures unfamiliar to me without giving offense.</i>	4.25	0.81	0.66
<i>I speak up if I notice that a policy or practice unintentionally discriminates against or causes an unnecessary hardship for a particular group in my organization's community.</i>	4.45	0.72	0.53
<i>I take advantage of teachable moments to share cultural knowledge or to learn from my colleagues.</i>	4.37	0.79	0.63
<i>I advocate for the marginalized in my school/district among my colleagues, the students, and their communities.</i>	4.51	0.74	0.55
<i>I seek to create opportunities for my colleagues, managers, clients, and the communities we serve to learn about one another.</i>	4.26	0.86	0.74

The culturally competent practice school principals reported as the most important included *I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting*. This practice had a mean of 4.65, a standard deviation of 0.67, and a variance of 0.44, which means school principals believe this practice is between very important and extremely important, and the variability in scores shows most values are fairly consistent and not widely dispersed from the mean. Approximately 91% of respondents indicated this practice is very important or extremely important in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of culturally competent practice: *Valuing Diversity*.

The second most important culturally competent practice school principals reported was *I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity*. This practice had a mean of 4.64, a standard deviation of 0.72, and a variance of 0.52, which means school principals believe this practice is between very important and extremely important, and the variability in scores shows most values are fairly consistent and not widely dispersed from the mean. Approximately 92% of respondents indicated this practice is very important or extremely important in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of culturally competent practice: *Valuing Diversity*.

The third most important culturally competent practice school principals reported was *I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings*. This practice had a mean of 4.59, a standard deviation of 0.68, and a variance of 0.46, which means school principals believe this practice is between very important and extremely important, and the variability in scores shows most values are fairly consistent and not widely dispersed from the mean. Approximately 91% of respondents indicated this practice is very important or extremely important in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of culturally competent practice: *Valuing Diversity*.

Conversely, the culturally competent practice school principals reported as the least important included *I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader*. This practice had a mean of 3.74, a standard deviation of 1.18, and a variance of 1.40, which means school principals believe this practice is important, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 7% of respondents indicated this practice is not important; 8% indicated slightly important; 24% important; 29% very important; and 33% of respondents believe this practice to be extremely important in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of culturally competent practice: *Assessing Cultural Knowledge*.

The culturally competent practice school principals reported as the second least important included *I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting*. This practice had a mean of 3.85, a standard deviation of 1.15, and a variance of 1.33, which means school principals believe this practice is important, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 6% of respondents indicated this practice is not important; 7% indicated slightly important; 19% important; 32% very important; and 36% of respondents believe this practice to be extremely important in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of culturally competent practice: *Assessing Cultural Knowledge*.

The third to last important culturally competent practice school principals reported included *I help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture*. This practice had a mean of 4.00, a standard deviation of 0.92, and a variance of 0.85, which means school principals believe this

practice is very important, however, the variability in scores shows a small dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 1% of respondents indicated this practice is not important; 5% indicated slightly important; 18% important; 42% very important; and 33% of respondents believe this practice to be extremely important in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of culturally competent practice: *Managing the Dynamics of Difference*. Figure 2 shows the mean score for school principals' value for culturally proficient practices for each Essential Element. Overall, practices associated with *valuing diversity* had the highest mean score, while those associated with *assessing cultural knowledge* were rated lowest regarding school principals' value.

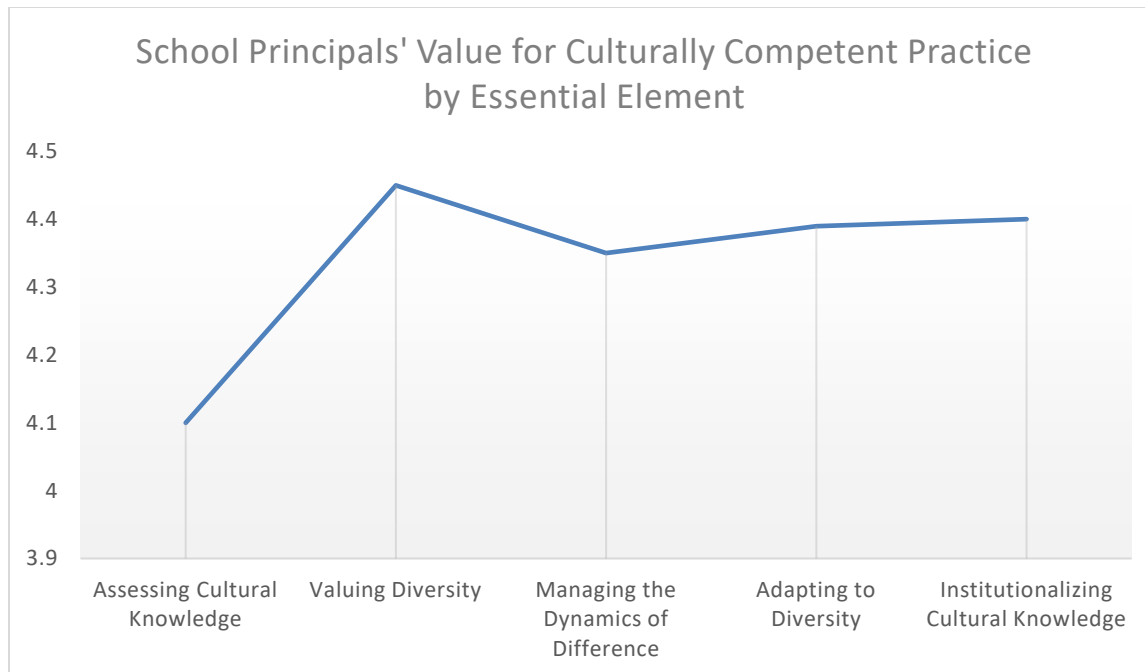


Figure 2. School Principals' Value for Culturally Competent practice by Essential Element. The line represents the reported mean score for school principals' value for practices for each Essential Element.

Research Question 2

The second research question explored K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding their use of culturally proficient practices. Table 4 includes the descriptive statistical analysis of the data collected from 383 school principals who responded to the survey. The mean was derived from the average using the following scale: (1) Rarely, (2) Seldom, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often, (5) Usually.

Table 4

School Principals' Use of Culturally Competent Practices (N = 383)

Questionnaire Prompt	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
<i>I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.</i>	3.64	1.14	1.29
<i>I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.</i>	3.74	1.15	1.32
<i>I recognize when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well.</i>	3.86	0.95	0.91
<i>I seek to learn about the cultures of my organization's clients.</i>	4.12	0.90	0.81
<i>I anticipate how my organization's clients and employees will interact with, conflict with, and enhance one another.</i>	4.00	0.92	0.84
<i>I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting.</i>	4.41	0.86	0.74
<i>I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.</i>	4.50	0.78	0.61
<i>I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings.</i>	4.41	0.75	0.56
<i>I work to develop a learning community with the clients (internal and external) I serve.</i>	4.29	0.77	0.59
<i>I teach the cultural expectations of my organization or department to those who are new or who may be unfamiliar with the organization's culture.</i>	3.84	0.98	0.96
<i>I proactively seek to interact with people whose backgrounds are different from mine.</i>	3.91	0.96	0.93
<i>I recognize that conflict is a normal part of life.</i>	4.31	0.80	0.64
<i>I work to develop skills to manage conflict in productive ways.</i>	4.37	0.78	0.61
<i>I help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture.</i>	3.53	1.11	1.23
<i>I check myself to see if an assumption I am making about a person is based upon facts or upon stereotypes about a group.</i>	3.93	1.04	1.07
<i>I accept that the more diverse our group becomes, the more we will change and grow.</i>	4.20	0.92	0.85
<i>I am committed to the continuous learning that is necessary to deal with the issues caused by differences.</i>	4.29	0.87	0.76
<i>I know how to learn about people and cultures unfamiliar to me without giving offense.</i>	3.98	0.86	0.73
<i>I speak up if I notice that a policy or practice unintentionally discriminates against or causes an unnecessary hardship for a particular group in my</i>	4.06	0.97	0.95

<i>organization's community.</i>			
<i>I take advantage of teachable moments to share cultural knowledge or to learn from my colleagues.</i>	4.04	0.92	0.84
<i>I advocate for the marginalized in my school/district among my colleagues, the students, and their communities.</i>	4.30	0.84	0.70
<i>I seek to create opportunities for my colleagues, managers, clients, and the communities we serve to learn about one another.</i>	3.95	0.97	0.94

The culturally competent practice school principals reported they use the most included *I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity*. This practice had a mean of 4.50, a standard deviation of 0.78, and a variance of 0.61, which means school principals reported the frequency to which they use this practice is often, and the variability in scores shows most values are fairly consistent and not widely dispersed from the mean. Approximately 90% of respondents indicated they use this practice often or usually in their roles as school principals. This practice of recognizing that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Valuing Diversity.

The culturally competent practice school principals reported as using second most frequently was *I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings*. This practice had a mean of 4.41, a standard deviation of 0.75, and a variance of 0.56, which means rural school principals reported they use this practice often, and the variability in scores shows most values are fairly consistent and not widely dispersed from the mean. Approximately 89% of respondents indicated they use this practice often or usually in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of culturally competent practice: *Valuing Diversity*.

The third culturally competent practice school principals reported they use most frequently in their roles was *I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting*. This practice had a mean of 4.41, a standard deviation of 0.86, and a variance of 0.74, which means rural school principals reported they use this practice often, and the variability in scores shows most values are fairly consistent and not widely dispersed from the mean. Approximately 87% of respondents indicated they use this practice often or usually in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of culturally competent practice: *Valuing Diversity*.

Conversely, the culturally competent practice school principals reported they use the least in their roles was *I help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture*. This practice had a mean of 3.53, a standard deviation of 1.11, and a variance of 1.23, which means school principals use this practice sometimes or often, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 4% of respondents indicated they rarely use this practice; 14% reported they seldom use this practice; 41% sometimes; 29% often; and 23% of respondents reported they use this practice usually in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of culturally competent practice: *Managing the Dynamics of Difference*.

The culturally competent practice school principals reported they use the second least was *I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader*. This practice had a mean of 3.64, a standard deviation of 1.14, and a variance of 1.29, which means school

principals use this practice between sometimes and often, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 7% of respondents indicated they rarely use this practice; 8% reported they seldom use this practice; 23% sometimes; 38% often; and 24% of respondents reported they use this practice usually in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of culturally competent practice: *Assessing Cultural Knowledge*.

The third lowest frequently used culturally competent practice school principals reported included *I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting*. This practice had a mean of 3.74, a standard deviation of 1.15, and a variance of 1.32, which means school principals' use this practice between sometimes and often. The variability in scores shows less dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 6% of respondents indicated they rarely use this practice; 9% reported they seldom use this practice; 19% sometimes; 37% often; and 29% of respondents reported they use this practice usually in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of culturally competent practice: *Assessing Cultural Knowledge*. Figure 3 shows the mean score for school principals' use of culturally proficient practices for each Essential Element. Overall, practices associated with *valuing diversity* had the highest mean score, while those associated with *assessing cultural knowledge* were rated lowest regarding school principals' value.

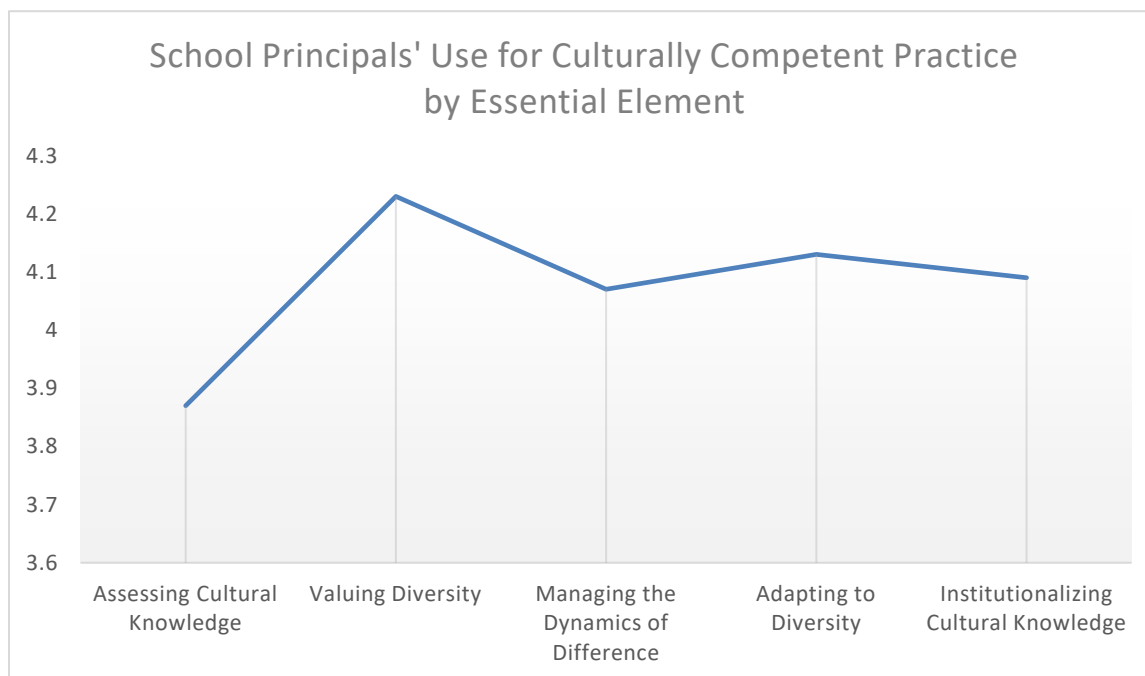


Figure 3. School Principals' Value for Culturally Competent Practice by Essential Element. The line represents the reported mean score for school principals' use of practices for each Essential Element.

Research Question 3

The third research question was used to investigate how K-12 school principals' perceptions of value and use of culturally competent practices differ across the urban, suburban, large town, and

rural locales. The means were calculated and analyzed for each Essential Element of Cultural Proficiency for use and value of culturally competent practices. Table 5 includes the means of the value and use for all principals, urban principals, suburban principals, large town principals, and rural principals for each Essential Element. Cells shaded indicate a mean score less than 4 for value and less than 4 for use.

Table 5

Use and Value Mean Scores by Essential Elements Construct and Locale

	Assessing Cultural Knowledge	Valuing Diversity	Managing the Dynamics of Difference	Adapting to Diversity	Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge
All Value	4.10	4.45	4.35	4.39	4.40
All Use	3.87	4.23	4.07	4.13	4.09
Urban Value	4.27	4.65	4.54	4.56	4.51
Urban Use	4.26	4.43	4.28	4.30	4.24
Suburban Value	4.13	4.43	4.29	4.40	4.36
Suburban Use	3.80	4.20	3.97	4.11	4.04
Large Town Value	4.34	4.67	4.54	4.55	4.63
Large Town Use	4.13	4.45	4.24	4.38	4.29
Rural Value	3.71	4.20	4.15	4.16	4.25
Rural Use	3.51	4.00	3.93	4.12	3.94

The culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Valuing Diversity* were valued the most by all principals with a mean of 4.45, urban principals with a mean of 4.65, suburban principals with a mean of 4.43, and large town principals with a mean of 4.67. These mean scores warrant the findings that overall, public, K-12 school principals value practices associated with *Valuing Diversity* the most. The mean scores 4.43 – 4.67 indicate they believe those practices are somewhere between very important and extremely important in their roles as school leaders. Examples of these practices include:

- I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting.
- I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.
- I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings.
- I work to develop a learning community with the clients I serve.
- I teach the cultural expectations of my organization or department to those who are new or who may be unfamiliar with the organization's culture.
- I proactively seek to interact with people whose backgrounds are different from mine.

Conversely, rural school principals' value for culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge* the most with a mean of 4.25, and *Valuing Diversity* a close second with a mean of 4.20.

The culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Assessing Cultural Knowledge* were valued the least by all principals with a mean of 3.87, urban principals with a mean of 4.26, suburban principals with a mean of 3.80, and large town principals with a mean of 4.15, and rural principals with a mean of 3.51. These mean scores warrant the findings

that overall, public, K-12 school principals value practices associated with *Assessing Cultural Knowledge* the least. The mean scores 3.51 – 4.26 indicate they believe those practices are somewhere between important and very important in their roles as school leaders; however, they believe the practices associated with *Assessing Cultural Knowledge* are less important than the practices associated with the other four Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency. Examples of these practices include:

- I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.
- I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.
- I recognize when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well.
- I see to learn about the cultures of my organization's clients.
- I anticipate how my organization's clients and employees will interact with, conflict with, and enhance one another.

The culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Valuing Diversity* were also rated as being used the most by all principals with a mean of 4.23, urban principals with a mean of 4.65, suburban principals with a mean of 4.43, and large town principals with a mean of 4.20. These mean scores warrant the findings that overall, public, K-12 school principals use practices associated with *Valuing Diversity* the most. The mean scores 4.23 – 4.65 indicate they believe they use those practices somewhere often and usually in their roles as school leaders. Conversely, rural school principals reported they use culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Adapting to Diversity* the most with a mean of 4.12, with *Valuing Diversity* a close second with a mean of 4.00.

The culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Assessing Cultural Knowledge* were also rated as being used the least by all principals with a mean of 3.87, suburban principals with a mean of 3.80, and large town principals with a mean of 4.13, and rural principals with a mean of 3.51. These mean scores warrant the findings that overall, public, K-12 school principals use practices associated with *Assessing Cultural Knowledge* the least. The mean scores 3.51 – 4.13 indicate they believe they use those practices somewhere sometimes and usually in their roles as school leaders. On the other hand, urban school principals reported they use culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge* the least with a mean of 4.12, with *Assessing Cultural Knowledge* a close second with a mean of 4.26.

Figure 4 includes a bar graph that compares the mean scores of school principals' perceptions regarding their value for culturally competent practices, separated by the urban, suburban, large town, and rural locales. Figure 5 includes a bar graph that compares the mean scores of school principals' perceptions regarding their use of culturally competent practices, separated by the urban, suburban, large town, and rural locales.

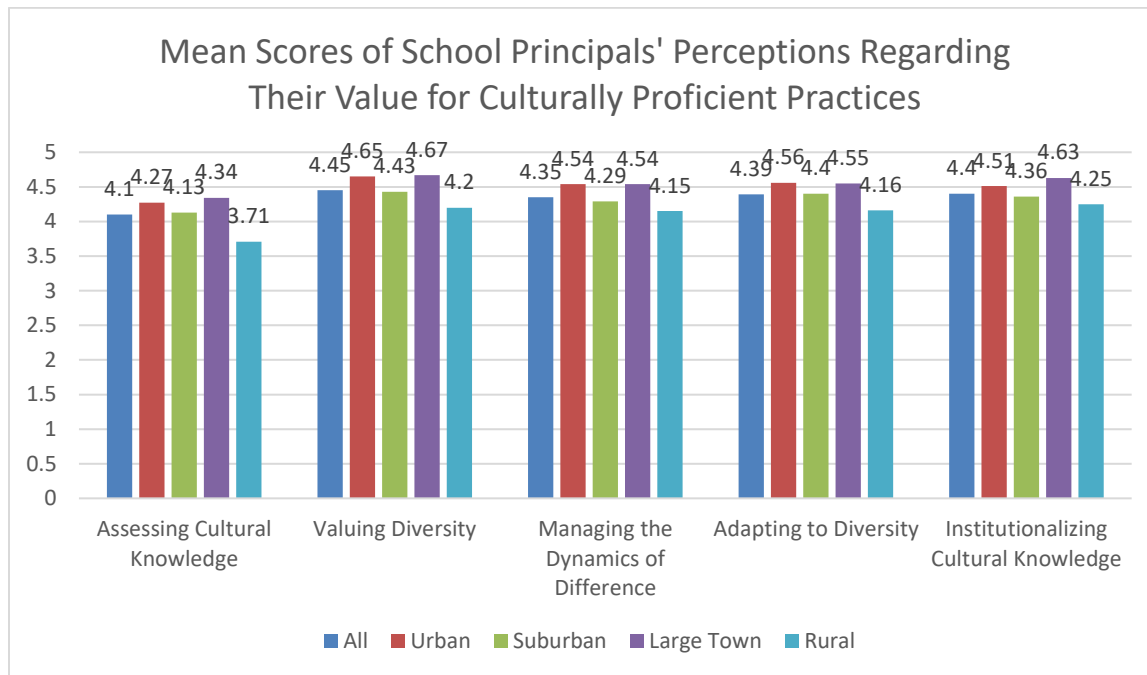


Figure 4. Mean Scores of School Principals’ Perceptions Regarding Their Value for Culturally Competent Practice by Essential Element and Locale. The bars represent the reported mean score for school principals’ value of practices for each Essential Element, compared by locale.

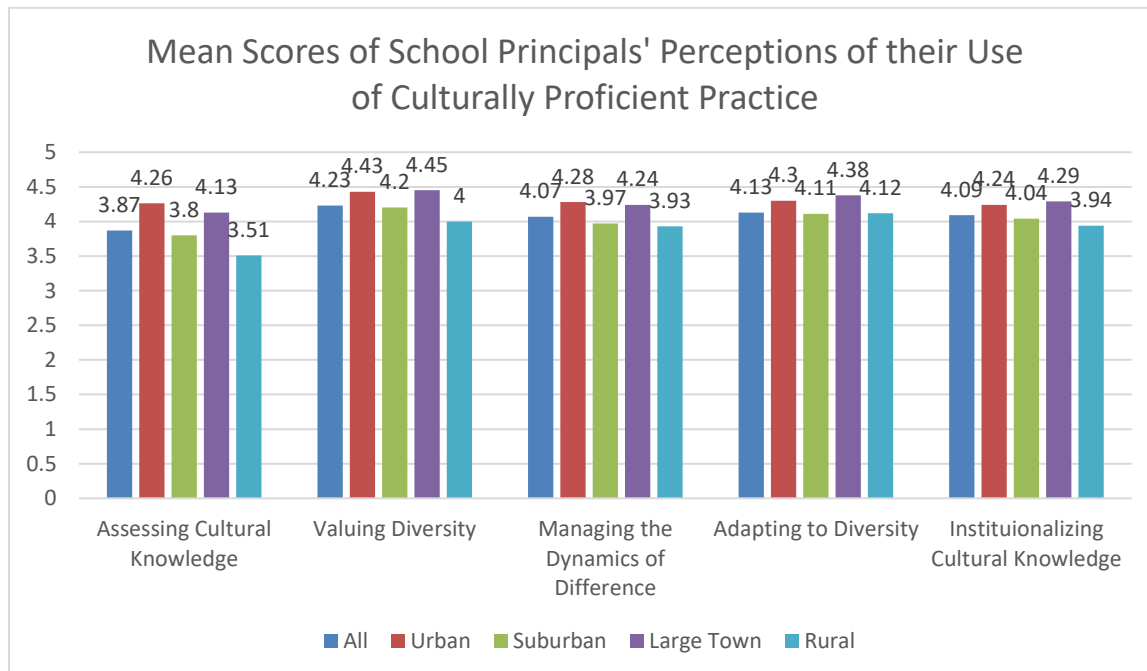


Figure 5. Mean Scores of School Principals’ Perceptions Regarding Their Use for Culturally Competent Practice by Essential Element and Locale. The bars represent the reported mean score for school principals’ use of practices for each Essential Element, compared by locale.

Conclusions

The findings of this study are important to the field of education, both for scholars and practitioners leading schools, because regardless of the locale of school and demographics of student populations in those schools, cultural diversity exists and disparities in opportunity, access, and educational gaps continued to be evidenced by outcome data. School leaders are called to focus on school reform and continuous improvement efforts annually by managing the dynamics of increasing diversity at their sites, mitigating inequitable or unfair policies and practices in our educational systems, and efficiently using a lack of resources to accomplish these tasks. Addressing barriers in schools does vary across urban, suburban, and rural contexts, however the Barriers of Cultural Proficiency, such as systems of oppression, a sense of privilege and entitlement, an unawareness of the need to adapt, and resistance to change inform policies, practices, and behaviors that ultimately produce the same results. Transformative school change is necessary. Simply stated by W. Edwards Deming (n.d.), “every school system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.” Praxis is the key to transforming urban, suburban, and rural school sites so that those students who are on the lower end of educational outcomes year after year rise. This change requires intentional, systematic action. By embracing the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency, action verbs for change, school leaders can transform organizations by building more inclusive and equitable educational environments where each and every student can realize their potential and thrive.

This study investigated (1) the school principal’s value of culturally proficient practices; (2) the school principal’s use of culturally proficient practices; and (3) the difference in school principals’ perceptions across urban, suburban, large-town, and rural locales across the United States. The analysis of data from the survey provided findings that can be insightful to educational leaders regarding the critical issue in educational practice of school improvement for equitable outcomes. The explanations of the findings, which are related to the use and value ratings of culturally competent practices are grounded in the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency. The Essential Elements include *Assessing Cultural Knowledge*; *Valuing Diversity*; *Managing the Dynamics of Difference*; *Adapting to Diversity*; and *Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge* (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). The following discussion includes the interpretations of the findings and conclusions from the data sets. These explanations are discussed in four conclusions corresponding to the research study’s conceptual framework: (1) School Principals’ Value for Diversity; (2) The Need for School Principals to Assess Cultural Knowledge; and (3) A Paradigm Shift to Praxis: Theory to Real Change.

School Principals’ Value for Diversity

Valuing diversity in our schools is about naming the differences that exist between and among all students, their families, staff, and the community, and celebrating and encouraging the presence of people of the varied cultural backgrounds in all activities (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). School principals, who value diversity genuinely accept that each person is uniquely human and their cultural behaviors are informed by the intersectionality of their identities such as race/ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, language, and ability. Because of each person’s distinctive experiences, each culture finds some values and behaviors more important than others. A leader who “walks the walk” of valuing diversity makes decisions that account for the embraced assets diversity filtrates into the school community, rather than

trying to create change aimed at attacking inappropriate responses to the environment from the cultural difference (Lindsey et al., 2019). Therefore, school principals demonstrate their commitment to valuing the diversity among their staff, students, and their families. They lead by modeling behaviors informed by respect and dignity, acknowledge and celebrate differences, foster trust, nurture relationships, and build an inclusive culture and climate where all students thrive because they know they are valued and belong to the school community.

This conclusion is drawn from the integration of the data in the study regarding use and value of culturally competent practices. The school principals overall believe that the practices associated with *valuing diversity* are most important in their roles. The mean score of 4.45 demonstrates a belief in value between *very important* and *extremely important*, and a mean score of 4.23 demonstrates the reported use of practices associated with *valuing diversity* as often. In examining the value for diversity as being the highest, yet the need for assessing cultural knowledge as the lowest, it is important to consider the degree to which these results, as well as the day-to-day actions of school principals, are based on accountability, mandates, and to a high degree, social acceptance versus reflection, dialogue, and continuous improvement through actions that seek to institutionalize cultural knowledge. Benjamin (2010) wrote,

The notion of ‘valuing diversity’ is attractive. It offers the possibility of reconceptualizing human difference as something to be celebrated in a plural society, and it appears to present a departure from the categorical thinking that has resulted in the separation and hierarchization of particular groups. It suggests that everyone is different, everyone is unique, and everyone is valuable for who they are. (p. 309)

This quote supports the conclusion that the mean scores for value and use of culturally competent practices were highly favorable, ranging from 3.51 to 4.67. One reason for this is genuine care school leaders have for students. Research supports the idea that many educators go into the field because they love children and want to make a difference in their lives. Fullan (2001) emphasized effective leaders operating with moral purpose demonstrate a “making-a-difference” sense of purpose. Essentially, they care; they build relationships, and they perceive they highly value their students, regardless of difference.

Expanding on the moral imperative, relationships, and care, Smylie et al., (2016) wrote, “From years of studying school leadership and reform, working with practicing educators, and participating in education policy development, we have come to conclude that caring lies at the heart of effective schooling and good school leadership” (p. 1). In their conceptualization of caring leadership, Smylie et al., (2016) noted, “Caring is a quality of relationship, the matter, manner, and motivation of personal and professional action and interaction” (p.6). School principals who value diversity intentionally develop, retain, and continuously reflect to improve a quality of relationship for a particular matter, in a particular manner, and with motivation to build an inclusive school community where all belong.

Another reason for the highly favorable scores may be because the “attractive” reporting by self is socially desirable. Phillips & Clancy (1972) defined social desirability bias as “the tendency of people to deny socially undesirable traits or qualities and to admit to socially desirable ones” (p.923). Brenner & DeLamater (2016) found that identity is a cause of measurement bias. They denoted, “Survey respondents overreport their activity to bring into congruence the ideal self, which includes many such internalized norms, and the survey report of behavior; in essence, bringing prominence and salience into consonance” (p. 12). The

prominence and salience of school leaders may in fact have a bearing on their report of the degree to which they value diversity and use practices that demonstrate that value for diversity.

The Need for School Principals to Assess Cultural Knowledge

Assessing our cultural knowledge requires starting with recognizing how our own culture and our understanding of it influences and impacts students' and families' educational experience. This critical analysis will have a profound impact on those who we consider to be different than us or that belong to the less dominant or marginalized demographic groups. This begins with being able to describe our own culture and recognize how it can impact the cultural and social norms and values of our schools and districts, as well as the individual stakeholders, namely, students in the organization. This important foundational action is an important step to continuous improvement toward creating transformative change that will, through our *actions*, demonstrate how we value and adapt to diversity (Lindsey et al, 2019; Shields, 2018).

Review of the data as to how school principals *Value Diversity* (highest use and value) and the need for school principals to *Assess Cultural Knowledge* (lowest use and value), it is imperative we consider the irony of this leadership challenge, or in our opinion, dilemma. A fundamental precept of Cultural Proficiency is that it is an “inside-out” approach that focuses first on those who are insiders to the school by encouraging them to reflect on their own individual understandings and values. This is why it is so important that education leaders begin with their own understanding of culture and the role it plays in developing an organizational culture that can serve all students (Lindsey et al., 2019).

The conclusion drawn from the data and our experiences is that these perspectives are based more on accountability mandates, and to a high degree, what is professionally and socially expedient and acceptable versus Freire's (1970) notion of *conscientization*, which is a critical approach to *transformative* leadership comprised of a four-action step process: critical awareness, critical reflection, critical analysis, and critical action. Action that more closely aligns with activism to recognize the need for deep and equitable change (Shields, 2018). This reflection will allow for educators to deconstruct knowledge frameworks (e.g., meritocracy and neoliberal ideologies and colorblind discourse) that can perpetuate cultural blind spots, to unconscious bias, prejudice, and deficit thinking of those who differ from the dominant culture (Briscoe, 2012, Desai, 2010, Flores, 2020; Hursh, 2007; & Mijs, 2016).

The conceptual framework for culturally proficient educational practice requires that educators constantly, and throughout this *transformative* process of continuous improvement, invoke and evoke a process comprised of reflection, dialogue, and action (RDA) that implements the five essential elements of cultural competence (Welborn et al., 2022). These five essential elements serve as standards for personal and professional values and behaviors, as well as organizational policies and practices, that begin with and continuously require that we recognize the importance of assessing cultural knowledge to improve, create, and maintain opportunities to demonstrate how we as individuals and as an organization both value and adapt to diversity.

As such, our analysis of these initial results, based on our professional knowledge of the Cultural Proficiency Framework combined with our practitioner's experience as K-12 teachers, site, and district administrators, are that the principals who participated in this study, may have answered more based on career preservation, what is deemed professionally and socially acceptable, and through a lens of compliance towards maintaining the status quo. As compared to the inverse of a process of continuous improvement through self-reflection, dialogue, and

praxis or action with the goal of challenging existing educational systems for the purpose of closing and eliminating, achievement, opportunity, and equity gaps.

Analysis of these results indicate respondent's perspectives and depth of knowledge of culture and diversity may be surface level relegated to basic foundational knowledge as it pertains to race and ethnicity and cultural characteristics and aspects such as traditions, heroes, holidays, and food. What is required is a deeper understanding of intersectionality that includes socio-economic status, class, language, gender and gender identity, and special needs that are necessary to providing a quality education so that all students can reach their full potential (Franco, Ott, & Robles, 2011).

Today's student generation, consisting of a rapidly changing multi-racial student demographic that requires transformative educational leaders with the capacity to recognize the need to lead praxis for equity and access. As Shields (2018) stated, "The leader, therefore, must also be engaged with the wider society in order to understand how best to educate all children" (p. 20). This requires an awareness by leaders to challenge one's own biases, both conscious and unconscious, cultural blind spots, stereotypes, and prejudices that can negatively influence or limit our perspectives of diversity, inclusion, and belonging. This "inside-out" or internal awareness strengthened by our understanding of foundational leadership concepts, and the Conceptual Framework for Culturally Proficient Practices, will help develop a new generation of leaders. Leaders that will lean into challenging individual beliefs and values, existing knowledge frameworks, perspectives, and ideologies that have not served all students. This call to action does not have to wait for state, county, or district initiatives. Educational leaders just need to build within themselves the capacity to reflect and act. As Freire (2015) stated,

Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of *praxis*: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. (p. 51)

To this point, our nation's public schools desperately need a paradigm shift toward transformative leaders with knowledge frameworks for equity and social justice, who are capable of leading institutional and organizational change in a way that knows how to assess culture, value diversity, manage the dynamics of difference, adapt to diversity, and institutionalize cultural knowledge.

A Paradigm Shift to Praxis: Theory to Real Change

Today's educational leaders needs to adopt a *Freireian* sense of praxis for social justice to effectively address dynamic institutional change for an educational landscape that no longer resembles the student generational demographic for whom it was originally created. Shields (2018) stated, "It is not an exaggeration to suggest that educational leaders are complicit (often unintentionally) in the perpetuation of today's educational shortcomings" (p. 5). The Conceptual framework for Culturally Proficient Educational Practice is an important framework for developing transformative leaders with the capacity to create praxis for equity and access. This requires an evolution of leadership from transformational to transformative. Presently, the term often used in describing our current leadership focus is described as *Transformational* leadership. It is our assertion that today's educational leaders need to move from transformational to transformative leadership to guide organizational change and educational

reform. Hewitt et al. (2014) stated, “Transformational leadership, in other words, involves reforming or improving the status quo while ultimately maintaining it and reproducing it” (p. 228). Research on the combined dynamics of leadership and cultural competence as praxis for equity could finally be the right leadership approach to finally close achievement, opportunity, and equity gaps.

This leadership approach directly answers the emphasis on accountability that continues to lead the discussion surrounding school improvement. Allen et al. (2015) proclaimed “that leadership is an important area of focus for researchers, especially given the current emphasis on school accountability” (p. 3). Educational leaders in charge of policy and practice for today’s schools face distinct challenges relative to issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Shields (2010) pointed out that today’s leadership needs to evolve to where it synchronizes and establishes a correlation between the educational organization and wider society.

Workman & Cleveland-Innes (2012) asserted that education’s outdated legacy models and structures are responsible for preventing its own transformation into contemporary learning models due to a lack of visionary leadership capable of creating transformative change. It has been our experience that learning is reciprocal. That as educators and teachers we tend to teach how we were taught, and as administrators, we tend to lead based on both these teaching experiences and our observations of other school leaders. This is how institutional ideologies of the dominant culture tend to unconsciously influence and shape our educational cultural perspectives which may not align with those of the existing generation of students. This creates what we call a “closed loop” leadership approach and perspective to education that not only maintains but perpetuates a flawed institutional status quo.

We are often reminded; we have a broken public education system. We tend to disagree with this statement and instead suggest that our present-day public education system is actually giving us the outcomes it was designed to deliver. This is why even a focus on being data-driven has not significantly closed existing achievement, opportunity, and equity gaps. Our assertion is that our public schools need culturally competent educators that recognize and understand how to assess culture, value diversity, manage the dynamics of difference, adapt to diversity, and institutionalize cultural knowledge. The Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency are key. We need educational leaders who recognize the importance of a paradigm shift from being school-centric to student and school-community centric. Transformative leaders will be able to lead praxis towards creating an organizational culture that values diversity, inclusiveness, equity, and access. This leadership approach is what Furman (2012) referred to as Social Justice leadership *as praxis* which leads to what Shields (2018) described as Transformative leadership where “the leader, therefore must also be engaged with the wider society in order to understand how best to educate all children” (p. 20). Transformative leaders are culturally proficient educators drawn naturally to praxis across personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological dimensions (Furman, 2012). The future of high-quality, public-school education for *all* students will depend on transformative leaders who can lead praxis for change towards a global society in a rapidly changing and diverse world.

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