

St. John Fisher University

Fisher Digital Publications

Education Doctoral

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

5-2023

An Examination of Culturally Responsive Leadership for Administrators in Urban Schools

Corey T. Hepburn

St. John Fisher University, chepburn27@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/education_etd



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hepburn, Corey T., "An Examination of Culturally Responsive Leadership for Administrators in Urban Schools" (2023). *Education Doctoral*. Paper 551.

Please note that the Recommended Citation provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit <http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations>.

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/education_etd/551 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at . For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjf.edu.

An Examination of Culturally Responsive Leadership for Administrators in Urban Schools

Abstract

This qualitative study examined the perspectives of school administrators in an urban setting that related to culturally responsive leadership. The study collected data from semi-structured interviews with eight school administrators. Using culturally proficient leadership theory, the study gathered data on leadership strategies, the nature of the culturally responsive training, and perceptions regarding such training.

Three key findings emerged: culturally responsive leaders in urban schools are intentional about being culturally responsive; training and support for leaders in urban schools is not systematic or automatic, urban school leaders seek out their own ways to gain skills and knowledge; and even if urban school leaders are intentional in their actions, the system is not designed to promote intentionality. The findings from this study led to recommendations for future research and applications for practice including: school leaders need to be intentional in their leadership behaviors and school district superintendents and school boards should require culturally proficient leadership training for all leaders.

The study can benefit school leaders, including principals, assistant principals, and superintendents who are implementing culturally responsive practices and need more information on how these practices relate to student connectedness and belonging in an urban school setting.

Document Type

Dissertation

Degree Name

Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department

Executive Leadership

First Supervisor

Marie Cianca, EdD

Subject Categories

Education

An Examination of Culturally Responsive Leadership for Administrators in Urban Schools

By

Corey T. Hepburn

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
EdD in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Marie Cianca, EdD

Committee Member

Cheryl McGruder Holloway, EdD

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher University

May 2023

Copyright by
Corey T. Hepburn
2023

Dedication

My dissertation journey included many late nights and early mornings filled with reading, writing, reflection, and editing. The process required individual commitment, dedication, and resilience. However, even with all that I was required to do, I realize that I did not do it alone. First, I thank my wife, Anastacia, and our children, Chloe, Sheldon, and Corey, Jr., who sacrificed as I journeyed toward the successful completion of my dissertation. Second, I thank the dissertation committee, Dr. Cianca and Dr. Holloway, who set high expectations and provided a high level of support that guided me forward. At times, they saw what I could not see and explained their perspective in ways I understood.

I am grateful for the early teachings I received from my parents, Fredrick and Adrienne Hepburn. They instilled the importance of putting God first and aggressively seeking the very best in life. They emphasized the Christian principle that faith without the work is dead. My brothers and sisters, Ricky, April, Charles, Sheldon, and Bre'onn, thank you for raising the bar and celebrating me as the first doctor in the Hepburn family. Who is next?

Additionally, I am thankful for the professors, guest speakers, presenters, and cohort members who made my doctoral journey special. I would like to thank the principals and assistant principals who participated in this study. Thank you for making the time in your busy schedules to help move research ahead in the field of education.

Lastly, I value the difficult times I encountered along this journey. The challenges reinforced the reality that hardship does not remove responsibility and in the face of blood,

sweat, tears, and heartache, I had to meet the deadlines. This chapter of my life now concludes,
and the next one begins!

Biographical Sketch

Corey Hepburn is a culturally proficient leader who has positively transformed K–12 schools in urban and suburban districts. He maintains a commitment to applying his lived experiences and training to ensure that all learners have access to every opportunity to be both academically successful and social emotionally successful.

With more than 20 years of experience in education, he currently serves as the principal of Odyssey Academy in the Greece Central School District (GCSD). He joined the GCSD after serving as principal in the Rochester City School District. Additionally, he served as vice-principal at the largest high school in the Syracuse City School District.

He began his teaching career in 2013, recognized as New Teacher of the Year for his focus on the development of healthy relationships, differentiating his instructional practices to support all students. He took his committed and innovative approach into his role as a principal. He is recognized as a dynamic leader who embraces opportunities for growth.

Mr. Hepburn attended Monroe Community College from 2008 to 2010 and graduated with an Associate of Applied Science degree in Physical Education in 2010. He attended Roberts Wesleyan College from 2011 to 2013 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Education and a Master of Arts/Sciences degree in Special Education in 2015. He went on to earn another Master of Science degree in Educational Leadership in 2017 at St. John Fisher University. He came to St. John Fisher University in the fall of 2019 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Mr. Hepburn pursued his research in culturally

proficient leadership under the direction of Dr. Marie Cianca and Dr. Cheryl McGruder Holloway and received the Ed.D. degree in 2023.

Abstract

This qualitative study examined the perspectives of school administrators in an urban setting that related to culturally responsive leadership. The study collected data from semi-structured interviews with eight school administrators. Using culturally proficient leadership theory, the study gathered data on leadership strategies, the nature of the culturally responsive training, and perceptions regarding such training.

Three key findings emerged: culturally responsive leaders in urban schools are intentional about being culturally responsive; training and support for leaders in urban schools is not systematic or automatic, urban school leaders seek out their own ways to gain skills and knowledge; and even if urban school leaders are intentional in their actions, the system is not designed to promote intentionality. The findings from this study led to recommendations for future research and applications for practice including: school leaders need to be intentional in their leadership behaviors and school district superintendents and school boards should require culturally proficient leadership training for all leaders.

The study can benefit school leaders, including principals, assistant principals, and superintendents who are implementing culturally responsive practices and need more information on how these practices relate to student connectedness and belonging in an urban school setting.

Table of Contents

Dedication	iii
Biographical Sketch	v
Abstract	vii
Table of Contents	viii
List of Tables	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Problem Statement	8
Theoretical Rationale	9
Statement of Purpose	12
Research Questions	13
Potential Significance of the Study	13
Definitions of Terms	14
Chapter Summary	15
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.....	18
Introduction and Purpose	18
Culturally Proficient Leaders' Performance Impact	19
Evolution of Terminology: CPL	22
School Building Leaders' Impact on Culturally Proficient Systems	23
Leaders' Behaviors and Communication Styles	24
Administrative Training and Professional Development.....	26

CRL Strategies	26
Gaps in the Literature.....	27
Chapter Summary	27
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology	29
Research Questions.....	29
Research Methods.....	29
Research Context	31
Researcher Description	31
Participants.....	32
Procedures for Data Collection.....	33
Instruments.....	34
Data Analysis	34
Confidentiality	36
Chapter Summary	36
Chapter 4: Results.....	37
Introduction.....	37
Data Analysis and Findings	38
Summary of Results.....	57
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	61
Introduction.....	61
Implications of Findings	62
Limitations	69
Recommendations for Future Research.....	69

Recommendations for Practice	69
Summary	71
References.....	74

List of Tables

Item	Title	Page
Table 3.1	Demographic Information of the School Principal and Assistant Principal Participants	32
Table 4.1	Research Question 1 – Themes, Concepts, and Subthemes	39
Table 4.2	Research Question 2 – Themes, Concepts, and Subthemes	50

Chapter 1: Introduction

For decades researchers have gathered information about teachers and culturally responsive teaching but have not fully examined the perspectives of culturally responsive school leaders (Lindsey et al., 2019). For example, researchers have conducted studies on the influence of teachers who applied culturally responsive practices and how those practices impacted the academic achievement of diverse learners (Gay, 2000, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Over the years researchers focused on the language used to identify the tenets of culturally *competent* practices in education. As a result, many terms have been used in various studies. There are some similarities and some terms that have been used, at times, interchangeably (Gay, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ultimately, limited research has been conducted on school leaders, school leader training, and culturally responsive leadership practices.

Similar to the framework of culturally proficient leadership (CPL), culturally responsive leadership (CRL) is a theoretical framework that addresses the development and achievements of educators while acknowledging, accepting, and affirming their cultural identities and the identities of the community at large (Khalifa, 2018; Lindsey et al., 2019). CRL engages educators and students to develop social justice perspectives that are critical of inequities in education (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lindsay et al., 2019). When explored further, culturally responsive leaders are defined as social justice advocates with an interest in advocacy for the communities of students and educators they serve (Khalifa, 2018; Smith, 2021). Advocacy from a leadership perspective through a social justice lens is a representation of leadership that is responsive to the needs of the leaders' sphere of influence. Leaders' practice is informed by the

multiple viewpoints of the communities they serve (Khalifa, 2018). Educators make intentional connections to their background knowledge and the prior experiences of learners (Gay, 1994). The term educator, in this context, is not limited to the classroom teachers and refers to the influence of all stakeholders and how a leader's focus on the diverse needs of teachers and students may enhance the learning experience. A language shift toward culturally proficient leadership (CPL) was noted by Lindsey et al. (2019) as the concepts of responsive leadership were further explored.

CPL is defined as an application of strategies within the culturally proficient leadership framework. The strategies are also described as a toolbox of resources that leaders utilize in the service of educators and students (Lindsey et al., 2019). The tools are identified as effective processes that can be used to support the advancement of people who have been minoritized (Khalifa et al., 2016; Mun et al., 2020). Ultimately, the processes function to uproot implicit biases that shape values which divide groups of people based on cultural differences. Value is added to communities when it is recognized that people are not naturally marginalized and when groups' unique differences and individuality are celebrated. Studies on the perspectives of school leaders related to cultural proficiency are currently limited.

However, Khalifa et al. (2016) did examine the perspective of urban principals and assistant principals and the strategies they used that were characteristic of CPL. Khalifa et al. (2016) evaluated the impact those practices had on the academic performance of learners at urban schools. As a result, there is evidence that suggests that school principals and assistant principals may be essential contributors to the academic and social-emotional status of students (Lindsey et al., 2019).

When examining this topic, it is helpful to understand that there are many terms that refer to a leader's knowledge and application of culturally relevant practices. In this study cultural proficiency, culturally competent, and culturally responsiveness are terms that are related and are used interchangeably to explore culturally relevant and effective practices. Lindsey et al. (2019) described the characteristics of leaders who are not culturally proficient. Those characteristics are defined as barriers to developing cultural proficiency, which are obstacles that prevent leaders from effectively utilizing CPL strategies. These obstacles include (a) unwillingness to reflect on practices and beliefs, (b) refusal to acknowledge the leader's role in division, and (c) making a direct or indirect contribution to racist ideology. In practice, the barriers can be recognized as blaming nondominant groups for the current societal conditions and celebrating the dominant groups' contributions while minimizing the input of the nondominant group (Lindsey et. al., 2019). Further, researchers have noted the systemic racist ideology of leaders who are not culturally proficient (Khalifa et al., 2019; Lindsey et al., 2004). Leaders who succumb to barriers contribute to the thinking that maintains those barriers. For instance, a barrier-dominant leader will blame the low academic achievement of nondominant learners on social assumptions connected to the group.

The guiding principles of cultural proficiency identify the priorities of a culturally competent mindset. The priorities include (a) acceptance and appreciation of the influence of culture, (b) recognizing that each person has their individual and group identities, (c) understanding that family influence shapes cultural beliefs, and (d) school districts being sensitive to the diverse needs of all groups (Lindsey et al., 2019). The principles function as a reference for leaders to ensure their practice is aligned with cultural competence. Ultimately, this guidance emphasizes the importance of cultures, the influence they have on society, and the

responsibility for schools to function as navigators of social justice. Families and community members are the first teachers for youth. Consequently, schools are resources that support each cultural group's distinct ways of learning. School principals and assistant principals who foster CPL principles demonstrate CPL (Lindsey et al., 2005). The principles are demonstrated by behaviors that represent thinking associated with cultural competence. Measuring cultural competence requires a unique formula and instrument that Lindsey et al. (2019) described as the cultural proficiency continuum.

The cultural proficiency continuum describes the language used within policies that impact the way people see things and ultimately behave. The continuum encompasses an approach that encourages a reflective mindset for leaders who consider their impact on performance rather than on students' deficits. For example, culturally proficient leaders will explore how systems at their schools underserve students who have historically been identified as underperforming. The culturally proficient continuum focuses on competence versus incompetence, proficiency versus deficiency, and capacity versus incapacity (Lindsey et al., 2019). Measuring people's behaviors and how people see things can be accomplished by utilizing the continuum (Lindsey et al., 2019). Further, the continuum represents an additional shift in the language associated with performance and how language is used to communicate a message with strengths and not deficits. Lindsey et al. (2019) identified a relationship between low academic performance and the cultural competence of school leaders that influence a school's culture and learning environment. This strength-based shift highlights a change in the thinking connected to the accountable thought process of CPL.

Finally, the essential elements of cultural proficiency, which is a focus on competence, proficiency, and capacity, create a baseline for CPL practices that can be used to monitor growth

along a continuum of culturally relevant leadership (Horsford et al. 2011). The essential elements shape the approach of CPL and provide benchmarks that measure competence while monitoring the behaviors, language, and beliefs exhibited through practices. The elements are included in what Lindsey et al. (2019) referred to as the toolbox for leaders to assess and support culturally competent practices.

In the culturally proficient toolbox, social constructs that create barriers are understood and overcome, the values are identified, a language that identifies productive and unproductive practices is described, and standards to measure proficiency are explained (Lindsey et al., 2019). Recent literature has developed from the framework of culturally relevant leadership (Horsford et al., 2011) to CPL through the researched works focused on the role of school leaders and their approach to challenging inequities in education (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Lindsey et al. 2019). The core elements of CPL are defined by values associated with cultural proficiency. Lindsey et al. (2019) described the characteristics further as the reality that culture influences everyone. The impact of the dominant culture varies by subgroup and group identity is important to acknowledge. Finally, Lindsey et al. (2019) stressed the importance of recognizing and acknowledging the individual identities within groups and supporting the unique cultural needs of dominated groups.

There is a need for a closer examination of CRL. CPL provides a framework to extend the examination of culturally proficient practices. Even with the noted evolution of terminology, much of the current research focuses on the teacher's role in delivering rich, instructionally sound, culturally responsive, relevant, and proficient practices. However, researchers have identified the significance of school principals and assistant principals' influence on culturally proficient systems in school buildings. Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) described the school

principal as the most informed about resources and able to lead school-wide development and reform. Focused within the teachers' role, regardless of the terminology used, is the significance of meaningful and valued relationships between the teacher and the learner. The cultivation of relationships is the foundation of culturally relevant practices that include CRL and CPL (Khalifa et al., 2016). Furthermore, school building leaders influence the teacher experience, which impacts the learner experience. In practice, school leaders have opportunities to engage staff positively and create professional development opportunities to increase their culturally responsive practices.

Additionally, the significance of relationships and their connectedness to learning can be interpreted through the lens of cultural responsiveness, cultural proficiency, and CRL. Several studies have been conducted, at all levels of education, examining the connection between learning and relationships. When school leaders positively engage staff and students, an environment that encourages teachers to explore, create, question, take risk, and lead is created (Cooper & Garner, 2012). Developing a culture of learning that is equitable for all, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference, is critical to the success of each student. School building leaders influence learning, and research has demonstrated that not all leaders realize the impact of their influence (Hallinger, 2003). Consequentially, school building leaders may model practices that support low expectations, low support, and deficit-based practices (Ding et al., 2020).

The school principal develops a mission and vision aligned with strong leadership and instructionally sound practices to create a school community that ensures academic success (Kearney et al., 2012). Like pilots of an aircraft, school leaders guide and control the direction in which a school travels (Dutta & Sahney, 2016). Charged with the task of school leadership,

school principals and assistant principals work beyond the school-day hours with minimal recognition for success (Drysdale et al., 2016). The long hours include relationship-building practices such as home visits, messages of support to team members experiencing hardships, strategizing communications, and attending events. These practices build a relationship-based community of support modeled by the school leader in response to the cultural needs of the school. Studies have found a disconnect with school leaders and the importance of cultural competence and responsiveness (Brion, 2021; Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Khalifa, 2018.). Khalifa et al. (2019) demonstrated the importance of relationship practices.

The following example from a study conducted in 2015–16 identifies school principal responses to the National Teacher and Principal Survey. Principals categorized their “top three most important educational goals as building basic literacy skills (72%), encouraging academic excellence (69%), and promoting good work habits and self-discipline (54%)” (Yanez et al., 2020, p. 1). What is not represented in the three educational goals listed by Yanez et al. is the significance of culturally relevant practices. The omission may indicate a lack of understanding connected to the importance of CPL. Culturally proficient leaders realize the importance of culturally relevant practices (Khalifa et al., 2019), therefore it can be assumed that a similar survey of CPL would render answers that support those practices. The numbers found by Yanez et al. may represent a mindset deficient of the cultural competence of the school leaders and teachers surveyed (Khalifa et al. 2019; Lindsey et al., 2019). However, culturally proficient leaders show a shift in mindset, core values, and cultural connectedness. Ford (2012) emphasized the role school leaders play in developing a culture of inclusion and equity. Additionally, school principals and assistant principals’ approaches are essential to the development of school environments that support students’ high academic success (Kearney et al., 2012).

Problem Statement

This study examined the perspectives of urban public school administrators and their perceptions of CRL (Johnson et al., 2021). Historically, students' academic achievements have been connected to teachers' instructional styles and approaches. However, limited information is available on the strategies that culturally proficient leaders use to build systems to support all learners. Culturally competent educators affect students' academic accomplishments, thinking, and interpersonal capacity related to culturally responsive learning environments (Ford, 2012; Gay, 2010; Jett et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2013).

The promotion of cultural competence includes a combination of behaviors, ways of being, attitudes, and a belief system that embraces a path toward understanding the ways that culture influences values (Gay, 2010; Khalifa et al., 2016). Promoting culture requires practices that are applied intentionally to develop meaningful relationships. Critical consciousness refers to culturally proficient leaders' commitment to understanding their own thinking and how their thoughts impact their leadership. Leaders who are conscious of their thinking are critically conscious and realize the assumptions they make about other groups (Johnson, 2014). Basically, the collective application of high expectations and high supports, a culturally competent approach, and the promotion of critical consciousness are crucial attributes of a culturally proficient leader.

The literature is scarce on CPL practices and the preservice and in-service trainings available for school leaders regarding CPL. The focus has been on the role of the teacher and the impact of their practice on students. Additionally, there is limited literature concerning the role school principals must play in developing their teachers into culturally responsive practitioners (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2016; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Tilman, 2003,

2005). School leaders may be undertrained and unable to support teachers with the implementation of a culturally responsive curriculum (Khalifa et al., 2016). Additionally, the level of access to preservice and in-service trainings is not widely known. Research related to CRL is evolving. This notion is supported by a 2010 study conducted by Young et al. that indicated principals as unprepared and inadequately trained to implement policies that would address issues surrounding diversity. Little is known about CRL and the role principals have in developing teachers to become culturally responsive (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015). A focus on urban districts is relevant. Historically, urban school student populations have been disenfranchised and marginalized by practices that included disproportionate suspensions and special education program placements (Beachum & Dentith, 2004)).

Additionally, a clear description of culturally proficient practices has not been identified to determine if school building leaders can recognize what implementation looks like. The absence of a clear description of CRL practices creates challenges relating to the development of systems to support and enhance students' diverse learning needs. However, the need for preservice and in-service trainings for school principals is well documented (Khalifa et al., 2019; Lindsey et al., 2004).

Theoretical Rationale

School principals and assistant principals who are not equipped with the cultural competence displayed through CPL may be contributing to school environments that are counterproductive for all students (Khalifa et al., 2016). For example, a counterproductive school environment makes students and their cultures feel unappreciated, misunderstood, scrutinized, and attacked. McGee (2013) highlighted the startling reality that Black males are disproportionately suspended for behaviors that White males and other students are counseled for

displaying. The documented disparity in responses to Black males' behavior versus White males' behavior demonstrates disproportionality. Furthermore, microaggressions and implicit and explicit biases present cause for additional research. The results of the biases are evident in suspension rates, disproportionality in special education classification, and academic performance results for Black male students versus White male students (McGee, 2013).

The theoretical framework for this study is CPL. Strategies for CPL can positively impact a school's culture. The model sets guidelines for how to embrace, engage, and have effective interactions with people representing other cultures (Lindsey et al, 2019). Culturally proficient leaders exhibit a way of being, of using language, of conveying their values, and displaying their appreciation for cultural differences that effectively engage school communities and individuals while challenging practices that minoritize groups (Lindsey et al., 2019). Culturally proficient leaders are conscious of their level of social intelligence and demonstrate a commitment to understanding the unique characteristics of cultures.

Several theories explore the internal and external reasons for the academic achievement gap between Black and White male students. For instance, placing a student in special education is an external factor that can have internal implications of low self-confidence of academic abilities (Cokley et al., 2012). Another external barrier to academic success for Black males with internal implications is structural racism. Schools in urban settings may have systems that support the performance expectations for Black male students (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015). Teachers' low expectations symbolize how teachers feel about students. Intuitively, students feel this and, in some cases, internalize the low expectations of the low efficacy teacher. High efficacy teachers demonstrate a culturally responsive skill set that exudes confidence in the academic performance of Black male students while affirming their cultural identity (Henfield &

Washington, 2012). For urban school principals and assistant principals to effectively connect with teachers, staff, and students, they should be provided with training and models of CPL.

Research has questioned teachers' access to culturally responsive training (Gay, 2010) and the same questions apply to school-based leadership. School-building leaders can strategically designate access. School leadership is a challenging task, requiring individuals to work long hours with little thanks in return (Drysdale et al., 2016). Scholars argue that most teachers are not culturally responsive in their practice and do not have a pathway towards training that support culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010). Research emphasizes the need for culturally responsive teaching preparation for educators (Ware, 2006). Additionally, more recent research highlights the importance of the school building leaders' role to maintain culturally responsive practices (Khalifa et al., 2016). Durden (2008) described culturally responsive school leaders as leaders who model practices that are inclusive and promote a school environment that is responsive to students' cultural needs (Khalifa et al., 2016; Riehl, 2000; Ryan, 2006).

Additionally, scholars have recognized that White and Black school leaders can be unconscious of their culturally oppressive leadership approaches and practices and contribute to exclusionary school environments (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al. 2016). Contrarily, culturally proficient leaders are conscious of their actions and behaviors. They reflect on their approach and interactions with peers, teachers, staff, students, and families. They challenge oppressive and microaggressive behaviors that ultimately negatively impact relationships, which influence learning (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Lindsey et al. (2019) emphasized the value of culturally responsive practices and described school leaders as critical to the development of school systems to address

disproportionality of suspension, special education placement, and graduation rates of students, including Black males. Lindsey et al. (2019) outlined the six components of CPL practices as (a) assessing the culture, by identifying the differences among people within their environment; (b) valuing diversity by embracing the differences among other cultures, and teaching others to do likewise; (c) creating a work setting that embraces the challenges of diversity; (d) understanding that challenges will arise by being realistic in the process; (e) managing conflict in a positive way to help everyone understand that cultural clashes can occur; and (f) adapting to diversity by being a lifelong learner of other cultures. These components identify thinking and behaviors that culturally proficient leaders demonstrate. One characteristic of culturally proficient leaders is that they evaluate culture and desire to learn about the individual differences of groups of people. They celebrate diversity by recognizing the differences as an asset to the community. Culturally proficient leaders accept opportunities to grow and learn about heritage and culture while being sensitive to cultural needs. Lastly, they challenge systems that oppress and attempt to minoritize groups of people based on their culture (Rodriguez-Mojica et al., 2020). The listed components identify a framework of cultural proficiency; therefore, the CPL theoretical framework can help determine what administrative practices may be in place or may be lacking. For this reason, the framework is well suited for the purpose of this study.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perspectives and practices of leaders in urban K–12 settings through the lens of CPL. School principals and assistant principals impact students' academic and behavioral achievement, which has direct and indirect influences on their individual internal perspectives. Additionally, the purpose of this study was to explore what culturally responsive training and preparation is offered to school

principals and assistant principals and to identify what culturally responsive strategies they use and model. Current research highlights the effects of culturally responsive teaching applied by teachers (Gay, 2000; Khalifa, 2018). However, the focus on school building leaders identifies the opportunity to further explore the direct and indirect impact school leaders can have on teachers' instructional approaches and student performance in urban settings.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this research concentrated on the implementation of CPL:

1. From the perspectives of urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals, what strategies do leaders use to practice cultural responsiveness and proficiency? Of these strategies, which ones work well for teachers and students, and which are not as effective?
2. From the perspective of urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals, what training and opportunities are available, or have they received, relating to CPL strategies?

The answers to these questions provided insight on the effectiveness of CPL and opportunities for systemic implementation of the strategies.

Potential Significance of the Study

School principals and assistant principals impact K–12 school communities and student performance. Quin et al. (2015) identified that the underperformance of students in urban settings, specifically Black males, is problematic for all stakeholders of education (Schott, 2015). However, current research on the preparedness of K–12 school principals and assistant principals

in urban settings is limited. Most research examines the strategies applied by school principals at the elementary level (Sebastian et al., 2017).

The results from this study present findings to better understand the training, preparedness, and characteristics of school principals and assistant principals regarding the successful implementation of culturally proficient strategies at the elementary and secondary levels. The findings will assist school and district administrators in developing training for new hires and veteran leaders to support culturally responsive practices in urban settings.

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions provide the reader with an understanding of terms used by researchers and are overlapping in meaning:

Cultural Proficiency - recognizes that a person is a student of their own assumptions, beliefs, and biases. Cultural proficiency is the ability of the individual to reflect on their assumptions and use their learning to celebrate the cultural differences and backgrounds of others (Lindsey et al., 2019). The essential elements, also described as tools of cultural proficiency are:

- Assess the culture by identifying the differences among people within their environment
- Value diversity by embracing the differences within other cultures and teaching others to do likewise
- Create a work setting that embraces the challenges of diversity
- Understand that challenges will arise
- Manage conflict in a positive way to help everyone understand that cultural clashes can occur

- Adapt to diversity by being a lifelong learner of other cultures (Lindsey et al., 2019)

Culturally relevant teaching – cultural knowledge instruction. In practice, educators make intentional connections to the background knowledge and prior experiences of the learners. The focus on the diverse needs of students may enhance the learning experience. The enhancement has been identified as teaching based on students’ strengths (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally responsive – highlights the relevance of the societal heritages of ethnic groups as legacies that impact students’ behaviors, ways of being, and learning styles. In practice, it connects learning to meaningful experiences across learning environments, encompasses learning strategies that support the diverse needs of all students, and teaches learners that their cultures, beliefs, and heritages are valued and important. It includes information, resources, and content relating to all subjects for all learners (Gay, 2000; Khalifa et al. 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Minoritized – refers to a group of people who have been disenfranchised and reduced to being identified as a less-dominant group (Khalifa et al., 2016; Mun et al., 2020).

Chapter Summary

Research demonstrates an evolution of terminology to represent culturally relevant practices. Over the years, researchers developed terms that identify culturally competent approaches (Gay, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lindsey et al., 2019). A common theme throughout the evolution of terminology is the educators’ impact, with current research emphasizing the teachers’ roles. School principals and assistant principals demonstrate effectiveness when they foster a community that embraces cultural differences (Khalifa et al.,

2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995). An opportunity for further research of the school principal and assistant principals' influence is present.

School principals and assistant principals influence students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional achievement. The school leaders' choice of approach can be detrimental to the success of their schools (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). The school building leader is primary in the process for developing training schedules and school-wide systems to support culturally relevant practices for teachers, who then translate their understanding by demonstrating culturally relevant practices through their instructional approach.

Urban school principals have a growing list of responsibilities and higher stakes with mandates from the U.S. Department of Education Department (USDOE) through such initiatives as the No Child Left Behind Act, the Race to the Top Initiative, and at the time of this writing, the Every Student Succeeds Act (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Finnigan, 2012; McGuinn, 2018; Shatzer et al., 2013). The oversight, funding, and resources associated with the initiatives have not produced increased academic performance results for students in urban schools (Cokley et al., 2012). Performance gap between students in urban districts and students in suburban districts is growing, and school building leaders are essential in closing that gap (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018).

This study examined the effective practices of school building leaders using the CPL framework. This study sought to add to the literature by analyzing how school building leaders described CPL practices and how they impacted their teachers and students. Chapter 2 presents the existing literature in the area of CPL, strategies used by K–12 school principals and assistant principals, and how their strategies impacted students' academic and social-emotional achievement. For the purpose of this study, the researcher used the theoretical framework of CPL

to represent culturally responsive and culturally relevant practices as two of the various terms that are used in literature (Gay, 2000, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lindsay et al., 2019). The following chapters reviews current literature that examines the problem statement, the methodology of the research study, the findings of the study, the discussion, and the conclusion.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

School principals and assistant principals who use CPL practices can have an impact on teachers and on the social-emotional and academic performance of students in urban districts (Khalifa et al., 2019; Lindsey et al., 2019). The current study examined the strategies applied by school building leaders who were considered culturally proficient as defined by Lindsey et al. (2019). Additionally, the study explored the effectiveness of these strategies and the training available for leaders to develop cultural responsiveness.

The literature review establishes some of the strategies used by K–12 school principals and assistant principals and how those strategies impacted their students' academic and social-emotional achievement. The literature also includes information on culturally responsive trainings for K–12 school principals and assistant principals in urban settings. Some of the specific strategies applied by building leaders may enhance learning and the academic experience of students. Culturally proficient school building leaders create ways for staff and students to connect while they model an appreciation for students' lived experiences, their communities, their voices, and their beliefs (Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2013).

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. From the perspectives of urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals, what strategies do leaders use to practice cultural responsiveness and proficiency? Of these strategies, which ones work well for teachers and students, and which are not as effective?

2. From the perspective of urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals, what training and opportunities are available, or have they received, relating to CPL strategies?

Culturally Proficient Leaders' Performance Impact

Much of the research focuses on student performance gaps from a deficit perspective (Ding et al., 2020). Conversely, culturally proficient leaders focus on the students' strengths (Gordon & Ronder, 2016). A strength-based approach reveals the value leaders see in each student and how they establish a foundation to develop healthy relationships. Not every urban school student is underperforming academically. Researchers contend that culturally proficient leaders' schools are outperforming other schools (McGee, 2013). For example, urban charter school organizations serve city residents. The New York State Education Department (NYSED, 2019) reported that the percentage of city school district students in Grades 3–8 who scored proficiently on the English language arts (ELA) state exam was 45.4% and in math, students in Grades 3–8 scored 46.7% proficiently compared to New York State charter schools where students scored 54% in ELA and 58.9% in math. The statistics represent a gap, and the numbers alone do not identify the role school building leaders have in student achievement. The comparison of data between urban charter schools and the traditional city schools' performances may include the impact of the role school building leaders may have in influencing learning.

Gay (2010) emphasized the critical role administrators play in the development of a culturally responsive instructional environment. School principals have been identified as the most influential component of a school's success in direct and indirect ways. Developing high efficacy teachers is vital in the process of recruiting and retaining the best teachers for children who have been marginalized (Khalifa et al., 2016). School building leaders play a critical role in

the hiring and professional development of school building personnel. School leaders have access to information about resources and are empowered to lead reform-based initiatives (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Khalifa et al., 2016). Leveraging their access to resources and influence creates opportunities that can move schools forward. This approach benefits from the strategies outlined by CPL practices. Administrators can set expectations aligned with the cultural proficiency. Expectations can be met with the development of targeted training for staff and modeling effective administrator practices which support positive relationships with staff. An absence of culturally proficient practices leads to gaps in academic performance.

The disparity in academic achievement has been documented by the rates of graduation of subgroups. For instance, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022) reported:

In school year 2018–19, the national adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for public high school students was 86 percent, the highest it has been since the rate was first measured in 2010–11. Asian/Pacific Islander students had the highest ACGR (93 percent), followed by White (89 percent), Hispanic (82 percent), Black (80 percent), and American Indian/Alaska Native (74 percent) students. (para. 1)

The racialized achievement opportunity gap (Khalifa et al., 2016) is not a new phenomenon and it continues to increase. However, the focus on the achievement gap has developed because of the national interest resulting from legislative mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), the Race to the Top initiative (2012), and at the time of this writing, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Finnigan, 2012; McGuinn, 2016; Quin et al., 2015; Shatzer et al., 2013). These mandates were initiated in response to the academic underperformance of students with the expectation that states disaggregated data by subgroups based on race or ethnicity, economically disadvantaged status,

limited proficiency in English, and classification for special education services (McGuinn, 2016). The below-standard academic performance extends throughout the school experience for Black male students. In 2012, the Schott Foundation of Public Education stated that the graduation rate for Black males was 59%, and it was 80% for White males. Over years the graduation rate disparity between Black and White males has increased. Unfortunately, graduation rates are not the only area of disproportionality. For example, the Schott Foundation of Public Education (2012) highlighted that Black males are disproportionately placed in special education classes that do not prepare them for the successful completion of high school.

Researchers have used a variety of methods to analyze the data they collected to explore the impact of leadership strategies. In a meta-analysis review, Agosto et al. (2013) applied the conceptual framework of CRL to examine the cultural implications of leadership that were guided by social justice concepts. Additionally, the meta-analysis reviewed leadership preparation trainings to examine if culture-based concepts were considered. The Agosto et al. study found that very few primary empirical studies had been conducted on leadership preparation courses that included an examination of course inclusion of culture-based concepts. The meta-analysis concluded that a proliferation of terminology has been assigned to culture-based concepts with an inconsistency in the value assigned to them (Agosto et al., 2013).

The studies examined in the Agosto et al. meta-analysis highlighted the definitions and terminology relating to CPL and how identification of the phrases continues to develop. However, the study went beyond the terminology to further explore preservice and in-service training school leaders received that related to the CPL framework. Additionally, the Agosto et al. (2013) study evaluated strategies leaders used and how they may have aligned with cultural proficiency.

Evolution of Terminology: CPL

For decades, researchers have examined the impact of culturally relevant teaching (CRT), CRL, CPL, and culturally responsive and culturally proficient practices in schools (Gay, 1994; Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lindsey et al., 2019). The tenets of culturally competent practices in education have similarities that can be used interchangeably. CRT is a theoretical framework that addresses students' academic achievement while acknowledging, accepting, and affirming their cultural identities. CRT engages students to develop social justice perspectives that are critical of inequities in education (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Explored further, culturally responsive teaching is defined as cultural knowledge instruction. In practice, culturally responsive educators make intentional connections to the background knowledge and prior experiences of learners (Gay, 1994). The focus on the diverse needs of students may enhance the learning experience in an environment that is responsive to the cultural needs of the learners. The enhancement has been identified as teaching based on students' strengths. Gay (2000) described the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching as embracing the cultural heritages of ethnic groups as legacies that impact students' behaviors, ways of being, and learning styles. Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching connects learning to meaningful experiences and encompasses learning strategies that support the diverse needs of students while including relevant information (Gay, 2000). Researchers (Khalifa et al., 2016; Lindsey et al., 2019) have conducted studies on CRT and concluded with findings and opportunities for future analysis of the influence of culturally proficient leaders, the focus of this literature review.

The constant progression of language terms associated with leadership practices creates challenges in identifying themes without associating consistencies within the language. For

instance, Khalifa et al. (2016) identified leadership traits of culturally responsive leaders as engaging and committed to social justice and equity. Not exactly the same, Welborn (2019) communicated the culturally responsive traits defined by Khalifa et al. (2016) as CPL indicators. However, both researchers agreed that the practices were effective.

Studies reviewed in the meta-analysis emphasized that multiple researchers used different definitions and terminology to represent culturally proficient practices. For example, Smith (2021) described school building leaders who are equipped with an engaging and culturally conscious approach as CRL. Further explained in his study, Smith connected the terminology citing, “the praxis of the culturally relevant and responsive principal or head of school is emphatically one of social justice activism and advocacy on behalf of the student communities served” (p. 32). Conversely, this study concentrated on the strategies school leaders apply and how the strategies connect to their training and experiences. Moreover, Brown et al. (2019) identified the social justice and equity advocacy as leadership qualities within culturally relevant leadership practices. Welborn (2019) used the term CPL when describing a leader with similar traits, and some studies used the terms interchangeably (Bal & Trainor, 2016), and the focus of this current study demonstrates a need for a more meaningful application of terminology in the area of CRL practices.

School Building Leaders’ Impact on Culturally Proficient Systems

Researchers have identified the significance of school principals’ and assistant-principals’ influence on culturally proficient systems in school buildings. Gordon and Ronder (2016) described the school principal as most informed about resources and able to lead school-wide development and reform. Exemplified within the leaders’ role, regardless of the terminology used, is the significance of meaningful and valued relationships between the school

leader, the teacher, and the learner. The significance of relationships and its connectedness to learning can be interpreted through the lens of CPL (Welborn, 2019), also defined by researchers as culturally relevant and responsive school leadership (Bal & Trainor, 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Miller, 2020). Students are not particularly influenced by what teachers know or how many degrees teachers have obtained. School leaders who positively engage staff and students create an environment where teachers can explore, create, question, take risks, and lead (Ten Bruggencate et al., 2012). Developing a culture of learning that is equitable for all regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference is critical to the success of each student. School building leaders influence learning, and the research demonstrates that not all leaders realize the impact of their influence (Brown et al., 2019).

Khalifa et al. (2018) researched the role of school principals' traits relating to culturally relevant leadership. Six CRL character traits were identified in a study conducted by Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012). These traits were described as (a) the importance of developing and maintaining relationships, (b) demonstrating a sincere care and respect for all, (c) being consistent, (d) being visible, (e) communicating with transparency, and (f) modeling cultural responsiveness. In the Madhlangobe and Gordon study, these leadership characteristics resulted in improved performance scores and increased positive community interactions.

Leaders' Behaviors and Communication Styles

Culturally proficient leaders are identified by their unique communication styles and behaviors. As defined, culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach that demonstrates value for cultural identity, addresses academic and social-emotional achievement, and challenges systems of oppressions in education (Miller, 2020). In practice, it means that a school's environment and culture align with the students' identity and beliefs. Levitan (2020) described a culturally

responsive setting as one that generates an atmosphere of respect and an appreciation for others and their individual differences. Miller (2020) further described culturally relevant practices as an approach that connects learners across academic and social-emotional competency levels. Brion (2021) agreed with the significance of leaders being intentional in their approach to applying strategies that support the diverse needs of learners. Additionally, Brown et al. (2019) emphasized the influence that school building leaders have on educators' instructional approaches.

Culturally relevant practices are directly and indirectly connected to CRL at the district and school level. Essentially, CRL is a model that functions as a guide to reflecting on held assumptions and perceptions about other cultures, ethnicities, and races (Johnson, 2007). A focus on cultural relevance is a pedagogical approach that school leaders can utilize to support the development of systems that promote equitable access to learning opportunities for all students, specifically Black learners (Hans, 2017). CRL encompasses practices that endorse high expectations and a high level of support; consequentially, this model is infectious and teachers and students respond to meet the standard (Brown et al., 2019).

Dailey et al. (2018) identified the importance of coaching and culturally responsive preservice and in-service training and how it impacts learning. The qualitative case study, which included focus groups totaling more than 90 administrators, found that the school leaders had an indirect and direct instructional impact on teaching and learning (Dailey et al., 2018). Hans (2017) identified culturally responsive school building leaders as those who endorse high expectations for teachers, staff, and students. Levitan (2020) conducted a study examining the way students learn and also found that leaders have an impact. Additionally, Brion (2021) emphasized leaders' commitment to making connections with the larger community,

participating in celebration of the school community's diversity, and embracing opportunities to challenge the status quo through practices that address inequities and injustice (Gordon & Ronder, 2016).

Administrative Training and Professional Development

Training and professional development opportunities for school principals and assistant principals is limited, generally not mandated, and regularly includes a focus on budget management, instructional leadership, and school operation. School building leaders are offered limited access to develop in their craft as culturally responsive leaders (Khalifa et al., 2016). The lack of training may inadvertently support leaders who are not reflective and informed about oppression and how privilege impacts the learning experience of White and Black students. Consequently, leaders who have not participated in culturally responsive training may engage in behaviors that replicate prejudice and discrimination in their schools (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). Leaders being intentional in their efforts to address the academic needs of minoritized students is an element of CRL that has a positive impact on the learning environment (Khalifa et al., 2016).

CRL Strategies

A strategy culturally responsive school leaders can use is establishing high expectations while creating support for teachers, staff, and students to meet the expectation—regardless their backgrounds (Gerhart et al., 2011). To establish a school culture of high expectations and support, leaders can model behaviors that signify the belief that every student can be successful. Expectations are connected to another strategy culturally responsive school leaders may apply, which is reflection. Leaders who monitor their own responsibilities for their role in impacting learning outcomes may be an essential element of the reflection strategy they apply (Donahoo et al., 2018; Lezotte & Synder, 2011). Additionally, culturally responsive school leaders are

collaborative, monitor the practices of teachers, and are optimistic about students' academic abilities (Donahoo et al., 2018).

CRL intentionally address the academic and social emotional performance gaps of all students. Culturally responsive leaders also consistently reflect on their leadership approach with a willingness to adjust their practice to meet the needs of the school (Khalifa et al., 2016). School leaders who are culturally responsive review relevant data points to address disproportionality and develop action plans while progress monitoring areas of concern (McGee, 2013; Khalifa et al., 2016).

Gaps in the Literature

Examination and synthesis of the current literature revealed gaps in the research focused on culturally proficient practices. Current research on the topic lacks the inclusion of assistant principals and the impact they have on the culture of learning and academic achievement directly and indirectly (Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally responsive preservice and in service training available for principals was also a gap in the literature. Additionally, current studies provided minimal information regarding how culturally relevant leadership strategies are implemented and practiced (Lindsey et al., 2019).

Chapter Summary

According to the literature, researchers have considered areas of concentration synthesized within sections related to culturally responsive practices and CPL. As discussed, the sections are (a) culturally proficient leaders' performance impact, (b) school building leaders' impact on culturally proficient systems, (c) leaders' behaviors and communication styles, (d) administrative training and professional development, and (e) CRL strategies. Each section represents important elements of the culturally relevant, responsive, and proficient leadership

practices. As noted, culturally responsive leadership and CPL encompass practices that challenge inequities. Those practices include (a) barriers to cultural proficiency, which supports navigating obstacles on the journey toward positive transformation through social justice; (b) building principles of cultural proficiency, which identify the priorities of a culturally competent mindset; and remaining on a cultural proficiency continuum, which describes the language outlined within policies that impact the way people see things and ultimately behave.

Cultural proficiency emphasizes a baseline for CPL practices that can be used to monitor growth along a continuum of culturally relevant leadership (Horsford et al., 2011). The literature reviewed for this study underscored the significance of the strategies applied by school leaders regardless of the language terms used to define them and this focus differs from previous meta-analyses referenced in this chapter. Opportunities for future research exist with the exploration of CPL. Chapter 3 discusses the research design methodology for this study.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals may apply culturally responsive strategies that positively influence their school cultures and students’ academic performance. Historically, urban schools have had lower graduation rates than suburban schools (Schott, 2015). The study identified strategies used by building leaders, and it explored what training existed for the leaders that related to the implementation of CRL practices.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study concentrated on the implementation of CPL:

1. From the perspectives of urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals, what strategies do leaders use to practice cultural responsiveness and proficiency? Of these strategies, which ones work well for teachers and students, and which are not as effective?
2. From the perspective of urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals, what training and opportunities are available, or have they received, relating to CPL strategies?

Research Design

This qualitative phenomenological study accessed the lived experiences of K–12 urban school leaders in New York State where there is a mandate to ensure that schools are culturally responsive (NYSED, 2021). Phenomenological studies are described as systematic and intentional examinations of the lived experiences of others (Usher & Jackson, 2019). Some

leaders model practices that build relationships with teachers and staff and can be identified as culturally proficient strategies (Lindsey et al., 2019). The researcher conducted this phenomenological study to examine the perspectives of urban school principals and assistant principals in supporting teachers through the lens of CPL. The researcher examined the perspectives of school principals and assistant principals that related to the elements of CPL, because culturally proficient leaders are identified as leaders who (a) assess the culture by identifying the differences among people within their environment, (b) value diversity by embracing the differences within other cultures and teaching others to do likewise, (c) create a work setting that embraces the challenges of diversity, (d) understand that challenges will arise, (e) manage conflict in a positive way to help everyone understand that cultural clashes can occur, and (f) adapt to diversity by being a lifelong learner of other cultures (Lindsey et al., 2019).

At the time of this writing, researchers had examined the impact of relationships and how they influence the performance of learning communities. This current study targeted the school building leaders' approaches with the intention of providing insight regarding how their practices connect to culturally responsive school leadership. Additionally, this study provides educators with information on the strategies school principals and assistant principals used to practice cultural responsiveness and identified professional development made available to them that built their culturally proficient skills and strategies.

This researcher chose the semi-structured interview process that provided flexibility in questioning based on the interviewees' responses. The researcher prepared and organized the questions to extract information from the interviewees and to synthesize relative experiences connected to their personal and professional experiences (Flick, 2018). The semi-structured

interview design was selected to provide the researcher with a format to gain an understanding of the strategies implemented by school building leaders in their own words.

Research Context

Information for this qualitative phenomenological study was collected through interviews conducted by the researcher with a combination of eight school principals and assistant principals from urban school districts in New York State. NYSED (2021) reported that there were 731 districts, 4,412 public schools, and 355 charter schools in New York State. Urban school demographics have shifted; however, where the Black or African American and Latinx students, combined, represent 44.1% of the student population, and the White student body still represents the minority at 43.2%. This role enrollment disparity is even more pronounced in urban districts that serve students with higher needs. These needs include high poverty rates, homelessness, and student mobility. For example, the researcher reviewed enrollment data by demographics for an urban school district with the following findings: 10.5% White students and 59.1% Black students with students of other races making up the difference (NYSED, 2019).

The researcher collected and examined the data provided by the participants through interviews to determine themes related to the strategies applied by the school leaders and how they aligned with CRL. Providing school principals and assistant principals with a platform to share their perceptions and lived experiences added increased awareness to the existing research and literature related to CRL practices.

Researcher Description

It is important to note that this researcher has been a school principal and an assistant principal in K–12 schools in two urban districts. At the time of this writing, the researcher is a school principal of a larger inner suburb school. Additionally, the researcher is a Black male

leader who is committed to the practices that are both culturally and social-emotionally responsive to the needs of teachers, staff, scholars, families, and community members. The researcher has led and participated in equity-centered trainings with school staff and other leaders. As a leader with an invested interest in culturally responsive practices, it is important for the researcher to evaluate and reflect on any biases (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

A purposeful sampling model was used to identify a total of eight current or former school principals and assistant principals who served in an urban district. In a qualitative study, having at least six interviewees is acceptable for saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Purposeful sampling is a widely used qualitative method that applies a criterion to identify participants and information relating to a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The names of school districts, schools, school principals, and assistant principals were modified to protect the identity of participants. Table 3.1 displays the demographic information of the study participants.

Table 3.1

Demographic Information of the School Principal and Assistant Principal Participants

Name Pseudonym(s)	School Level	School Pseudonym	Administrator Level
Mr. Love (P1)	High school	Charter World US	Principal
Mr. Evers (P2)	K–12	World of Science	Principal
Mr. Boston (P3)	K–6	Green Hills Elementary School	Principal
Ms. Down (P4)	High school	Happy Vista High School	Assistant Principal
Ms. Trime (P5)	K–8	Anne Burns School	Principal
Ms. Ohla (P6)	K–6	Flower Elementary School	Assistant Principal
Mr. Ring (P7)	K–6	Abbie Elementary School	Principal
Mr. Smith (P8)	High school	Technology High	Assistant Principal

Note. Participant names and locations are pseudonyms.

The K–12 school principals and assistant principals from urban schools were targeted for the purpose of this study. The criteria for the leaders considered for this study included (a) experience in an urban district, (b) experience with a diverse student population, and (c) experience in a district with a commitment to culturally responsive practices.

Procedures for Data Collection

The recruitment of the participants included an email, phone calls, and social media contacts to the participants. The study's questions were consistent throughout the interview process for fidelity. There was diversity in the participant group (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

For the purpose of this study, the following steps outline the procedures used:

1. Developed an interview protocol and reviewed interview questions, prior to soliciting participants, with administrators not identified as participants for this study.
2. Submitted the required documents to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher University and obtained approval.
3. Employed a purposeful sampling method to identify at least six current or former school principals and assistant principals to potentially participate as interviewees for this study.
4. Sent electronic communications and made phone calls to secure participants and schedule interviews.
5. Created digital folders for each participant as a primary location to store signed consents, notes, and interview transcripts.
6. Conducted interviews with the school principals and assistant principals.
7. Utilized audio recordings to generate transcripts of the interview sessions.

8. Used emotion coding, a priori coding, and pattern coding to code the data collected through the interviews.
9. Analyzed the data for themes and subthemes.

Adherence to the procedures outlined ensured fidelity across the interviews and that the appropriate steps were taken during the research process. Additionally, measures were taken to protect the rights and welfare of participants.

Instruments

The instrument that was used for this phenomenological study is an interview protocol that was designed using the culturally responsive school leader framework. The interview questions were connected to the CRL and CPL frameworks. The elements of CPL used for this study were: “(a) assess culture, (b) value diversity, (c) embrace the challenges of diversity, (d) understand challenges will arise, (e) manage conflict positively, (f) adapt to diversity” (Lindsey et al., 2019, p. 8).

This study consisted of participants who had experience in New York State urban schools. The collection of the data occurred with the individual participants, and it took approximately 2 months to retrieve. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, using the questions developed by the researcher, which were connected to the study’s research questions. The questions were open ended to provide the researcher with the most accurate lived experience responses. Each interview was audio recorded as approved by the IRB process. The researcher maintained notes to include details that were significant to the study and related to the interview environment and particular notable issues.

Data Analysis

The researcher obtained transcripts from the audio interviews with the K–12 school principals and assistant principals. Audio recording transcriptions assisted the researcher with a complete record of the interviews. To systemically categorize data collected during interviews, three coding methods were used (a) emotion coding, (b) a priori coding, and (c) pattern coding. Codes assign meaning to the data collected in a study by categorizing and organizing the information into themes and patterns for analysis (Saldaña, 2016). Descriptions of the selected coding methods follow.

Emotion coding was used to examine the internal and external experiences and actions of K–12 school principals and assistant principals that related to their interactions with urban school students (Saldaña, 2016). This process allowed the researcher to categorize the data collected through the interviews related to specific approaches and strategies applied by the school leaders. A priori coding was used to develop a provisional list to intentionally address the terms relating to CRL. The a priori method of coding allowed the researcher to use prior knowledge and the interview questions to develop the process for coding the collected data (Saldaña, 2016). Pattern coding was used to identify the relative data that was connected to specifically coded categories (Saldaña, 2016). This methodology supported the researcher’s ability to categorize data related to the actions of the interviewees. The combination of the coding methods used for this study allowed the researcher to be purposeful and rigorous with the study’s findings (Saldaña, 2016).

During the interviews, the researcher took notes that were used to analyze the participants’ responses. Observable nonverbal and verbal expressions of the participants were recorded and considered in developing themes. Consistencies emerged in their responses to questions related to culturally proficient training they received. Each participant either smiled or made an amused gesture while emphasizing that the training they received was self-sought.

Confidentiality

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, the following steps were followed by the researcher: (a) interviews were conducted with individual participants, (b) consent forms were made available for the participants to sign prior to the interviews, (c) electronic and hard copies of the transcripts, signed consents, and notes were passcode protected or stored in a lock-secured location, and (d) pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants. Additionally, all research artifacts will be stored for 3 years from the publication of this manuscript, and all research artifacts will be destroyed at the end of the 3 years. The confidentiality protocols were submitted to the IRB at St. John Fisher University for consideration and approval prior to beginning this study.

Chapter Summary

A qualitative phenomenological study provided this researcher with the information needed to advance research in the field of CRL. A focus on fidelity created additional opportunities for added value in the field of study. A consistent process for data collection and purposeful selection criterion for the participants added value to the potential findings. Identifying specific procedures and a process for data analysis provided the researcher with the appropriate guidelines for this study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

School principals and assistant principals make critical contributions to the practices and cultural awareness of K–12 school communities (Quin et al., 2015). Multiple studies have indicated the impact that school leaders have on schools’ cultures and how strategies they apply influence teachers’ instructional practices, ultimately impacting student achievement data (Sebastian et al., 2017). More recent reports indicate the contributions of CPL strategies (Lindsey et al., 2019). Researchers continue the exploration of the effectiveness of school principals and assistant principals on data points relating to CPL.

The existing research does not explicitly highlight strategies used by K–12 urban school leaders aligned with CPL practices. Consequently, this study gathered qualitative data collected from K–12 school principals and assistant principals in urban settings to learn more about their individual practices. Data were gathered and analyzed, in part, by referencing the CPL framework (Lindsey et al., 2019) to examine the culturally responsive strategies that urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals used and the training they received.

This study examined the strategies that the school leader participants applied while using the framework of CPL and how those leaders practiced cultural responsiveness and cultural proficiency. The researcher conducted a total of eight interviews with school principals and assistant principals and answered the following research questions:

1. From the perspectives of urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals, what strategies do leaders use to practice cultural responsiveness and proficiency? Of these

- strategies, which ones work well for teachers and students, and which are not as effective?
2. From the perspective of urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals, what training and opportunities are available, or have they received, relating to CPL strategies?

Chapter 4 details the analysis of the data and findings of this study. The analysis and findings of the study are written in sequence and aligned with the research questions. Additionally, key concepts and themes for each research question are identified and presented consecutively. Chapter 4 concludes with a summary of the findings gathered through the analysis of the data collected during this study.

Data Analysis and Findings

Semi-structured interviews with eight participants were conducted to collect qualitative, open-ended data. Transcripts from the interviews were analyzed using three stages of coding: (a) a priori codes, (b) emotion codes, and (c) pattern codes. The CPL framework was used during the first coding cycle to apply a priori codes. The second cycle of coding used was emotion coding and the third was pattern coding. The emotion coding process identified consistencies across participants' perspectives (Saldaña, 2015). Finally, pattern coding identified patterns based on thematic or conceptual similarity (Saldaña, 2015). Examination of the coding resulted in themes and subthemes for each research question.

Research Question 1

From the perspectives of urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals, what strategies do leaders use to practice cultural responsiveness and proficiency? Of these strategies, which ones work well for teachers and students, and which are not as effective?

This study examined the strategies used by school principals and assistant principals relating to CPL practices. The participant leadership responses related to school culture, valuing diversity, embracing challenges, being realistic, and conflict management. The responses were examined through the lens of the culturally proficient framework. Consequently, data analysis revealed two themes related to Research Question 1: “relationships are key and be inclusive.” Table 4.1 shows the themes key concepts, and subthemes for Research Question 1.

Table 4.1

Research Question 1 – Themes, Concepts, and Subthemes

Theme	Key Concept	Subtheme
1.1. Relationships are key	Value diversity by embracing the differences among other cultures and teaching others to do likewise	1.1a. Listening and trust 1.1b. Positively engage all
1.2. Be inclusive	Assess the culture by identifying the differences and similarities among people within their environment	1.2a. Think critically 1.2b. Ask questions

Theme 1: Relationships Are Key. During interviews, the participants spoke of valuing everyone to build and maintain healthy relationships. The participants consistently described the importance of ensuring that all stakeholders feel valued and affirmed. Responding to the first research question, all participants mentioned the value of relationships in some capacity. Connected to the theme of “relationships are key” and subthemes of “listening and trust” and “positively engage all.” Mr. Love, a sitting principal at Charter World US, described, “So, for me, the biggest key to any organization is relationships. And in order to find out how your culture is, you have to build relationships and people have to be able to trust you and be vulnerable to express themselves.” (P1, 21–22). Mr. Evers also explained:

And, so, the thought here, I've always said, that everyone within the school culture and our community are all valued. They come with their talent, their skills, and, therefore, the thought is that we put those values and skills to work. And, hopefully, we're all on the same page, moving in the same direction. (P2, 42–45)

Effectively demonstrating an appreciation for all cultures requires the establishment of healthy sustaining relationships. Ms. Trime of Anne Burns School communicated, “healthy relationships include listening to and responding to the needs of your school community. Leaders that fail to establish healthy relationships do not listen to their team” (P5, 33–35). Similarly, Ms. Ohla highlighted:

Knowing how people are interacting with each other, how students are responding to each other, how students feel, just the vibe of your building. Now, how do you get it to where you want it to be? Building a community and forming relationships with each and every person that is different. You have to get people to buy into whatever your vision and mission of the school is, or whatever your goal is for the school, you have to get people to buy into that. (P6, 19–24)

Relationships are the pathway for getting people to connect with a common belief. People are not going to commit themselves to a mission if they are not connected. The glue to that connection is relationships. Ms. Down emphasized the importance of establishing meaningful relationships by demonstrating inclusive practices:

We show what we value and we don't let it happen by chance. We strategically put things in place, whether it is PD [professional development] for staff, celebrations that we do in the building, assemblies, people that we bring in that we make sure that we value every culture in our building. One of the things that we have done, we have the international

Knight where Knight is our mascot, so with a play on words, we have all of the different cultures throughout the building . . . our staff members work with a different group, family, and community members, and we all come together and showcase our different foods, cultures and clothing . . . They make poster board or trifold boards, or they can do PowerPoints. You know, just telling about the different cultures, and students have the opportunity to go around and sample the foods. (P4, 36–45)

Being intentional in creating inclusive spaces for all stakeholders is a strategy that the leaders used to establish healthy relationships. Correspondingly, Ms. Downs described her success in building healthy relationships with staff, families, and students as the result of being genuine, “the majority of people say they trust me because they feel like I am genuine. I will tell them when it is yes, and I will tell them when it is no” (P4, 77–78).

Subtheme 1.1a: Listening and Trust. The subtheme of listening and trust was evident in the participants’ responses to Research Question 1. To build trust, Mr. Love employed strategies that included intentionally and positively engaging all students, families, and staff while also listening:

I did a listening and learning tour for the first 2 or 3 months while I was here and just introducing myself to people, not making any changes, just trying to see what the atmosphere and the culture was for staff, parents, and students, before I decided to make any changes. But during that process, I had individual meetings with every member in the building, not just the teachers; the leaders, the teachers, the custodians, the café, and I had created some specific questions. (P1, 24–30)

Aligned with this concept, Mr. Evers explained:

And then being a good listener to people. It's very interesting, in terms of what you learn from people in various pockets, and, ideally, everyone, but in various pockets, such as the union leadership, such as the parent group, PTA, PTO group, and such as student government in terms of those leaders and their thought processes in terms of the school and/or community environment. (P2, 26–30)

Both Mr. Evers and Mr. Boston indicated the importance of listening as a strategy to establish meaningful relationships and build trust to make stakeholders feel valued and affirmed.

Additionally, the focus on listening to the needs of students to build sustaining relationships was evident as described by Mr. Boston:

I have to concentrate on the needs of the children first. Adults brought me an issue related to the transition of students with disabilities. They shared that it is difficult to move them to specials because of their wheel chairs and other assistive equipment. They wanted to have specials' teachers push into classes to remove the transition. I realize the importance of having kids interact with other kids their age. So, I made the decision to continue the transitions because it is best for kids, not adults. (P3, 24–28)

Of the eight school building leaders interviewed for this study, seven mentioned elements of trust relating to listening to gain an understanding of the needs of the school community. Ms. Down connected the strategy of listening to developing trust for the cultivation of an inclusive school culture:

One of the ways that we determine what our school culture is [is] by what we value. We don't let it happen by chance. We strategically put things in place, whether it is PD for staff or celebrations we do in the building, assemblies, people we bring in, we make sure we value every culture. (P4, 33–37)

Ms. Down illustrated the importance of modeling the way and being intentional while leading by example and demonstrating values. Mr. Love described the importance of listening:

We have to be open to listen to our leaders and our teachers before we make an informed decision but having that open model. So, one thing about leadership for me, too, is wanting everybody to have a voice, but having that voice with the understanding that I'm still in charge. I'm charged with making the final decision and doing what's right, what I feel is right for the organization, but you don't ever want anyone to leave and say, "I wasn't heard." So, if they feel heard and valued, they'll support your initiatives. They may not always agree. And that's from your top leadership, too. And you want them to feel comfortable to say, "Hey, I don't agree, but I'm still going to support you 110% because you heard me out, but you still went with your decision, but I got your back."

(P1, 114–125)

Building healthy relationships requires listening and leaders who authentically listen demonstrate inclusiveness. Mr. Smith of Technology High emphasized:

Sometime[s] listening does not include asking questions. It is more about having the listening ear and hearing what people are saying. A lot of times without anyone saying anything, you get a feeling from observing what is taking place. You can get a feel of where the culture is currently from just being in the space and seeing people outside of yourself operate and function. Listening and hearing for myself is the best way that I have found. (P8, 44–49)

Listening is an art that culturally proficient leaders embrace and recognize as significant to establishing and maintaining healthy relationships. Ms. Ohla explained the principles of listening and trust in this statement, "I have to listen and understand that I don't have to be the

smartest person in the room. This makes me a better collaborator and develops trust within my team” (P7, 95–96).

Subtheme 1.1b: Positively Engage All. School building leaders apply a collaborative approach with almost all scenarios that include their interactions with the school community. The participants described the importance of inclusive practices and shared strategies that anchored into including the ideas, thoughts, and beliefs of all stakeholders. Mr. Evers described an approach:

Certainly, I would have values, my own personal values, but the thought here is not to let my values get in the way of the greater whole. And in the greater whole, I don’t think I’ve met anyone in my past who may not want to be successful within the school environment. And the thought here is trying to get feedback and to work with that feedback from various segments of the professional learning community and move accordingly. (P2, 32–36)

The school principal and assistant principal participants identified intentional strategies they used to engage members of their school communities. Mr. Love explained:

I had individual meetings with every member in the building, not just the teachers: the leaders, the teachers, the custodians, the café, and I had created some specific questions.

First of all, I was just learning more about their personal selves, where they come from, their background, particularly, what’s their “why.” Sometime that question stuck people, but I thought it was a good question to make people think. But, also, what their intentions are with being here, do they have future aspirations for a higher position or going back to school? So, I collected a lot of data, and I researched and I did a lot of

reflecting, myself, of what the culture was here before I decided some things that I would do to implement some changes. (P1, 28–37)

Ms. Ohla described the one-on-one interactions as critical, even if it was a simple greeting. “I make sure that I make eye contact with everyone and say, ‘hello.’ When I am visiting classrooms or transitioning from one place to another” (P6, 31–33). Mr. Smith echoed the importance of making direct contact with people:

I engage people all day every day verbally and nonverbally. I say, good morning and/or ask about their weekend. I ask them how their children, family, and pets are doing. I get to know them, and I authentically engage them. I greet students with head nods, high-fives, and smiles. No matter how I am feeling, I present my best self. (P8, 53–57)

Theme 1.2: Be Inclusive. This theme refers to strategies that the school leaders used to ensure that every voice was heard. This study’s participants explicitly described the importance of an inclusive leadership approach to develop a shared vision and responsive school culture. The subthemes of thinking critically and asking questions evolved from participants’ responses. Mr. Love stressed inclusivity as a practice that must be modeled from the top of the organization:

Our board has a community committee that is chaired by one of our board members. And that committee is in our biggest discussions on diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. And, right now, we’re working on a document for the board to approve about being a DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] full network. So, it’s approved from the board down, and within there, it speaks about opportunities from our hiring practices, how we treat parents, how we treat each other, our trainings. So, that’s something that’s huge. (P1, 148–154)

In the hierarchy of education, the board of education supervises the superintendent. Mr. Love described the influence he had on the board and how it was aligned with his desire to be inclusive. This approach was echoed in his reflection on being inclusive in the decision-making process:

It was something I had found out in [the] Indianapolis' school district. And I definitely showed you; I thought it was great because it was a policy in the board ,and the policy comes down to the school to implement, but it has several different layers. One is educational. One is operational, one is management. But it, basically, what it does is it makes you . . . It talks about how we make our decisions based off of diversity, equity, and inclusion and make sure we're not excluding anybody in all of our decision-making processes. (P1, 156–163)

The school principal and assistant principal participants described layers of inclusive practices. Another example that joined to making inclusive decisions and applied to inclusive strategies was provided by Mr. Evers who shared:

One of the things, if I get this right, and I'm a little rusty on some things, but the thought of talking a lot is to let teachers know, and school team, in general, as a principal of the school building, I'm not there to beat up on anyone. I'm there, and we're all there, and what brings us all together would be our students. And you notice probably with every question, I may be saying students, and it is not to lose focus of what has brought us there, whether the students are top-notch or whether they're in need of great support, but it's to have an understanding and hopefully a commitment that we're going to do the best job that we could possibly do to move the student agenda, instructional agenda; the outcomes, hopefully, would be good. (P2, 75–82)

The layers demonstrated within the participants' responses included the intentional efforts to influence from the top, down, within and beyond the school building. As Ms. Ohla expressed, "I can't lead alone. I have goals to accomplish that require me to tap into the skills of others. Collaboration is my middle name" (P6, 66–67).

Subtheme 1.2a: Think Critically. The participants expressed consistencies relating to how school building leaders think and how their thinking impacts the culture and climate of a school building. Mr. Smith referenced thoughts on the values of thinking critically as a leader:

I think about the current culture of the school and delve into the culture of where we currently are and galvanize the current culture by paying attention to where people are. Leaders have to be multifaceted; I say that because, on so many occasions in a minute's time, you can wear so many hats. Thinking about the roles we play while wearing the different hats is a critically component. (P8, 65–68)

The school leaders were able to adjust appropriately to address the needs of their building. These adjustments sometimes required them to take on roles not included in their job descriptions. Ms. Trime identified the balance leaders are required to have:

Interesting, [I am like a] tight rope walker! Kind of using some analogies, a waitress (motions hands balancing trays filled with dishes) is sometimes something that comes into my head, where I am serving something so delicate and so delicious that I need to make sure that it remains and stays on the platter. Sometimes that is an analogy that is in my head when I am thinking about the day ahead. (P5, 51–55)

Mr. Smith shared thinking related to this strategy:

The word that come to mind is multifaceted. I say that because, on so many occasions within . . . honestly within a minute's time you can wear so many hats within a minute's

time. When you add those minutes up, you can serve in so many roles. You can serve in the role of a food service individual, serving food, and then onto [being] someone who has to give feedback that was either positive or not so positive. Then sometimes you become a father figure of some sort to your students or sometimes even to a colleague. In this day and age, the role of an administrator has changed over the years. (P8, 71–77)

Subtheme 1.2b: Ask Questions. The school principals and assistant principals acknowledged the skill of questioning to gain understanding and to learn. Mr. Ring expressed, “never assume, always ask questions to clarify” (P7, 34). Ms. Trime provided more thoughts on questioning:

I ask questions in place of making assumptions with a goal of making sense of the situation. My team and I survey the staff and families quarterly to gather data and learn more. I conduct observations regularly, and during the observations, I see things that I could easily make assumptions about. Instead, I am very intentional in asking questions prior to drawing conclusion[s] about the instructional and management practices of the teachers. I ask questions that include why, what, and how. This allows for healthy dialogue and information that supports relationships instead of damaging the relationship. No one likes to be accused, especially with minimal information. (P5, 72–78)

Ms. Trime’s reflection on the practice of questioning supports the theme of leading by example. This building leader’s interactions with team members encouraged a culture that included assuming positive intentions through questioning. However, the practice of questioning can be used to be inclusive with parents and the community. Mr. Boston reflected on a conversation with a team that included parents and community members:

After events, we canvas parents and community partners. We ask questions, and the first one is generally, “how did the activities of this event make you feel?” How they feel after an event tells us a lot about the relationship and how they felt welcomed and affirmed. Their responses help us prepare for the next event and even the next conversation. I like to think of myself as someone who responds to what people feel and express. This is one way that our school is more responsive to cultural needs. (P3, 37–42)

A close examination of the perspectives of the urban K–12 principals and assistant principals identified strategies they used to practice cultural responsiveness. Of the strategies that the school leaders described, establishing relationships and being inclusive resonated as approaches that work well with teachers and unauthentic interactions were identified as least effective. The participants provided insight relating to their personal experiences, and this study highlights the consistencies in the data. The importance of relationships and inclusiveness was underscored in the participants’ responses to the research questions.

Research Question 2

From the perspective of urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals, what training and opportunities are available, or have they received, relating to CPL strategies?

This study sought a thorough understanding of the training and opportunities made available to K–12 school principals and assistant principals in urban schools. Collection and review of the data highlighted the themes of “lead by example” and “lack of training they received.” Table 4.2 depicts the themes, key concepts, and subthemes generated for Research Question 2.

Table 4.2

Research Question 2 – Themes, Concepts, and Subthemes

Theme	Key Concept	Subtheme
2.1. Lead by example	Manage conflict in a positive way to help everyone understand that cultural clashes can occur.	2.1a. Do the work 2.1b. Be visible
2.2. Lack of training	Adapt to diversity by being a lifelong learner of other cultures.	2.2a. Thrown into the fire 2.2b. Leader’s responsibility

Theme 2.1: Lead by Example. In response to the interview questions, this theme underscores the school building leaders’ thoughts, ideas, and understandings related to doing what they said and what they did. The subthemes drawn from the data collected are “do the work,” and “be visible.” The participants were asked about effective strategies that they believed were most helpful and six of the eight participants referenced modeling the expectations for staff. Ms. Ohla explained how a leader’s thinking is demonstrated through their behaviors:

I think that my role is a facilitator. I think that as a leader, you can’t just say, “do as I say and not as I do.” You have to model what you want people to embody, so my role as a leader is to make sure that I am practicing what I am preaching; I am being an example of what I would like the school to look like and that means across all stakeholders with kids, with parents, with staff, with everybody. With community members . . . that I am being consistent in what I believe in and that I am being supportive and not leaving anyone out.
(P6, 44–50)

Ms. Down explained,

I am the leader; I know everything that’s done or not done is really a play on what I put my stamp of approval on or what I show attention to. Even with staff, you know I may

want somethings but if I do not take the time to assess those things I expect to see than it won't happen. So, going back to the strategic part of how to do things, understanding my role and what I want to see in my building begins with me. (P4, 53–57)

Ms. Down also reflected on her leadership approach in response to a question that asked what she does differently to build the cultural competence of teachers and staff,

I lead by example. I cannot expect something from my staff that I don't do. Just to give an example, I had a meeting with all of the faculty, and one of the things I need them to be able to do is . . . You know, we have some teachers who have a hard time relating to our students, and I feel like it is my role to help them see our students and their needs. Not to just see them as a student that is just sitting in the classroom . . . and take ownership in the students' success. (P4, 78–84)

Subtheme 2.1a: Do the Work. The participants described the function of school leaders as specific to the work they do. A key concept that arose in each interview was that leaders need to understand they must be involved in the work being done. In reflection, the participants provided descriptions of how leaders make an impact on the work being done at their schools. The types of strategies they described included delegating responsibility, being present and visible, and willing to help in any capacity. Mr. Boston spoke about a leader's responsibility to do whatever is needed to support outcomes, "I have custodial staff, cafeteria staff, and other team members that have specific job duties. However, on several occasions I have wiped tables, cleaned floors, and handed out lunches" (P3, 77–80). Ms. Down echoed this thinking:

I do what is necessary and avoid overwhelming myself. I will take on assignments that are not specific to my job duties. I may help sweep the floor and remove trash, but I will not become the janitor. My team takes pride in the work they do, and by doing too much,

I can make them have feelings about their work ethic. I do enough to help and then it is back to what they expect the principal [should] be doing. (P4, 83–87)

When referring to culturally proficient practices that are most helpful to developing the culture and community of the school, Mr. Smith explained his approach,

Man, I do whatever I can to make the difference for kids and families. I visit homes with the attendance team, I sit in restorative circles with the mental health team, I am at school sporting events jumping and screaming. I do what it takes to get the results needed. (P8, 144–146)

Mr. Smith of Technology High made a connection to doing the work and being visible, which is another subtheme that was established.

Subtheme 2.1b: Be Visible. As a subtheme of “lead by example,” principals and assistant principals in K–12 urban schools described their roles and responsibilities related to “being visible” in their schools. For example, Mr. Ring of Abbie School shared:

I was mentoring a new principal and I went to visit the school. While in the main office, I observed the parent liaison working with children and families. My mentee at the time was in the office with the office door closed. I sat for about 10 minutes and could hear parents and children calling the parent liaison the principal. I asked the parent liaison why they called her principal and she replied, because they think I am. I am the person they see and interact with. (P7, 88–92)

This example highlights the effect of a leader’s presence. A leader who fails to be out of the office and, at a minimum, visibly available for students, staff, and families, make it difficult for stakeholders to know who they are. In the absence of confirmation, people make their own assumptions. Mr. Evers reflected saying:

I think that it is important for a principal to be out and available to everyone. Every morning, I greet students during arrival. During this time, I am able to interact with parents and guardians. They have access to me and can ask a quick question and share information. They know that I am the building leader, and they know that they will see me each day. (P2, 123–126)

All of the study participants mentioned a form of visibility including communications, being physically available by visiting classes, intentionally moving throughout the school, utilizing social media platforms, and spending time in the cafeteria during lunches. Mr. Smith reflected, “I use every platform to connect with families, the community, and students. Social media provides unique opportunities for our school to make information available” (P8, 166–167). Ms. Trime shared the philosophy of Mr. Smith when referencing the importance of visibility:

As the principal, I am the face of the school. When something good is happening at my school, I get credit just as much as when I have to answer questions when something bad happens. I intentionally ensure that the story of our school is shared on Facebook and Twitter. I have an amazing social media team and they consistently post highlights from our school. (P5, 41-44)

Theme 2.2: Lack of Training. The second theme that developed in response to the interview questions for Research Question 2 was related to the training or lack of training the school principals and assistant principals received prior to becoming a school leader. The situation of having to navigate the role of a school leader without adequate preparation was emphasized by all participants. All of the participants accentuated the reality that they had

received no formal training beyond their higher education course work requirements. Mr. Evers stated:

The training that I received, basically, it was ultimately leaving the teacher ranks, becoming AP [assistant principal], and to observe the principal and to listen to the principal who took me under his wing. I'm not sure everything was shared with me. I thought becoming a principal that I may have known a lot, but the world was so different than what I thought as I left AP to become a principal. (P2, 130–133)

Mr. Love furthered Mr. Evers's thoughts by stating:

So, I don't believe I've received really good training. I just have to be honest. Not talking about now, so it's a history. So, you think about the 15, 20 years ago when I came into leadership, I had just got my degree. I got a dean position. I was just thrown into the position. Like I said, I was baptized by fire. (P1, 244–247)

The idea of being “baptized by fire” (P1, 247) or “thrown into the fire” (P2, 162) was described by the participants passionately as they reflected on their professional and personal experiences. Ms. Ohla responded to an inquiry about the training she received in preparation for the role of an assistant principal stating, “[laughing] I mean, you have your traditional leadership program where you take the required courses on leadership. I don't know if that is training” (P7, 66–67).

Subtheme 2.2a: Thrown Into the Fire. The idea of being thrown into the fire represents what the participants described as the lack of training they received prior to becoming a school leader. Mr. Ever stated the following:

It was learn as you go for me, thrown into [the] fire and hopes that you're going to end up coming out on the other end in a better way than when you entered the fire. And again,

fortunately for me, things worked out. I will also add, along the way, there were a lot of good people, teachers, and administrators who were very, very supportive. (P2, 162–165)

Additionally, Ms. Ohla described some informal training she received, explaining:

Professional developments that I have participated in for my own knowledge and then being a person that is teaching classes and taking classes. A lot of my training is informal and not coming from a training or a handbook. I would say that is where most of my training comes from. (P7, 166–169)

The participants' responses to questions about the training they received were consistent. Ms. Trime shared her training experiences and spoke directly about her higher education and on-the-job experiences. Her employer in another state had a pipeline administrative program that did not explicitly connect with culturally proficient practices, but she shared that her program was valuable:

Okay, so I had two great experiences... I was chosen to be a part of a principal pipeline that they had there, where it was 2 years and you earned your master's degree, and it was in alignment with the district's priorities, which was neat because it . . . you were really fed what you were expected to lead. So, I did that through... University and then had on-the-job kind of training, so I was my principal's intern. (P5, 61–64)

Mr. Smith's response substantiated thoughts connected with indirect training experiences:

I think the best training that I have had is life; life, itself, has been the most real, in a sense, training that I had. I grew up . . . in the church and that, for me, has provided so many just different levels of quote unquote "training." A lot of time people would ask me, and I am not saying this to be, like, pompous or you know . . . I am always [learning and] trying to get better, but, you know, public speaking, things of that nature, now those

pieces took place when I was a little young pup doing Easter speeches, Christmas speeches at church, not getting a grade, but getting the nods of elders, and the hand claps of other individuals of acceptance, you know, the good jobs and memorizing poems and things of that nature right in church. You know, a lot of my training as a leader really came from growing up in church. (P8, 30–37)

The participants consistently made connections to their individual training experiences abstractly. None of the eight administrators' interview responses clearly identified the leadership training they had received early in their administrative roles that were directly connected to cultural responsiveness.

Subtheme 2.2 b: Leader's Responsibility. Articulation of a leader's responsibility was referenced by each of the participants. Both the school principals and assistant principals applied the concept of self-guided practice to their description of the responsibility leaders have. Ms. Ohla, a vice-principal at Flower School, stated:

I am responsible for the safety and security of my building, staff, and students. I have to make sure that systems are in place to support my responsibility. I am responsible for developing a school environment that is welcoming and affirming for staff, families, and community members. I have to conduct emergency drills with fidelity. (P6, 143–145)

Mr. Ring, the principal at Abbie School, described the responsibility of a school leader as one that includes empowering teachers, staff, and students:

I think you have to give them opportunities to build their competence. You can't assume that people already know how to do stuff. You have to give them opportunities to build their toolbox. You can't pretend that they know how to be responsive to the needs of the

school. They don't know what they don't know, and I think that it is my job to build their skills. (P8, 205–208)

Creating opportunities for stakeholders to grow, learn, and develop in ways that would positively impact the goals of the school community resonated within the responses of all participants. Culturally proficient school leaders have a keen eye for identifying the strengths of team members while leveraging their growth areas.

Summary of Results

Chapter 4 presented the results of the qualitative data analysis of eight semi-structured interviews conducted with five principals and three assistant principals who were leading schools in urban settings. The semi-structured interviews explored two research questions. Research Question 1 provided data that were analyzed to understand the perspectives of the participants and the strategies they used to practice cultural responsiveness and cultural proficiency. Consequentially, two themes emerged from the analysis of the data. The first theme identified was the significance of relationships. All eight participants emphasized the importance of establishing meaningful, healthy relationships. A key concept that emerged from the Research Question 1 responses was that responsive leaders value everyone, and that connected to the initial themes that evolved as “listening and trust” and “positively engage all.” Conversely, the participants designated insincerity and inauthenticity as least effective approaches.

During the semi-structured interviews, the eight participants' responses to the interview questions proved their commitment to the development of relationships. The school principals and assistant principals' words and nonverbal expressions emphasized their willingness to go above and beyond to secure meaningful relationships with teachers, staff, and students and to create a school culture that was responsive, welcoming, and affirming for all.

Research Question 2 focused on the exploration of what trainings and opportunities the school building leaders received that related to CPL strategies. Two themes emerged from the analysis of the participants' responses in this section. The first theme highlights the school building leaders' perceptions of the meaning of "lead by example," which was connected to the key concept of do what you say. Additionally, two subthemes that emerged: "do the work" and "be visible." The second theme indicated the "lack of training" the school building leaders received relating to culturally proficient practices. The participants all agreed that the training was not made available, and beyond their higher educational experiences, additional training was self-directed.

In the analysis of the interview data, a clear connection to the theoretical framework of CPL emerged. Lindsey et al. (2019) identified the six components of CPL as assessing the culture, valuing diversity, embracing diversity, being realistic, managing conflict, and adapting. The components align with the themes and subthemes that developed in this study. Assessing the culture included recognizing and accepting the differences of all people. Mr. Evers described his approach to assessing the culture, valuing diversity, and building relationships:

First and foremost, I'll start out with a basic, the school is in place before I arrived. And the thought for me is to try to get an understanding of the professional learning community; an understanding of, certainly, the student body; understanding of parents in terms of their thought processes; understanding staff. Also, community is very important in terms of what the organization may be like in terms of establishing for myself a foundation in terms of what's there. And the thought is also to take quite a bit of data, at least look at data, established data, prior to coming on board and then being on board.

(P2, 19–26)

Additionally, Mr. Smith shared similar sentiments relating to learning and valuing the school community:

I do not just see the differences in people, I appreciate and even celebrate them [their differences]. One practical, but not always easy way to do this [celebrate differences], is to get peoples' names right. I am not the best at pronouncing names, and I am honest about that with people. I tell them, "your name is important and I want to be sure to say it correctly and I want you to correct me if I get it wrong." I don't give people nicknames, like "Ms. B" for a complicated name that begins with the letter B. I think being intentional and explicitly expressing my intentions to people goes a long way. (P8, 23–29)

While the theme of establishing relationships resonated, the data regarding how urban leaders approached building relationships demonstrated differences in methods. Two of the six participants described a focus on utilizing quantitative data over the qualitative data, while the other participants shared strategies that relied on their instincts. Ms. Trime of Anne Burns School explained:

I get data from the students, their parents, and the community. We send surveys every quarter and sometimes more often depending on the need. The survey responses have provided my team with information that helps us know more about the school community. We learn what they like, what they want, and how we can do better to serve the school community. (P5, 36–39)

Moreover, Mr. Boston emphasized his approach, "I am all about getting surveys into the hands of stakeholders. I let them tell me who they are and I avoid assuming" (P3, 21–22). Even with the differences of focus from very direct personal interactions to the survey approach, both

groups provide qualitative and quantitative data points that culturally responsive leaders use to assess the culture, value diversity, and build relationships.

Chapter 5 discusses the research implications based on the results presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 also includes the limitations of this study, the recommendations for practice and future research, and it presents the conclusion of this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Researchers have conducted extensive studies of culturally responsive practices, CPL, and the roles of school leaders (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lindsey et al., 2019). However, the existing studies have provided limited qualitative insight regarding leaders' perspectives of the strategies they applied and the culturally proficient preservice and in-service training they received (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2016; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Tilman, 2003, 2005). Consequently, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perspectives and practices of leaders in urban K–12 settings using the framework of CPL. Ultimately, this study emphasized the reality that school principals and assistant principals impact students' academic and behavioral achievement, which has a direct and indirect influence on their individual internal perspectives. Chapter 5 provides the key findings of this study and its limitations, gives recommendations for school leaders and future research, and concludes with a study summary.

This qualitative study addressed the following research questions:

1. From the perspectives of urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals, what strategies do leaders use to practice cultural responsiveness and proficiency? Of these strategies, which ones work well for teachers and students, and which are not as effective?

2. From the perspective of urban K–12 school principals and assistant principals, what training and opportunities are available, or have they received, relating to CPL strategies?

The research questions were examined through the lens of the CPL framework (Lindsey et al., 2019). Critical examination of the data resulted in the development of themes and three key findings.

Implications of Findings

Three key findings emerged from the analysis of the data collected during the participant interviews. First, based on the participants' responses, culturally responsive leaders in urban schools are intentional about being culturally responsive. Second, training and support for leaders in urban schools is not systematic or automatic. Urban school leaders seek out their own ways to gain skills and knowledge. Ultimately, urban school leaders have to rely on the training they seek for themselves to develop cultural proficiency. Finally, even if urban leaders are intentional in their actions, the system is not set up for developing intentionality. The participants described their experiences that developed their ability for listening, engaging, and connecting with all factions of their school communities. The school leaders emphasized asking critical questions and challenging normalcy. The leaders described maximizing their influence by being anchored in cultural proficiency.

The scope of these findings is aligned within the components of the culturally proficient framework. Lindsey et al. (2019) outlined the importance of (a) assessing the culture, by identifying the differences among people within their environment; (b) valuing diversity by embracing the differences among other cultures and teaching others to do likewise; (c) creating a work setting that embraces the challenges of diversity; (d) understand that challenges will arise

by being realistic in the process; (e) managing conflict in a positive way to help everyone understand that cultural clashes can occur; and (f) adapting to diversity by being a lifelong learner of other cultures. The responses of the participants in this study aligned with the framework of Lindsey et al. (2019).

Finding 1

Culturally responsive leaders in urban schools are intentional about being culturally responsive.

Being culturally responsive invites opportunities for school leaders to develop and maintain healthy, sustaining relationships with students, staff, and community members. Gay (1994) described educators who make intentional connections while applying their background knowledge as high efficacy practitioners. At the time of this study, all eight of the study participants were leaders of urban schools. Culturally responsive urban school leaders utilize strategies and have a particular skill set unique to the environments in which they serve. Madhlangobe & Gordon (2012) conducted a study and found that culturally responsive leaders focus on establishing meaningful relationships with the school community while being visible and sincere. Furthermore, the participants of this study described the unique skill set of urban leaders as being individuals who are culturally alert, reflective of their practices, and who aggressively seek feedback. By being culturally alert, culturally proficient school leaders embrace opportunities to learn more about other cultures and recognize the value of diversity (Khalifa et al., 2016). These leaders were very intentional in their interactions and metacognitively aware. Similarly, Johnson (2014) stated that the awareness culturally proficient leaders have is a term called critical consciousness. These leaders apply a multifaceted approach to culturally relevant scenarios while being reflective in the moment. The participants of this

study communicated how they reflected about their practices concerning interactions with stakeholders and how their reflections occurred before, during, and after their interactions. Urban leaders benefit from thinking about their own thinking, while reflecting on decisions and preparing for next steps. This was evident in their responses as they discussed their approaches to being culturally sensitive. The study participants described being culturally sensitive as being responsive and inclusive. Further, they expressed ways they intentionally sought input from all members of their school communities. Consistent with the study's data, Johnson (2014) described leaders who are intentional in their practices and conscious of their thinking as culturally competent.

The urban school leaders in this study used strategies intentionally, and they consistently maintained a positive outlook that could be recognized within their interactions with all. The participants consistently stated how they maintained a positive approach in their response to adversity. They emphasized the importance of assuming positive intentions when examining communication from staff and members of the school community. In assuming positive intentions, they assume that the people they interacted with were applying their own understanding of the paths toward accomplishing a common goal. The school principals and assistant principals responding to the interview questions related how they interpreted private and public conversations with stakeholders saying that they believed, until proven differently, that stakeholders meant well. Their positive approach created opportunities for them to inspire students, staff, and community members.

Culturally proficient school leaders apply the strategy of intentionality by being intentional with the language they use; being intentionally positive and looking for positive outcomes; being intentional in celebrating the success of students, staff, and community

members; being collaborative; being aware of the interests, values, and needs of others; listening intently to learn; and being intentional when reflecting. Consistent with the idea of being intentional, Johnson (2014) emphasized that leaders who think critically about their style of leadership are more responsive to the cultural needs of their school communities. Furthermore, school leaders who intentionally counter racist ideologies and systems have attributes associated with cultural proficiency (Khalifa et al., 2016). The leaders interviewed for this study discussed intentionality as a natural characteristic they had while highlighting the impact of their approach. When asked about practices he used intentionally, Mr. Love stated:

So . . . when we talk about diversity, equity, and justice, I intentionally, when I'm looking at hiring people, I'm looking at the population that my school is, which is Black and Brown young men, predominantly, from the city of [removed]. So, when I'm looking at my staff, I am intentionally, first and foremost, I'm looking for quality candidates to put in front of our young men to be examples. But part of it, too, is I'm also looking to put quality candidates that look like the community that I'm leading. So, I intentionally make that a priority of mine, and I think it's very important. (P1, 65–72)

Like Mr. Love, the participants described how they strategically disrupted racist systems from their positions as school leaders. The disruption required intentional focus on goals and the assumption that all stakeholders have the best intentions. When leaders assume the best intentions, they are better equipped to consider unique ideas. Consequently, they are more sensitive to diverse thoughts and suggestions. The assumption of positive intentions within interactions promotes reflection and the support of coordinated efforts that impact change. Examples of the participants' efforts were defined as listening to perspectives for understanding and asking essential questions for clarity.

Finding 2

Training and support for leaders in urban schools is not systematic or automatic. Urban school leaders seek out their own ways to gain skills and knowledge.

Culturally responsive training was not formally made available for the participants of this study. They described the lack of preservice and in-service training opportunities they had. Young et al. (2010) indicated the lack of preparation principals receive and sought policy implementation that would require culturally responsive training for school leaders. Additionally, Khalifa et al. (2016) explained that school leaders who are not culturally competent and not provided culturally responsive training are likely to impact school communities negatively. In response to questions about the preservice training received, the participants described their higher educational experiences. Unanimously, the participants explained how specific training and learning opportunities connected to cultural proficiency were not explicitly offered during their higher education coursework. All the participants referenced what they learned or were exposed to as college students, however, each made a connection to the training they sought, themselves, to support their path forward. All eight of the study participants explained how relationships guided their paths toward cultural proficiency. Mr. Love used the term mentor numerous times during his interview and stated:

So, I'm a counselor by trade. For me, mentoring has been the key thing for my whole entire career. And when I say mentoring, it's mentoring slash relationship... So, for me, mentorship is the most important thing and its [about the] relationship. (P1, 74–79)

The foundation of mentorship is guiding relationships. Culturally proficient leaders understand the importance of making connections that will build their competence. For example, Ms. Ohla stated, "I reached out to mentors who helped shape my thinking and ability to impact the culture

of my school” (P7, 75–76). The urban leaders who participated in this study explained that actively seeking resources to develop skills helped navigate scenarios in ways that contributed to the needs of the school community. The participating school principals and assistant principals actively seek resources. Actively seeking resources is an essential element of the practices applied by urban school leaders. In fact, Mr. Smith stated, “The people I reached out to prior to securing a principal role and talk to while in the principal seat have been the most essential trainers I have had” (P8, 39–40). These urban school leaders maximized the relational capital they gained through networking and by developing over years. They recognized each individual person as a resource for asking questions and calling for support (Khalifa et al., 2016; Lindsey et al., 2019).

Finding 3

Even if urban leaders are intentional in their actions, the system is not set up for developing intentionality.

Urban districts do not have systems in place that provide training for school leaders to become intentional during their leadership journey to gain cultural proficiency. The lack of training prevents consistency of practice and does not offer school leaders the opportunity to build cultural proficiency. Consequently, school leaders are left to rely on their ability to seek training on their own. This prevents fidelity of practice and creates performance gaps that can be identified by schools in urban districts.

School leaders make an impact by strategically being intentional in their practice. Urban school leaders who use the knowledge gained through their experiences apply strategies that are culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of the school community. The participants of this study consistently accentuated their intentionality relating to the theoretical framework of

Lindsey et al. (2019)—even if it was not an element of their natural character. Mr. Ring stated, “even when I do not feel like it, I talk to parents with a smile and let them know I understand their perspective” (P7, 38–39). The idea that doing what is necessary to gain an understanding of the cultural needs of the community served resonated as consistent data points. Gay (1994) coined the practice of recognizing the cultural needs of a community as making intentional connections. The idea of making intentional connections includes authentically meaningful interactions between leaders and stakeholders. Being purposeful when engaging with the school community invites opportunities to extend relationships and better understand peoples’ perspectives (Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2013).

The participants explained how urban school principals and assistant principals make connections that are consistent and align with exercises that represent cultural proficiency. The connections are made through intentional approaches and constant reflection. They applied the principles outlined by Lindsey et al. (2019), which include assessing the culture. The school principals and assistant principals who took part in this study recognized that being responsive did not happen by chance, and they understood that the training they were provided did not explicitly hone their skills of being intentional in their interactions, being intentional in the language they use, and being intentional about reflecting during and after their interactions. The formal training for the urban leaders did not offer immediate connections to developing CRL skills (Khalifa, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2018). The participants described training scenarios that highlighted how their lived experiences fostered their culturally responsive skill set more than the formal training they received. Each explained how mentors and colleagues directly or indirectly influenced their leadership practices.

Limitations

Although appropriate for a qualitative study, the sample size for this study was relatively small compared to the number of urban leaders in the studied location. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable to all urban leaders.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined the lived experiences of urban school leaders using the CPL framework. The framework contains six elements that provide a general synthesis of approaches that culturally proficient leaders apply. Future research examining the lived experiences of suburban and rural school district-level leaders would add value beyond the findings revealed in this study. Also, opportunities for future related research include increasing the sample size of participants and surveying superintendents and board members to examine how they plan for policy and systems for cultural proficiency in their schools.

For example, increasing the sample size of the number of participants may provide additional data points with a more diverse participant pool. Additionally, a study surveying superintendents and school board members to gain insight on how they plan for policy and systems may provide data from a different perspective. A study examining the perspectives of students' lived experience relating to leaders who apply culturally responsive techniques may offer additional data.

Recommendations for Practice

This study identified the notion that culturally responsive leaders apply strategies intentionally to positively influence school communities. The practice of being intentional coincides with an element of CPL's description of being responsive to diversity by being a lifelong learner of other cultures (Lindsey et al, 2019). Intentionality requires adaptability to

remain responsive to the diverse needs of urban schools. Miller (2020) examined culturally relevant leadership and found that students are influenced more by their interactions with leaders than what is being taught in textbooks. All leaders need to be required to participate in training that endorses the strategies aligned with culturally proficient practices. One of the participants in this study described being intentional within his interactions with all members of the school community as one of his greatest attributes as a leader. The training and coursework can be made available during the onboarding process or made part of their higher educational pathways. Gay (2010) and Khalifa et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of leadership and the training leaders receive to grow toward cultural proficiency. Currently, higher education institutions do not offer coursework that explicitly focuses on intentionality to develop cultural proficiency. Additionally, preservice and in-service professional development lacks a focus on school leaders being intentionally aligned with the elements of CPL. School principals play a critical role in developing a culturally responsive school culture. This study provides insight on how principals can utilize CPL strategies to support the implementation of culturally responsive practices school-wide. For example, the participants of this study shared how they use their influence to interview and potentially hire candidates with diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Furthermore, superintendents and school boards need to be intentional in the plan for policy and systems for cultural proficiency in their schools. The participants of this study emphasized their intentional efforts to influence district-level leadership by using data and asking relevant questions. However, systemic change does not occur without a shift in mindset and the shift comes from an understanding of the significance of culturally proficient strategies (Lindsey et al., 2019). School district leaders can create opportunities and mandate culturally specific training. This can be done by adding requirements to the employment contracts and by infusing

training within the onboarding process for new administrators. For example, school leaders newly hired would be required to complete training aligned with CPL strategies.

Summary

This qualitative study used the theoretical framework of CPL to collect data from school principals and assistant principals of K–12 urban schools. Prior research focused on teachers' roles in being culturally responsive with limited studies focused on administrators' impact (Gay, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Urban schools across the nation are consistently identified as underperforming compared to suburban schools. The longstanding gap between urban and suburban districts has been researched using multiple approaches and theoretical frameworks (Khalifa, 2018). The focus of prior studies pointed toward the underperformance of Black males as a subgroup.

Some articles examined the role of the assistant principal, however, none of the literature reviewed for this study included the assistant principals' perspective on CPL (Khalifa et al., 2016, 2019). Conversely, the previous research underscored the school principals' roles and how they directly impacted teachers' instructional practices that directly guided learning. Additionally, minimal research examined the strategies leaders used relating to cultural proficiency. Although researchers mentioned the significance of the school leaders' roles, none explicitly examined the lived experiences of school principals and assistant principals.

An examination of the literature revealed the influence that culturally proficient leaders, by applying specific strategies, have on the academic and social emotional achievement of learners in urban schools (Gay, 2002; Lindsey et al., 2019). The elements outlined include assessing the culture, valuing diversity, understanding that challenges will arise, managing conflict, and adapting to diversity (Lindsey et al., 2019). Research on the value leaders add to

school communities revealed a focus on students' strengths, the evolution of terminology, the leaders' emphasis on the language, and how they communicated (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Miller, 2020). A review of the literature exposed a gap that pinpointed limited research including the experiences of assistant principals relating to cultural proficiency.

A total of eight school leaders, including school principals and assistant principals were interviewed for this study. Themes relating to the research questions emerged from the interview data. The themes underscored the participants' concentration on the following: relationships are key, be inclusive, lead by example, and lack of training. The findings identified in this study developed from the themes and subthemes.

The study established that school principals and assistant principals in urban schools apply specific strategies and have skills directly connected to cultural proficiency. Each of the participants of this study emphasized the importance of relationships and the value they added to school communities. They also mentioned how inclusivity ties to building healthy and meaningful relationships. Ultimately, the participants explained how establishing relationships relies on being inclusive as a leader. Additionally, the leaders described the lack of training that was made available to them prior to and after they officially moved into a leadership position. To supplement the lack of training, the school leaders explained how they sought training on their own through mentorship and lived experiences.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of school administrators in an urban setting related to CPL. This study found that urban school leaders apply very specific strategies to address the unique needs of the students, teachers, and community they serve. Ultimately, the leaders develop the skills to do the very important work they do through self-directed learning paths as formal culturally responsive training is not readily available.

Finally, this study provides evidence of the importance of leaders being intentional in their practice. Each element of their leadership responsibilities requires a laser-like focus on intentionality. The participants shared that the aspects of CPL are part of their practice. Additionally, the participants communicated how they intentionally (a) assessed the culture, by identifying the differences among people within their environment; (b) valued diversity, by embracing the differences among other cultures and teaching others to do likewise; (c) created a work setting that embraced the challenges of diversity; (d) understood that challenges will arise by being realistic in the process; (e) managed conflict in a positive way to help everyone understand that cultural clashes can occur; and (f) adapted to diversity by being a lifelong learner of other cultures (Lindsey et al., 2019). The participants in this study shared the importance of using responsive language, conveying their values, and displaying their appreciation for cultural differences that effectively engage school communities and individuals while challenging practices that minoritize groups (Lindsey et al, 2019). Participants felt strongly that culturally proficient leaders are conscious of their own level of social intelligence and intentionally demonstrate an appreciation of culturally differences.

References

- Agosto, V., Dias, L., Kaiza, N., Alvarez McHatton, P., & Elam, D. (2013). Culture-based leadership and preparation: A qualitative meta-synthesis of the literature. In L. C. Tillman & J. J. Scheurich (Eds.), *Handbook of research on educational leadership for diversity and equity* (pp. 625–650). Routledge.
- Bal, A., & Trainor, A. A. (2016). Culturally responsive experimental intervention studies: The development of a rubric for paradigm expansion. *Review of Educational Research, 86*(2), 319–359. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315585004>
- Beachum, F., & Dentith, A. M. (2004). Teacher leaders creating cultures of school renewal and transformation. *The Educational Forum, 68*(3), 276–286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131720408984639>
- Brion, C. (2021). Using a culturally proficient leadership lens to effectively serve refugee students. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership, 24*(4), 30–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554589211012428>
- Brown, M., McNamara, G., O’Hara, J., Hood, S., Burns, D., & Kurum, G. (2019). Evaluating the impact of distributed culturally responsive leadership in a disadvantaged rural primary school in Ireland. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 47*(3), 457–474. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217739360>
- Cokley, K., McClain, S., Jones, M., & Johnson, S. (2012). A preliminary investigation of academic disidentification, racial identity, and academic achievement among African American adolescents. *The High School Journal, 95*(2), 54–68. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41343015>
- Cooper, N. A., & Garner, B. K. (2012). *Developing a learning classroom: Moving beyond management through relationships, relevance, and rigor* (1st ed.). Corwin.
- Creswell, J. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dailey, D., Cotabish, A., & Jackson, N. (2018). Increasing early opportunities in engineering for advanced learners in elementary classrooms: A review of recent literature. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 41*(1), 93–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162353217745157>

- Davis, S. H., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2012). Innovative principal preparation programs: What works and how we know. *Planning and Changing*, 43(1/2), 25–45. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ977545.pdf>
- Ding, H., Yu, E., & Li, Y. (2020). Strengths-based leadership and its impact on task performance: A preliminary study. *South African Journal of Business Management*, 51(1), a1832. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v51i1.1832>
- Donahoo, J., Hattie, J., & Eells, R. (2018, March). The power of collective efficacy. *Educational Leadership*, 75(6), 40–44. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/the-power-of-collective-efficacy>
- Dutta, V., & Sahney, S. (2016). School leadership and its impact on student achievement: The mediating role of school climate and teacher job satisfaction. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 30(6), 941–958. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-12-2014-0170>
- Drysdale, L., Gurr, D., & Goode, H. (2016). Dare to make a difference: Successful principals who explore the potential of their role. In D. Gerr & L. Drysdale, *International studies in educational administration* (pp. 37–54). Journal of the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration & Management. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321319772_Dare_to_Make_a_Difference_Successful_Principals_Who_Explore_the_Potential_of_their_Role
- Durden, P. C. (2008). Wanted: Good leaders for urban schools. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 3(1), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/194277510800300102>
- Finnigan, K. S. (2012). Principal leadership in low-performing schools. *Education and Urban Society*, 44(2), 183–202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124511431570>
- Ford, T. (2012). Culturally responsive leadership: How one principal in an urban primary school responded successfully to Maori student achievement. *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, 2(2012), 28–35. <https://doi.org/10.18296/set.0384>
- Flick, U. (2018). *An introduction to qualitative research* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Gay, G. (1994). Coming of age ethnically: Teaching young adolescents of color. *Theory Into Practice*, 33(3), 149–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849409543633>
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, & practice* (1st ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106–116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053002003>

- Gerhart, L. G., Harris, S., & Mixon, J. (2011). Beliefs and effective practices of successful principals in high schools with a Hispanic population of at least 30%. *NASSP Bulletin*, 95(4), 266–280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636511428373>
- Gooden, M. A., & Dantley, M. (2012). Centering race in a framework for leadership preparation. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 7(2), 237–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775112455266>
- Gooden, M. A., & O’Doherty, A. (2015). Do you see what I see? Fostering aspiring leaders’ racial awareness. *Urban Education*, 50(2), 225–255. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085914534273>
- Gordon, S. P., & Ronder, E. A. (2016). Perceptions of culturally responsive leadership inside and outside of a principal preparation program. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 25(2), 125–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105678791602500202>
- Hallinger, P. (2003). Leading educational change: Reflections on the practice of instructional and transformational leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 33(3), 329–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764032000122005>
- Han, H., Vomvoridi-Ivanović, E., Jacobs, J., Karanxha, Z., & Feldman, A. (2017). Using collaborative self-study methods to explore culturally responsive pedagogy in higher education. In *SAGE research methods cases Part 2*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473959453>
- Henfield, M. S., & Washington, A. R. (2012). “I want to do the right thing but what is it?” White teachers’ experiences with African American students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 81(2), 148–161. <https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.81.2.0148>
- Horsford, S. D., Grosland, T., & Gunn, K. M. (2011). Pedagogy of the personal and professional: Toward a framework for culturally relevant leadership. *Journal of School Leadership*, 21(4), 582–606. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461102100404>
- Jett, C. C., McNeal Curry, K., & Vernon-Jackson, S. (2016). Let our students be our guides: McNair scholars “guide” three urban teacher educators on meeting the needs of culturally diverse learners. *Urban Education*, 51(5), 514–534. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085914549262>
- Johnson, C., Sdunzik, J., Bynum, C., Kong, N., & Xiaoyue, Q. (2021). Learning about culture together: Enhancing educators’ cultural competence through collaborative teacher study groups. *Professional Development in Education*, 47(1), 177–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2019.1696873>
- Johnson, L. (2014). Culturally responsive leadership for community empowerment. *Multicultural Education Review*, 6(2), 145–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2014.11102915>

- Johnson, L. (2007). Rethinking successful school leadership in challenging U.S. schools: Culturally responsive practices in school community relationships. *ISEA*, 35(3), 49–57. https://www.academia.edu/30747586/Rethinking_successful_school_leadership_in_challenging_U_S_schools_Culturally_responsive_practices_in_school_community_relationships
- Kearney, W. S., Herrington, D. E., & Aguilar, D. V. (2012). Beating the odds: Exploring the 90/90/90 phenomenon. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 45(2), 239–249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2012.661248>
- Khalifa, M. A. (2018). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.
- Khalifa, M. A., Gooden, M. A., & Davis, J. E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 1272–1311. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543166630383>
- Khalifa, M. A., Khalil, D., Marsh, T. E. J., & Halloran, C. (2019). Toward an Indigenous, decolonizing school leadership: A literature review. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 55(4), 571–614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X18809348>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1163320>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2013). Lack of achievement or loss of opportunity. In P. L. Carter & K. G. Welner (Eds.), *Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance* (pp. 11–22). Oxford University Press.
- Levitan, J. (2020) Incorporating participant voice in culturally responsive leadership: A case study. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 19(3), 390–406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2019.1585546>
- Lezotte, L., & Snyder, K. (2011). *What effective schools do: Re-envisioning the correlates*. Solution Tree Press.
- Lindsey, R. B., Roberts, L. M., & CampbellJones, F. (2004). *The culturally proficient school: An implementation guide for school leaders*. Corwin.
- Lindsey, R. B., Robins, K. N., Terrell, R. D., & Lindsey, D. B. (2019). *Cultural proficiency: A manual for school leaders*. Corwin.
- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (1990) Transformational leadership: How principals can help reform school cultures. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 1(4), 249–280, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0924345900010402>
- Madhlangobe, L., & Gordon, S. P. (2012). Culturally responsive leadership in a diverse school: A case study of a high school leader. *NASSP Bulletin*, 96(3), 177–202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636512450909>

- Marshall, S. L. V., & Khalifa, M. A. (2018). Humanizing school communities: Culturally responsive leadership in the shaping of curriculum and instruction. *Journal of Educational Administration, 56*(5), 533–545. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-01-2018-0018>
- McGee, E. O. (2013). Threatened and placed at risk: High achieving African American males in urban high schools. *The Urban Review, 45*(4), 448–471. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-013-0265-2>
- McGuinn, P. (2016). From No Child Left Behind to the Every Student Succeeds Act: Federalism and the education legacy of the Obama administration. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism, 46*(3), 392–415. <https://doi.org/10.1093/publius/pjw014>
- McKenzie, K. B., & Scheurich, J. J. (2004). Equity traps: A useful construct for preparing principals to lead schools that are successful with racially diverse students. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 40*(5), 601–632. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X04268839>
- Mills, J., & Birks, M. (Eds.). 2017. *Qualitative methodology: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473920163>
- Miller, I. A. (2020). Passing the mic: Toward culturally responsive out of school time leadership. *International Journal for Research on Extended Education IJREE, 8*(1), 52–65. <https://doi.org/10.3224/ijree.v8i1.05>
- Mun, R. U., Ezzani, M. D., & Lee, L. E. (2020). Culturally relevant leadership in gifted education: A systemic literature review. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 43*(2), 108–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162353220912009>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *Public high school graduation rates*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/coi/high-school-graduation-rates#suggested-citation>
- New York State Education Department. (2019). *State education department releases spring 2019 grades 3-8 ELA & math assessment results*. Author. <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2019/state-education-department-releases-spring-2019-grades-3-8-ela-math-assessment-results>
- New York State Education Department. (2021). <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/crs/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education-framework.pdf>
- Puchner, L., & Markowitz, L. (2015). Do Black families value education? White teachers, institutional cultural narratives, & beliefs about African Americans. *Multicultural Education, 23*(1), 9–16. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1090572.pdf>
- Quin, J., Deris, A., Bischoff, G., & Johnson, J. (2015). Comparison of transformational leadership practices: Implications for school districts and principal preparation. *Journal of Leadership Education, 14*(3), 71–85. <https://doi.org/10.12806/v14/i3/r5>

- Riehl C. J. (2000). The principal's role in creating inclusive schools for diverse students: A review of normative, empirical, and critical literature on the practice of educational administration. *Review of Educational Research*, 70, 55–81.
- Rodriguez-Mojica, C., Muñoz-Muñoz, E. R., & Briceño, A. (2020). Preparing bilingual teachers to enact culturally sustaining pedagogy. In J. Keengwe (Ed.), *Handbook of research on diversity and social justice in higher education* (pp. 202–221). IGI Global.
- Ryan J. (2006). *Inclusive leadership* (Vol. 2). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2012). The urgency of now. The Schott 50 state report on public education and Black males. <https://dataspace.princeton.edu/bitstream/88435/dsp01n583xx70x/1/urgency-now-schott-50-state-report-20121114.pdf>
- The urgency of now: The Schott 50 state report on public education and Black boys (Rep.) (2015). Retrieved from www.schottfoundation.org/urgencynow.pdf.
- Shatzer, R. H., Caldarella, P., Hallam, P. R., & Brown, B. L. (2013). Comparing the effects of instructional and transformational leadership on student achievement. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 42(4), 445–459. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213502192>
- Smith, P. A. (2021). Black male school leaders: Protectors and defenders of children, community, culture, and village. *Journal of School Leadership*, 31(1–2), 29–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684621993051>
- Ten Bruggencate, G., Luyten, H., Scheerens, J., & Slegers, P. (2012). Modeling the influence of school leaders on student achievement: How can school leaders make a difference. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(4), 699–732. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X11436272>
- Tillman L. C. (2003). Mentoring, reflection, and reciprocal journaling. *Theory Into Practice*, 42, 226–233.
- Tillman L. C. (2005). Mentoring new teachers: Implications for leadership practice in an urban school. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 41, 609–629.
- Ware F. (2006). *Warm demander pedagogy culturally responsive teaching that supports a culture of achievement for African American students*. *Urban Education*, 41, 427–456.
- Welborn, J. E. (2019). Increasing equity, access, and inclusion through organizational change: A study of implementation and experiences surrounding a school district's journey towards culturally proficient educational practice. *Education Leadership Review*, 20(1), 167–189. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1234931.pdf>
- Yanez, C., Seldin, M., Mann, R., & Synergy Enterprises, Inc. (2020). *Public school principals' top three most important education goals, by charter status and school level*. (NCES 2020–201) U.S. Department of Education.

Ylimaki, R., & Jacobson, S. (2013). School leadership practice and preparation: Comparative perspectives on organizational learning (OL), instructional leadership (IL) and culturally responsive practices (CRP). *Journal of Educational Administration*, 51(1), 6–23.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231311291404>

Young, B. L., Madsen, J., & Young, M. A. (2010). Implementing diversity plans: Principals' perception of their ability to address diversity in their schools. *NASSP Bulletin*, 94, 135–157.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636510379901>