SOCIAL JUST PRINCIPALS’ PURSUIT OF CULTURAL PROFICIENCY

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The purpose of this research was to explore how the personal and professional experiences of school leaders strengthened or hindered their ability to engage in social justice leadership to advance educational equity and encourage culturally proficient practices in their schools. I employed a descriptive multi-case study and the research was viewed through a conceptual framework that included social justice, equity, and the five elements of cultural proficiency. Five principals from three different school districts were selected as participants. They represented elementary, middle and high schools. Interviews consisted of semi-structured face to face interviews with each principal participant and one focus group interview with five participants. Each participant also provided a cultural autobiography. Findings revealed while principals may care deeply about providing equitable opportunities for students, the interest does not supplement knowledge, skills, experience, and support. The information gained from this study can inform the practice of school leaders, and the way in which districts and programs of educational leadership prepare school leaders to serve and address the needs of all students as public schools become more culturally diverse.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

School leaders within the United States are met with challenges rooted in how to best serve the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. According to statistics from the National Center for Educational Statistics, by the year 2023, Whites will make up approximately 42% of the student population in K-12, reflecting an 8% decrease from 2016 to 2023, while African Americans will remain steady at 15% of the student population (Hussar & Bailey, 2016). There will be significant increases in student populations of Pacific Islanders to 19% representation, and Hispanic demographics will reflect a 32% increase in population, resulting in a growth from 26% representation in 2016 to 58% by 2023.

By contrast to student demographics, as reported by the U.S. Department of Education (2016), White teachers comprised 82% of teachers in 2012, with Hispanic teachers at 8% and African American teachers at 7%. These numbers closely mirrored the demographics of those who served as school administrators. White administrators comprised 80% of all administrators, while African Americans comprised 10% and Hispanics comprised 7%. Given these data, it is obvious the demographics of students, compared to teachers and administrators, highlight a significant discrepancy. Polleck and Shabdin (2013) extended on this, stating “when teachers do not share the same cultural backgrounds, linguistic codes, social protocols, and/or value systems, discord can occur, which can detract from students’ learning” (p. 143). This disconnect between students and their learning environments is punitive in nature for students, as revealed in the following statement:

There is a disproportionate over-placement of [B]lack and Latino students in programs for the learning and emotionally ’disabled,’ and the under-placement of such students in programs for the talented and gifted. Evidence also abounds for greater disciplinary
referrals and school suspensions for such students, and greater levels of school dropouts and failure to graduate from high school. (Boykin, 2014, p. 503)

It is incumbent upon school leaders to move beyond the recognition of challenges faced in educating students of all cultures; school leaders must be advocates for students who have been and continue to be historically marginalized. Grant (2012) raised the level of expectations for school leaders, stating, “We should engage in the cultivation of flourishing lives and that a social justice vision is necessary for this cultivating work” (p. 929). This social justice vision can be achieved, according to Terrell and Lindsey (2009), through the use of the tools of cultural proficiency. These tools of cultural proficiency will be discussed in the review of literature.

Statement of the Problem

There is a breadth of literature on educational leadership programs and their course offerings to develop socially just leaders. Yet, there is a dearth of research on why some school leaders are intrinsically compelled to create culturally proficient schools and how their desire to be socially just leaders manifests itself in beliefs and actions. Bustamante, Nelson, and Onwuegbuzie (2009) documented the need for and the challenges of educational leaders’ promotion of cultural responsiveness, equity, and social justice for students of different genders, races, ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, abilities, and sexuality. Recognition of these challenges is addressed in the growing research on school leadership preparation programming. Gooden and O’Doherty (2014) called on graduate leadership programs to move beyond the acknowledgement of need and equip future educational leaders with the skillset to critically self-reflect and closely examine how to “dismantle the structures that perpetuate the current opportunity gap that students of color experience in our schools” (p. 247).
While the United States, and by extension its students, has become more culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse, the approach to educating students continues to remain the same. Given the growing diversity of the student population in the United States, Cooper (2009) recognized the need to reframe educational policies and practices that traditionally served White students. Cooper asserted:

Students need leaders and advocates who are prepared to be cultural change agents—educators who are armed with the knowledge, strategies, support, and courage to make curriculum, instruction, student engagement, and family partnerships culturally responsive. This partly entails educational leaders’ rejected ideologies and practices steeped in blatantly biased or color-blind traditions to transform schools. (p. 695)

Moreover, Cooper implored educational leaders “to perform cultural work, thereby broadening their cultural knowledge, engaging in critique and resistance, and building coalitions with diverse groups to promote cultural responsiveness, educational equity, and social justice” (p. 696).

Theoharis (2010) compelled school leaders to move beyond recognition of how traditionally marginalized students continue to be failed by schools in the United States. The challenge, he asserted, is to “create school structures, teaching staff, climate, communities, and achievement results that support and demonstrate success for every child” (p. 332). For these changes to occur, it is imperative that one recognizes why some school leaders are inherently vested in the creation of culturally proficient schools. Furthermore, the value in learning how these leaders move themselves and their schools along the continuum of cultural proficiency is great. Gleaning from those leaders who are committed to advocacy for all students has the potential to impact hiring practices within school districts and tailor the support systems and professional learning opportunities for school leaders who are already entrenched in the current educational system within the United States and abroad.
Conceptual Framework

Building on the work of Cross (1989), who developed a framework for cultural competency, Lindsey, Graham, Westphal, and Jew (2008) characterized cultural proficiency as a mindset that entails a “paradigmatic shift from viewing others as problematic to viewing how one works with people different from one’s self in a manner to ensure effective practices” (p. 21). The authors presented four tools of cultural proficiency.

1. The guiding principles of cultural proficiency serve as an introduction for a person or organization to identify their core values as they relate to issues of diversity.
2. The cultural proficiency continuum provides language to describe unhealthy and healthy values and behaviors of persons and policies and practices of organizations. In addition, the continuum can help you assess your current state and project your desired state. Movement along the continuum represents a shift in thinking from holding the view of tolerating diversity to transformation for equity. This is not a subtle shift in world-view; it is paradigmatic.
3. The five essential elements of cultural competence serve as standards by which one develops healthy individual values or behaviors and organizational policies or practices.
4. Identifying the barriers to cultural proficiency provides persons and their organizations with tools to overcoming resistance to change. (pp. 21-22)

Terrell and Lindsey (2009) asserted educational leaders must possess the willingness, as well as the ability, to examine themselves and the organizations they lead to address the educational inequities that are pervasive today. Blankstein, Noguera, and Kelly (2016) posited:

In most schools throughout the United States, a child’s race, socioeconomic status, and zip code continues to predict not only how well he or she will do in school but also the quality of school he or she will attend. (p. 13)

They argued school leaders must not only embrace the ideals of equity, they must embrace the notion that schools, and society in general, will benefit greatly when excellence through equity is realized as possible. Terrell and Lindsey (2009) asserted equity and high levels of student achievement can come to fruition if leaders utilize the tools of cultural proficiency with fidelity. However, Terrell and Lindsey compelled educational leaders to recognize that cultural
proficiency “is not a set of independent activities or strategies that you learn to use with others” (p. 21). Rather, cultural proficiency is an approach to both personal and professional lives that requires a full-time commitment. Grogan (2014) implored school and district leaders to assume the role of social justice leaders who “expose the injustices that currently exist and refus[e] to accept the status quo” (p. 310). Further, Grogan suggested the development of social justice leadership is contingent upon continual efforts focused on social justice in their daily interactions with all constituents of education. While Grogan acknowledged the political landscape as a barrier, she asserted it is the role and responsibility of school leaders to set the tone in setting a more just society. Terrell and Lindsey (date) shared a like sentiment. This commitment to social justice necessitates the mindset of cultural proficiency whereby leaders value the cultural differences of all students in contrast to the current state of education whereby cultural differences are perceived and treated as deficiencies.

![Figure 1. Cultural proficiency framework (R. B. Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009).](image)

Transformational leaders assume a responsibility to consider how they impact the educators with whom they work, the students they serve, and the communities they serve. According to Terrell and Lindsey, these transformational leaders can use the tools of cultural
proficiency “as a template for their personal and professional development” (p. 22), as demonstrated in Figure 1. With that understanding, it is through the lens of the five essential elements of cultural proficiency that this research is framed. Figure 1 depicts the theoretical framework that undergirds the current study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how the personal and professional experiences of socially just leaders influence their leadership and how their leadership encourages culturally proficient practices. Given the demographics of students in K-12 settings, much of the research focuses on the need for socially just and culturally proficient leaders; however, there is a gap in the literature and meaningful discourse on how the experiences of socially just school leaders encourage culturally proficient school practices.

Research Questions

The descriptive multi-case study was designed to explore how the personal and professional experiences of socially just leaders influence their leadership and how their leadership encourages culturally proficient practices in their schools. I focused on five principals who are using promising practices toward developing culturally proficient schools. With this qualitative study, I aimed to answer the overarching question:

How do the experiences of socially just leaders strengthen or hinder their leadership toward developing culturally proficient schools?

In the current study, I also addressed the following sub-questions:

1. How have the personal experiences of socially just leaders strengthened or hindered their development of more culturally proficient schools?
2. How have the professional experiences of socially just leaders strengthened or hindered their ability to be socially just leaders?

Significance of the Study

In much of the research on cultural diversity and school leadership, a clear need for school leaders to acquire a culturally proficient lens is articulated (Miller, & Martin, 2014). Recognizing the ever-changing landscape of education, it is imperative school leaders know how to intentionally address race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality and sexual identity, language, national origin, ability, and religion. With this study, I illuminated characteristics, experiences, and actions of principals who aspire to become social justice leaders who become culturally proficient. These professionals serve as models for those school leaders who are genuinely driven to engage in the deeply reflective and personal work of cultural proficiency. Additionally, by closely examining the experiences, characteristics, beliefs, and actions of socially just school leaders towards the pursuit of a culturally proficient school, district leaders can guide their hiring practices through the creation and utilization of a list of characteristics commonly ascribed to culturally proficient school leaders. Additionally, recognition of these characteristics allows for personal and professional cultivation, which may prove valuable to the individual, district, and school. Furthermore, this research will enable the design of more purposeful professional development opportunities for educational leaders in meeting the needs of a culturally diverse student body.

Delimitations

This research occurred between April 2017 and October 2017. Because school principals have the capacity to influence the school culture and instructional practices, the sample of the
study consisted strictly of principals from elementary, middle, and high schools. Purposeful sampling was utilized in the recruitment of participants. Given that professors within the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program at the University of North Texas-Denton have knowledge of and access to those practicing principals who may exhibit an interest in cultural proficiency, I solicited their recommendations for possible participants. The screening instrument, as seen in Appendix A, was utilized to determine who was selected to participate in this study.

Assumptions

The underlying assumptions in this study were that principals who are committed to cultural proficiency are intrinsically motivated. It was assumed that whether mandated or self-initiated, these socially just leaders pursue cultural proficiency as an ethical imperative. Additionally, it was assumed those who are culturally proficient are committed to creating equitable learning environments for their students. Finally, I assumed there is a relationship between the academic achievement of all students, a healthy school culture, and the leadership of the principal.

Definition of Terms

Terms that are important to this study have been identified. Because of the relevancy of these terms, definitions have been provided.

- Achievement gap. Refers to the persistence of disparities in student achievement among students of color as compared to White and Asian students (Blankstein et al., 2016).
• Color-blindness. An ideology that perpetuates systemic inequity by the avoidance of meaningful discourse regarding race and racism (Marx & Larson, 2012).

• Culture. Refers to a system of norms, standards, and control mechanisms with which members of society assign meanings, values, and significance of things, events, and behaviors; culture includes patterns of knowledge, skills, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as material artifacts produced by human society and transmitted from one generation to another (Pai, Adler, & Shadiow, 2006, p. 239).

• Cultural competence. Assuming responsibility for learning about the cultures of students and the community and integrating this understanding of culture as a foundation for instructional practices (Cross, 1989).

• Deficit thinking. Blames school failure on the students’ racial, ethnic and/or low socioeconomic status, citing students enter school not ready to learn based on their parents’ lack of interest and lifestyle (Walker, 2010).

• Educational equity. The realization of policies, practices, and programs that eliminate barriers regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, age, and national origin. Additionally, the provision for equal access is in place and those who have been historically underserved meet the same standards of rigor indicative of academic success as all other students (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009).

• Excellence. The realization that students who have been historically marginalized achieve at high levels. This entails setting high expectations for all students, with an emphasis on focusing on those students who have been historically marginalized. The achievement of excellence is generally reflected in higher achievement, as measured by standardized testing, as well as increased enrollment in advanced level courses (Blankstein et al., 2016).
• Multi-cultural education. Provides a deep understanding of one’s own culture and the culture of others (Pai et al., 2006).

• Race. “The socially constructed meaning attached to a variety of physical attributes, including but not limited to skin and eye color, hair texture, and bond structures of people in the United States and elsewhere” (Singleton, 2015, p. 50).

• Racism. The “belief and an enactment of beliefs that one set of characteristics is superior to another set (e.g., white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes are more beautiful than brown skin, brown eyes, and brown hair)” (Singleton, 2015, p. 50).

• Racist. A person who subscribes to racism and who, consciously or unconsciously, perpetuates racism (Singleton, 2015).

• Socially just leadership. Leadership that is characterized by maintaining a focus on those issues of race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, ability, and other marginalizing characteristics that deny equitable opportunities and school environments (Theoharis, 2010).

• White privilege. The inherent advantages one receives “simply by virtue of their appearance, and to a lesser degree, the privilege lighter-skinned people of color garner as compared to darker members of the same or different non-White racial groups” (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 183).

Summary

Chapter 1 provides an introduction and background for the study. This chapter also details the problem addressed, the purpose, significance, delimitations, and assumptions of the study. Key terms are defined to aid in clarity. The conceptual framework, Five Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency, was the lens by which I explored the personal and professional
experiences of socially just leaders and how those experiences influence their leadership and how their leadership encourages culturally proficient schools. Though there is a wealth of research addressing the need for and how to develop culturally responsive educators, there is a gap in the literature and meaningful discourse on how the experiences of school leaders encourage cultural proficiency.

Organization of the Study

I organized this study into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study. Chapter 2 is a review of literature on the connections between social justice, educational equity, and the pathway to cultural proficiency. Chapter 3 reveals the research design and methodology of this study and states the limitations of the study. Additionally, Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the instrumentation used to screen participants, along with a description of the process used to identify school principals in the research study. In Chapter 4, I provide an analysis of the study, with the findings presented. Chapter 5 is the summary, conclusion, and further recommendations from this study.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Recognizing the changing landscape of education within the United States, it is a given that continuing to gear education towards the dominant culture, Whites, will drive the decline of achievement (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Madsen and Mabokela (2014) asserted it is the role of principals to address the diversity of their schools as the demographics continue to change, and principals must embrace their role and respond to the learning needs of students. However, Villegas and Lucas (2002) warned that the “fragmented and superficial treatment of diversity” has become the standard in education (p. 21). They argued that meeting the needs of a culturally diverse student population requires that educators:

(a) are socioeconomically conscious, (b) have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, (c) see themselves as responsible for and capable of bringing about change to make schools more equitable, (d) understand how learners construct knowledge and are capable of promoting knowledge construction, (e) know about the lives of their students, and (f) design instruction that builds on what their students already know while stretching them beyond the familiar. (p. 20)

This call for cultural responsiveness is rooted in the awareness that this nation continues to grow in diversity, yet education remains framed around the needs of the dominant culture. Grogan (2014) beckoned school leaders to lead from the perspective of social justice leaders who are guided by ethical principles that compel them to seek equity, fairness and inclusivity. The three areas explored in the literature review—equity, social justice, and cultural proficiency—serve as the foundation of exploration in this research. Educational equity, though often discussed, remains an elusive acquisition. Though daunting in nature to consider, educational leaders who lead from a perspective of social justice do so with the goal of eradicating educational inequities among all students.
Educational Equity

Blankstein et al. (2016) cited the word *equity* as controversial and confusing. They pointed out the idea of equity for those who are affluent and privileged is uncomfortable because those who possess the privilege fear losing it. For those who are underprivileged, the focus of equity implies attention and relief. This zero-sum mindset, that helping the disadvantaged will mean less for the advantaged, paralyzes the dialogue, thus acquisition of equity. Another confusing aspect of equity is understanding what it means. Educators tend to use equity as an umbrella encompassing social justice. Equity is understood as “a principle, an action, a process, and an end goal” (Wang, 2015, p. 671). Equity tends to be considered in the context of access. For this research study, equity is discussed in terms of access.

Historical Glance at the Pursuit of Educational Equity

The landscape of education historically has been marred by inequity. Children of color in the United States have long suffered the ills of a society that devalued them, simply based on the color of their skin. Though African Americans have challenged systematic discrimination since the inception of this nation, despite amendments to the Constitution of the United States of America, and legislation aimed at ameliorating discrimination, inequities persist. Three years prior to the abolishment of slavery in the United States, the desire for African Americans to seize control of their own lives was evident in Frederick Douglas’ address to the Emancipation League in Boston, as noted by Murtadha and Watts (2005). They cited Frederick Douglass’ 1862 plea:

We ask nothing at the hands of American people but simple justice, and an equal chance to live; and if we cannot live and flourish on such terms, our case should be referred to the Author of our existence. Injustice, oppression, and slavery with their manifold concomitants have been tried with us during a period of more than 200 years. Under the whole heavens you will find no parallel to the wrongs we have endured. (Frazier, 1970, p. 136 as cited by Murtadha & Watts, 2005, p. 595)
Although the 13th amendment to the United States Constitution abolished slavery, the opportunity for African Americans to flourish was largely contingent upon their ability to become educated citizens, a right long denied for most African Americans.

During the Reconstruction Period of 1867-1877, African Americans sought control of their lives as freed men and women. They raised funds within their own communities to build Black schools. Schools that ranged from elementary to college were created and led by African Americans. For African American children, this segregated system of education afforded them a glimmer of hope in pursuing an equal chance. The irony of the rise of Black colleges is noteworthy. Murtadha and Watts (2005) described Booker T. Washington as a leader who downplayed “civil and political rights in the list of Black priorities” (p. 597). Washington argued, in his 1895 address at the Atlanta Exposition,

> The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather that of artificial forcing. (as cited in Dubois, 1903, para. 14)

However, Washington is largely remembered as a social and educational leader of his era who gained the financial favor of White philanthropists, such as Andrew Carnegie, to fund the building of libraries and dormitories for Black colleges (Murtadha & Watts, 2005).

There were noteworthy African American activists, such as W.E.B. Dubois, who opposed the views of Booker T. Washington. Dubois believed there was an undeniable link between educational equity and social justice. He argued racial discrimination should be eliminated in education and public life. Dubois, an outspoken critic of racism, valued the culture and history of Black people; he believed democracy did not exist without the realization of social justice and racial equality (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Further, equal access for African Americans was greatly undermined by the passing of Jim Crow laws. These laws limited access to
transportation and public areas such as restaurants and parks. Menial, low paying jobs were relegated to African Americans, which restricted the African American community’s ability to adequately fund schools. While African Americans maintained the right to an education, they were served by an educational system that was separate and immensely different (Murtadha & Watts, 2005).

Legal Responses to Educational Inequities

Perhaps the most pivotal legal response to educational inequities within the United States was the ruling of Brown v Board of Education (1954). This Supreme Court ruling decreed “that in the field of public education . . . separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (para. 21). The Supreme Court outlawed segregation of schools. Though segregation was illegal, the practice persisted throughout the nation for many years. Moreover, some scholars argue that “nearly 60 years after Brown v. Board of Education, 2 of 5 Black and Latino students are in intensely segregated schools, and both groups attend schools with about twice the poverty concentration of the schools of White and Asians” (Orfield, 2014, p. 273).

Recognizing that Brown v. Board of Education (1954) did not fully provide educational equity within the United States, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was enacted. It was aimed at providing more equitable distribution of resources to all students. ESEA, to some degree, federalized education by offering federal aid to bolster (1) school libraries, (2) state departments of education, and (3) education research. Amendments to ESEA provided subsequent funding for bilingual education and students with disabilities (Bustamante et al., 2016).
One reauthorization of ESEA became known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002). The ideal of NCLB, as stated by Rod Paige, the United States Secretary of Education from 2001-2005, was that every boy and girl in America, regardless of socioeconomic background, race, or ability would receive a high quality education (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). NCLB standards were established to close the achievement of traditionally underachieving students. Schools were expected to demonstrate annual yearly progress (AYP) in all groups. Those schools that failed to demonstrate AYP received *needs improvement* and were forced to provide remedies that included allowing students the opportunity to transfer schools and providing additional educational services, such as private tutoring (Shelly, 2012). Though NCLB did illuminate achievement gaps, those gaps persist.

Former President Obama’s 2010 Race to the Top (RTTP) was a response to the recognition of needed education reform that did not come to fruition with NCLB. Per the U.S. Department of Education (2016), RTTP asked states to pursue reforms around four specific areas:

1. Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace, and to compete in a global economy;
2. Building systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction;
3. Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and
4. Turning around our lowest-achieving schools. (para. 1)

The premise of RTTP was to offer states the opportunity to compete for competitive federal grants that would encourage school improvement. McGuinn (2012) explained RTTP can be characterized by a federal shift on goals rather than means, from sanctions to incentives, and from compliance-monitoring to capacity building. McGuinn asserted the flaws of RTTP are not far removed from those of NCLB.
The most recent reauthorization of ESEA is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Former President Obama signed the reauthorization in December 2015. Accountability through assessment remains in place with ESSA; however, ESSA is intended to grant states “greater responsibility for designing and building their state accountability stems and for determining supports and interventions for schools and districts” (Darling, et.al, 2016, p. 1). This new approach to accountability eliminated Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and allows states multiple measures of student and school success. States, districts, and schools are now held accountable for curriculum design, access to resources, and educator development. According to the Texas Association of School Boards, 2017, with the decreased focus simply on state assessments, states can now utilize measures of success such as student growth, graduation rates, and progress in English language proficiency. Indicators of school and student success also include access to and completion of advanced level coursework and postsecondary readiness. ESSA repealed the highly qualified requirement of teachers. Instead, all professional and paraprofessional employees must meet the state certification or licensing standards for their field of employment. Although ESSA does not require each state to devise their own educator evaluation systems to be approved through the Department of Education, the state of Texas implemented the Texas Teacher Evaluator System (T-TESS) and the Texas Principal Evaluation System (T-PESS). However, districts can devise their own evaluation systems as long as student performance is one weighted component of the system. While there are numerous differences and similarities between ESSA and former authorizations of ESEA, what remains consistent is that high stakes accountability and federal oversight remain in place, neither of which secures educational equity.
Examples of Educational Inequities

It is important to examine the disparities that exist in educational equity. To challenge these disparities, first they must be acknowledged and closely scrutinized.

Overidentification in Discipline

The overrepresentation of students of color receiving punitive school consequences is one example of systematic educational inequity. According to the U.S. Department of Education, this civil rights imperative is a call for schools to abandon zero tolerance discipline policies that “punish minority students more harshly and more frequently than their White counterparts” (Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014, p. 352). Triplett et al. highlighted that the application of zero tolerance discipline policies originated from concerns of violence and drug incidents in school settings in the 1980s. Media attention to school-associated violence increased dramatically while school-associated violent deaths decreased by 40% throughout the 1990s. The media-induced panic that the public experienced seemingly justified zero tolerance discipline. Initially aimed at reducing offenses related to drugs and violence, zero tolerant discipline became more frequently used for nonviolent and drug related incidents. Triplett, et al. argued that suspension from school has become “the punishment of choice rather than the consequences of last resort under zero tolerance” (p. 355). Fenning and Rose (2007) shared that African American students were found to be twice as likely as their White peers to receive a discipline referral and are suspended at higher rates. Moreover, students of color were more apt to be suspended for non-violent offenses, such as disrespect. It is alarming to realize that while only 18% of children enrolled in public preschool programs are African Americans, they represent 48% of students suspended more than once (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). As Jackson and Howard (2014) reported,
Black students, while making up 16% of student enrollment, make up 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of all school-related arrests. Fenning and Rose (2007) contended that often students who have greater academic needs are perceived as problems rather than identified and served academically and emotionally.

*Overrepresentation in Special Education*

Jackson and Howard (2014) reported the alarming trend of high enrollment of African Americans in special education. They cited that African Americans comprise 26% of students in the U.S. identified as educable mentally retarded, 34% of students identified as having emotional disturbances, and 33% of students identified as developmentally delayed. This overrepresentation of students identified as needing special education services calls into question the assessment methods used to justify these assignments of labels. More importantly, it begs the question: What role does the lack of early academic interventions play in the overrepresentation of African American students in special education?

*Limited Access to Qualified Teachers and High-Quality Curriculum*

Limited access to experienced and qualified teachers and high-quality curriculum remains a civil rights issue. Darling-Hammond (2007) discussed the inequities African American and Latino students experience in having access to qualified teachers. She cited 2001 data that revealed students in “California’s most segregated minority schools were more than 5 times as likely to have uncertified teachers as those in predominantly White schools (p. 323). This is important to recognize, considering Ferguson’s (1991) analysis of 900 school districts in Texas. Ferguson analyzed the influence of teacher quality on student achievement. He measured the
expertise of teachers by the scores they earned on state certification exams, as well as teacher experience and level of education earned. Ferguson gleaned that the most important measurable predictor of gains in student achievement was teacher expertise.

*Lack of Opportunities for Students of Color to Prepare for the Rigor of College is indeed a Matter of Equity*

Darling-Hammond (2007) argued schools whose majority demographic consists of students of color are less likely to offer advanced college preparatory courses, as compared to those schools that serve predominantly White, more affluent students. Additionally, she asserted students of color remain underrepresented in honors courses, gifted and talented programs, and advanced placement courses. Jackson and Howard (2014) also highlighted the lack of college access, specifically, for African American students. As reported by the U.S. Department of Education (2014), only 9% of African American students, as reported by the Office of Civil Rights, enrolled in AP courses, while only 4% earned a qualifying score. Orfield (2014) stressed that students of color often remain disconnected from the paths that lead to college success. He made the case that barriers to college loom large for students of color who attend low performing schools. These students lack the resources to navigate the terrain of financial aid and college admission requirements. Orfield called for a new civil rights agenda that incorporates equalization of educational opportunity, citing college is one remedy of equalization.

*Inequities in Bilingual Education*

Brooks, Adams, and Morita-Mullaney (2010) confirmed that English language learners (ELLs) in the United States are one of the fastest growing student populations. From 1998-2008, there was a 7.2% increase in the total number of students in K-12. However, during this same
time span, the number of ELLs increased by 51%. The rising number of ELLs in the United States highlights a systematic failure in education to meet the needs of ELLs adequately. In response to these rising numbers, ELLs are met with limited teachers certified as English as a Second Language (ESL). The state of Indiana saw a 409% increase in the growth rate for ELLs from 1998-2008. However, only 325 teachers in Indiana are certified to teach the 46,419 ELLs. With ELLs not being served by certified ESL teachers, an academic disconnect is created. This academic disconnect mirrors the disconnect between the schools and families of ELLs. A lack of communication between school and families of ELLs alienates families. Parent access to available resources is cumbersome and often daunting when parents lack the ability to communicate with the schools that serve their children. This is a barrier to parent advocacy. Disparities between ELLs and their White peers persist. Assessment data reveals that ELLs are inherently at a disadvantage (Boykin, 2014).

Role of Assessment in Educational Inequities

The inequities perpetuated by high-stakes assessment remain a point of contention for many educators and scholars. Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), U.S. leaders have been preoccupied by assessment as a means of gauging the academic progress of educational institutions in the United States. NCLB (2002) became the answer to closing the achievement gap, as argued by the George W. Bush administration. Bush, in his impassioned campaign speech to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), reframed civil rights:

I will confront another form of bias, the soft bigotry of low expectations . . . There’s a tremendous gap of achievement between rich and poor, White and [M]inority. This, too,
leaves a divided society . . . Equality in our country will remain a distant dream until every child, of every background, learns so that he or she may strive and rise in this world. No child in America should be segregated by low expectations, imprisoned by illiteracy, abandoned to frustration and the darkness of self-doubt. There’s reason for optimism in this land. A great movement of education reform has begun in this country built on clear principles: to raise the bar of standards, expect every child can learn; to give schools the flexibility to meet those standards; to measure progress and insist upon results; to blow the whistle on failure; to provide parents with options to increase their option, like charters and choice; and also remember the role of education is to leave no child behind. (Bush, 2000, pp. 1-2)

NCLB (2002) was intended to serve as a vehicle for educational reform and it did bring the achievement gap to the national forefront. However, the reality is that while high-stakes “assessment can assist in reform efforts, nations cannot assess, test, nor examine its way out of its educational problems” (Madaus, Raczek, & Clark, 1997, p. 5). Therefore, it is not surprising that rationalization for high stakes assessment, as an instrument for educational equalization, was met with great opposition since the enactment of NCLB.

Educators and scholars do not argue against assessments. However, the suggestion has been made that high-stakes assessments coerce learning and behavioral control. More importantly, the quality of student engagement is undermined (Boykin, 2014; Stiggins, 2002). Stiggins (2002) suggested that raising the bar of expectations for disengaged and disenfranchised students, then testing them on these higher expectations, exacerbates the achievement gap. According to Stiggins, the emphasis of assessing student learning is to utilize assessments to encourage students to want to learn and assist educators in ascertaining how to help students believe they can learn.

Recognizing the value of accountability, while remaining committed to equity, creates a struggle between educators and policy makers. Grogan (2014) reaffirmed this struggle.

Ironically, in the absence of much despised NCLB, we would never have had permission to address inequities grounded in race, ethnicity, language, disability and so on. And while there are few statistical measures available of how these approaches have resulted
in increased student achievement or well-being, there is now compelling moral impetus for attention to marginalization. (p. 304)

Skrla et al. (2009) pointed out the relationship between equity and accountability has created simplistic characterizations of each, resulting in the polarization between educators and policy makers, creating a choosing of sides between the two. The argument centers around the necessity for a respectful conversation regarding equity and accountability that does not exclude one from the other. Skrla et al. noted systemic equity only exists if equity is present in every part of the educational system. While accountability is measured in test scores, the pursuit of equity addresses resources afforded to students. What is seemingly elusive is the bridge between the two. Darling-Hammond (2007) astutely pointed out:

Standards-based reforms have been launched throughout the United States with promises of greater equity, but while students are held to common standards—and increasingly experience serious sanctions if they fail to meet them—most states have not equalized funding and access to the key instructional resources needed for learning. The result of this collision of new standards with old inequities is less access to education for many students of color, rather than more. (p. 318)

Orfield (2014) vehemently argued the threat of sanctions instituted by NCLB proved to undermine the attainment of equity. He insisted schools that served poor students and students of color who failed to meet the accountability standards resorted to teaching test-taking skills and some schools went so far as to manipulate the data while other schools resorted to cheating.

One controversial sanction employed by NCLB (2002) was the reallocation of public school funds to charter schools. Orfield (2014) asserted NCLB’s school choice policies gave rise to inadequate charter schools with more inexperienced teachers. These charter schools, as argued by Orfield, perpetuated racial and economic segregation. Given the contemporary history of accountability, perhaps more resources should be allocated to creating equitable educational opportunities before the expectation of high academic achievement is legislated.
Role of Racism in Educational Inequities

The *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) Supreme Court ruling that decreed separate but equal, by nature unequal, spawned a civil rights struggle within the United States historically unmatched to date. The civil rights movement marked an attack on overt discrimination of African Americans. The 1957 integration of Little Rock High School, for example, served to highlight institutionalized discrimination that would not yield to the law. The *Little Rock Nine* became the faces of integration and served to illustrate the necessary courage to be agents of change. While these images provoked inspiration, often omitted in the recollection of this historical event is that the citizens of Little Rock chose to close the school the following year, in opposition to integration (History.com Staff, 2010). Recognizing opposition to change is important, in not only understanding the history of social justice, as exemplified by the civil rights movement, but in contemplating the current educational inequities. Orfield (2014) recognized that race-conscious laws borne out of recognition of overt discrimination expanded the rights of African Americans and other minorities. However, he made provocative claims regarding the civil rights of American students today. Orfield asserted the United States is on a “destructive path, that our policies are inadequate and sometimes destructive” (p. 273). Moreover, Orfield pointed out that, in a time when society continues to be polarized by race and class, it is prudent to consider the current state of education, focusing on the rights of students of color and the necessary actions for providing support for future success.

Though racism is an obvious barrier to the achievement of educational equity, the unwillingness of educators to acknowledge and address racism directly perpetuates inequities for students of color. Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, and Urban (2011) shared the realization that some educators:
Still believe that factors such as genetic deficiency, class differences, family background, and access to learning opportunities at home are the most reliable predictors of school achievement. With this view, schools can excuse themselves from any responsibility for inequalities and gaps between student subgroups. (p. 85)

This grim recognition is shared by Singleton (2015) who reiterated the idea that schools are free to shift the blame of lack of achievement to external forces rather than address the racial achievement gap head on. Singleton argued educators must accept the educational responsibility for students of color rather than faulting students for their backgrounds and experiences. Further, he implored educators to engage in self-examination of values and beliefs, engage in courageous conversations and, ultimately, re-create schools where all students thrive.

Singleton’s (2015) call for self-examination is but one step in the process of actualizing educational equity. Skrla et al. (2009) stated school leaders need to be equipped to recognize patterns of internal inequity in beliefs, values, practices, assumptions, policies, and procedures. The practice of conducting equity audits is a systematic process to recognizing internal inequities. School leaders who are willing and able to recognize the entrenchment of inequities in education increase their likelihood of becoming agents of social justice. Theoharis (2010) clarified that school leaders who accept the challenge of creating school structures that support every child are socially just and committed to educational equity.

Social Justice

The characterization of social justice as a concept is rooted in the acknowledgement that social justice is an ideal that remains difficult to define. Merriam Webster’s online dictionary defined social justice as “a state or doctrine of egalitarianism” (Social justice, n.d.) and defined egalitarianism as” (1) Belief in human equality especially with respect to social political, and economic affairs; (2) A social philosophy advocating the removal of inequalities among people”
(Egalitarianism, n.d.). Though some theorists note the ideals of social justice have existed since Plato’s writings, social justice is most notably associated with the work of John Rawls. Bankston (2010) shared that Rawls espoused justice as fairness. Rawls (1999) asserted “each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override and for this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others” (p. 3).

Despite ample research and literature on social justice, the lack of clarity with how it is defined is problematic. Hackman (2005) bemoaned that those unfamiliar with social justice grapple with exactly what it means, thus it “dilute[s] the essence of social justice education and weaken[s] the call for teachers, schools, and communities to be true vanguards for change” (p. 103). For the purpose of this research, I borrowed from Lee and McKerrow (2005), who concluded there is a framework for social justice that can be delineated in two dimensions. The first dimension of social justice is defined “not only by what it is but also by what it is not, namely injustice. By seeking justice, we anticipate the ideal. By questioning injustice, we approach it. Integrating both, we achieve it” (p. 1). The second dimension emphasizes the practices of social justice.

Individuals for social justice seek to challenge political, economic and social structures that privilege some and disadvantage others. They challenge unequal power relationships based on gender, social class, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, language, and other systems of oppression. (p. 1)

What is striking about the characterization of the two dimensions is even without a concrete definition of social justice, principals must recognize the lack of social justice and be intentional in breaking down the structures in education that support the lack of justice for each student. Recognizing this necessity is merely the first step in actualizing socially just education. As DeMatthews, Mungal, and Carrola (2015) asserted, social justice leadership “identifies, focuses,
and acts to address marginalization in schools and communities, but also [is] an ongoing struggle complicated by personal, cultural, societal, and organizational dimensions associated with the leader, school, community, and society as a whole” (p. 19). Noting the struggles inherent in serving from the stance of social justice, it is important to possess a clear understanding of social justice, including recognition of failures in education, as well as remaining cognizant of the inevitable struggles characteristic of social justice leadership. Educational leaders must face these struggles armed with the belief that “education is a mechanism to effectuate change and is therefore dangerous. It is a threat to institutions that thrive from inequality. It is the most effective social justice tool at one’s disposal” (Jones, 2015, p. 94).

Practices of Principals Committed to Social Justice

Brown et al. (2011) discussed the historic marginalization of underprivileged children as being “left behind without hope, without vision, and without equal access to the excellent education to which all children are entitled” (p. 50). While many schools continue to fail to meet the needs of all students, Brown et al. highlighted that some schools prove to be successful in creating equitable learning environments by taking a systemic approach to equity and excellence. They pointed out that a fundamental component of those successful schools is the leadership of those campuses. They stressed those leaders who take on this challenge not only possess a moral and ethical obligation, they recognize the necessity for scrutinizing the cultural aspects of education that have institutionalized educational inequities.

A one size fits all approach to social justice in education has not been revealed in the research literature. However, there are common practices among principals who are dedicated to social justice for students.
Self-Assessment

In order to pursue social justice in education, it is prudent for principals to first assess their own beliefs, traditions and values (Grant, 2012). Grant acknowledged analyzing one’s own life experiences and personal beliefs is critical to the ability to understand students. An even more provocative step is necessary in self-assessment. That is challenging those beliefs and values that are traditions and those beliefs that are simply habitually accepted. This Socratic self-examination requires principals to engage in potentially uncomfortable work. Grant further asserted that if educators hope to teach students how to think, educators must thoughtfully reflect on their own life experiences and beliefs.

Conversations about Race

While analyzing long-held personal beliefs may be uncomfortable, yet illuminating work, principals who advocate for social justice discuss issues of race with staff. This strategy for disrupting injustice involves confronting racial injustices perpetuated by the educational system (Theoharis, 2010). Some principals Theoharis examined facilitated book studies as a means of encouraging discussions. Those principals who made significant strides in addressing inequities on their campuses devoted consistent time engaging in learning more about race and equity issues. It was noted that engaging White staff in these sometimes-difficult discussions was pivotal in moving the schools beyond tolerance and understanding to schools that truly valued diversity and examined the impact of race on students and staff.

Hire and Supervise with Equity in Mind

Kose’s (2009) assertion has been presented that teacher quality has a direct bearing on
student achievement. Principals committed to student achievement for historically marginalized students have acted as social justice agents who facilitate the development of their staff (Kose, 2009). Professional development has been a key element for principals who led their campuses to higher achievement levels. Kose (2009) and Theoharis (2010) advocated for professional development that allows for continued discussions around issues of inequity, which aligns with school improvement, and the learning goals of students. Principals who shared their success in professional development as a social justice strategy cited the importance of empowering teachers and encouraging ownership of their own learning (Kose, 2009). In his article, “Disrupting Injustice: Principals Narrate the Strategies They use to Improve their Schools and Advance Social Justice,” Theoharis (2010) highlighted how Principal Meg sought to build staff capacity through hiring and supervision of staff members. She stated she sought candidates who demonstrated an inclusive philosophy, enthusiasm, and experiential skills in dealing with issues of race and multiculturalism. She also required that all new classroom teachers become certified in ESL. She asserted this practice not only brought in teachers with a wider range of skills, it dissuaded potential teacher candidates from applying to her school. Admittedly, this hiring practice did not give Principal Meg’s existing staff new skill sets; it did, however, increase the capacity of her staff to become more inclusive and more likely to enact practices of justice.

Principal Meg was also intentional in the supervision of her staff (Theoharis, 2010). She cited being deliberate in creating a sense of trust. She argued if her teachers felt they were being treated as trusted professionals, they would respond accordingly. Theoharis also stated that principals in this study reported being aggressive in dealing with teachers who failed to create equitable learning environments. Principal Meg shared there were times when she very closely monitored the performance, organization, and curriculum of those teachers who proved
ineffective in addressing the behavioral and academic needs of students. She cited it was her 
responsibility as the leader of her campus to provide the necessary support to coach those 
struggling teachers, but it was her moral responsibility to be direct and straightforward with the 
nonnegotiable of promoting educational equity.

*Create a Welcoming School Climate*

The importance of creating school climates that are welcoming to communities and 
marginalized families cannot be overstated. The disconnect between schools and the community 
they serve perpetuates educational inequities. Theoharis (2010) highlighted the common 
practices of principals who sought to disrupt their unwelcoming practices. Greeting families 
warmly, though a seemingly small step, conveyed a sense of respect. Principals invited families 
to their campuses. Principal Meg took a bold step and hosted ethnic parent meetings. While 
some disagreed with this practice because they felt this practice was exclusive and segregating, 
Principal Meg cited hundreds of families who had never been involved at the school were now 
involved. Finally, the principals in this study revealed that their efforts to connect with 
community agencies afforded students the ability to receive beneficial services the schools could 
not provide. Working with outside agencies removed an unnecessary barrier of access to 
services.

These proven practices of principals who approach the issues of educational equity from 
the stance of social justice is not meant to be an exhaustive list. However, these examples do 
highlight that these practices can be generalized in any school setting.

Social Justice Leadership
As previously noted, a universal definition of social justice is lacking (Kose, 2009); however, leading for social justice provides a clearer delineation. “Leading for social justice means re-cultivating individual and institutionalized practices rooted in low expectations, deficit thinking, marginalization, and cultural imperialism of diverse students” (p. 630). Kose charged principals with the task of cultivating professional development that addresses “socially just teaching and socially just learning” (p. 631). Here, a moral purpose is inherent in the pursuit of social justice. Fullan and Ballew (2004) explained that moral purpose, however, is not enough. Principals must develop strategies and actions while maintaining moral purpose. Moreover, Fullan and Ballew recognized:

Moral purpose is problematic because it must contend with reconciling the diverse interests and goals of different groups; different races, different interest groups (including those who may have a vested interest in the status quo as long as it works in their favor), different power bases, and people from different lots in life. (p. 23)

However noble and necessary a pursuit, Merchant and Garza (2015) suggested “advocating for social justice is uncomfortable, difficult, and solitary” (p. 54). Grogan (2014) contended the argument of educators’ actions being constrained by federal and state policy failed to consider the great opportunity for local decision making in the implementation of policies and practices that minimize educational inequities. In this regard, principals should not have to bear the burden alone. Needless to say, social justice leadership remains no small endeavor, thus there is the need to understand how principals perceive social justice and work toward that end.

With a qualitative study of 22 school principals in Ontario, Canada, Wang (2014) sought to explore how principals committed to social justice “understand and perceive social justice in their leadership practices” (p. 667). Common among the participants of the study was the focus on equity as access. While some understanding of equity was present, the principals could not definitively separate equity from social justice. This has been a common finding in much of the
literature. Wang’s findings revealed the perceptions and understanding of equity varied. Some participants considered equity in terms of fairness of access to resources and treatment of students while others considered equity in terms of inclusion. Wang found the integration of social justice into the leadership values and actions of one of the principals interviewed revealed a commitment to the belief that:

Social justice is actualized and planted among the students by nurturing their understanding and awareness of its meaning, its significance for themselves and their community. The seeds of justice consciousness will then take its root among students who themselves will become social justice advocates. (p. 667)

This commitment highlights a deep-seated belief in the responsibility a school principal accepts in equipping students and teachers to “become critical citizens who can actively engage in forms of social learning and expand their capacity for empathy, compassion, respect, and solidarity” (p. 678).

Roles of Principals

The role of principals in leading their campuses in social justice is paramount to actual achievement of creating equitable learning environments. Kose (2009) presented a framework that outlines roles principals accept in professional development. He cited principals must be visionaries, learning leaders, structural leaders, cultural leaders, and political leaders. Visionary leaders build consensus of what their schools stand for, who they want to be, and develop goals aligned with the vision and with student achievement data. Learning leaders influence professional development. They directly facilitate professional development, supervise teaching, and provide feedback to teachers. Structural leaders provide and manage the resources teachers need. These include building common planning time into the master schedule, setting aside time for professional development, managing the curricular needs, allocating finances appropriately,
and providing the personnel needed for the campus. As cultural leaders, principals develop professional learning communities (PLCs) that provide continuous learning for staff. Finally, as political leaders, principals are charged with getting the school stakeholders on board with promoting and working towards the vision of the school and improving student achievement.

It is important to recognize that there is a lack of clarity regarding the impact of the principal’s role in developing teachers’ ability to learn and teach from the perspective of equity, democracy, and justice (Kose, 2009). However, the roles principals must accept as leaders in the actualization of social justice are varied and complex.

Leadership Traits of Social Justice Leaders

While there is no prescribed list of characteristics that serve as prerequisites for social justice leadership, it is relevant to examine common characteristics or traits of educational leaders who are committed to social justice. Theoharis (2008) investigated the identities and leadership traits of seven urban school principals committed to social justice. These principals represented elementary, middle, and high school levels. Their cultural identities and personal and professional experiences varied. However, Theoharis gleaned three common leadership traits shared among his seven participants.

The first trait, arrogant humility, highlighted the beliefs of each principal as being right, knowing what is best, and feeling a responsibility to lead their vision for their schools. Their humility was revealed in their self-doubt of their abilities, their willingness to admit when they made mistakes, and questioning whether they were doing a good job. Theoharis (2008) noted that “arrogance, self-confidence, and self-doubt create a very complicated and dynamic leader (p. 15).
Passionate visionary leadership was another trait common of the principals studied (Theoharis, 2008). These principals are not bureaucrats or middle managers. They are so deeply committed to their work that their leadership is tightly interwoven into the fabric of who they are. These principals, compelled by their moral purpose, experience a deep personal connection to their schools. They are recognized as sincere and are respected by those who may even resist their efforts. These leaders internalize their dissatisfactions. They maintain highly visible profiles on and off campus with students, staff, and families. The success of principals pursuing social justice is connected to their passionate visionary leadership (Theoharis, 2008).

Finally, the principals examined in Theoharis’ (2008) study demonstrated tenacious commitment to justice. Their commitment to their vision of social justice was sustained and unwavering. Though these principals experienced resistance in their quest for social justice, they noted their feelings of being even more dedicated. Their deep commitment, with their solid belief that they could enact justice, enabled these principals to lead collaboratively and democratically. These principals, though head strong in their own vision, were deliberate in empowering staff in working toward their vision. Theoharis noted this combination gave rise to a complex and dynamic leadership style.

Recognizing the common leadership traits revealed in the literature is prudent in heeding the call to serve as social justice leaders in education. This recognition is not meant to dissuade the pursuit of social justice leadership. It exposes the courage and character necessary to serve with fidelity.

Women as Social Justice Leaders

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), female principals
serving in K-12 public schools in 2011-2012 comprised 52% of all public-school principals.

Granted, the number of male principals serving at the secondary level remains higher. Given that the number of women in principal positions continues to rise, it is important to examine the socialization of women and the impact on leadership of that process. Normore and Jean-Marie (2008) asserted that women have been socialized to show their emotions, are more apt to lead with compassion, are less concerned with power, and are more concerned with “the care of children and their academic success” (p. 185). Relationships with their constituents is a focal point of their leadership styles. Women tend to yield influence, as opposed to power, over the schools they lead. Instead, they empower their staff by sharing their knowledge with the “noble intention of extending participation in collaborative decision-making and problem-solving processes. Power also serves to build an environment of social justice, fairness, and responsible behavior toward others” (p. 185).

Normore and Jean-Marie (2008) argued women in leadership possess unique opportunities and responsibility in opening access to resources and knowledge to those who have less power. They further suggest that women, regardless of title or standing, have roles in social justice leadership. In examining women as social justice leaders, Santamaria and Jean-Marie (2014) asserted:

Educational leaders who are women and also members of historically underserved groups in the U.S. . . . tend to manifest cross-cultural leadership practices through different filters of experience than their mainstream and dominant-culture peers. One explanation for this is their ability to take positive attributes of their cross-cultural differences and combine them with empirically effective leadership practices. (p. 334)

Beyond the lens of examination of women as social justice leaders, Galman, Pica-Smith, and Rosenburger (2010) stated the urgency in addressing the responsibility of White women in recognizing it is imperative that as they grow in leadership capacities. White women,
specifically, must recognize their place in dismantling racism by examining their part in White domination of education. This dismantling of racism is one facet of social justice leadership that warrants further inquiry and discussion.

Cultural Proficiency

Though not intended for education, Cross (1989) sought to develop a philosophical framework that would improve services to those children of color who suffered “serious emotional handicaps” (p. 16). Cross’ work was rooted in treating cultural differences as assets. This framework, cultural competence, was defined “as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or amongst professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively across cultural situations” (p. 7). While Cross developed the idea of cultural competence with the intent of assisting children through child welfare services, this work has greatly influenced the understanding of cultural proficiency in applications beyond child welfare. The influence of Cross is evident in the work of R. B. Lindsey et al. (2009) as they provided a manual of how school leaders can utilize the tools of cultural proficiency. They suggested the tools of cultural proficiency, when used with consistency and fidelity, can change the view people and organizations hold that cultural difference is an obstacle to clear and instead recognize it as an asset.

Guiding Principles

To move productively along the continuum of cultural proficiency, D. B. Lindsey and Lindsey (2014) emphasized that guiding principles provide a template for creating core values that guide the positive movement along the continuum. These guiding principles are:
1. Culture is a predominant force in society.
2. People are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture.
3. People have individual and group identities.
4. Diversity within cultures is vast and significant.
5. Each cultural group has unique cultural needs.
6. The best of both worlds enhances the capacity of all.
7. The family, as defined by each culture, is the primary system of support in the education of children.
8. School systems must recognize that marginalized populations have to be at least bicultural and that this status creates a distinct set of issues to which the system must be equipped to respond.
9. Inherent in cross-cultural interactions are dynamics that must be acknowledged, adjusted to, and accepted. (p. 6)

Lindsey and Lindsey argued moving along the continuum of cultural proficiency is value-laden work. With that said, it is imperative the leader is guided by the understanding and acceptance of these principles. As stated by R. B. Lindsey et al. (2008), the guiding principles should provide a “framework for how the diversity of students informs professional practice in responding to student learning needs” (p. 23). In other words, these principles should be mirrored in the values, beliefs, and actions of educational leaders. However, as shared by R. B. Lindsey et al. (2009), often there is a disconnect between the stated values and beliefs and the actual policies of the school. They highlighted personnel policies are written from a legalistic vantage point that speaks of distrust. The threat of fear is the basis of the written policies whereas value statements of the school speak of trust, harmony, and honesty. In essence, to determine the cultural proficiency of the school and school leaders, the focus is on what occurs as opposed to what is espoused.

Cultural Proficiency Continuum

One of the tenets of change, as held by many theorists and practitioners, is that of self-
reflection. An understanding of the cultural proficiency continuum, according to Terrell and Lindsey (2009), provides insight and a launching point in determining placement and direction that requires the ability and willingness to self-examine. From the lowest level of cultural proficiency to the highest level, the continuum follows:

1. Cultural destructiveness. Leading in a manner that you seek to eliminate the culture of others in all aspects of the school and in relationship with the community served.
2. Cultural incapacity. Leading in a way that you trivialize other cultures and seek to make the culture of others appear to be wrong.
3. Cultural blindness. Leading where you don’t see or acknowledge the culture of others and you choose to ignore the discrepant experiences of cultures within the school.
4. Cultural pre-competence. Leading with an increasing awareness of what you and the school don’t know about working in diverse settings. At this level of development, you and the school can move in a positive, constructive direction or you can falter, stop, and possible regress.
5. Cultural competence. Leading with your personal values and behaviors and the school’s policies and practices being aligned in a manner that is inclusive with cultures that are new or different from you and the school.
6. Cultural proficiency. Leading as an advocate for life-long learning with the purpose of being increasingly effective in serving the educational needs of cultural groups. Holding the vision that you and the school are instruments for creating a socially just democracy. (p. 25)

In examining the continuum, R. B. Lindsey et al. (2009) pointed out the left side of the continuum is reactive in nature. The focus is on tolerance and reflects the belief that differences are problematic in nature. The right side of the continuum is proactive and places the focus on the transformation of the school leader. Further, these authors shared that this is not a stagnant line; it is indeed a continuum in that some practices may be more proactive than reactive. They offered that while culturally proficient policies may be evident throughout the school, the practices of the office personnel, for example, may reveal cultural blindness or extend as far as being culturally destructive. The point made by R. B. Lindsey et al. (2009) is there must be an
ongoing use of the cultural proficiency continuum to assess the practices and policies enacted honestly.

R. B. Lindsey et al. (2009) defined essential elements of cultural proficiency as “an interdependent set of standards to guide being intentional in [the] journey to cultural proficiency” (p. 125). They explained that essential elements occur at the cultural competence point of the continuum. Further, they noted the essential elements provide for a deeper exploration of the “values, behaviors, policies, and practices that describe positive and healthy responses to diversity” (p. 124). The five essential elements of cultural competence are:

- Assessing cultural knowledge—Leading the learning about others’ cultures, about how educators and the school as a whole react to others’ cultures, and what you need to do to be effective in cross-cultural situations. Also, leading for learning about the school and its grade levels and departments as cultural entities.
- Valuing diversity—Creating informal and formal decision-making groups inclusive of people whose viewpoints and experiences are different from yours and the dominant group at the school, and that will enrich conversations, decision making, and problem solving.
- Managing the dynamics of difference—Modeling problem solving and conflict resolution strategies as a natural and normal process within the organizational culture of the schools and the cultural contexts of the communities of your school.
- Adapting to diversity—Being the lead learner at your school about cultural groups different from your own and the ability to use others’ cultural experiences and backgrounds in all school settings.
- Institutionalizing cultural knowledge—Making learning about cultural groups and their experiences and perspectives an integral part of the school’s professional development. (R. B. Lindsey et al., 2009, p. 124)

Of the four tools of cultural proficiency, R. B. Lindsey et al. emphasized the essential elements should be the most frequently used tools by school leaders who are genuinely invested in fostering a culturally proficient school. Further, school board members, communities, and districts administrators must all assume responsibility of the pursuit of culturally proficient values and actions by using the five essential elements. Grogan (2014) supported the premise of
the intentionality that must be employed, stating, it is not enough to simply rely on the intrinsic motivation of those leaders whose lived experiences compel them to act.

Barriers to Cultural Proficiency

R. B. Lindsey et al. (2009) declared barriers to achieving cultural proficiency exist in society in general, with schools as no exception. Moreover, they suggested that the failure to recognize, acknowledge, and circumvent these barriers perpetuates and legitimizes oppressive barriers to cultural proficiency. Further, Cooper (2009) asserted,

In the midst of demographic change, students need leaders and advocates who are prepared to be cultural change agents—educators armed with the knowledge, strategies, support, and courage to make curriculum, instruction, student engagement, and family partnerships culturally responsive. This partly entails educational leaders rejecting ideologies and practices steeped in blatantly biased or color-blind traditions to transform schools. (p. 695)

These ideologies and practices serve as barriers to the achievement of cultural proficiency. The three categories of barriers to achieving culturally proficient actions include: systems of oppression, a sense of privilege and entitlement, and resistance to change (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009).

**Systems of Oppression**

The impediment of access for those who are not in the dominant cultural group has been an unfortunate historic reality within the United States (R. B. Lindsey et al., 2009). For those in the dominant cultural group, the recognition of an imbalance in power may not be obvious, as they perhaps have not experienced this oppression. This barrier is a difficult one to overcome because those who recognize their inherent privilege are reluctant to relinquish it and those who do not see it have a difficult time accepting the existence. Within education, this barrier
resembles the misnomers held by entitled members of society. Some of them may believe the
United States is truly the proverbial land of opportunity that affords every citizen the chance to
succeed. Those who do not succeed fail because they choose to focus on the inequities of the
past and simply refuse to move on. What is overlooked is the understanding that most
educational policymakers are White. With that noted, curriculum, for example, excludes the
truths of cultures that do not belong to the dominant group. This is but one example of how
policymakers in education perpetuate the systems of oppression within the United States.

A Sense of Privilege and Entitlement

Entitlement “is the accrual of benefits solely because of membership in a dominate
group” (R. B. Lindsey et al., 2009, p. 75). Heterosexual White men are more representative of
those who reside in the dominant group. Thus, they are inherently entitled, in most situations.
Additionally, the authors made the case that lack of recognition of entitlement does not negate
that privilege is automatically extended. One prime example they cited is that of accountability
in education. The desire to close persistent achievement gaps in education did not arise from a
noble desire to delve into the data in pursuit of these truths and discover ways to create
educational systems of equity. The public revelation resulted from the spotlight that shone on
the achievement gaps, as revealed in standards-based accountability. In other words, there was
no push to close the achievement gap, although the recognition has been in place for over 30
years. Those who were being served within the educational system had no real reason to
challenge nor remedy when they were not being harmed.
Resistance to Change

Color-blindness is one form of resistance of the persistence of racism in society. As it applies to education, this form of liberalism, though at times well-intentioned, perpetuates racism by downplaying race. Capper (2015) highlighted when educators make statements which characterize they do not see color and assert they treat all students the same, it serves to deny that racism even exists. Espousing that race does not impact the educator’s view of a student of color “denies the atrocity of racial inequities in the past and the pervasive racial microaggressions, societal racism, and systemic racism that individuals of color experience on a daily basis and the way racism permeates all aspects of schools” (p. 816). Further, the expected assimilation of students of color to blend into the dominant culture of White, English speaking students is another harmful practice of educators.

Miller and Martin (2014) examined the perceptions of practicing administrators regarding their own effectiveness as culturally responsive, equity driven, social justice leaders, as well as their perceptions on their preparation programs in preparing them to be effective, culturally responsive principals. What they found is, while each principal could easily be characterized as caring leaders, they led with their own color-blind ideology, declaring that race did not matter to them. Additionally, each principal cited not feeling prepared to lead their schools, and by extension, their teachers and students, toward cultural responsiveness, as their principal preparation programs did not adequately equip them. These findings support what continues to be confirmed throughout the literature: school principals may be well intentioned but lack the fundamental knowledge to lead as social justice proponents of educational equity productively, due in part to their obscuring ideology of color-blindness. Capper (2015) posited, with color-blindness, the danger lies in the fact that educators believe everyone should be treated the same.
The implications then remain unchanged; curriculum, instruction, and assessment continue to reflect the institutionalized advantage of Whites.

In examining the challenges of erecting and sustaining culturally proficient educational systems, it must be noted, despite the illumination of racism, the response has been shallow. Ladson-Billings (1998) argued the attempts to transform schools have been superficial at best. Given this understanding, it is imperative that educational leaders strive to overcome these barriers to facilitate the creation of culturally proficient schools.

Culturally Proficient Leadership

Cultural proficiency is an approach interwoven into the fabric of the school culture (R. B. Lindsey et al., 2009). The argument made is “culturally proficient leaders forthrightly address issues that emerge when cultural differences are not valued in schools and other organizations” (p. 45). Additionally, R. B. Lindsey et al. stressed cultural proficiency is a process that requires time to consider the values and behaviors of those who will oppose the focus on cultural proficiency. Mayfield and Garrison-Wade (2015) asserted “when all practices in schools are examined through the lens of student culture, students have a greater chance of experiencing success” (p. 15). Inherent in this statement is the recognition that school leaders must have an in-depth understanding of the cultural identities of the students they serve. Race, language, gender, social class, faith, ability, and sexual orientation are all cultural markers that color the identities of students. Moreover, Terrell and Lindsey (2009) compelled school leaders to delve deeply into their own cultural identity by constructing their own cultural autobiography. This emotionally and intellectually provocative experience is deemed pivotal in the pursuit of cultural proficiency. This deeply personal endeavor requires the school leader to engage in writing a
cultural autobiography that includes addressing race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, ability, and faith. The premise is that writing one’s own cultural autobiography functions as a powerful and necessary component of cultural proficiency. The examination of each of these identities is intended to facilitate insight into the portrait of the individual as a cultural being. Terrell and Lindsey argued the inability to self-examine limits the ability to honestly critique beliefs, values, and experiences. Indulgence in understanding others is limited in the presence of lack of understanding of self. This same idea is affirmed as Hernandez and Kose (2012) asserted a consistent theme in literature regarding social justice leadership is focus on self-awareness and self-reflection. This purposeful work is not simply a task to be undertaken, as reinforced by Ezzani (2014), “It is first and foremost who we are more than what we do. This is predicated on one’s courage and ability to examine one’s self and the organization” (p. 7). The willingness to engage in this highly personal labor requires a leader who is inherently driven by purpose and ethics.

Summary

Researchers must dedicate themselves to the critical investigation of the experiences of those school leaders who strive to serve as social justice leaders who secure equitable educational opportunities and access for all students. Moreover, focusing on the attainment of culturally proficient practices of those school leaders dedicated to social justice is invaluable. It is from those studied in this research that I hope to uncover the characteristics of school leaders who feel compelled to fulfill their ethical and moral obligation of creating schools that meet the needs of all students by valuing their cultural identities. More to the point, it is my hope that this
research adds to the body of knowledge on effective practices of culturally proficient school leaders. In Chapter 3, I provide the methodology employed in my study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODODOLOGY

In this chapter, I describe the research design, including the qualitative methodology, sampling, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Limitations, assumptions, and ethical considerations are also included in Chapter 3.

For this qualitative research study, I employed a descriptive multi-case study designed to explore how the personal and professional experiences of school leaders strengthened and hindered their ability to engage in social justice leadership to advance educational equity and encourage culturally proficient practices in their schools. Hesse-Biber (2017) noted “qualitative researchers are after meaning. The social meaning people attribute to their experiences, circumstances, and situations, as well as the meanings people embed into texts, images, and other objects are the focus of qualitative research” (p. 4). Using this study, I sought meaning in understanding how experiences have strengthened or weakened principal participants’ resolve in becoming school leaders who have evolved into social justice leaders. I sought to determine what compels them to seek cultural proficiency for themselves and their schools. Five principals were studied to find answers to the overarching research question, paired with two sub questions:

How do the experiences of socially just leaders strengthen or hinder their leadership toward developing culturally proficient schools?

1. How have the personal experiences of socially just leaders strengthened or hindered their development of more culturally proficient schools?

2. How have the professional experiences of socially just leaders strengthened or hindered their ability to be socially just leaders?

Research Design

Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2011) defined multi-case or collective case study “as
the intensive and detailed description and analysis of one or more cases” (p. 374). They further explained the case study design allows for multiple sources of data, as well as multiple methods of data collection. Because this study focuses on multiple school leaders and their experiences, I used three different data sources in a multi-case study design. My timeline is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Research timeline.

Multi-Case Study Research Design

One of the difficulties in describing the use of case studies is the ambiguity in the ability to define case study. Rather than remaining mired in the many definitions offered by researchers and theorists, I chose to focus on the characterization of case studies as favoring intensity and depth, as well as exploring the interactions between case and context (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2012) cited that case studies include some of the following key elements:

- Case study as a research genre
- Bounded unit—a person, a group, an institution or organization
- Located within personal, professional, local and national communities
- Involves interactions, communications, relationships and practices between the case and wider world and vice versa
Focus on collecting rich data—capturing the complexity of case
Data may be collected over extended periods with repeated collections or may be collected during an intensive but short period of time
Requires spending time within the world of those being researched
Uses a variety of data collection tools (interviews, observations, reflective journals and others) and are different perspectives (child, teacher, parent, researcher) to provide depth
Employs two or more forms of data collection and/or two or more perspectives. This helps to triangulate the data and reinforces the legitimacy of the conclusions drawn. (p. 9)

My study employed most of the key elements cited by Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2012). They argued that researchers grapple with agreeing on whether case study is a method, methodology, or research design. They explained, however, researchers can agree that the use of case studies evolved as an approach to research that can yield rich data to provide an in-depth perspective. While the multi-case study allows for multiple data sources, another important function of a case study is to provide the researcher with a “holistic understanding of a problem, issue, or phenomenon within its social context” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 221). The use of a multi-case study was predicated on my belief that this research would yield a deeper understanding of the principals who strive to become social justice leaders who achieve cultural proficiency for themselves and their campuses.

Participants

This study included five principals from school districts in north Texas. Upon approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the dissertation committee, principal participants were selected and revealed. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling. Yin (2014) described purposeful sampling as: “The selection of participants or sources to be used in a study, based on their anticipated richness and relevance of information in relation to the study’s
research questions” (p. 311). Relying upon Yin’s definition, I believe the utilization of purposeful sampling yielded the rich data I anticipated. Based on the recommendations of professors and colleagues in the educational leadership doctoral program at the University of North Texas, I pursued candidates who have expressed or demonstrated interest in culturally proficient leadership. A copy of the nomination form is in Appendix B. Participant selection was based on willingness of candidates and the utilization of screening instruments. The screening question posed was intended to elicit responses that reveal each principal’s commitment to social justice leadership as they utilize cultural proficiency to create equitable learning environments. Terrell and Lindsey (2009) speculated, principals who are guided by the five essential elements of culturally proficient leadership would be caring, empathetic, determined, tenacious, and communicative. They value learning and diversity. Once selected, all participants remained anonymous, with the assignments of pseudonyms to the individual participants and the districts of affiliation. I anticipated receiving at least 10 nominations for participants. Seven participants were nominated. However, two of those nominated were not able to participate in the study due to their time constraints. I secured five participants for this study. Three of the participants are middle school principals, one is a high school principal, and another is an elementary principal. The demographics for each participant and the districts in which they work are provided in the data collection discussion.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection began in the spring semester of 2017. I solicited participant nominees utilizing a nomination form, as seen in Appendix A. I emailed a written request to each nominee, describing the purpose of my study, and requesting their participation. Participants
answered one question that spoke to their current practices in addressing cultural diversity. The principal screening instrument is in Appendix B. The principal screening rubric contains established criteria based on the five essential elements. This rubric, as seen in Appendix C, was used for screening purposes to determine if the candidate met the criteria for this study. The document analysis, focus group, and individual interviews commenced in April and concluded in October. Member-checking was conducted in August 2017 (Patton, 2002). Participants had the opportunity to review a synopsis of the findings and submit their feedback by October 1, 2017. No participant submitted feedback. However, based on questions I had during the process of data collection and data analysis, I did seek clarity as needed with each participant.

Data Collection

The data collection process began with the principal screening rubric that contained one question. Following the completion and my assessment of the screening rubric, I distributed the cultural autobiography directions, to be completed by each participant no later than August 1. I began the participant interviews following the distribution of the cultural autobiographies. Interviews were conducted with one high school principal, one elementary principal, and three middle school principals. A total of five interviews were completed for a minimum of eight total hours. After I completed all the participant interviews, I conducted a focus group interview with the five principals that was scheduled for 90 minutes; however, the focus group interview lasted two hours.

Zainal (2007) stated that engaging in case studies helps “explore or describe the data in a real-life environment, but also helps to explain the complexities of real life situations” (p. 4). According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), the benefits of interviews as a means of data
collection include the quick yielding of data, which allows time for clarification. In this study, the primary strategy employed was interviewing. This research study included the use of interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. It was important to utilize various data collection methods to provide multiple opportunities for the participants of this study to tell their own stories. In addition, cultural autobiographies were used to support methods for collecting data, as well as for the triangulation of data. Table 1 shows the demographics for the five participants in the current study.

Table 1

*Participants’ Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Maria</th>
<th>Stella</th>
<th>Doug</th>
<th>Jeremy</th>
<th>Frances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Asian/Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as a Principal</td>
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<td>05</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in Current Position</td>
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<td>05</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of School</td>
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<td>Middle</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym of School</td>
<td>Zora Neal Hurston HS</td>
<td>JK Rowling MS</td>
<td>Percy Jackson MS</td>
<td>Stephanie Meyer MS</td>
<td>Judy Blume Elementary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISD Pseudonym</td>
<td>Crawford</td>
<td>Potter</td>
<td>Forest Hills</td>
<td>Forest Hills</td>
<td>Central Park</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Enrollment</td>
<td>28,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Enrollment</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>400</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learners</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Developing an inquiry-based framework with interview questions tied to my research questions was important. This framework, otherwise known as an interview protocol, was developed to solicit rich conversations (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The protocol, as seen in Appendix D, provides the interview questions, along with probing questions, that guided my interviews. My interviews were semi-structured interviews, as noted by Hesse-Biber (2017), allowing for a more conversational flow. I recognized I could be interviewing principals who may have a deeper and more thorough understanding of and experiences with cultural proficiency than I. Given this recognition, it was prudent to utilize an interview structure that provided the opportunity for new knowledge to emerge, and by extension the opportunity to explore new topics as they organically materialized. Semi-structured interviews with the principals took place in their offices at their respective campuses. These scheduled interviews were for a minimum of 90 minutes. Each participant was interviewed one time, individually, with a request for follow-up via phone, email, or face-to-face, should there be a need to probe for additional data. With permission from the interviewees, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by me immediately thereafter. Logistically, that limited the number of interviews to no more than two per week. The interviews occurred between April and August 2017.

Focus Group Interviews

Qu and Dumay (2011) pointed out the value of focus groups to “understand the way the interviewees perceive the social world under study” (p. 245). Given the nature of my study, the use of a focus group was appropriate as I sought to uncover the individual and collective experiences of my research participants while delving into their social world and the social world
of education. Further, Qu and Dumay shared the use of focus groups provides for a “flexible and exploratory discussion format emphasizing interactions between participants rather than between the interviewer and interviewees, with the interviewer serving the role of moderator” (p. 243). It is with this understanding that I chose to utilize one focus group as another source of data collection. Moreover, I heeded Barbour’s (2007) assertion that a researcher who chooses to utilize focus groups as a means of data collection because they believe it is a short cut is misguided in understanding the purpose of a focus group. My use of focus groups was not for the intended purpose of short cuts. Also, I recognized that a well-developed plan needed to occur to create focus group interviews that were productive and meaningful in nature. Thus, I used the focus group protocol (Appendix E). The use of a focus group for this research allowed the opportunity to glean rich data as the participants engaged in discourse that extended what was revealed in the interviews (Barbour & Schostak, 2011). Hesse-Biber (2017) explained the value of using focus groups is important to realize. Focus groups are dynamic in nature. The interaction between the participants is vital because “participants, even if they hold similar views, attitudes, and life experiences, are not merely responding to questions posted by a researcher but are also responding to each other and the group dynamic as a whole” (p. 153). This dynamic, as explained by Hesse-Biber, cannot be duplicated. I utilized one focus group including all five participants. I conducted the focus group interview in August 2017 at a neutral location, the University of North Texas in Frisco.

Content Analysis of Cultural Autobiography

Content analysis is a method for describing and interpreting documents, such as textbooks, speeches, and political speeches. This method evolved from one that focused more on
the quantification of specific words to a process where researchers focus on the meanings and relationships of words and concepts (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Within social sciences, the use of content analysis has been more prolific in use than in other fields (Coffey, 2013). Data derived from documents often makes sense of social and organizational practices.

The document I used as a data source is a cultural autobiography. The principals participating in this study produced their cultural autobiographies. Each participant was provided a detailed explanation of the cultural autobiography assignment, along with the justification, as shown in Appendix F. Terrell and Lindsey (2009) asserted the creation of cultural autobiographies is one crucial step in understanding the cross-cultural values and assumptions one possesses. I anticipated the analysis of each principal’s cultural autobiography would yield rich personal and insightful data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The fact that the cultural autobiographies were solicited documents was an important consideration in the analysis. Coffey (2013) pointed out documents that are recipient designed are produced with the reader in mind. Each of the principals participating in this study was aware of my profession and my research interest. I anticipate their recognition of audience may impact the breadth and depth of what they composed. Participants submitted their autobiographies in May 2017.

Data Analysis

The process of data coding and analysis was as follows. With this study, I sought to explore how the personal and professional experiences of school leaders strengthened or hindered their development as culturally proficient social justice leaders. During and after the data collection process, I followed detailed steps to understand and make meaning of the data.
Upon receipt of each of the principal participant screening instruments and cultural autobiographies and following each individual interview and the focus group interview, I analyzed the data. These sources provided a variety of data for analysis. Marshall and Rossman (2016) shared the benefits of using transcription software as it serves as an efficient and time saving tool. I used Rev.com for transcription of the interviews and focus group interview. It was not cost prohibitive but more importantly, I received the transcriptions of the interview and focus group data within hours of submission. After the transcription of each interview and the focus group interview, I read through each of the transcripts, simply to gain a cursory perspective.

Prior to analyzing the data collected, it was prudent to approach coding with the purpose of the study in mind. Coding, the categorization of names and labels assigned to topics, phrases, and concepts, served as a representation of the analytical thinking required for this study. Keeping the end in mind increases the likelihood that the analysis will be clear and relevant. For that reason, I used a priori codes, otherwise known as pre-established codes, in the facilitation of compiling, labeling, and organizing the data in a purposeful way (Stemler, 2001). I used a hybrid method of creating codes, consisting of a priori codes and emergent codes. Coding was utilized in the analysis of the interviews, the focus group, and document analysis. I based the a priori codes on the conceptual framework, five essential elements of cultural proficiency, and research questions.

The computer data analysis program, NVivo, was used as a tool to assist with the process of data analysis. Through the process of data analysis, emergent codes became apparent and were utilized. Although the a priori codes allowed me to contemplate ideas that I anticipated, I also recognized unanticipated ideas, concepts, and relationships would emerge (Stemler, 2001).
As I was coding, I was mindful of trends that arise, taking notes, and creating codes that allowed for the emergence of rich data analysis.

Since I secured a variety of data from five participants, as well as securing data from three different sources—interviews, focus groups, and document analysis—utilization of tables and charts was necessary to organize the process of analysis. Data and document triangulation were necessary to perform a synthesis of lessons learned from the various school leaders, which contributed to ascertaining the characteristics of socially just leaders and their beliefs and actions toward developing culturally proficient schools (Patton, 2002). Table 2 diagrams the process for coding, analysis, and organizing data; and the integration of the framework with the themes and research questions.

Table 2

*A Priori Codes, Emergent Codes, Themes, and Correlation of Themes to Sub-questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A priori codes</th>
<th>Emergent codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Correlation of themes to Sub-questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Background</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Prevalence of Race</td>
<td>SQ 1 &amp; 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Struggle with Identity</td>
<td>SQ 1 &amp; 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice</td>
<td>Socioeconomics</td>
<td>Abundance of Empathy</td>
<td>SQ 1 &amp; 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Accountability</td>
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<td>Values Diversity</td>
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To gauge the validity of my data analysis, a doctoral student from the University of North Texas, with some experience in qualitative data analysis, agreed to code one data set using the chart of a priori and emergent codes I developed during my analysis process. Additionally, I provided my conceptual framework, along with my research questions. Interrater reliability was established at 80% with this data set.

Data Saturation

One significant concern in qualitative research is that of data saturation. Fusch and Ness (2015) discussed the often misconstrued ideal sample size in relation to data saturation. They stated having a large or small sample size is no guarantee of data saturation. Further, a connection is made between triangulation of data and data saturation. Their assertion was that triangulation is a means of reaching saturation. As Fusch and Ness pointed out, rich data are multi-layered while thick data are a large quantity. This was important to note in my methodology as I believe the use of three data sources provided rich data and thick data.

Ethical Considerations

Stutchbury and Fox (2009) stressed educational research is not exempt from the ethical issues that are inherent in all research studies. Moreover, they argued the process of making decisions must be transparent and morally defensible. Clark and Sharf (2007) astutely reiterated this responsibility of the researcher when they stated:

The practice of qualitative research, especially research on life history, social problems, and interpersonal relationships, is guided by important ethical principles and primary among these is our responsibility for our informants. These principles all stem from our bond with them, a relationship we initiate and for which we bear prime responsibility. Above all, we must do them no harm. Our intention and our hope, of course, is to do good. We choose to study what we think are important issues, things that matter to us
and to others, and we want our work to make a difference in the lives of others, and perhaps even to create social change in a particular arena. But our primary responsibility is always to our informants. (pp. 2-3)

It is with this charge that I ensure provision for and communication of informed consent to protect the participants of this study to the greatest extent possible from any foreseeable potential risks. A copy of the informed consent form explaining any foreseeable risks is in Appendix G. Recognizing that I would receive recommendations from colleagues and professors at the University of North Texas, I clarified that participation in this study is voluntary. I obtained signatures of all school leaders who consented to participation, as well as secured district consent for each participant. Additionally, participants were made aware of their ability to withdraw from this research study, at which point consent would be revoked. I followed the procedures, as determined by the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board, regarding informed consent for all participants. Participants were reminded of the confidentiality of this study, as well as received written and oral explanations of each process related to the interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. As stated earlier, the principals, schools, and school districts remain anonymous, each provided pseudonyms for protection of confidentiality.

In gaining access to participants in this study, relational ethics must be considered. As Kerstetter (2012) noted, insider researchers have an advantage in gaining access to participants and using their shared experiences to illicit richer data from the participants. In seeking nominations from professors at UNT, not only would there be shared experiences between the participants and myself, it was likely that I might know some of the participants. The ability to establish a rapport with each of the participants was inherently increased because I, like them, am a school principal in the north Texas area. Each of the participants, since nominated by a UNT professor, was either in the process of or had completed a doctorate in educational
leadership. These shared experiences provided a balance of power between me and the participants of this study. While I am cognizant of the benefits of being an insider researcher, I understand the necessity of mindfulness in remaining objective and maintaining confidentiality of each of the participants.

Limitations of the Study

For the researcher to earn the confidence of the reader, validity is illustrated through the above process (Hesse-Bibler & Leavy, 2010). The previously detailed procedures were in place to ensure validity and reliability; yet, there are risks that must be considered.

The sample size of this study was relatively small due to the nature of the study, which was intended to be in-depth. The limitation of time and access to more participants was an important consideration. The responsiveness of two of the participants’ school districts was a contention as it took three months to get approval. Additionally, two of the school districts approved the research study for one academic year only. Given I began the process of securing IRB approval in January 2017, I knew my access to the participants would be limited by their availability. The small sample size does preclude generalizability (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Hesse-Biber (2017) highlighted reflexivity allows researchers to put “their reflexive experience into the research process enabl[ing] them to engage in a dialogue with their own personal biases as researchers” (p. 96). Researcher bias posed a threat as I am currently a school principal and graduate student who may have had classes with some of the participants. In consideration of addressing the ethics of my study, reflexivity proved valuable in the process of analysis of the data collected from my interviews, focus group discussion, and the document analysis. Serving as the interviewer and moderator, it was my responsibility to remain mindful
of consideration of ethics. To overcome this limitation, I remained cognizant of reflexivity throughout this study. The participant selection criteria were established with mindfulness of researcher bias.

A limitation I considered throughout the data collection and analysis was the use of self-reported data. I had to rely on the honesty of the participants. However, the triangulation of data did provide some reassurances.

Summary

This chapter describes the research design and methods of data collection procedures and analysis that I used in my research. The qualitative multi-case study research design was intended to allow me to explore how the experiences of school leaders who aspire to become culturally proficient social justice leaders strengthen their leadership and how their leadership encourages culturally proficient schools. There were five principal participants from four different school districts. I employed the use of interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis. Data collected from these data sources were coded and analyzed for correlating findings with the conceptual framework of this study, the essential elements of culturally-proficient leadership, and the research questions. After data collection, I examined patterns of reoccurring topics to determine emerging themes. Additionally, it was important to utilize reflexivity throughout this study. The responsibility to protect the participants in this study was assumed with fidelity. Chapter four presents my research findings and provides an analysis of findings in relation to the review of literature.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

This study was designed to explore the experiences of school leaders who are in pursuit of social justice and cultural proficiency. Throughout this chapter, the results are discussed based on the analysis of principal participant screening instruments, the individual participant interviews, the focus group interview, and the principals’ cultural autobiographies.

Personal narratives of each principal participant are presented with a discussion of their experiences and backgrounds, as well as a discussion of their leadership. The narratives and discussions of leadership are based on the data from the cultural autobiographies, principal participant screening instruments, individual interviews, and the focus group interview. Pseudonyms were assigned to each principal participant, their school district, and their school campus. The themes and subthemes that emerged as prevalent and relevant, along with a graphic depiction of the themes are listed and shown in Figure 3:

1. Prevalence of Race
   a. Leveraging race
   b. Racism in schools
   c. Racism with the community

2. Struggle with Identity and Fitting in

3. Abundance of Empathy

4. Equity
   a. Role of accountability in equity
   b. Access to Opportunities
Figure 3. Themes of socially just principals’ pursuit of cultural proficiency.

The overarching research question was formulated to guide the study and the answer to this question surfaced within each common theme.

How do the experiences of socially just leaders strengthen or hinder their leadership toward developing culturally proficient schools?

1. How have the personal experiences of socially just leaders strengthened or hindered their development of more culturally proficient schools?

2. How have the professional experiences of socially just leaders strengthened or hindered their ability to be socially just leaders?
Experiences and Background

Frances reflects on the personal and professional experiences that are largely responsible for the paths she travelled, her leadership, the challenges she faced personally and professionally, and the decisions she makes as a school principal. Frances describes herself as a first-generation immigrant to the United States. She came to the United States as a baby and spent all her formative years, elementary through her undergraduate degree, in California. Growing up in Little Saigon in California in the 1970s, Frances remained acutely aware of her status as a Vietnamese girl. She began learning English in pre-kindergarten. In her recollections of her early life as a young child, Frances recognized she was different. Her attire and the texture of her long black hair made her stand out. In the sixth grade, Frances was selected to participate in a gifted and talented program. To participate, Frances was bussed to another campus where few students looked like her. Though she was indoctrinated into the mainstream culture of the White, middle class, her experience growing up was vastly different from her White counterparts. Frances shared when she recognized that her home was vastly different from those of her classmates.

In sixth grade, I was invited to sleep overs and birthday parties and learned that a ‘home’ consisted of many rooms and furniture pieces for which I did not know the names. Up until this point in my life, my family of six shared one bedroom of a home. We slept on pallets made of blankets laid out on the floor. It was not until my high school years that my parents came upon more money that we graduated to sleeping on beds and/or the couch.

Frances excelled in the White, middle class school she attended. She shared that one component characteristic of her Vietnamese culture is to be compliant. Her compliance allowed Frances to thrive in the educational system geared toward White students. Frances cited the great influence of her high school teachers, noting that it was her desire to “pay homage to their profession” that
drove her to pursue a teaching career. After earning her teaching credentials in 1996, Frances taught for two years before moving to Texas, where she taught four more years before becoming a school counselor. Frances served as a school counselor for two years before moving into administration. Frances’ professional and academic experiences, including her doctoral pursuit, contribute to her interest in understanding how the educational system that is geared toward serving White, middle class clashes with serving the needs of marginalized students.

Frances’ Leadership Experiences

As an elementary principal, Frances described herself as a leader who demonstrates servant leadership, builds relationships, and is transparent in her communication and actions. Her servant leadership manifests itself in simple ways.

Anything that I ask my colleagues to do, I do it. I make sure that I demonstrate, and I show them that I would do it. If I clean tables, if I take out the trash, anything. Before I ask them, I want them to know for sure that I would do it too. If I ask them to stay late, I’m here staying late alongside with them. If I’m asking them to learn, I put myself out there. I show them, ‘Hey, I don’t know this. I’m learning alongside you.’

Frances, only in her second year at her current school, has been deliberate in building relationships with the school community, students, and staff. She is collaborative with the school PTA in attempting to involve more parents in school functions, planning, for example, a Family Fun Night. Frances now translates materials sent home in Spanish. Understanding one of the pillars of social justice leadership is creating a welcoming school climate; Frances focuses on creating an inviting and accessible school as the demographics continue to shift from what was once a campus predominantly comprised of White students to what is now 1/3 White, 1/3 African American, and 1/3 Hispanic. When meeting her staff, Frances feels it is important to communicate a bit of her background, sharing with them.
My being an immigrant has had a great impact on how I lead, or my choice to even become an educator. I am so proud to be an American. Everything that I have, everything that I’ve learned, my education was only made possible because I’m here in the United States, because I was given the opportunity by teachers, way back when, to help me grow.

In building relationships with her students and staff, Frances cited visibility as the key component. She serves lunch and recess duty, walks the halls, and goes into the classrooms as much as time allows. Frances shared that her normal day on campus entails many hugs from her students, wherever she goes. She noted that while her students may not fully understand the role of principal, they know she is their principal. Her understanding of the importance of building relationships is evident in her interview acknowledgement.

Even with parents, even with teachers, the visibility aspect of me being out there, and being open, and being genuine with what I say and what I do. The morning announcements I share with my assistant principal. Whenever we can, we’re out there. We’re on the morning announcements, which is a video broadcast. That’s why I mention to you that I might look at next year with posing questions, or something like that. Yes, building relationships is definitely at the forefront. Without building that relationship to begin with, we can’t move forward. That’s really what I’ve been focusing in on this first year before making any changes that needed to be made. It’s basically letting them know that I care. I care through my actions, and my actions is whatever events that we have, I’m here alongside with you. I’m learning with you. I’m celebrating with you.

Frances explained that transparency marks her interactions with parents, students, and staff.

Being genuine with what she says and does is important in earning their trust, and ultimately their buy-in.

When asked if she believes her leadership is questioned because of her gender, Frances shared she does not believe she leads differently because she is a woman. However, she perceives her leadership differently, based on her gender.

I believe that staff believes that because I am a woman, that I am more detailed oriented and have higher standards and that I hold them more accountable as opposed to male leaders who don’t micro-manage. I’m sure my staff believes I micro-manage. I do believe White male leaders bear more responsibility as advocates for social justice as they are traditionally the ones with voices that are heard.
In discussing Frances’ growth as a school leader focused on social justice, she noted the lack of direction and knowledge provided through her principal preparation program.

I’m trying to think if there were any courses on culture. No. It was just more multicultural education that I received as a teacher, but not as an administrator. In all honestly, I will probably tell you that this idea of cultural competence didn’t come to my knowledge, or something that I realized was something to think about until I took the cultural foundations class in my doctoral program. The whole idea of being a social justice leader was foreign to me up until that point. I was so empowered by that class. I realized I’ve been quiet all these years. I’ve been silent. I could’ve said more. I could’ve done more, but I didn’t. I didn’t really see how important my role was as a principal until that course 2 years ago. My school district has tried to bring out the cultural competency modules to just say there’s differences in students, differences in teachers based on age, based on religion.

Frances acknowledged she has much more to learn and while she may receive some guidance from her school district, it has not been enough. With that acknowledgment, Frances stated she feels the weight alone in learning how to become a school leader who operates as a social justice leader.

Frances, while invested in positively leading her campus along the cultural proficiency continuum, struggles between awareness and implementation of practices. Practices, such as a multicultural night or Hispanic Heritage Week, are problematic for Frances. She does not believe that recognition of diversity should be “relegated to a week, a day, or a month. I’m really looking for ways to bring in awareness year-round. It’s not that I’m color blind. I’m very aware of color.” Though Frances is quick to point out the ways in which she fails to live up to expectations of herself in promoting cultural proficiency, she is driven to do more.

Doug’s Journey – “I do this because I love you”

Doug’s Experiences and Background

Doug is in his 10th year as principal at his middle school and has spent 14 years overall
as a school principal. He began his career as an assistant band director in the same small town where he attended college. Having grown up in a large Texas city, Doug returned to the area and taught in several school districts before embarking on his administrative career. Doug’s reflections highlight that he did not plan to take the route he travelled. His interactions with fellow teachers and people he met along the way seemed to carve out his path. One of his peer teachers encouraged Doug to begin his master’s degree for school administration. Though he was not sure if this was the right choice, once he took his first class, he knew he was in the right place. What resonated with Doug was the sphere of influence afforded him as an administrator. Serving all students and staff on a school campus became his calling. Each step along the way to his current position, there was a colleague who recruited him. Having recently earned his doctorate, he reflects that he was even invited to join a cohort. He entered his program with the mindset of trying just one class, doubting his desire to see the doctorate through to the end. Out of Doug’s original cohort of 12, just four finished the doctoral program. He stated that while the dissertation phase was trying, he could not fathom getting that far along, spending all that money, without earning his doctorate. While accomplished in his own right, the influence of those he respects was noted by Doug throughout the individual interview.

When Doug was 5, his father took him to live with his grandmother and grandfather. Doug reflects that his experience as a White boy living in a “predominantly African American and Hispanic neighborhood” with his grandparents taught him “a lot about how to accept other people for who they were and not based on what they looked like.” However, this lesson did not come easily. When Doug was in elementary school, he was one of a few White students in his school. He stated that he encountered alienation because he was White. When his grandfather passed away, Doug, at the age of nine, moved to three different middle schools in three different
years. Ironically, having spent his elementary years in an economically disadvantaged school with the majority of students being students of color, the transition for Doug, when he and his grandmother moved to an affluent area with little diversity, was even more culturally unsettling. Doug cited he felt “off balance” until he reached high school. He, an only child, felt he had no one in whom he could confide. Doug reflected that his grandmother, though a warm woman, was seemingly unable to help him as he struggled with fitting in and belonging.

I would come home and complain to my grandmother, and she would say, ’Well, you know, you just have to figure it out.’ You know there wasn’t a lot of excuse making in my home. I grew up with a single grandmother, a depression era grandmother. There wasn’t a lot of excuses. It was just, ‘Okay, just go make it work.’ There wasn’t somebody running to the school or trying to micromanage your life. You had to figure it out. Got to act reasonable and you had to be respectful even when they’re not. If somebody’s not respectful to you, be respectful to them . . . One of my favorite sayings of my grandmother, I think she only told me once, but I distinctly remember. It was, ’You can learn something from everybody, even if it’s how not to act.’ That was her general comeback when I’d say, ‘Somebody’s acting disrespectful.’ Or, ’That kid called me a name.’ Well, I guess you can learn that that’s not what you need to do. It wasn’t . . . there was no excuse making. It was like, ’Learn from that. But I can’t help you.’

Doug now credits his upbringing and the straightforwardness of his grandmother as having great positive influence on him as a school leader.

Doug’s Leadership Experiences

As a leader, Doug is moved to action by one question, “Does this hurt or help kids?” He is solution focused, to the extent that his expectation of staff members is that when they come to him with a question or concern, they can articulate options or plans they have already considered. As much as is reasonable, Doug believes teachers should feel they have autonomy, that their views are heard. He states he does not approach decision making and communication from the vantage of “I’m the principal; I have spoken.” It is important to treat teachers like the professionals they are. Doug believes that, without trust, school improvement falters.
You know one of my favorite books is Speed of Trust. So, we do a lot of trust and verify, here. We don’t do a lot of micromanaging. We get buy-in from them . . . When we hire here, we hire in teams. Now I have the final decision, but we sit there and there’s usually four people all basically kind of the same, to me on paper, and I just ask them, who can you work with? This would be my choice, but I don’t have to sit with them in a PLC with them every day. This creates trust, buy-in, and responsibility.

Doug confessed he leans on the teacher leaders on his campus as much as possible in making campus decisions since they are the ones who are charged with carrying out the actions necessitated. He trusts their knowledge, intentions, and integrity to do what is right for kids.

Doug leads with his heart. He approaches data from the perspective of understanding students. In examining the rise of discipline referrals, he discovered a trend that he believes is rooted in the anxiety students experience going into the breaks throughout the year and into the summer break. With 54% of his students on free or reduced meals, Doug posited that the breaks remove students from the one setting, school, that affords them two meals each day and security.

This is the safest, warmest, cleanest, most loving place some students have. There are people that walk around and say, I love you. I love you, you’re such a great kid. I love you. Even though you screwed up, I absolutely love you. The worst thing they want me to do is suspend them [they] say, ’I can’t go home for two days. I’ll do anything to be here.’ I’ve had kids say that. And then food. You know, they know we’ll feed them and take care of them and they don’t have that at home. Some of them don’t have electricity, you know? So, when it gets nasty out. So -- this summer, good lord. July in [Texas] with no AC? That’s not a good time.

Disaggregation of the discipline data was prompted by Doug’s desire to better understand the rise in discipline referrals. His recognition of the plight of some of his students reveals he cares more about the why of student misbehavior. In this example, Doug specifically examines the data as it relates to poverty; however, Doug did not cite race as a variable he considers in delving into the discipline data analysis. In order for teachers to be reflective of their practices, it is incumbent upon the social justice leader to confront the issue of race in every practice.
Relationships are paramount in Doug’s ability to lead his campus. His penchant for building trusting relationships with staff, students, and parents is contingent upon transparency. Doug believes his transparency and the ease with which he interacts with students and parents of different races and religious beliefs is rooted in the way he was raised. Growing up poor, being the isolated White kid in schools that were predominantly comprised of African American and Hispanic students and being raised with his grandmother’s no excuses approach to life are all factors that prepared Doug to lead with heart. The campus data revealed Doug’s mindfulness in examining factors such as race and socioeconomics. However, the intentionality of leading staff in understanding implications of race, as it pertains to relationships and practices, was not apparent in the discipline data.

While discussing how Doug’s degree programs helped him become a principal who strives to become a social justice leader, he provided an emphatic response.

We had no discussions about social justice, culture, or equity. Undergraduate certainly didn’t do it. Masters didn’t. My doctoral program made a weak attempt. So, I took one class that was called cultural diversity, or some version of that. I can’t remember the name of the class, right now, but that’s all that was. That’s all that class was. And it still really didn’t do anything but just cause us to talk about it, and I don’t know how practical it was. But it was the only class where we talked about things like, What are you going to do when your teachers don’t look like your kids? Or your community doesn’t look like your teachers? Or you’re an all-White district with a small population of some minority, and they’re not feeling it. They’re not in anything, they’re not doing anything, they don’t feel a part of it. I mean, what are you going to do?

When asked the role his current school district plays in requiring and equipping him to lead from the stance of social justice, Doug was quick to point out his district talks about the need to serve ESL students better but rarely does the talk lead to action.

Doug is unapologetically direct in his beliefs. He is a leader who is compelled to let his students know how much he loves them. His belief that he is the parent to each student is revealed in his advocacy and actions.
Maria’s Journey – “God says I’m exactly who I am supposed to be.”

Experiences and Background

Maria grew up in a small west Texas town. She shared that living in this small west Texas town taught her that being brown was synonymous with being Mexican, speaking Spanish, and working in the cotton fields. While Maria is of Mexican descent and her father did indeed work in the cotton fields until he graduated from college in 1974, Maria’s dark skin was more attributed to the summers playing outside as a child, not working in cotton fields.

The interview and Maria’s cultural autobiography highlighted the sense of pride and responsibility she feels in living up to the expectations of her parents. Growing up, education was very important in Maria’s household. Her father graduated from college in 1974 and her mother graduated from college in 1984. Maria’s father assumed a career in personnel after earning his degree. Maria’s mother served as a teacher’s aide, ultimately becoming a teacher, after having earned her degree and teaching credentials. Contemplating her own career path, it was in high school that Maria decided she wanted to earn her college degree and become an English teacher. She was awarded a modest scholarship to pursue teacher education. In her sophomore year of college, Maria completed her required classroom observation hours at a local high school. This experience, according to Maria, terrified her and she decided she was not well-suited to teach. However, her father refused to allow Maria to change her major. Realizing she no longer desired to teach high school, Maria completed her undergraduate degree in English and immediately enrolled in graduate school to earn her master’s degree in higher education. Maria shared that her parents agreed to pay for graduate school, working extra jobs to provide this opportunity for her. Ironically, she decided to utilize the teaching certification she reluctantly earned. Maria took a teaching position merely to pay her bills. To her surprise, Maria
discovered she enjoyed teaching. During her fifth year of teaching, Maria took on a second job as a night-school director at a business college. She realized she loved the responsibilities associated with administration. It was then that Maria pursued and earned her principal certification. During her marriage, and later, her divorce, Maria transitioned from the classroom, to the assistant principal position, to a building principal. Having served as assistant principal to her mentor/building principal, Maria accepted the principal position at the middle school when her mentor retired. Maria was principal there for seven years. Realizing at age 40 she was never going to have children, she informed her second husband she was enrolling in a doctoral program for educational leadership. It was when she finished her doctorate that she decided she wanted to return to working in the high school setting. Thus, Maria accepted the position of opening a new high school in a nearby school district. She now serves as the inaugural principal of the newest high school in her district. Hurston High School opened in 2016. Prior to the opening, Maria spent one year planning and working through the details associated with opening a new school. With 11 years of principal experience, Maria admitted she is excited as she works towards establishing campus norms, building traditions, and creating a campus culture but feels inept in creating a campus of cultural proficiency when she does not fully understand the concept of cultural proficiency.

Maria’s Leadership Experiences

Maria described her leadership style as collaborative. It is important to her that she garners input from the stakeholders of her campus. She stated that opening a new high school highlighted the extent to which she must work with all school constituents. Even before her school opening, Maria was very visible within the local community. Though Maria does not use
the term “political leader,” the extent to which she recognizes the importance of her role as such. Realizing the weight of the responsibility in establishing all the campus norms, Maria sought ways to gather input. The incoming ninth graders voted on the school mascot and school colors. She held monthly community meetings to provide updates on the status of the building. As she hired her new staff, Maria provided opportunities for staff members to meet and get to know each other. Maria shared her leadership is marked largely by her transparency. This need for transparency is an issue of integrity and moral purpose, especially when difficult conversations must occur.

You know I want to be very transparent with everyone. When I talk to somebody and they’re not meeting the expectations, I will tell them. I tell them immediately so, if I’m from Day 1 transparent about what I expect of myself and the people around me, then there are no excuses. I must be transparent about decisions that are best for the school and the kids and the community. If I can be transparent, then having those conversations with people is actually very easy because if somebody is on this campus that doesn’t have that same belief, that’s okay because it’s not for everybody; not everybody is going to want to work here with me.

Maria conveyed the contrast she recognizes in her belief in transparency with her top strength, harmony, as identified by the results of her Gallup StrengthsFinder survey. Maria pointed out that those who have harmony as their strength steer away from conflict. They seek common ground and minimize conflict. She quickly pointed out she does not avoid conflict because she has the inherent responsibility as the leader of her campus to make the tough decisions, realizing ,as she stated, “The buck stops here.” She has no qualms with being the self-appointed “bad guy” when it comes to addressing necessary conflict when it is in the best interest of students. However, she highlighted the importance of creating an environment where people want to come to work, where people are satisfied, care for each other, and are supported in reaching the collective potential of the team and the individual potential of each staff member.
In the interview, I asked Maria if she believes gender impacts her practices as a principal who strives to serve as a social justice leader. She responded, “We all act as social justice advocates because we’re human beings, not because we’re a man or a woman, but I do recognize I have to function differently because I am a woman.” Maria did not articulate the ways in which she has to function differently.

Maria used the phrase “building bridges” to characterize the deliberate act of building relationships of trust. She believes this is the most important practice she has as a leader. When working with staff, students, and parents, Maria cited that putting her own ego aside at times pays far greater dividends. She is quick to own that sometimes she makes mistakes and understands that apologizing is important in regaining any bit of lost trust. When Maria interacts with students, she makes it a point to be direct in her expectations and communication. If a student, for example, rolls her eyes during an exchange with Maria, Maria lets the student know that she perceives that as an act of disrespect and lets the student know consequences will follow if it occurs again. Maria shared this takes some effort on her part to put aside her own emotional reaction and calmly approach the incident as an opportunity for relationship building, as well as clarity of expectations. Maria believes in picking battles. She stated:

Sometimes you need to concede, even though it’s not what you want. You concede because it’s not about you and your pride. It’s about doing what’s right for kids. Sometimes you have to step back and not get what you want to build a relationship with a family so the next time it becomes real and more important, you can put your foot down and say, ‘I need you to trust me on this; you’re just going to have to trust me on this.’

When asked in the interview how she leads as a principal who strives towards social justice and how she leads her campus towards cultural proficiency, Maria pointed out her lack of understanding of cultural proficiency.

Well, I don’t know what cultural proficiency means. I don’t know what that means but what I do understand is that a leader must foster a culture of acceptance, of tolerance, of
I explained cultural proficiency is the ability to serve students of all cultural backgrounds while understanding there are systems in education that marginalize students who are not White, middle class. Maria explained her lack of understanding is not surprising because she was not exposed to learning about social justice or cultural proficiency during her years of post-secondary education. The lack of exposure with these concepts in her degree programs was made worse by some of her experiences. Maria asserted that her educational experience has been “very White man driven.”

As a PhD student, I’m in class and the professor starts speaking Spanish to me and he’s doing it kind of in a joking way. At another point, he started speaking Chinese to the Asian girl, assuming she spoke Chinese. He even mentioned to the African American woman in that class how she would know certain wedding songs because Black people play it at their wedding. Okay, what’s my point on that? I wanted to complain against him to the dean but a mentor reminded me, ‘Don’t rock the boat, get your doctorate, just get your doctorate, don’t rock the boat.’ That’s exactly what I did.

Recounting these incidences, Maria expressed regret that she did not report this professor to the dean but she did not because she was afraid she would jeopardize earning her doctorate.

While Maria acknowledged her lack of understanding cultural proficiency, she acknowledged the challenge to becoming a school leader extends beyond her lack of understanding. Only in her second year as the inaugural principal, Maria stated she does not know her staff as well as she feels is necessary to focus on cultural proficiency. Maria recognizes the need to continue to put processes in place that allow for understanding and facilitation of moving towards cultural proficiency. However, she is conflicted regarding the timing. In the interview, Maria initially argued that until instructional norms and common standards are solidified across the campus, not much movement along the continuum can occur.
So when we establish those, those instructional and assessment norms, it’s not with
culture in mind, it’s with learning in mind. The cultural sensitivity comes from building
a relationship with a kid and that’s not necessarily in the instructional norm. Holy Cow!
Maybe it should be. I’m just having this epiphany. Maybe that does need to be part of
the instructional norms. We need to build relationships. We have to be culturally
sensitive. We have to have cultural awareness of the kids we teach in order to build
relationships. To teach kids, we have to understand them and know them. We’re not
taught to do this. Now I have to have conversations with my leadership team.

Participating in this study, Maria shared, has been “a little eye opening and frightening. It has
made me think that my work is small. I need to get my butt in gear. There’s so much more I
need to do for my kids.” Maria proclaims a heightened awareness of how much more she needs
to learn about social justice and cultural proficiency. Maria recognizes her evolution from a
school leader to a social justice school leader is contingent upon learning much more about
cultural proficiency, educational equity, and social justice. However, without the intervention
and support of her school district, it is not likely to occur.

Jeremy’s Story – “School is a place of judgement; school should feel safe.”

Jeremy’s Experiences and Background

Jeremy is a 41-year-old African American male. He grew up in a small town in northeast
Louisiana that was ranked by Time magazine as one of the poorest places in America. This
distinction is important to note as the poverty of this racially divided town made a great impact
on Jeremy growing up. Jeremy cited having a healthy, respectful fear of his grandmother as a
child. A devout Jehovah’s Witness, his grandmother dedicated herself to ensuring the family
lived in accordance with their religious beliefs. Jeremy shared this often conflicted with his
desire to fit in with his friends and engage in their social activities. Jeremy longed to participate
in Christmas gift exchanges and birthday parties. The internal conflict Jeremy experienced
growing up is evident in what he shares.
Kids made fun of me because my grandmother would come to the school to get all of the Jehovah Witness students prior to any Christmas parties. I wasn’t allowed to participate in Valentine’s Day card exchanges. All of this has created a sort of complicated relationship between organized religion and me.

Jeremy grew up on the “Black side of the lake.” As a first-grader, he remembers his White teacher. She was the only White person with whom he had ever had any personal contact by that age. He cited his reference point for White people, up until that point, had been what he saw on television. As a second-grader, Jeremy was bussed to “the White side of the lake.” There, Jeremy discovered nicer buildings. He took comfort in having an African American teacher and several African American students in his class. This was important because he found comfort in faces that looked like his. As a middle schooler, Jeremy, along with his peers, was sent back to the middle school on the “Black side of the lake.” There, he felt pressured to prove to his peers that he was not trying to be White. Jeremy cited becoming a “caricature of what [he] thought it was to be Black.” During his junior year of high school, Jeremy became less concerned about what others thought and sought out befriending the “smart kids.” This peer group influenced Jeremy to consider college. However, unlike his new-found friends, Jeremy had not applied himself throughout his schooling, thus recognizing he would not receive scholarship money to attend college. Noting the advertised benefits of joining the military, Jeremy enlisted and served in the Marine Corps while attending college. When he began college, he saw there was a ROTC program. Joining the ROTC, Jeremy was afforded full-paid college tuition and a monthly G.I. Bill provided by the United States for his military service. Jeremy’s experiences in the military highlighted his proclivity for leadership, noting “solutions that eluded others often came to [him] quite easily.” Pondering different careers, Jeremy earned his college degree and teaching credentials. He taught for two years before turning to the corporate world. His tenure in the corporate world came to an end when Jeremy concluded he missed working with kids.
Returning to teaching, he observed leaders floundering. This observation motivated Jeremy to earn his master’s degree. After earning his degree, Jeremy became a school administrator. He has served as assistant principal, associate principal, and principal. Jeremy is in his third year as building principal at his current school, Meyer Middle School. Additionally, Jeremy is finishing his doctoral program in educational leadership. Though Jeremy’s career path did not lead him directly to education, he found his niche in educational leadership.

Jeremy’s Leadership Experiences

Jeremy describes his leadership style as flexible and situational. He noted that different scenarios warrant different responses and leadership. His behaviors must serve the needs of his campus. Jeremy believes it is important to give staff members permission to take risks, to make decisions, and to fail. He credits the staff, stating that he is willing to delegate because he trusts his staff. Learning from failure is powerful. While Jeremy seeks to empower his staff, he recognizes he must guide their thinking at times. Additionally, he recognizes that he cannot blindly trust. Sometimes, he takes a more direct approach, less guided by teaching and more indicative of authority.

Sometimes I can be willing to delegate decisions over, and maybe guide people to their thinking something. For the most part, we have a really good organization that are staffed with really good people. They can figure out those issues. Sometimes you just have to guide their thinking and give them permission to make those decisions also. While also give them an opportunity to fail and learn from that failure . . . There’s certain people that you don’t give them as much freedom to make decisions . . . and so with those folks, you’re a little bit more direct, a little bit less teaching, a little bit more directing at that point.

Though Jeremy does not describe his leadership as empathic, it is evident that empathy guides his interactions with students, staff, and parents. Jeremy shared a conversation he had with one of his assistant principals regarding why some of the poorest students who lack
necessities own multiple pair of expensive tennis shoes. Jeremy addressed the faulty assumptions sometimes made. He referenced his own experience of growing up poor and how it fuels his understanding of parents.

I know what it’s like to be poor, and I didn’t know how poor I was when I was growing up. But there were times where I got picked on because we couldn’t afford brand new shoes. And so, you know, I’d have to get the shoes out of a trash can, someone else threw them away, and they’d be all run down and dirty. I remember this one pair of shoes I had. My mom had gotten them from Family Dollar. And they were made of this sort of plastic, on the part of your footwear. You know where you walk and it sort of crinkles and they didn’t have any grip on the bottom. They were just hard plastic on the bottom, soft plastic on top . . . And then after about a month or so, the part at the crease cracked . . . You try to hide things like that. You know? I know my mom would have loved to have protected me from the things that occurred because I had on a $5 pair of shoes. But she didn’t have the resources to do that, and so I always tell people, don’t assume. Don’t make assumptions about what a person’s value set is, just because they’re on free lunch. Every parent I know of that is disadvantaged, they love their kids just as much as parents who have resources. For people who are disadvantaged, sometimes the way they choose to deal with potential conflict is to buy those things that help their child fit in. Now they may not have anything to eat but they’re going to be okay because they have on some shoes that look like what everybody else has on.

Jeremy assumes the role of a learning leader, one who directly addresses the gaps of his staff’s experiences and skills through staff development and training specific to creating equitable learning opportunities. He strives to resist judging his own staff when they fail to meet the needs of their students. Instead, he takes time to provide another lens to add perspective. While Jeremy is cognizant of the need not to judge staff, he cited his frustration in being able to lead from the stance of social justice leader. He noted the disdain some staff members communicate when the word “diversity” is mentioned. Their “eyes just kind of roll because it’s one more example of political correctness run amok in schools.” Nevertheless, Jeremy cited his commitment to pushing through those who are less than enthusiastic.

Jeremy understands the necessity of ongoing reflection in becoming a culturally proficient school leader. As part of examining the cultural and communication structures in
Jeremy delves into the data, looking for trends. He wants to know which kids are receiving discipline referrals. He looks for trends with teachers who issue referrals. Based on his data analysis, Jeremy utilizes staff development to reinforce culturally responsive practices. His campus has embraced Rita Pierson’s (2013) “Every Kid Needs a Champion” approach to working with students and teachers new to the campus. This, Jeremy explained, requires a respect of cultural differences. Moreover, training for recognition of cultural differences and how to deal with challenges that arise is paramount.

Jeremy demonstrates characteristics consistent with that of a structural leader. He believes utilizing his master schedule to provide time for professional learning is critical in achieving cultural proficiency. He cited the appropriate development of curriculum, instruction, and assessment as crucial in engaging all students in learning. He has facilitated considerable training on lesson design. Jeremy stated it is important to embrace lesson design as a vehicle for forging relationships between students and teachers. He poses questions for his staff:

How is this lesson relevant for this kid or that kid? What is this kid or that kid going to take out of it? How are you going to bring in every kid? I tell them to identify the kid that you are the most worried about, the one who needs you the most. Who needs you the most? Who needs you the least? You build your lessons for the kids who need you the most. The ones who need you the least are going to get it. You have to build lessons for those students who are the most disengaged.

In this example, Jeremy poses questions that necessitate teachers to consider specific students; however, the race and socioeconomic status of students is not mentioned. The intentionality of addressing both would better serve Jeremy’s pursuit of cultural proficiency. Nevertheless, those teachers who fail to plan with engagement in mind, who remain tied to their worksheets, are teachers who are not invited to remain on Jeremy’s staff.

Jeremy believes data analysis, and further, acting on what data reveal, is a must in providing academic and behavioral supports for students. He dedicates a staffing unit for
instructional coaching. The instructional coach, along with a team of teachers, counselors, and administrative staff, meets weekly to hone the academic and behavioral plan for students who have been identified as needing additional support. Jeremy cited involving students in the conversations is enlightening and beneficial. These conversations provide the most important information, the student perspective. Teachers can adapt their lesson designs to meet the needs of students who struggle the most.

We have one of our instructional coaches who is dedicated solely to RTI, and she knows every single student, where every single student has a personalized behavioral and academic intervention plan . . . And we meet every Monday at 2, and we talk about those kids. We talk about kid by kid, we have the counselors in here, the MRS, librarian, the assistant principals, instructional coaches. We all come together, and we all plan every week for every kid who has come to our attention as needing some sort of academic or behavioral support . . . Review, check grades, that’s all part of the data that we look at when we come together on Mondays in the afternoons . . . We get everybody involved, and it’s all about the team playing, at that point . . . You bring the kid in and you talk. You know you sit there and talk with the kid. What’s hard for you about school? What’s easy for you about school? Tell me about your favorite lesson that you’ve had this year? What did you like so much about that lesson? And then you feed that information to the teachers so that when they’re thinking lesson design, they can think, okay, this kid likes this sort of learning, and so here’s what we’re going to do. So you build up this sort of repertoire for teachers, and how they’re going to address being able to identify kids by need, and when you get to know each kid, and I try to get to know each kid as much as I can, then we know how to design work environments that are going to work for them.

Additionally, target classes are built into the master schedule to provide additional academic intervention, as Jeremy realizes that most identified students do not have the ability to stay after school for additional support.

Jeremy cited that an obstacle in serving as a social justice leader has been lack of training throughout his career. He pointed out his principal preparation program did nothing to prepare him to become a culturally proficient leader. Further, Jeremy stated the principalship continues to evolve; however, the preparation has not. Careful not to denigrate professors, he added that many of his professors have not served in K-12 in many years, thus have lost sight of the reality
of public education, particularly, necessary leadership skills to meet the current and future needs of staff and students.

It did not at all. That was not something that was even part of the package. There’s so many things missing from principal preparation programs that I think need to be put in place. And I don’t want to knock professors at colleges, but a lot of times, these are people who are no longer in buildings, and the way the principalship has evolved, even over the last 5 to 10 years, is so different than when it was, maybe 20 years ago, or 30 years ago.

Jeremy also added, regarding leading with culture in mind, he has been left to his own devices in the different school districts in which he served. He cited receiving minimal support in learning about and leading with cultural proficiency in mind. His own desire to meet the needs of all students spawned his intrinsic motivation to become a culturally proficient school leader.

Stella’s Story –

“When people marginalize other people, any people, it moves me to fight.”

Stella’s Experiences and Background

Stella is a 44-year-old White female in her 6th year as principal of Rowling Middle School. She is a first-generation college graduate who grew up in east Texas. Until the eighth grade, Stella and her sister were on free lunch. Both of her parents worked tirelessly to provide financial stability within the home. By the eighth grade, Stella’s parents were moving up within their respective jobs and while this provided financial relief, her parents did not have the time to become involved in Stella’s education. This awareness was not lost on Stella or her parents. In high school, Stella tried out for and made her dance drill team. While Stella’s mother was proud, she was afraid that her lack of parental involvement would stymie Stella’s leadership opportunity as an officer or captain of her drill team. Thankfully, Stella’s drill team director recognized Stella’s talent, work ethic, and character. Stella shared that she maintains a heightened level of
awareness in working with parents of her students who cannot actively participate in their student’s academic and extracurricular lives. For most of her childhood, Stella dreamed of going to college and becoming a teacher. Upon graduating from high school, Stella attended Kilgore Junior College with aspirations of enrolling at Ole Miss. However, Stella’s parents had moved to the College Station area, where her younger sister was a junior in high school. Having already been moved from one high school to another, and not having a positive transition, Stella’s parents asked that she enroll at Texas A&M because their jobs were moving them and they did not want to move her younger sister again. At that point, Stella became legal guardian of her sister. During her time at A&M, Stella earned her way on the pom-pom team. This experience cemented her desire to become a drill team director and a teacher. She graduated with an elementary certification in reading and mathematics with a minor in mathematics. Stella, like most new graduates, took the first teaching job offered. This teaching job was in a small town in Texas where, according to Stella, racism was rampant. Because she had family in this small town, she was not unaware of what to expect. Her first year of teaching, Stella taught Algebra I, geometry, a math intervention class, and drill team. While Stella remembers working with some nice colleagues, she stayed in that position for only one year. The social constraints of living and working in this small town were too much for Stella to consider on a long-term basis. Stella laughingly recalls thinking, “I’ll never meet someone here I’d actually want to marry.” After receiving a call from a friend about an open position as a drill team director in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, Stella interviewed and was hired to teach mathematics and drill team. She taught for nine years on that campus. During those nine years, Stella got married, had a baby, and earned a master’s degree. After serving for six years as an assistant principal at a high school within the same district, Stella assumed the principal position at Rowling Middle School. Stella credits the
impact of her dedicated and hardworking parents with the work ethic she possesses in serving the needs of her staff and students.

Stella’s Leadership Experiences

In describing her leadership, Stella is hesitant because she does not believe that people view her approach as legitimate or even effective. She is a self-described charismatic and optimistic leader.

I know that this gets a lot of bad press, but I’m pretty charismatic. I do like to . . . I’m naturally optimistic and peppy. I like to engage with kids and engage with teachers and get people motivated and excited. The other piece about my leadership style is, there’s a pretty authentic piece that runs . . . the person I am at school is the person I am at home, is the person I am if we’re in a hard conversation, it’s the person I am if we’re in a great conversation. And I would like to be a different leader, but since it’s not natural for me . . . I think I’m a caring leader, but I’m also a leader who will really push people. And sometimes I want change, whereas a lot of people in this profession don’t.

Stella believes in authenticity and remains true to her need to engage with students, staff, and parents. Stella believes the time she spends gauging the practices of teachers and the learning of students is crucial. She shared she spends approximately one-half of her time going into classrooms. To understand where teachers are in their own social and emotional competence, it is best to observe their interactions with students. She confessed she must become more diligent in treating the campus like her classroom, looking for opportunities to lead her staff in learning. Stella makes it a point to meet with teachers during conference periods to ask questions such as “How can I help?” “How can I better support you?”

The sincerity and transparency of Stella’s leadership is apparent. Though she is committed to facilitating learning for her staff, her focus is around her relationships with students. She shared a student conversation regarding her recent marriage to her husband, who is Puerto Rican and Cuban.
I think one of the best compliments I could have ever received was after I married my husband last year. Remember, he’s Puerto Rican and Cuban. And the kids came up, and they said, ‘Miss, you’re finally one of us.’ And this other kid goes, ‘No, she’s been one of us.’ I was like, okay. I might not be proficient yet, but I’m at least culturally pulling up into the driveway.

Stella’s leadership is marked by her capacity for assuming the roles of structural and cultural leader. Stella utilizes school resources to promote equity through her management of the school and master schedule. Stella shared her dismay when she became principal, upon recognizing what professional learning communities (PLC) really were until her tenure.

When I got to the school, they weren’t even using PD. They were taking PD and conference and teaching for each other to go home earlier, and there was no discussion of culture, social justice, or equity . . . During my time here, I’ve gotten to know where each of them are in their social emotional competence. I regret not starting this sooner but working on my doctorate has distracted me. But now I spend half my day observing classrooms and the other half of the day stopping by on conference or leading TD. I give them feedback and guidance. I ask them how I can support them and what they need from me. I’ve seen a really big shift. I keep my expectations high and I’m seeing improvements.

Stella’s capacity in the role of structural leader propels her as a cultural leader who has developed a campus PLC that provides continuous learning opportunities for the staff.

Though she cites caring deeply for others, she does not shy away from accountability. She stated the recognition of having teachers on staff who were seemingly there to merely get a paycheck. She sought out “pockets of brilliance” on her campus to start a movement in establishing cultural norms and expectations that disallow mediocrity or apathy. In doing so, she experienced a higher teacher turnover rate in the first three years of her tenure. Stella recognized her role as a social justice school leader is contingent upon the courage she demonstrates in her leadership.

It took me four years to get brave enough to start moving people to make them leave so that the right people could come in who were in my circle of social justice, to make the school a great place for kids.
It is important to note that this has, according to Stella, been a testament to the embodiment of the values set for the campus. Now those pockets of brilliance characterize most of her staff, while only pockets of mediocrity and apathy still exist.

Like her participant counterparts, Stella shared her degree programs did not prepare her for becoming a leader in social justice. At no point in her principal preparation program was there a focus on social justice, educational equity, or cultural proficiency. However, as it became evident that Stella was well versed in discussions of social justice, cultural proficiency, and equity, she explained:

My school district has not given me any tools to use. I credit my doctoral program with what I have learned to date. Before this program, I was not intentional in examining my practices. I didn’t utilize my data in meaningful ways. My coursework in this program has taught me how to conduct equity audits. Our cohort has learned how to do this together. My growth as a leader who even understands what it means to be a school principal who advocates for social justice is due to the requirements and rigor of this doctoral program.

Stella maintains the necessity to continue to learn more about social justice and the implications for her as a leader. She is grateful to the guidance she received so far in her doctoral program and is dedicated to continuing to learn and grow.

Emergent Themes

In the first part of Chapter 4, the findings of each principal participant narrative were presented in the following domains: (1) personal experiences and backgrounds and (2) leadership experiences. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the themes derived from the data analyzed from the principal participant screening instruments, cultural autobiographies, principal interviews, and the focus group interview of the five principals. The following themes emerged: prevalence of race, struggle with identity and fitting in, abundance of empathy, and lack of
equity. The totality of the themes drawn from the data corresponds to the research overarching question and two sub-questions. As I revisited data during the analysis process, I discovered the themes broached both the personal and professional aspects. All participants were forthcoming in their personal stories, and through self-reflection in their cultural autobiographies, viewed their work as school leaders to be both personal and professional.

Theme 1—Prevalence of Race

The prevalence of race in the discussions, while not surprising, was poignant. Most participants shared how race impacted them personally and professionally. Additionally, most of the participants shared their continued painful experiences of racism. The prevalence of race is captured in three subthemes: leveraging race, racism in schools, and racism within the community.

Leveraging Race for Personal Gain

While discussing examples of marginalization because of race, Frances, Maria, and Jeremy all discussed how they believe they have been able to leverage their own race to further their careers in education. These revelations were shared in the individual participant interviews. All three unapologetically stated they have no qualms with this recognition as they each realize their own worth. Moreover, they stated their hard work serves to prove they are deserving of their roles.

Frances, who shared her frustration regarding Asians not being considered for affirmative action, acknowledges that among the minorities, Asians are more privileged than African
Americans and Hispanics. She attributes that to the ability of Asians to better assimilate into the mainstream White culture. In reflecting on race as it impacted her career, Frances added:

I will joke to this day that I am in my role because I am the token Asian in the district. There aren’t very many Asians in administration. There aren’t very many Asians in education in general. To be at the administrative level, I think it was a quota they possibly needed to fill. I’m an Asian who speaks Spanish but looks Hispanic or something. I do feel that in some ways, just because of my name, because of being Asian, I have been afforded opportunities over Anglo colleagues who have worked just as hard. I feel that I may have been advantaged. I did put forth the effort, but at the same time I do feel being Asian has given me an advantage.

Maria was the second participant to discuss how her identity as a Hispanic woman afforded her the first teaching job she gained. Moreover, she claimed being placed on numerous committees her first year of teaching because her district needed someone with a Hispanic last name to serve. Maria also cited her success in graduate school, earning her masters, was largely attributed to her status as a Hispanic woman. Her school was looking for diverse students and that was a box she could check for the university. Maria also discussed the belief that she was hired as principal at a middle school because she was qualified and Hispanic. Finally, Maria feels being a “Hispanic woman with a PhD is going to work in [her] favor and [she’s] okay with that because [she’s] confident in [her] own skills.”

Lastly, Jeremy discussed how his race earned him favor in a former school district. He described receiving a phone call to meet with a parent within the district who was upset regarding a book in one of the school libraries. When he inquired, Jeremy discovered this was not even a student at his school. At that point, he thought to ask the race of the parent. When her race of African American was confirmed, the district person informed Jeremy they thought the parent would be more willing to listen to his reasoning because he is African American. Jeremy shared how he willingly accepted the role of “company man.” At the request of his district, Jeremy found himself assuming the role of company man so much he jokingly told his
wife that he was the official “Black guy” for his school district. He was recruited to serve on committees that afforded him exposure to “the higher ups” within his school district. Though Jeremy did jest regarding his role as the official Black guy for his district, he pointed out how beneficial it was for the district and for him to learn how to navigate the difficult terrain that comes with cultural differences.

*Leveraging Race Professionally*

Each principal participant discussed his or her belief in the importance of hiring staff whose race mirrors that of students. The data from the principal participant screening instrument, individual interviews, and the focus group interview support their belief in the importance of hiring with diversity in mind.

Doug shared he is intentional in his hiring practices. His goal is to have a staff that closely mirrors the racial demographics of his student body. He states it is an important component of his leadership, although this mindset was not intuitive from the beginning.

Well, I used to be the person that said, you know, if people won’t apply then I can’t make them work here. I finally went out and started finding people of color to apply. It’s daunting. They don’t want to apply if they can’t see themselves working here. In meeting some really neat African American ladies in DC, I said, ‘Why don’t you want to come work in Texas with me?’ They described wanting to work in an inner-city school, making a difference. When I asked them to name other reasons why, their perception was that they’re going to come in here and be belittled or they’re not going to have as much influence in a school like mine.

While Doug was quick to point out that he hires based on the merit of the candidate, he is intentional in making sure he interviews a diverse pool of candidates. However, there is no evidence that Doug seeks candidates who demonstrate a philosophy of inclusivity or have the skills and experience in dealing with issues of race. Extending beyond his desire to hire a
diverse staff, Doug stated he recognizes that students need to see leaders in their building who look like them.

Doug described that he is deliberate in looking for ways for teachers to lead. Specifically, he creates staff advisory groups to lend voice to decisions on campus. He actively solicits a diverse group of leaders on his campus. Though Doug acknowledged that it may be uncomfortable for him and teachers, he encourages diverse leadership by constantly saying, “I think you’d be really good at this.” He stated he encourages acceptance of new roles of responsibility and then makes it his mission to ensure their success. For Doug, the recognition that African American students, for example, are seeking out courses and clubs taught and sponsored by African American teachers makes him proud.

It’s not just that everybody has to look alike, but they do have to have a reference that, yeah, there’s somebody in the building that will listen to me and gets it, that understands. I just think that’s important. I remember thinking that my teachers understood me. Thinking back, 99% of them were White, like me.

While seeking a diverse faculty is a positive move, Doug did not share any evidence of seeking candidates who understand the challenges of creating an inclusive school culture.

Maria’s respect for her students and her community drives her to seek diversity in the job candidates she selects. Maria noted there’s a perception that the demographics of her campus reflect affluence and lack of diversity.

When people come to this community, they think it’s an affluent community. We are so not affluent, we are very working class. We have families that rent houses here and let two other families live with them. This is becoming more of a working-class community. We do have some affluence here. But we are becoming more diverse. Almost ¼ of our students are African American, I think 24%, followed by 19% Hispanic.

These data, she insists, are important to consider in her hiring practices. Maria stated one of the most tangible ways to demonstrate respect for the demographics of her community is to be intentional in hiring a more diverse staff. In building relationships with students, Maria believes
students should have opportunities to more readily connect with adults in school. One powerful way to provide this opportunity is to hire staff who resemble the student body. Among her administrative team, Maria hired one White male, one African American female, one African American male, and one Indian female. The racial diversity on the administrative team compels Maria to understand more about the culture of those with whom she works most closely. She stated it is imperative that she get to know the individuals on her team and not overgeneralize racial or ethnic stereotypes.

We still have to know the individuals, I still have to know Andrew and understand him. I’m working with Dalaja and she comes from a completely different culture. She and I grew up with lots of differences. I’m trying to learn more about her and her culture. I have to take time to sit down and have a conversation to make sure my expectations are being very clearly understood and that I’m respecting where she’s coming from. We have to meet the individuals where they are, but it’s important that we don’t make assumptions about each other based on our cultures.

Maria remembers her own feelings of being stereotyped, thus her desire to remain cognizant of avoiding the painful perpetuation. Like Doug, Maria made no reference to seeking candidates who possess the experience or skillset in dealing with issues of race. In working with a community that is growing in diversity, specifically one in which the population of African Americans continues to increase in representation, it would behoove Maria to consider the experiences and skills of new hires regarding race and diversity and not assume that being a person of color implies the ability to work with a diverse demographic.

Like her counterparts in this study, Stella has been intentional in her hiring practices. She believes part of being a culturally proficient leader is the intentionality with which she pursues job candidates who reflect the culture of the students. She cited research that affirms lifted achievement for students of color when they are taught by teachers of color. With that understanding, Stella seeks qualified African American and Hispanic teachers, preferably males.
She shared she needs more male teachers of color on her campus to mentor her male students of color. Like the other principal participants, Stella did not make any references to seeking candidates who have experience in dealing with issues of race or gauging candidates’ interest in inclusive education.

Racism in Schools

When asked to recall instances of encountering marginalization of students in schools, most participants readily shared situations they have encountered in working with staff members whose actions have perpetuated racism.

Frances, in response to interactions with staff in her two years as principal at Blume Elementary, collaborated with her district to develop and deliver professional development on implicit bias. This test refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that unconsciously impact the decisions we make, our actions, and our understanding. Frances felt, given interactions between some Christian and Muslim staff members, that recognizing implicit bias and how it affects interactions within and between groups would lift a veil of misunderstanding while shining a light on the bias. She clarified the rationale in her principal participant screening instrument response.

This is something I noticed among staff upon my arrival last year. There are some staff members that are reluctant to embrace other staff members who are Muslim. With the help of our Professional Learning Department in the district, I was able to deliver a powerful PD on implicit bias that opened the doors to recognizing our implicit bias and how they affect our interactions with in/out groups (groups that we belong and groups that we don’t belong). There will be additional PD on this topic to help staff develop skills on how to break that initial response associated with implicit bias.

Since the initial professional development, Frances cites her staff will continue to have professional learning opportunities to help develop skills on interrupting and breaking the initial
responses associated with implicit bias, though she did not specify how these learning opportunities would come to fruition.

Frances works with her teachers to recognize how the traditional ways of discipline, such as in-school suspension, detention, or out-of-school suspension, fail to consider differences in cultures. One encounter she noted as pivotal in her recognition, thus she needed to implement change, was when she was working with a new student who had recently moved from another school. This young African American girl, who was also economically disadvantaged, continued to get in trouble in her classes for her use of profanity. This third grader was identified as a problem child who was also behind in school. When she was brought to the attention of Frances, she met with the third grader. Instead of the traditional disciplinary actions at her disposal, Frances worked with the student to help her understand why it was not okay to curse. She helped her develop language that allowed her to voice her frustration in a more acceptable manner. In working with the student, Frances ascertained quickly that while her vernacular needed adjusting, she was an articulate and very intelligent child.

One of the things that this student was being faulted with was cussing. She easily would say the F word the S word, whatever it is, in her communication with her peers. Peers would tell the teacher and then she would get in trouble. I’m sitting here and I’m talking with her. I understand that this is the language she’s accustomed to hearing and using. I have to go through and explain to her what is appropriate and inappropriate for school. Instead of sending her to ISS or detention, I had her come up with different words, different sayings instead of cursing. We discussed coping strategies when she recognized she felt like cursing. She came up with walking laps. My interaction with this student was the beginning of conversations with teachers in working with students and evaluating how we respond in situations that have warranted the more traditional disciplinary responses. We try to understand our students.

Frances stated teachers have begun to reevaluate the ways in which they discipline students. They are now more apt to engage with individual students to determine how to communicate the expectations within the classroom, while equipping them to meet those
expectations. However, there is no mention of conversations or training specific to examining the impact of race on staff and students, as it pertains to equity or social justice. This was a missed opportunity for Frances to lead her staff in learning how the dynamics of race impact the disproportionate assignment of disciplinary actions against students of color.

Jeremy shared one experience of confronting racism on his campus. He cited an incident between one of his teachers and an African American male student in the hallway.

I was in my office, and I could hear this teacher just yelling and screaming at this kid. So, I walk out of my office and I went around the corner, and I kind of stood there and looked, and I saw it was this tall African American student, big old football player looking kind of kid, and there was a White teacher. She’s about a foot shorter than him, but she is just ripping him, a new one . . . I see things start to go south because she’s being disrespectful at that point. I kind of walk slowly up to the scenario, and finally I stop and say what’s going on? So, she’s describing things that were not disrespectful, but she saw them as being disrespectful because he kept being loud. So I started thinking to myself, if in his home, people talk loud all the time, when kids get to school, they’re going to talk loud when they’re in school because kids tend to sort of migrate in and out of what’s appropriate at home, what’s appropriate at school. It’s a very tough terrain to navigate.

While Jeremy did intervene in the exchange and walk away with his own epiphany of sorts, he did not follow up with the staff member with any training related to race or implications of culture.

Stella stated she believes it is vital to assess the campus culture. To establish a culture of respect for differences and empathy for all, she consistently gauges the beliefs and values of her staff. Like Frances, Stella believes the implicit bias test is a useful tool in self-reflection and promoting dialogue. Stella shared her belief that the implicit bias test can help staff recognize how bias impacts relationship building within the school and community.

Every staff member on my campus has taken the Implicit Bias assessment offered through Harvard. We followed up with professional development on how implicit bias impacts education, specifically, the implications for the way we interact with our students and parents. I feel a sense of more positivity on campus. Of course, there’s going to be
follow ups where we touch upon how do we break this implicit cycle? How do we break this initial reaction? But, I do believe that we’re on the right track.

One disconcerting reality Stella recognized almost immediately in her first year as principal was how some teachers have abused the inherent trust her Hispanic parents place in the schools.

Working with the Hispanic culture, the parent implicitly trusts the school that the maestra is the expert, we’re not going to question the teachers or the principals. I feel sometimes the teachers in my school have mistreated kids because they will not get questioned. That, coupled with the knowledge that many Hispanic parents’ work schedules do not allow them to come to the school has enabled some teachers to mistreat kids. Stella stated she believes some teachers abuse this trust because they realize they will likely not be questioned by parents. Stella discussed the prevalence of lowered expectations and inaccessibility to rigorous curriculum for students of color. She has battled the mindset of “those kids” cannot be successful if academically challenged.

Stella shared her belief that the perpetuation of White privilege hinders the pursuit and thus the attainment of culturally proficient schools. Stella is quick to recognize that she possesses White privilege. In a school that is comprised of 87% lower socioeconomic students who are predominantly Hispanic and Africa American, Stella was disappointed to recognize the extent to which White privilege has prevailed on her campus. She cited examples of conflicts with staff members who have been culturally insensitive to those they serve within the community.

Within the last five years, in the building there was a definite divide between teachers who said, ’These kids can’t learn,’ and ’Those kids can’t do that.’ These are the White teachers. So much so, I had to tell them ‘You’re not going to wear that with a blue shirt to school. We’re not going to do that. We’re not going to have our African American kids walk in here and feel unsafe because you’re wearing blue to make a political statement.’ There is a subculture I have seen. There are teachers who claim, ‘I really care about these kids. I’ve been here my whole career.’ But when it comes right down to
it, they will say things to kids like, ’Did you understand what I just said?’ And I’m like, ’Do you talk to me that way?’ Of course, they respond, ’No.’ And I’ve had to really drive home one of my core values with the whole staff, and that’s respect. We’re going to respect all kids. We’re going to respect all persons.

One thing that stands out with Stella is the resolve with which she approaches advocacy for her students. Although her actions are indicative of a leader compelled to assume a role of political leader, she is quick to discount her courage.

Well, my courage quotient is pretty low. I’m a White woman and, although my last name is Hispanic, my husband is half Cuban and half Puerto Rican. My maiden name is [Jones]. I do feel, as much as I care, and I want to make change in the world, and I know that I can, I have to be very courageous to enter that space and be sensitive to African Americans, to be sensitive to my Hispanic students. Let’s take DACA. I sent a video to my staff of the Houston superintendent who came on and said, ’We are not going to support President Trump with DACA.’ And I sent that video to my staff. I said, ‘I stand with this Houston superintendent. We will follow FERPA. We will release no records, and all children will be safe here.’ I still have about five staff members left here who don’t care about social justice. But, I think the real victory is that they didn’t say anything. They know I mean business, because I’ve made numerous staff changes in my time here. I have 26 new staff members this year. But it took me a long time. It took me four years to get brave enough to start moving people to make them leave so that the right people could come in who were in my circle of social justice, to make the school a great place for kids.

Racism Within the Community

One of the more provocative obstacles that Frances continues to face are the prejudicial attitudes of some community and staff members. Because Frances is new to her campus, she is somewhat reticent to be as direct as she would prefer in addressing those uncomfortable moments of prejudice. One of those moments was with her PTA. Both the PTA and Frances planned a school community activity that served as an opportunity to engage Hispanic parents who have not been as involved. When Frances offered up the idea of recruiting parents to provide tamales for the Family Fun night, the initial response from the PTA was positive. However, once the PTA met, they concluded that they were concerned about the health and
safety practices of those parents bringing in tamales from the outside and they would simply
order pizzas. Frances’ response was not as direct as she wanted.

How I left it was I said, ’I think those are all great ideas. I’m here to support whatever,
but if you ask me,’ I said, ’We need to think about, in the future, if you want to bring in a
different segment of parents, we have to change some of the things that we’re doing.’
That’s how I left it, because I’m not going to be able to change it in one year. Do you
know what I mean?

Frances shared that while she is intentional in taking some time to foster the rapport she feels is
necessary to make changes, it is in opposition to her desire to more quickly “institutionalize the
culture of [her] campus and community to adapt to diversity” so that each individual of every
culture on her campus feels valued, respected, and honored. Her reticence to challenge her
PTA’s exclusive practices reveals the failure of her intentionality of social justice leadership in
this instance. She acknowledged the necessity of challenging the structures in place that prevent
social justice; however, Frances failed to challenge the injustice as it occurred. This role of
political leader is one Frances acknowledges needs to be strengthened.

Jeremy and Doug, who work in the same school district, recalled a volatile incident
within their community. An interaction between local police officers and several young African
American teenagers in a nearby neighborhood was recorded by witnesses on scene. The
recording highlighted questionable police responses when dealing with African Americans.
Some within the community cited the acts of the police officers as unwarranted and abusive
while others cited uncooperative teens were noncompliant when approached by the officers
responding to a complaint made against the teens. This incident made the local and national
news. Because this recorded incident involved teens, it was even more provocative. Jeremy
cited the trepidation they felt in anticipating the impact on their campuses.

I was worried that entire summer. I was glad it happened early in the summer, because
that did turn into a Black-White issue. I worried about whether or not that would infiltrate
our campus culture. But, I thought about that all summer long. Just . . . I was not looking forward to going back to school and wondering whether or not that was going to be a part of what was going on.

Jeremy worried how his students, staff, and parents would respond, given one of the students involved was a former student on his campus. Although this particular incident did not become a matter for Jeremy to address, he pointed out he has had to address parents who wanted to display “Black Lives Matters” posters on his middle school campus. Jeremy contends there is a racial and political divide in the United States that gives him pause to consider the implications for schools.

One of the things that’s been difficult, especially here lately, is our country’s more divided than it’s ever been. It’s getting more and more difficult to bring people together around common goals, around common understandings, around common values, common missions. And so, I always realized that schools are sort of a microcosm of the communities of which they serve. You have to be able to predict how that’s going to impact things on the inside of your building and respond accordingly. That’s not always easy.

He has made it clear that he will not allow racial divisiveness to thrive on his campus. Jeremy asserted his role of principal is to “stand at the door and shield our staff and kids from the outside noise.”

The clash between the current political climate and race is a daunting dynamic with which Stella contends. Stella shared the difficulty in conveying acceptance and safety to her students when, in the last few years, political groups lobbied for laws that precluded undocumented immigrants housing access. She also stated trust is fragile when students fear they will be deported.

DACA is truly scaring my kids. Because, I have two young teachers that are concerned they will be deported. I’ve got kids who are afraid for their brothers and sisters. They are really worried . . . We should be a sanctuary for our kids, but we are inundated with fear . . . I’m ready for that to be done, because it’s terrorizing them. It’s not fair. I really love that a superintendent in the Houston area went on his district television station and said he does not support President Trump. He spoke to his students and said, ‘You are
our children. You have been in our schools. We love you. We accept you. We want you here to learn. We do not support the removal of DACA.’ It was just very touching.

Stella cited some parents are afraid to come to the school because they realize there are cameras, thus they fear being arrested. This fear makes it very difficult to build trust within her school community. The distrust is hard to negate when parents at a local high school football game drew so much attention to two of Stella’s middle school students who refused to stand for the pledge, instead choosing to kneel and place their hand over their heart, that one of the two students was arrested. The student was arrested under the guise of disorderly conduct. However, Stella reported a White couple in the stands yelling, “Get up niggers. Get up,” were not even approached by the officers. Stella’s quest for social justice grows stronger with instances like these that expose the glaring scarcity of social justice.

While varied, the effects of race within the campuses and communities of the principal participants are pronounced. Seemingly, race has been of little significance to Maria’s development as a school principal. However, Frances, Doug, Jeremy, and Stella provided ample evidence to suggest their development as school leaders who seek to become social justice leaders is strengthening.

Theme 2—Struggle with Identity and Fitting In

One of the unanticipated themes that shone through the findings of this research is the extent to which the principal participants have struggled with their own identities. Though varying degrees of identity struggle are apparent, all five participants revealed deeply personal accounts.

Frances revealed her awareness of being different traces back to her early childhood. She expressed vivid memories as a kindergartener, standing out among her White school mates.
I have always been aware that I am Vietnamese. As a refugee, first generation immigrant to the United States in the 1970s, I vividly remember, as a young student attending pre-kindergarten, that I was learning English and that I was viewed as different from the other children by how I dressed and the texture of my long, black hair.

Frances cited being indoctrinated into mainstream White, middle class structure despite living in a Vietnamese community in California. Being bussed into a predominantly White, more affluent school necessitated the ability for Frances to find her way among those who did not look like her nor live like her. The way she found to fit in was to excel academically. Ironically, Frances recognized she did not fit the mold within her own Asian culture. The perception of Asians as the most diligent, thus highest ranking academic students accentuated Frances’ struggle with identity. Moreover, Frances confessed her frustration with attempting to live up to the stereotype of an Asian student while not being afforded opportunities she may have gained if she was Hispanic or African American. This was most evident to her when she was applying to colleges during her senior year of high school. With affirmative action in place, Frances realized Asians were excluded from participation. This, she realized, made it unlikely that she could attend the college of her choice. Her ethnicity, at times, has been an obstacle.

There’s a bunch of Asians and we all do well. I’m not at the top of the Asian quota. In some instances, I felt a little bit that I got the shorter end of the stick. I find myself even now sometimes being silent because I’m afraid. I’m afraid to be different. I’m afraid to stand out, to rock the boat. I have been more brazen, more courageous, since two years ago taking that coursework but I still find myself, Who can I say this to? Who can I trust? Because, yeah, I don’t know.

Frances shared she has learned how to fit into her surroundings, whatever they may be. She added, “Even to this day, I still live a double life of what I am like at home versus how I am in the public setting—aware not to stand out and ensuring I fit in.” It appears, however, Frances does take pride in her status as an Asian American who inspires students. A Vietnamese parent of one of Frances’ students recently shared the pride and excitement of her daughter. The
Vietnamese daughter was excited to share with her grandparents she has a Vietnamese principal. Recognizing her own self-awareness and struggle with identity, Frances explained the more she learns about cultural proficient leadership, the more compelled she feels to leave the shadows of “fitting in” and take a bolder approach to leadership.

As an only child raised primarily by his grandmother, Doug described the sense of isolation he felt growing up. He had very little interaction with immediate or extended family. During elementary and middle school, Doug attended urban schools, predominantly lower socioeconomic, with mostly African American and Hispanic students. As one of few White students in his schools, he remembers feeling out of place. Doug shared how growing up as a young White child in neighborhoods of predominantly African American and Hispanic families made him acutely aware of his race.

We lived in southwest Fort Worth in a predominately African American and Hispanic neighborhood. Being White and being raised by my grandmother was a significant difference from most other children.

Following the death of his grandfather, Doug, age nine, felt off balance. He moved often, attending three different middle schools in three different years. It was difficult for Doug to build and maintain friendships due to the constant changing of schools. Learning and navigating social norms took more time for Doug. His own social awareness was slow in developing. As much as Doug struggled with a sense of belonging as a young child, when he moved to a more affluent neighborhood and started attending a White, middle class school, he still struggled with fitting in. There was little diversity in Doug’s new high school. Conversations about race and differences did not occur. It was at this point Doug observed the act of exclusion as an abuse of power by some of his more affluent White classmates. However, when Doug attended college, he found himself in a diverse setting. In thinking about a long-time friendship that began in college, Doug reflected on his identity and awareness.
We have had many conversations over the past 30 years about race and the implications of how each of us is viewed. This would have been much more helpful dialogue when I was younger (middle school/high school). I didn’t really know how to manage relationships with kids or adults from another background. Currently, my job is at a school that is fairly diverse and the conversations that I have had and the awareness that I now have are instrumental in my dialogue with parents, especially in today’s charged climate. So, I believe my social identity was greatly enhanced by the unstable manner in which I grew up. There wasn’t a bubble for me when I faced adversity or new challenges in regard to race or social identities.

Like Frances, Doug assumes responsibility in leading his campus towards cultural proficiency. He recognizes the necessity of engaging parents as part of the process. Inherent is also his understanding of the importance of self-reflection.

Race and language played significant roles in Maria’s struggle with her identity. Maria recalled that she was always self-conscious about her race until five or six years ago. She cited accounts of degradation, even by those with whom she was close.

My sister and cousins used to call me nigger because my skin was so dark. As a younger kid, I remember that some of my friends would tell me that their parents didn’t like Mexicans. In fourth grade, my best friend’s mom called me Spanish because it sounded better than Mexican.

She stood out not only because she was Hispanic, but also because she did not speak Spanish. As a third grader, one of Maria’s teachers spoke to her in Spanish and then turned to another adult and laughed because she knew Maria did not understand her. In recalling this incident, Maria stated it still makes her angry to remember. Maria hated being different as a child. She would become embarrassed when her parents spoke Spanish in public. Maria wanted to fit in with White people so much that when she was in middle school she applied fading cream to her arms, hoping it would make her lighter. When Maria entered high school, she dreaded taking Spanish as her second language. She felt she would be further ridiculed because she did not speak the language most assumed she knew. She was embarrassed that she did not speak Spanish. When Maria attended college, she still felt disconnected from her ethnicity. She joined
the Hispanic Student Society on her campus in hopes she would feel part of something.

However, she felt she was not like most of the students in the organization. Maria remembered one conversation in a course in which the discussion turned to something related to race. Maria and an African American student were the only two students of color in that class. She stated she nor the other student engaged in the conversation because they felt uncomfortable. She explained after class, to her professor, that discussing racial discrimination in a room full of White people made her very uncomfortable. Now, Maria is less reticent to avoid topics of race and discrimination. Moreover, after a lifetime of internal struggle, Maria has arrived at a place of self-acceptance.

I have always been a little self-conscious about my race until about five or six years ago. I was involved in a Bible study with a group of ladies. They were all White and, yes, I knew it. But in the middle of one of the studies, I read a passage that talked about God making us perfect. I am supposed to be on this Earth as a Mexican woman. This is God’s perfect plan for me. He gave me talents and skills to do His work, and if I did not fulfill His purpose for me, shame on me. God says I’m exactly who I am supposed to be.

Maria feels more compelled to accept her race without shame or conflict.

Though Jeremy asserts he refuses to allow race to define or govern him, he is all too aware that there are times when he “feels very Black and that when people see [him], the first thing they see is a Black man.” Jeremy’s experiences as a young poor Black child growing up in rural Louisiana highlight his struggles with identity. He shared he always felt out of place where he grew up. Growing up in a town that was racially divided by the lake namesake revealed what it meant to grow up poor and Black. As shared in his narrative, Jeremy’s grandmother was a devout Jehovah’s witness who raised him strictly according to the religious teachings. Jeremy experienced some level of embarrassment and resentment for his exclusion from birthday parties and gift exchanges at Christmas. He cites his struggle with organized religion because of his strict religious upbringing. During elementary school, Jeremy was bussed to a White school on
the other side of town. He shared his relief of discovering a few African American teachers at the “White” school. He remembered feeling comforted by seeing faces like his own in a place where most he encountered were White. Attending the White school may have afforded Jeremy nicer facilities and better resources; however, he paid dearly in his neighborhood. He had a music teacher who loved teaching the class songs from Mary Poppins. When Jeremy made the mistake of singing the “White songs” in his neighborhood, he was taunted by his peers for “acting White.” Jeremy shared he knew he was being insulted but did not know exactly what he was doing or saying that labeled him as acting White. When Jeremy got older, he rebelled against this idea of acting White and “overcorrected” by embracing rap music, wearing sagging pants, cursing, becoming involved in gangs and drugs. Jeremy recognized, even at the time, that his actions felt unnatural and forced. He felt awkward and lost in trying to find the right way to be Black. It was when Jeremy began to befriend the “smart kids” in school that he ceased to be the “caricature” of what he thought it meant to be Black. Though it was a rough transition for Jeremy to leave his peer group of drug dealers and gang bangers, he focused on what the future could provide if he instead chose to embrace a path that could lead him out of the town he knew he was not meant to live in as an adult. Jeremy shared the explanation.

I am often asked how I rose up from the poorest place in American to be the first person in my family to reach the middle class. The only answer I come back to is that I was not meant to be in [this town]. It didn’t feel natural and it didn’t feel like home. I feel more comfortable around a diverse population. It allows me a race-less persona, where I can focus more on what I have in common with the people around me and not those things that separate us. Today, I can’t put into words what it means to be Black. There doesn’t seem to be a right or wrong way to be Black anymore. Things don’t seem as clear cut as they used to be when I was younger. It could either be that I don’t care if someone thinks I’m Black enough, or it could be that I refuse to let race define who I am supposed to be or govern how I am supposed to behave as a Black man.

Jeremy does acknowledge there are people who will first and foremost see him as a Black man, looking no further than his skin color to determine who he is as a man. Ironically, even when he
is being recognized as someone who is intelligent, the recognition for Jeremy is he must be an anomaly. The awareness of his race is constant.

Sometimes I have people that say things like, you’re really articulate, and I go, I didn’t hear you say that to anybody else. Why would you feel the need to say that to me? It’s so offensive. But it is one of those things where people have lowered expectations of me simply because I’m Black.

However hard to ignore, Jeremy stated he has learned not to allow the ignorance of others to taint who he is as a man; moreover, as a Black man.

One interesting aspect of identity with which Stella struggled was her concern of being perceived as “country” once she moved to north Texas.

I had a much thicker accent, because I had never been out of east Texas until college… When I moved, I just remember thinking. Everyone here thinks I'm slow because of the way that I talk. And just that … you wear it like a cloak of worry…Then, I started working on my presentation skills…But just feeling like a country bumpkin has never left me. I mean, even to this day, the middle school principals will be like, ’There she is. Here comes country.’ Just this backwoods label that gets put on you.

Stella’s struggle with identity is also revealed in what lies behind her smile. Her smile, at times, serves as a facade, shielding others from her own pain or confusion. Her smile also serves as a tool for connecting. In her cultural autobiography, Stella revealed the true nature of her smile.

I spoke in my interview about my story. It seems I have SMILED my whole life, regardless of the circumstances. As a child, I was marginalized due to not having enough. My parents worked so hard, they tried to make sure I didn’t feel that way. My extended family was poor. I am a first-generation college graduate. When I know what I am doing and when I don’t, I SMILE. As a result, people talk to me, and because most people have always treated me in kind, I’ve been able to be an optimist and find the best in people. Meanness bothers me. When people marginalize other people, any people, it moves me to fight for social justice. As a White heterosexual woman, I fully realize the lens of privilege I live with and through. My struggle is how to find my courage quotient so I can stand in the space with people who have been marginalized in a way that is appropriate and proximate to their pain. It is only then, when I am welcome and accepted in that space, that I SMILE and mean it.
Stella does not struggle with being a White, middle class woman. However, she possesses an acute awareness of the privilege that she is afforded as such. The struggle is more rooted in how she, this White, middle class woman, can be a courageous leader who is sensitive to the needs of students of color.

Of the data sources utilized in this study, the individual interviews and the cultural autobiographies written provided a depth of understanding in how identity, and more specifically, the struggle with identity, strengthened the resolve with which each principal participant approaches recognition and appreciation for cultural differences.

Theme 3—Abundance of Empathy

There are differences and similarities in experiences between the principal participants of this study. However, one of the findings presented is that each participant possesses great empathy and understands the importance of empathy in building a culturally proficient campus.

Frances relates with her students of color and economically disadvantaged students. She remembers the feelings of being a poor immigrant child surrounded by children who did not look like her and had lived more comfortable lifestyles. She recognizes how much education has afforded her as an adult and shares her story with staff and students. She reminds students that education is a privilege for many in the world and living in the United States is an advantage. Her opportunity to be a leader in education is not one she takes for granted. In fact, she shared that because educators encouraged her in her formative years, she always wanted to be an educator. When she encounters families who feel excluded from their children’s educational experiences, Frances is intentional in reaching out to her families. During the U.S. presidential election process, there were reports that some students chanted, “Build the wall. Build the wall.”
She worked with her staff to reassure some children who expressed fear of being deported. She met with students individually to assuage them of their fears, reassuring them that school is a safe place. Finally, Frances’ abundance of empathy compels her to remember her charge as a campus leader.

Now, as a leader of a campus, I am more aware of how my actions may promote or inhibit the celebration of diversity. Each person is complex and cultural identity is not only your race or ethnicity. It is also your gender, sexual orientation, faith and/or religion, as well as age. We are complex human beings, and I try to value each person I meet. I learn about their uniqueness and contributions to our world.

Although Frances does not profess to achieving the status of culturally proficient school leader, she remains dedicated to the process, realizing a necessary component is understanding the perspectives of her students, staff, and families while never forgetting her own cultural story.

The empathy Doug possesses is revealed in the data. However, Doug’s empathy for parents who are precluded from being involved in their students’ schooling does fall short of action taken to encourage parent access.

As Doug reflected on his own educational experiences throughout his life, he noted most of his teachers were White. He observed that even when he attended schools that were predominantly comprised of African American and Hispanic students, there were few teachers of color.

Ninety-nine percent of my teachers were white . . . I felt like my teachers understood me. I think it’s important to feel like there’s somebody in the building that will listen and gets it . . . Even when I went to schools where I was in the minority, I had all White teachers. I felt understood and now as an adult, I know why. I understand when students tell me I wouldn’t understand them because I’m White. I understand when my students tell me they feel more comfortable just knowing that an adult in the building looks like them.

A lack of representation, according to Doug, is a detriment to building understanding, to valuing diversity of cultures, and ultimately denies students representation. Though he strives to connect with all his students, he does understand the perspective of the student of color who perceives the
White principal as someone who inherently does not understand their culture. Doug insightfully reflected on his recognition that, while he may have attended schools where he was in the racial minority, because the staff was mostly White, the system was reflective of White America. In this regard, he did not share the same experience of minorities who continue to be educated by White teachers. His recognition motivates Doug to be mindful of his recruiting and hiring of staff of color.

Doug believes his childhood experience taught him how to accept people. The adversity he faced in growing up poor and socially isolated during his elementary and middle school years equipped him to learn how to face challenges related to race and culture. Doug’s role is more than instructional leader. Being raised by his grandmother instilled in Doug the value of serving as a parent figure for others. He charges himself with being the parent of every student on his campus. He explains to students that he cares and he embraces his role as “dad.” It is important that students feel secure and safe at school. Doug remembers what it felt like to be in the minority as a child. He maintains,

When you are a person within a minority, you are aware of it. It does create complex scenarios that have to be well thought out. And so you choose your words carefully, choose your actions carefully. Everything you do is put under a microscope.

While Doug does not expound in great detail the impact poverty had on him, the empathy he has for his families that struggle financially is unquestionable. He understands the plight of parents, whose work schedules do not allow them to participate in their student’s education. He works with students and families who cannot afford the fees associated with extracurricular activities, such as band and cheerleading. As an administrator, Doug remains intentional of not losing sight of the experience of teachers. He fosters leadership among his staff, empowers them to make decisions, and promotes autonomy for them professionally. He has reminded those in central
office of the importance of remembering the daily responsibilities teachers assume when a new
initiative is being deliberated. The empathy with which Doug leads affords him trust among his
staff, students, and parents.

In working with staff, Maria stresses the importance of understanding. She believes her
leadership requires her to get to know her staff members individually and collectively.
Understanding them culturally is a big step in establishing the campus norms. Maria contends
understanding of kids is contingent upon taking the time to understand the adults that work
within the school setting. She understands the daunting tasks associated with educating children
and believes leaders have to take time to understand the adults in order to equip the adults to
work with students in positive, culture affirming ways. Regarding empathy for students, Maria
readily calls up memories of mistreatment she experienced as a student. She referenced some
interactions so painful she was emotionally scarred. During the interview, she speculated.

Maybe my leadership was affected by those scars. Maybe because I’m now much more
sensitive to kids and very careful what I say to kids so they don’t feel bad about who they
are or what they’re wearing or how they grew up because it’s not their fault. They’re
kids; they’re children; they’re products of however their parent decided to raise them.
Probably how I interact with kids and maybe that’s why I got into education is because I
hated middle school. I didn’t care for high school and I don’t want kids to feel that way;
it’s a shitty feeling.

Maria’s experiences as a student ave influenced her leadership. She remains cognizant of others.
She leads with transparency and empathy, careful not to hurt those she serves. However, the
empathy she possesses has not prompted actions toward educational equity.

Throughout the data collection process, Jeremy provided rich accounts of his experiences
as a young boy, young man, and professional. Though he contends his desire is to maintain a
raceless persona, his experiences as a poor Black male growing up in extreme poverty in rural
Louisiana are intertwined in his interactions, leadership, and practices on his campus. Working
within a diverse campus, Jeremy relates to his economically disadvantaged students. He remembers what it felt like to wear shoes to school that no longer fit and were falling apart. He lived the everyday difficulties and challenges of living in poverty. Jeremy does not bemoan growing up in poverty. However, he reveals enough about his experiences growing up, it is clear equitable opportunities were lacking. As cited earlier, it was not until Jeremy attended elementary school on the White side of town that he encountered nice buildings. His school facility was much different than the one in his neighborhood. He stated it was not until he arrived at college in 1993 that he used a personal computer. To that point, his only encounter with a personal computer was seeing one in the yearbook classroom. Like many of his current students, Jeremy was not exposed to many things that are easily taken for granted. The first time he flew in a plane was on his way to basic training for the Marine Corps. He shared his feelings of terror that his plane was going to crash. When he hears students share they have never stayed in a hotel, taken a vacation, or even travelled further than a few miles from their homes, Jeremy remembers the first time he saw a McDonalds in person. For years, his only reference point was a commercial. The connection Jeremy feels with his disenfranchised students is clear.

And so, having grown up extremely disadvantaged, I do have an understanding of what it means to walk into a school like this, and be scared. I guess this is probably the most accurate term to use there. That’s not necessarily that anybody’s going to do anything to you, but it’s the fear of the unknown. You know home, but when you come to school, it’s so different because people expect different things of you, and you’re being watched and judged for nine hours a day, on everything you say, everything you do, the way you look, the way you dress, the way you talk, everything. The way you walk, everything. You’re being judged constantly; you’re being assessed constantly. And so, I know firsthand what that feels like, and so I do things very intentionally to try to end that fear as quickly as possible.

Though Jeremy now represents the socioeconomic upper middle class, he realizes poverty continues to be an obstacle for many students. It is Jeremy’s understanding of living in poverty that allows him to see the dynamics clearly and work to counter the effects as much as possible.
Living within middle class America for the last two decades, Jeremy understands the discrepancies that exists between his two worlds. This enables Jeremy to “tap into understanding the values that come with living in poverty and help those around him understand how choice looks different when you’re poor.” As a leader who remains dedicated to teaching his staff how to become more culturally responsive to the needs of a diverse student body, Jeremy attempts to provide staff with a lens of understanding. He engages his staff in scenarios that simulate poverty.

We do something called a poverty simulator during staff development . . . We get them to understand the mindset of people who are without resources. It’s a simulator where you basically, you draw cards online; it gives you a job, how much money you make, and then you keep playing, hitting the button, and it gives you all these scenarios. So you see money go into your account, then you see something happen, you have to make a decision about what you’re going to do. Are you going to pay this light bill, or are you going to pay to get the brakes fixed in your car? Pay to get the brakes fixed because you’ve got to go to work and now your lights are cut off. Kids can’t do their homework. I think it opens their mind . . . There’s an assumption that people of color, or people from disadvantaged backgrounds, care less about their kids’ education than people who have resources, who are not disadvantaged. Nothing could be further from the truth.

During the interview, Jeremy asserted though this is a simulation for his staff, he has families who make these real choices. He contends, living within the middle class, it is easy to misjudge the values of those we do not tend to understand. Jeremy stated sharing his experience has engaged his staff in dialogue that forces them to address their own misjudgments made about their students and their families. Jeremy is dedicated to helping his students feel accepted at school. One way he attempts to ease the fears of students and make them feel wanted is by hosting a welcome pep rally outside of the school on the first day of school. He speculated the impact of this welcoming pep rally.

Just think, when the kid opens that car door, the first thing they want is if they are wanted here. They think, ’Am I safe?’ Driving up and seeing the staff throwing a pep rally to welcome them knocks down that fear as quickly as possible.
He recalled the fear he faced daily walking into school. He anticipated being judged based on his appearance. He remembers what it felt like to seek belonging and wants to communicate a sense of excitement and belonging. With these recollections, Jeremy has been purposeful in meeting with students to discover their needs. In working with students, he ascertained that students who live in poverty, who are African American or Hispanic, want to experience higher expectations and greater access to rigorous curriculum. Though their diction was not exact, the meaning was the same. They want adults to believe in them and to provide them with the structure, access, and accountability that produces higher achievement. It is due in part to Jeremy’s own struggles with poverty and identity that he sought out the student voices on his campus.

Finally, Jeremy’s understanding of the sense of fear some equate with school extends to those parents who are hesitant in coming to his campus. His empathy for those who are afraid of being arrested if they come to the campus is clear in his removal of barriers.

We especially have such a high Hispanic population . . . When I find out that the parents don’t want to come to the school because they think that they’ll be turned in because they’re undocumented, I invite them in and meet them at the front door and bring them to my office. That has lowered some of the reluctance to come to the building . . . To hear a student tell me his mother doesn’t want to come to the school because she thinks we will call the police because she’s undocumented bothers me. I say, Oh no. We don’t do that here.

The degree of empathy Jeremy experiences is manifested in the actions he takes as a school leader dedicated to the pursuit of social justice, thus educational equity. Though Jeremy did not cite the phrase cultural proficiency, the findings of this research support his attainment of some culturally proficient practices.

In her cultural autobiography, Stella’s recollections of growing up poor and her awareness of the sacrifices her parents made were personal and poignant.
The lights are hot. The audience is pitch-black. I forget to smile when the hot lights hit me. Thank God it is dress rehearsal. The next day, Vaseline is rubbed on my teeth so that I do not forget to SMILE. It feels disgusting. I am four. I can’t complain because my mother is scraping together every penny to pay for my ballet lessons which she never received because she grew up with much less than we had, which had to be zero.

Although Stella’s parents have always been supportive, their absence due to their long hours at work left a void. School helped to fill this void Stella felt as a child. School gave Stella a purpose. Her teachers encouraged her to work hard and pursue college. When students tell Stella their parents’ work schedule does not allow them to come to their school, Stella empathizes and takes action.

I think it just comes from home visits with kids, meeting parents who will look at you and say, ‘I can't come because I will be fired, can't clock out and get there.’ Okay, we'll come to you. We'll come to you. What time do you get home? I mean, it's just all of those things. If it weren't for teachers encouraging me, and my parents, who didn't go to college encouraging me, I would not have gone to college. My parents wanted me to go. But they didn't know the first thing about it. And neither did I. Without school being a place that I wanted to be, who knows where I would be? I mean, my cousin's on meth and she's got a restraining order from her own parents. That could have been me.

The belief Stella’s teachers placed in her drives Stella to provide an encouraging, engaging safe haven for her own students.

Stella characterizes poverty as the great equalizer. Although she does not cite experiences laden with racial awareness or conflict, Stella posited growing up poor weighed heavily on everyone within her community.

I had a couple of African American friends that were classmates. I didn’t feel they were any different. They were just kids. Because we were poor and they were poor. We were the same. Our poverty was equalizing at that point.

While Stella cited she did not feel her African American friends were any different than her, they might have a different view. Though Stella was not subjected to acts of hate from racists individuals or groups, she recognizes the proliferation of racism and the toxicity to which
students have been exposed. She recognizes her own White privilege and with that Stella is driven as a social justice advocate for all students.

Theme 4—Lack of Equity

The data collected from all the data sources revealed a resounding recognition of lack of equity in education. Each participant recalled first hand experiences of growing up in poverty. While childhood poverty characterized the socioeconomic status of each principal participant, the experiences were cited as merely obstacles they had to overcome. However, when speaking of their students, most principal participants passionately spoke to the lack of equity students experience.

Role of Accountability in Equity

The role of accountability in educational equity was discussed in the focus group interview. All the participants recognized the impact of high stakes accountability on student equity. However, the issue of accountability and student equity is complex for these participants. They are conflicted because they believe high stakes accountability encourages schools to provide access to more rigorous curriculum. They cited their beliefs that because all students are held to higher levels of academic achievement, schools are now forced to provide more inclusive curricular and instructional opportunities for English Language Learners (ELL) students and students who receive special education services.

For Doug, the conflict arises with the Texas state assessment instrument, State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), and rules that govern the assessment. While Doug feels ELL students benefit from being able to take their STAAR assessments in their home
language during their elementary years, Frances was quick to assert her belief the STAAR test does more harm in ensuring educational equity.

I wholeheartedly believe the STAAR test is a developmentally inappropriate test for elementary age children. Especially for those who are economically disadvantaged second language learners. They will not, from kindergarten to third grade year, develop enough language skills and enough cognition to be able to pass the STAAR test at the rigor the state expects. Even the passing standard, the final level passing standard, even our students who come in with all the resources intact, are not meeting the level three standard. The level of expectation is absolutely ridiculous for elementary.

Jeremy contends the STAAR test has addressed unethical solutions some school leaders implemented to boost their school ratings in the past. He shared his experience with one principal who engaged in manipulation of testing.

My principal told us to call all the Black special ed kids and tell them they didn’t have to come to school that day. It was such a weird thing to do. But, I was like, okay. I guess there’s a reason for this. Maybe they don’t have to take tests. I didn’t know anything. I was coming in brand new. I thought they didn’t have to take it. I said, okay, I’ll call them all. The kids were happy to stay at home. But, I didn’t realize until later on that she was manipulating the data of the school by doing that.

When Jeremy shared this account in the focus group interview, the other four nodded in agreement, one stating, “Yes, I remember those days.”

In considering how accountability has positively impacted educational equity, most shared in the focus group interview how much they value the progress growth measure. Doug specified how teachers historically have been able to hide behind the academic levels of their students. In other words, teachers who taught the advanced level courses appeared to be more effective, based on the results of standardized testing. Those who taught the on-level or struggling students felt beat down by the data. Doug cited how conversations around the accountability data have changed.

That’s a different conversation when you’re talking about growth and when you’re talking about a test score. Some teachers have relied on teaching the GT kids. But I look at the test results and see zero, zero, zero, zero. They all passed. Matter of fact they all
passed at mastery level. But, they aren’t growing. That kid just sat and wasted a year. That’s the conversation to have with GT teachers. These conversations boosted the teachers that were taking a whooping every year. The target teachers, the recovery teachers, they look at their data and see their students grew. I mean, they get pumped about that, when it used to be like, crap, you didn’t pass again. They would just cry. They don’t cry anymore. They get excited.

The focus group interview provided an opportunity for the participants to engage in dialogue that exemplifies the complexity of high stakes accountability and educational equity. The consensus among the group was the recognition that accountability holds school leaders to higher standards in meeting the needs of all learners. As Doug noted, “We are now held responsible for every kid who walks in the building. That’s how it should have been from the beginning.” Moreover, progress monitoring is indicative of valuing student growth. The contention with accountability, as it relates to educational equity, is the STAAR assessment does not take into consideration the discrepancies in language acquisition and cognitive development among students. In this regard, it serves no positive purpose in encouraging equity.

Access to Opportunities

The fervor with which the principal participants shared their exacerbation with the educational system that excludes students of color and economically disadvantaged students was enlightening. The principal participant screening instruments, individual interviews, focus group interview, and the cultural autobiographies yielded data which highlighted the proliferation of denied access to programming for historically marginalized students. In some instances, parents lack access to their student’s school for reasons beyond their control.

Frances cited the changing demographics of her campus as a challenge for her staff and the community. Her campus of approximately 400 students is approaching 40% economically disadvantaged. Frances stated her campus is in a transition period that is outpaced by the needs
of the students. This, she recognized, tasks her with “growing teachers to help them acclimate to a changing population to help them know that we’re building language in all students.” As the instructional leader on her campus, Frances realized the resources available to her students and staff do very little to honor the cultural differences that reside on her campus.

This is probably an area of deficit in our district. In sitting with teachers and evaluating them through T Tests, because this is the first year we’re doing T Tests, we’re delving into each of the descriptors and stuff. Some of it talks about the multicultural aspects. The teachers have discovered that, yeah, we probably don’t do a good enough job with that because of whatever adopted materials that we’re doing. That’s an area definitely we are lacking in. I want to say we’re lacking in because, one, it doesn’t exist or, two, we aren’t sure where to find it.

Frances acknowledged her failure to this point in providing resources to staff and students that would promote culturally proficient practices on her campus.

Frances believes one of the ways she can promote educational equity for students is to address practices within special programs, such as Gifted and Talented and Special Education programming. As an advocate for her students, Frances requires teachers to provide enrichment opportunities for all students. Though district driven, the Equal Opportunity initiative in her district is one Frances supports with fidelity, as noted in the principal participant screening instrument.

I am seeing staff adapt and accept diversity in ways that I did not see last year. In addition, district-wide, there is a mandate for “Equal Opportunity” – an initiative to increase the participation of minority students in advanced academic options. I am working with my Gifted and Talented teacher to provide enrichment opportunities to a variety of students not typically tested for GT. Our hopes are that through exposure to this enrichment, more under-identified students will eventually be tested and qualified for advanced academic placement.

Additionally, Frances evaluated the special education program on her campus and realized that many students were pulled out of general education classes when what they needed was in-class support. She began reviewing the IEPs of her students and immediately started amending their
programming. During the interview, Frances shared a bit of her journey working with her teachers.

I had some heart-to-heart conversations with my general education teachers, letting them know our special education team right now is still learning. They have never been accustomed to planning with general education teachers. They have not been accustomed to really know what TEKS are. I shared with them that pulling students out of general education classes increases the learning gaps. I explained I don’t think it’s ethically right. I started the phase of pushing in. Then now, just probably last week, a group of teachers came to me and shared their recognition that one of the resource students had regressed since the beginning of the year. I said, ‘I know. I said, ‘That’s why I’m putting forth the effort for inclusive practices, especially for our kindergartners and first-graders. We don’t need to start them out to be unsuccessful.

Frances asserted “students may learn differently, speak differently, or look differently. But teachers need to see the assets students bring into the classroom.” Of the principal participants, Frances was the only participant to address specifically the needs of students who receive special education services. Moreover, she was the only one to discuss culturally responsive practices that address students who are served in special education programming.

Frances views herself as a principal who has recently discovered her own voice in providing equitable learning opportunities for all students. While she admits that she is at times hesitant to project her voice as quickly and loudly as is warranted, she warns that her small physical stature in no way represents the authority and forcefulness with which she is prepared to speak. She is dedicated in her quest to learn how to be a stronger leader whose “actions will promote” and celebrate the complexity of human beings and their contributions offered to the world. This self-reflection on the part of Frances highlights her intentionality of becoming a stronger social justice leader, recognizing she must evolve more in her role.

Poverty, according to Doug, creates an opportunity gap for students. The socio-economic discrepancies on his campus creates a campus of haves and have-nots. Students can easily be precluded from participating in extra-curricular activities, such as band or cheerleading, because
their families cannot afford the fees associated. Doug shared his dissatisfaction with funding of extra-curricular activities. He experiences ongoing frustration when students are excluded from activities such as band, orchestra, and cheerleading. Doug discussed the feeling of “running into a brick wall” when advocating at the district level for leveraging of scholarships for students who cannot afford to buy or rent band and orchestra instruments. The response of the school district was noncommittal. Students of color and students who live in poverty “can’t be a cheerleader because it costs $1,800 to be a cheerleader.” Doug explained that to the extent possible, he utilizes his principal budget to offset the fees.

I just refuse to not let cheerleaders participate. I refuse to not help that kid who wants to participate in band. If the kids wants to participate, I just take it out of the principal fund and I buy their uniform or pay for their instrument rental or whatever they need. I make them sign a contract that they’ll pass their classes and they always manage that. They all usually end up paying me back. Sometimes it takes a few years, but they’ll pay me back. Because I want them to experience it, I don’t care how long it takes for them to pay me back. They may not get to participate in high school but there’s no reason why they can’t have that fun and experience in middle school.

Doug fervently believes it is his responsibility as the school leader to do everything he can to provide students with equitable access to every aspect of the school experience.

Because of the geographic location of Doug’s campus within the vast district lines of his school district, parents often experience difficulties in transportation. This is an obstacle that prevents some students from participating in athletics or fine arts because working parents cannot drive their students 30 minutes to and from practice throughout the week. District and school funds are not available to provide bus transportation; therefore, some students are excluded. In the interview, Doug explained the plight of some parents.

I was just drawing the maps. It’s like 13 miles south and 12 miles east. Then eight miles north, for some kids. Some parents just can’t get their kids to practice at 6:30 in the morning for football practice every day, when it takes them 25 minutes one way. That’s just talking about whether it’s practical. For some parents, it’s too expensive. Because, most of my rural parents are not wealthy.
Doug recognizes those students whose parents are not able to provide transportation are automatically excluded from participation. He shared his regret of their lived reality but confessed he feels there is nothing he can do to provide these excluded students access.

Along the lines of poverty, parents are excluded access to the school. Doug recognizes that the absence of the parent is not indicative of how much parents care.

Even though their parents make an okay living, they’re just strapped for cash, constantly. And they’re never here because they work insane hours. There are some parents I couldn’t point out on the street . . . They just don’t have time to come up here. It’s not that they’re bad parents, they just can’t join the PTO. If asked, they respond, “Are you kidding me? I got to take care of my other four kids.” They just don’t have time.

Doug understands the plight of the working poor families served by his campus; however, he made no mention of ways in which he has attempted to provide ways for parents to become involved in their students’ education.

One practice Doug implemented to provide equitable educational opportunities has been the purposeful identification of students who historically have not participated in advanced courses. His campus data highlighted most of his students enrolled in the gifted and talented courses were White and in a higher socioeconomic class. He recognized the same trend in the Pre-AP courses as well. Doug asserted, in the principal participant survey and in his interview, his charge in response to this recognition. Rather than allow bright students to earn the easy A, Doug established the expectation on his campus that all students will be appropriately placed in challenging courses. This change in practice increased the number of students of color accessing challenging curriculum. Students who receive services through special education do not appear to have been served with the same mindfulness with which Doug speaks regarding access. Additionally, Doug’s ELL students do not appear to be a focus of inclusivity on his campus.
Doug’s advocacy for student access to equitable educational opportunities is apparent throughout the data. He may not employ practices to address every inequity he recognizes; however, the findings highlight Doug’s desire and progress.

Jeremy, when asked to consider one of the biggest obstacles faced in leading for educational equity, he cited systemic discriminatory practices. He recognizes that schools are structured to reflect values that are indicative of White middle class, while ignoring the needs of every other student. Specifically, Jeremy cited that over 40% of his students do not fit the White middle-class profile. In speaking with his students, Jeremy learned that many students “feel like they have to navigate landmines” in learning how to operate within the established parameters of schools. They feel misunderstood by their teachers and sometimes disrespected. Jeremy stated that he witnesses the lowered academic expectations many teachers hold of their African American and Hispanic students. He cited recognition that English Language Learners on his campus often feel overlooked. The disparity between the needs of students and the structure of education leaves many students behind.

Schools are meant to reflect the values of White middle-class America. However, 40% of the kids that are in these buildings are not kids from White middle-class America . . . School is confusing for Black kids; they try to navigate the hidden rules of schools, as Ruby Paine calls it . . . Talking to my Black kids and my Hispanic kids, they want the same thing. They want their teachers to have the same expectations of them as they do for the White kids. They feel that their teachers let them off the hook a lot of times . . . They feel like their teachers don’t have the same expectations for them or the same respect for them . . . So they have a totally different mindset of things that they feel like are the landmines they have to navigate in school.

Jeremy acknowledges the challenges he faces in leading his staff to recognition of the disparities and, more importantly, arming his staff with the ability to transcend the institutionalized discriminatory practices within education.
Jeremy does not bemoan growing up in poverty. However, he reveals enough about his experiences growing up; it is clear equitable opportunities were lacking. As cited earlier, it was not until Jeremy attended elementary school on the White side of town that he encountered nice buildings. His school facility was much different than the one in his neighborhood. He stated it was not until he arrived at college in 1993 that he used a personal computer. Like many of his current students, Jeremy was not exposed to many things that are easily taken for granted. The connection Jeremy feels with his disenfranchised students is clear.

And so having grown up extremely disadvantaged, I do have an understanding of what it means to walk into a school like this, and be scared. I guess this is probably the most accurate term to use there. That’s not necessarily that anybody’s going to do anything to you, but it’s the fear of the unknown. You know home, but when you come to school, it’s so different because people expect different things of you, and you’re being watched and judged for nine hours a day, on everything you say, everything you do, the way you look, the way you dress, the way you talk, everything. The way you walk, everything. You’re being judged constantly; you’re being assessed constantly. And so, I know firsthand what that feels like, and so I do things very intentionally to try to end that fear as quickly as possible.

Though Jeremy now represents the socioeconomic upper middle class, he realizes poverty continues to be an obstacle for many students. It is Jeremy’s understanding of living in poverty that allows him to see the dynamics clearly and work to counter the effects as much as possible.

Jeremy believes data analysis, and further, acting on what data reveal, is a must in providing academic and behavioral supports for students. He dedicates a staffing unit for instructional coaching. The instructional coach, along with a team of teachers, counselors, and administrative staff meet weekly to hone the academic and behavioral plan for students who have been identified as needing additional support. Jeremy cited involving students in the conversations is enlightening and beneficial. These conversations provide the most important information, the student perspective. Teachers can adapt their lesson designs to meet the needs of students who struggle the most.
Tell me about your favorite lesson that you’ve had this year? What did you like so much about that lesson? And then you feed that information to the teachers so that when they’re thinking lesson design, they can think, okay, this kid likes this sort of learning, and so here’s what we’re going to do. And so you build up this sort of repertoire for teachers, and how they’re going to address being able to identify kids by need, and when you get to know each kid, and I try to get to know each kid as much as I can, then we know how to design work environments that are going to work for them.

Additionally, target classes are built into the master schedule to provide additional academic intervention, as Jeremy realizes that most identified students do not have the ability to stay after school for additional support.

Examining “touchpoints” for inclusion and diversity is a practice Jeremy believes is extremely important in putting action to ideals of cultural proficiency. Simply put, Jeremy compares the messages of inclusive education to the realities on his campus. One discrepancy with which he struggles is the homogenous make-up of advanced level classes. In touring his campus, he pointed out the racial makeup of the pre-AP and gifted and talented classes we passed. The majority of the students in the classes we saw were White. During the interview, Jeremy shared he worked with his staff to develop a new identification process in enrolling students of color. He noted there is much more that needs to occur. However, evidence of increased inclusivity was presented in recognizing 24 more students of color are taking sixth grade advanced level math. The old identification process would have only identified two students of color. This, Jeremy notes, is movement in the right direction.

We spend a significant amount of time examining the messages that are communicated relating to our campus’ value of diversity. For instance, I examine all touchpoints for inclusion and diversity. Our yearbook, social media, website, and other touchpoints are reflective of the diversity of our campus. For whatever reason, our advanced placement and GT courses are culturally homogeneous in many ways. To tackle this issue, we do deep dives into the data that we have for students. This exercise allowed us to put additional 24 students into advanced level of sixth grade math for next school year, up from the two students that would have normally qualified if we had used a typical identification process.
One area Jeremy did not address when considering educational equity was the representation of students in special education classes. No data source revealed Jeremy’s intentionality in examining school data related to special education, thus affecting policies or practices designed to serve students who receive special education services in the least restrictive environment. This may be a touchpoint that Jeremy overlooked sharing in this study or it may be reflective that Jeremy has failed to examine this as one of his touchpoints of inclusive practices. Jeremy’s participation in this study, as he stated, reaffirms the importance of his work as a social justice leader on his campus. Jeremy asserted: “I always have at the forefront of my mind those students who are systematically excluded from anything. Being part of the system, I feel like an obligation to make sure that I’m looking out for those kids.” Jeremy is driven to serve the needs of all students, readily remembering what it felt like to grow up disenfranchised in an educational system that failed to conform to the needs of the students who most needed a more equitable educational experience. He takes to heart his responsibility to advocate for those who need him the most. For him, this work is personal.

Stella stated one thing she has changed on her campus that has the potential to do more in creating equitable learning opportunities is critiquing and changing the curriculum and courses offered. She believes it is her responsibility to create equitable educational opportunities for students.

And the way that people have been treated until now, we can never make right. But what we can do is try to make the place that they’re in now safe, comfortable, equitable, not equal but equitable. If I’m from poverty, this is what I need. If I’m African American, I need to have a principal who has de-tracked courses so that I am allowed in the pre-AP classes, so that a teacher isn’t blocking my way.

Stella asserted that walking into any pre-AP class, two years ago, would have highlighted the inequities on her campus. Most students in those classes were White. Important to consider is
the fact that those students travelled as a group all day from class to class. The social and emotional component of teaching students to appreciate and respect diversity was inherently flawed because students were racially segregated within the campus. To remedy the inequities and the social segregation, Stella de-tracked the courses. This was not an easy task because teachers were concerned with the fidelity of the curriculum, as well as fear regarding the behavior of students who may not be academically prepared for the rigor. Stella brought in research-based articles that highlighted how engaging lessons decrease behavioral issues. She worked with teachers to learn how to provide differentiated instruction within the pre-AP classes so that every student would have access to engaging and rigorous curriculum. She and her teachers began to consider how to use technology in more engaging ways. In working with teachers and parents, Stella shared how her beliefs were actualized.

All of our classes are pre-AP. We got all these calls from parents, ‘We did not sign up for pre-AP.’ Well, no, you did not, and I had a couple of parent meetings. But what we know is that equity begins with access to rigorous curriculum. And if we’re going to go to college, what we know is kids have to get through Algebra II . . . successful[ly].

Stella stated that staff, students, and parents recognize and are proud that students have met the raised bar for academic and behavioral expectations.

Stella, like Jeremy, embraces the role of school leader as someone who must be a structural leader. The master schedule she created illustrates her commitment to a culturally proficient campus. Her schedule supports her assertion that meeting the social and emotional needs of students is a necessary component of culturally responsive education. She added an eighth period to the schedule, which is split between morning and afternoon. Both sessions are segregated by gender. The morning session, 25 minutes long is dedicated to SSR (Silent Sustained Reading). The afternoon session is 20 minutes long and incorporates three Social and
Emotional Learning (SEL) sessions each week. The fourth session allows for the use of restorative practices, and finally, there is a recess time each week.

According to Stella, one of the most rewarding practices in which she now engages is making home visits. She has parents who cannot come during the normal school day because they work and cannot afford to take time off to come to the school. Some parents lack the means of transportation and others are afraid they will be arrested and deported if they come to the school.

Stella shared the impact of collective efforts by her teachers and parents that led her to believe college was an option for her. Recognizing the collective effort of those who advocated for her as a student, Stella understands that she needs the support of her staff and she needs to support her staff as the leader who ultimately leads the way as a social justice school leader who fails to relent in her quest for educational equity for her students.

The staff knows that I can’t do this work alone of shifting our school to one that is about equity, a school that is a social emotional learning school, a school that puts community and kids first. We can’t get there unless I’m leading the way and taking care of the adults along the way.

Stella’s personal background gives her some insight into the need for educational equity. More importantly, her personal and professional experiences feed her need to grow as a leader of social justice and educational equity.

Four of the participants articulated their commitment to the establishment of high expectations for their students, for support in ensuring students success, and for implementing practices that will remove barriers to educational equity.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided the analysis of data reflective of experiences of principals in
north Texas who strive to achieve social justice for their students by the pursuit of culturally proficient practices. The principal participant screening instruments, interviews, focus group interview, and cultural autobiographies provided opportunities for the participants to share their experiences. Participants shared personal and professional experiences that demonstrate how their pursuit of social justice and cultural proficiency has been hindered and strengthened. Their personal backgrounds and experiences and leadership experiences highlight common experiences, as well as delineating unique experiences among the five participants. Data revealed the varying degrees of commitment and success in the pursuit of social justice. A synthesis of the themes presented in Chapter 4, in relation to the literature review, will be offered in Chapter 5. I also will discuss further the relationship of the conceptual framework components: The Five Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency, Social Justice, and Equity. Additionally, the implications for educational leadership and recommendations will be asserted in Chapter 5.
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

In this concluding chapter, I discuss the findings of this research as they relate to the literature and conceptual framework. The data sources: principal participant screening instruments, interviews, focus group interview, and cultural autobiographies, provided insight into the five principal participants nominated by professors in educational leadership. The nominations of these principals were based on the perceptions held of them as socially just principals who employ culturally proficient practices as they strive to provide equitable learning opportunities for students. One of the participants is an elementary principal, one is a high school principal, and three are middle school principals. The rich and varied personal and professional experiences of the participants answered the overarching research question and the two sub-questions of the study.

How do the experiences of socially just leaders strengthen or hinder their leadership toward developing culturally proficient schools?

1. How have the personal experiences of socially just leaders strengthened or hindered their development of more culturally proficient schools?

2. How have the professional experiences of socially just leaders strengthened or hindered their ability to be socially just leaders?

Listed are the themes and subthemes that emerged as prevalent and relevant:

1. Prevalence of Race
   a. Leveraging race
   b. Racism in schools
   c. Racism with the community

2. Struggle with Identity and Fitting in

3. Abundance of Empathy
4. Equity
   
a. Role of accountability in equity

   b. Access to Opportunities

Connections to the Conceptual Framework and Literature

The constructs in the framework utilized for this study include social justice, Lindsey and Terrell’s (2009) five essential elements of cultural proficiency, and educational equity. The five essential elements of cultural proficiency transpire at the cultural competence point of the cultural proficiency continuum and serve as a guide to the point of proficiency. The framework allowed me to explore the principal participants’ experiences as social justice leaders who seek educational equity for their students. The findings of this research are discussed as they pertain to (a) educational equity, (b) social justice, (c) assessing cultural knowledge, (d) valuing diversity, (e) managing the dynamics of difference, (f) adapting to diversity, and (g) institutionalizing cultural knowledge.

Educational Equity

   Wang (2015) drew a distinction between social justice and equity. He explained equity encompasses more than principle. It is a process, an action, and most importantly, an end goal for educators. Singleton (2015) made the case for school leaders assuming responsibility in scrutinizing their beliefs, values, and practices. He argued they, and all educators, must be willing to engage in courageous conversations and recreate schools. All participants in the current study strongly held the principle of equity. However, the degree to which they assume the responsibility of ensuring equity varies. Yet, the empathy they possess in working with
students was glaringly obvious in every data point. They quickly recalled their own experiences of growing up and experiencing inequities because of race and socioeconomics. There was consistent recognition of inequities that exist on each campus. The participants cited their frustration and enumerated the ways in which they have addressed inequities. However, the processes established and responses rendered in acquisition of equity varied.

Underrepresentation of students of color in advanced classes is a common educational inequity that exists in schools, as argued by Darling Hammond (2007). Orfield (2014) extended on this example of inequity, asserting students of color are disconnected from paths to college. This disconnect, according to Orfield, more than justifies a new civil rights agenda that incorporates equalization of educational opportunities. Most participants of the current study discussed the lack of equity as it pertains to access, affirming the review of literature. They shared underrepresentation of students of color in advanced level courses has historically been the norm on their campuses. However, they cited actions they have taken to correct this inequity of access. The actions encompassed altering screening processes, identifying students who were academically capable and enrolling them in the courses, removing barriers such as parent/student contracts, and de-tracking courses. In the recollections shared, the stance of principal directives was clearly and firmly articulated. Their desire to provide equitable learning opportunities was unwavering. However, the missing component for most of the principals is how they engage their staff in the learning process of creating and sustaining practices specifically designed to build equity.

Fenning and Rose (2007) argued the overrepresentation of students of color receiving discipline referrals. They asserted African American students receive twice the rate of disciplinary referrals as compared to their White peers. Further, African Americans are more apt
to be suspended for non-violent offenses. Four of the principals specifically addressed the
overrepresentation of students of color receiving disciplinary action in their schools. One
principal made the connection between lack of access and perceived behavioral problems, noting
his belief that smart African American and Hispanic students who do not enroll in advanced
classes become perceived as behavior problems. He contended these smart kids are not
challenged, which is the root of the behavioral issues. One principal noted the disproportionate
number of Hispanic students from her school sent to the disciplinary alternation campus in her
district. She cited how this data resonated with her after reading Howard’s (2006), *We Can’t
Teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*. She recalled the point
Howard makes in stating White privilege dominates the teaching force with a lack of
understanding and connections to their students. She discussed sharing the data with her staff, as
well as introducing them to the literature she referenced. She believes this was a starting point
for her in reversing the trend. Her plan is to begin introducing cultural competences to her staff
to create a more inclusive environment. Though each principal articulated actions taken to
combat inequities, there was only one principal who has demonstrated her use of professional
development as a tool in establishing a dialogue among her staff.

Role of Assessment in Educational Inequities

The role of assessments in reform efforts within the United States since passage of ESEA
has remained a source of controversy for educators. Madaus et al. (1997) noted assessment can
assist in reform efforts; however, assessment is not the cure of educational problems. Reflective
of the research, the principals in this study shared their frustration with the role of assessment in
education. They all spoke to the complexity of assessment to promote inclusive education while
sharing their frustration regarding their belief that high stakes assessment creates more educational inequities. They all acknowledged, in the focus group, their belief that NCLB forced schools to raise academic standards for students who participate in special education. However, they also discussed the role of assessment in unethical practices. One principal cited his belief that accountability in Texas, through ESSA, includes growth measures. This change influenced the conversations he has with his teachers regarding expectations of academic growth of all students. In promoting equity, the principals agreed analyzing data from STAAR has necessitated implementation of interventions that target struggling students. What is unclear is the extent to which the principals have utilized assessment data to promote equity in their schools.

Social Justice

The five principal participants all conveyed awareness of inequities they recognize exist in education. Moreover, their desire to serve as social justice leaders for students was clearly articulated throughout the research. Brown et al. (2011) highlighted schools that have been successful in creating equitable learning environments have assumed a systemic stance to equity. They contend leaders who assume the challenge of creating equitable learning environments not only possess a moral obligation, they are compelled to scrutinize systems and practices within education that have institutionalized inequities in education.

Practices of social justice principals. One of the ways school principals can pursue social justice in education is to self-assess their values and beliefs (Grant, 2012). Two of the participants of this study shared their use of the Implicit Bias assessment as a means of gauging bias they may inherently possess. Additionally, they shared they have used the Implicit Bias
assessment as an instrument for promoting self-awareness among their staffs. Both participants who had taken the Implicit Bias assessment themselves cited being nervous about taking the assessment. One stated, “I was really nervous to take it. I want to be honest.” The other participant jokingly shared with the focus group, “Yeah, I was nervous too, but my test was clean.” Another participant shared his use of the Poverty Simulator as a means of understanding the perspectives of his students and parents. He shared, “There’s an assumption that people of color . . . care less about their kids’ education.” This participant discussed how the use of the Poverty Simulator helped him and his staff understand inaccurate generalizations of parents who are assumed to have misplaced priorities. While these principals have taken some action towards self-assessment, and by extension have engaged their staff in this process, the findings suggest a lack of depth and breadth in the practice of self-assessment.

Theoharis (2010) cited principals who advocate for social justice disrupt injustice by discussing issues of race with staff. While the participants shared their experiences with race, there was limited evidence of them taking on the issue of the impact of race with their staff, students, and parents. Four of the participants noted, specifically, the perpetuation of institutionalized racism as evident in the underrepresentation of students of color enrolled in advanced level courses. In their recognition, the four principals confronted institutionalized racism through their removal of barriers for students of color in enrolling in pre-AP, honors, and GT courses. One principal stated he removed the parent contract as a requirement for students to enroll in advanced level classes, citing his belief in the intentionality of parent contracts as an exclusionary tactic to keep students out of the advanced classes. There was no data presented that revealed ongoing dialogue with staff regarding implications of race in their practice of requiring parent contracts. Another principal removed all barriers by de-tracking all the courses
offered on campus. This principal, however, did share throughout the interview her practice of discussing implications of race as it pertains to student achievement and the culture of the school.

Some of the principal participants, as it applies to relationships in schools, have confronted race. One of the participants shared a confrontation she had with a group of White teachers on her campus who arranged to participate in a “Wear Blue” campaign to support police officers. Though she did not cite professional learning offered to staff members following the incident, she did confront the teachers. It is important to note that the five participants of this study were open in their discussions of race through each data source. However, the findings of the study did highlight hesitancy on the part of most of the principals in discussing implications of race with their staff. The disruption of injustice occurs on a case by case basis. While that is a positive response, systemic measures through professional learning are not evident.

A common thread found in the practice of the five principal participants was their mindfulness in hiring with diversity in mind. Theoharis (2010) noted the importance of school leaders being intentional in seeking personnel who have the interest, philosophy, or skillset to work towards inclusive education. Each participant noted the importance of hiring staff members who reflect the cultures of their students and communities. While they each articulated the importance of students feeling a sense of representation and connectedness in seeing “like” faces among the school staff, it was not apparent through the research findings that these principals screened candidates based on their experience in dealing with issues related to race and culture. Moreover, there was no evidence that suggested the principals sought candidates who demonstrated an inclusive philosophy or interest.

Theoharis (2010) argued the disconnect between schools and the communities they serve perpetuates educational inequities. One of the most powerful practices of social justice
principals create is a welcoming school climate. All five participants stressed the importance of creating welcoming school climates. One participant shared his practice of welcoming pep rallies on the first day of school. His resolve is to communicate to students and parents the excitement of school personnel in serving students.

Three of the five spoke specifically of the reluctance some parents experience in coming to the schools due to their fear of being deported. These three principals revealed, in the focus group, their decision to ensure parents feel welcome and safe. One principal shared the startling reality that some parents avoid coming to his campus because they are terrified at the prospect of being detained and deported due to their status as undocumented. His solution is to invite them directly into his office, avoiding having to check in officially. He emphatically asserted to his students who shared this fear that he will never target a parent because of immigration status. Another participant revealed the same fear exists for parents and students within her community. She shared her practice of making home visits to parents who have difficulty trusting they will not be arrested and deported if they come on school grounds. She cited this has not only made families feel they are welcome, she feels she is building trust. These three participants have taken action to create welcoming school environments and, in this regard, are engaging in a practice indicative of social justice leaders.

Social Justice Leadership

Theoharis (2010) reiterated the necessity of school principals using professional development in a way that promotes equity and empowers and encourages teachers to take ownership of their own learning. He asserted that the trust built around this model of learning facilitates social justice. Only one principal provided data that highlighted the connection
between PLCs and culturally proficient practices. Through her PLCs, this principal continues to reveal her analysis of data as it pertains to inequities. The PLCs then focus on how to respond to data that reveal inequities. Her counseling PLC, for example, studies ways to increase ELLs confidence in academics, with the goal of engaging ELLs in their education. Though all of the participants did cite the importance of professional development as a campus norm, the findings revealed only one participant has demonstrated a steadfast dedication to using professional development to promote culturally responsive or proficient practices.

The findings from this research highlighted the difficulties in serving as a social justice leader. Merchant and Garza (2015) noted the sense of isolation, the difficulty and the discomfort principals often experience in assuming the role of social justice leader. Though the participants did not bemoan their roles as social justice leaders, it was clear that the work is no small task.

The difficulties and discomfort each participant experienced as a social justice leader were evident throughout the interviews and the focus group interview. Most of the principals shared the difficulties they experience with the current political climate in the United States and within their communities, stating the division within their communities implores them to rally around common understandings, common values, common missions, and common goals. At times, these principals have responded quickly and directly, as was the case when one participant had to escort a parent off campus who wanted to post “Black Lives Matter” literature around campus. The principal responded with an emphatic no, stating he would not allow his campus to be disrupted.

The difficulty and discomfort associated with social justice leadership was apparent for another participant who shared it took her four years to gain the courage to work through personnel issues to move people off her campus who are not dedicated to serving all students.
She shared this has resulted in broadening the circle of social justice minded staff members on her campus. In working with this participant, it became apparent she is passionately driven as a social justice leader. However, it is important to note her recognition of the time it has taken her to be more assertive and courageous.

**Leadership Roles**

Kose (2009) argued a social justice leader must assume various roles within professional development. He asserted principals must be political leaders, learning leaders, structural leaders, visionaries, and cultural leaders. Kose discussed the importance of the roles assumed by principals who pursue social justice, stating achievement of equitable learning environments is contingent upon the leadership of the principal.

The role of political leader is important as such leaders promote the school vision and improve student achievement as they garner buy-in from all school stakeholders. One of the participants reflected on her interactions with her PTA the first year she was principal. Though she believed the PTA was excluding Hispanic families from becoming involved in a school fundraiser, she reluctantly acquiesced to their decision not to sell tamales due to possible health and safety concerns. Her reluctance was rooted in not wanting to alienate her PTA. In recounting this occurrence in the interview and within the focus group interview, it was clear she regretted not responding as a social justice leader in that moment. The interaction between the principal and her PTA reaffirms the necessity of a social justice leader to assume the role of political leader. Moreover, it reaffirms her difficulty in assuming the role.

The role of principals as learning leaders, as explained by Kose (2009), is imperative since they assume responsibility for the facilitation of professional development and they
supervise teachers and provide meaningful and timely feedback. Some of the principal participants referenced professional development they have facilitated on their campuses. However, only one stressed the importance of ongoing professional learning opportunities and expectations. She cited the dedication of time she spends observing teachers, participating in their PLCs, and providing feedback as instrumental in the development of culturally proficient practices within her school. As a learning leader, this was the only principal who exemplified this trait.

Kose (2009) highlighted that visionary leaders build consensus. They develop goals tightly aligned with the vision of the campus and student achievement. They are confident in what they, and the school, represent. One of the participants assumes the role of visionary leader on her campus. In discussing her responsibility in leading the work, she shared her reality that she needs the commitment from her staff to shift the culture of her campus to one dedicated to educational equity. However, she noted it is her responsibility to lead the way. While the other principals shared their commitment to serving students and staff and are inspired by their work, they fell short of demonstrating their current role as a visionary leader.

In his study of seven urban school principals committed to social justice, Theoharis (2007) identified three common leadership traits shared among the participants. The trait *arrogant humility* highlights the complex nature of this social justice leader who is confident in the belief of being right, knowing what is in the best interest of the school, and assuming responsibility in leading with their vision. These leaders, however, experience self-doubt, question their job performances, and willingly admit mistakes. The findings of this study revealed all the participants possess the leadership trait of *arrogant humility*. All of the principals expressed their commitment to social justice. Additionally, they all were quick to own
mistakes or doubts they recognize in their leadership. One principal, during our interview, expressed the sentiment that she recognizes there is more to be done on her campus to secure social justice. She noted staff recognizes her commitment and her dedication. A common thread between some participants in this study is the resolve they maintain in pursuing social justice for students they serve. They epitomize Theoharis’ (2007) trait of arrogant humility.

The second trait Theoharis identified in his 2007 study is passionate visionary leadership. These leaders are deeply committed to the ideals of social justice; they are driven by their moral purpose and possess a deep personal connection to the schools they serve. They are highly visible on their campus and within their communities. The dissatisfaction they experience is internalized. While each principal participant expressed deep commitment to the ideals of social justice, three demonstrated deep connections to the schools they serve. One principal cited her commitment to her school as evidenced by feeling compelled to enroll her child, stating, “If my school is good enough for the students I serve, it’s good enough for my son. Wouldn’t it be hypocritical to communicate otherwise?”

The final trait identified in Theoharis’ (2007) study is tenacious commitment to justice. These leaders maintain an unwavering commitment to social justice. They lead collaboratively. These leaders are intentional in engaging and empowering their staff in pursuit of the vision held by the principal. These principals, while meeting resistance in their pursuit of social justice, became even more dedicated to the pursuit rather than dissuaded. The findings of this research revealed the difficulty with this trait. More specifically, the ability to lead collaboratively was in question when staff members failed to follow their lead. However, one principal cited on several occasions the vigor with which she addresses resistors. Her presence in professional learning communities on her campus and in the classrooms has translated into the proverbial drinking of
the Koolaid. She explained it has taken her four years to bring her staff along, citing she lost some along the way who refused to follow her lead. The relationships and partnerships she built in her tenure there resulted in the “right people . . . who are in [her] circle of social justice” assuming ownership and responsibility for moving the campus along. They have silenced those few staff members who have yet to transform their beliefs and actions.

Women as Social Justice Leaders

Galman et al. (2010) stressed as women grow in leadership capacities, White women own the responsibility of dismantling racism by examining their part in White domination of education. There was only one White female principal participant in this study. It was interesting that she referenced White privilege in every data source offered. Her willingness to articulate recognition of her own White privilege was unexpected and interesting. This willingness to self-assess is the first tenet of the five essential elements of cultural proficiency. In speaking to differences in gender with educational leadership, one participant stated her belief that staff believes her high level of accountability and attention to detail is because she’s a woman. Moreover, she declared male leaders should assume greater responsibility in advocating for social justice since they are traditionally more apt to be heard.

Normore and Jean-Marie (2008) speculated that women social justice leaders are more focused on the relationships within the school setting. This belief that gender impacts social justice leadership was reiterated by two more participants. One female participant stated what she believes, “We all act as social justice advocates because we’re human beings, not because we’re a man or a woman, but I do recognize I have to function differently because I am a woman.” One of the male participants cited his practice of routinely administering staff surveys
because he believes being a man requires overt actions of gauging feedback as he is not as “in
tune” with his staff. His belief highlights the findings of this research which support perceptions
of difference between male and female social justice leaders. However, there was no indication
of difference in the desire and ability to build relationships with constituents based on the gender
of the principal.

Cultural Proficiency

Terrell and Lindsey (2009) described cultural proficiency as a process and a mindset for
how we interact with all people, regardless of the culture to which they belong or identify. They
asserted it is a “24/7 approach to our personal and private lives” and is indicative of the
worldview comprised of language, values and standards for “effective personal interactions and
professional practices” (p. 21). In approaching this research, I anticipated some findings related
to the participants’ desire to lead as social justice leaders in pursuit of educational equity;
however, conducting the research and analyzing the findings through the lens of cultural
proficiency was more difficult. The findings of this study revealed various degrees of social
justice leadership. In reviewing the literature, it was apparent these principal participants vary
with where they are along the continuum of cultural proficiency.

Barriers to Cultural Proficiency

The most glaring barrier to cultural proficiency for these participants is simple to
understand, overwhelming to overcome. Cooper (2009) asserted students need leaders and
advocates who are prepared to become change agents armed to assume the challenge. The armor
missing for these participants consists of knowledge, skills, and experience. All five participants
emphatically reported lack of preparation in their principal preparation programs. Interestingly, none of them went through their master’s program at the same institution. Two of the participants have earned their doctorate and the other three are currently in their doctoral program in educational leadership. Four of the participants share the same university program for their doctorate. It was interesting to note, the two who are still working toward their doctorate at the common institutional program cited taking one course related to equity. For these two, this class fueled their desire to learn how to become social justice leaders. However, they were quick to add one class was not enough to provide them the knowledge and structure necessary to assume the role of social justice leader adequately. One participant is in her doctoral program at another university. Throughout this research project, it became clear she is far more advanced in understanding ideals of social justice, equity, and cultural proficiency. She conducted equity audits and the findings of her audits have begun to drive her practices. When I inquired how she managed to learn and enact so much, she referenced her doctoral coursework. The rigor and guidance she received, according to her, is what equipped her to become a social justice leader who is moving positively along the continuum of cultural proficiency.

Lack of direction and adequate support from school districts created a barrier for most of the participants. No participant cited the district as being instrumental in providing the knowledge and skills necessary for growth as a culturally proficient leader. One participant defended his district. He acknowledged his district has not overtly provided support but they want to help. This lack of commitment and initiative on the part of his school district was indicative of the commitment three of the participants experienced within their district. Moreover, it highlights the deficit of leadership within the districts. Given the findings of this
study and review of the literature, this deficit is likely due to lack of expertise that exists at the highest levels of school districts.

R. B. Lindsey et al. (2009) referenced lack of access for those who do not belong to the dominant group has plagued education in the United States. For those who possess the power, there is no real impetus to acknowledge or relinquish the imbalance of power. It is much easier and much more advantageous to ignore the imbalance if you belong to the group that possesses that power. The discomfort in confronting this system of oppression was commonly communicated throughout the study. However, the characterization was not explicitly linked to the principals’ recognition of the imbalance of power. This finding highlights the barrier and the participants’ lack of understanding. One principal cited challenges he faced in training teachers how to be culturally proficient. He stated the mention of diversity is perceived as another example of political correctness.

This overt resistance characterizes the reluctance experienced by the principals who had their staff engage in the Implicit Bias assessment. Both principals cited the level of discomfort and disengagement their staff demonstrated. One of these principals asserted encountering responses that bordered on defensiveness and hostility. Given the review of literature, this response was not a surprising discovery in this study.

Five Essential Elements

R. B. Lindsey et al. (2009) asserted the five essential elements of cultural proficiency serve as a set of standards meant to guide the journey along the continuum of cultural proficiency. They noted the five essential elements begin at the cultural competence point of the continuum. The intentionality, and more importantly, the ability to exercise these five elements,
provides the structure to delve deep into the practices, values, behaviors, and policies that are indicative of appropriate and productive responses to diversity. Based on Terrell and Lindsey’s clarification of the points of the cultural continuum, in examining the six points of the cultural proficiency continuum, two of the participants of this study are at the point of cultural pre-competence. They are leading with an increased awareness of the limitations of their skills and practices in effectively engaging cultures other than their own. They strive to learn more and to do more but remain aware they still have much to learn in order to move along the continuum to the point of cultural competence. The other three principal participants demonstrated they are at the point of cultural competence. They have implemented use of the five essential elements, which resulted in leadership guided by personal values and behaviors. The school’s policies and practices are inclusive of the cultures represented in the school setting. It is important to remember Terrell and Lindsey’s clarification that the continuum is not static. Principals striving to achieve cultural proficiency will continue to move in and out of the points along the continuum. In examining the results of this study, it is apparent the principal participants’ use of the five essential elements of cultural proficiency varies in application.

Assessing cultural knowledge. R. B. Lindsey et al. (2009) explained that assessing cultural knowledge is leading the learning of your own culture, as well as the culture of others. Assessment of cultural knowledge includes communication of cultural expectations for everyone who interacts in the school setting. All of the participants have employed the use of this essential element. In the cultural autobiographies shared in this research study, the participants revealed a depth of self-awareness that was enlightening and poignant. Culture, as related to race, gender, and socioeconomic status, was shared in each of the accounts. Further, the interviews and focus
group interview revealed the principals’ understanding of the cultures of their schools and the communities served by the school.

*Valuing diversity.* Terrell and Lindsey (2009) explained valuing diversity entails the creation of formal and informal groups that represent the view of those whose experiences and perspectives are different from the leader and the dominant group of the school. The degree to which the participants demonstrated valuing diversity varied. One participant spoke directly in his interview of his practice of creating committees that engage in decision making on his campus. He stated the importance of giving voice to representatives from cultural groups within his staff. When he interviews job candidates, he employs the use of a committee, trusting in their desire and ability to select candidates who best represent the vision of the school. Another participant shared his use of student groups in decision making on his campus. He solicits input from students because he believes in the importance of empowering and engaging students. One of the interesting actions he has taken has been meeting with groups of students to gauge an understanding of their needs and perspectives. He discussed how meeting with some of his Hispanic and African American students helped better understand their needs from a cultural perspective. He discovered his Hispanic students articulated the desire for more segregated classes. He shared his confusion over this initial request but later discovered, through his ongoing conversations, that they experienced lower academic expectations from their teachers. These expectations decreased their confidence and engagement. This newfound perspective fueled his focus on lesson design. In discussing diversity, it was interesting that all participants spoke of their appreciation of diversity. I do believe their understanding of valuing diversity is lacking, however. In most cases, the participants continued to reference diversity as more of a challenge to be overcome rather than diversity as an asset.
Managing the dynamics of difference. Terrell and Lindsey (2009) explained managing dynamics of difference includes modeling problem solving and conflict resolution strategies as a natural and normal occurrence within the school and community setting. The participant who required his staff to engage in the use of the Poverty Simulator is a solid example of his expectation that staff understand the perspectives of families that differ from their own. This ability, as stated by this principal, allows staff to possess more empathy and resist the tendency to judge those parents whose actions do not seemingly align with their values. The two principals who utilize the Implicit Bias assessment engage in this practice to begin an honest dialogue about bias that is inherently possessed. One principal shared the discomfort of some teachers in taking the assessment and stated they were resentful and suspicious of the process. Another practice this principal shared in managing dynamics of difference is the use of restorative practices on her campus. Recognizing the over identification of students receiving out of school placement for discipline issues, she incorporated social and emotional learning into her master schedule. One of the practices she implemented is the use of circling once per week. The teacher facilitates circling, a component of restoratives practices that provides a framework for building relationships and addressing conflict. This provides a venue for students to connect with each other in a structured and non-threatening way. She expressed the excitement she feels in noting the reduction of referrals since the implementation of restorative practices.

Adapting to diversity. Terrell and Lindsey (2009) stated principals who adapt to diversity assume responsibility for leading the learning about cultural groups different from their own. They examine practices and policies that are discriminatory in nature and act as necessary. All participants in this study discussed, in their participant screening instrument, interviews, and focus group interview, their dedication to hiring with diversity in mind. They spoke of the power
of employing teachers and staff who represent the racial demographics of their student body. Four of the participants shared how their analysis of data revealed the lack of diversity in advanced courses on their campuses, and they have all acted to rectify this inequity. One cited the de-tracking of advanced courses, while others shared how they have been intentional in identifying students of color who have historically been overlooked in the process of enrolling in advanced level courses. One participant discussed her dismay and frustration of noting the lack of access granted to students who receive support through special education. She worked with general education teachers to help them understand the negative impact of student growth when denied access to the general education classes. While she was cognizant of her need to educate her staff on the impact, she did not wait to collaborate with staff before taking action. This, given her self-professed reluctance to dictate action, is proof of her level of resolve and advocacy in providing equitable learning opportunities for her students.

Institutionalizing cultural knowledge. According to R. B. Lindsey et al. (2009), the principal, who institutionalizes cultural knowledge, “models and monitors schoolwide and classroom practices” (p. 132). This principal engages in practices such as analyzing data to understand student needs better. They actively seek ways to provide equitable opportunities on their campuses. One principal in this study shared resistance she experienced in her efforts to engage in more inclusive communication processes. Noting the growing number of Hispanic families enrolling students on her campus, she now translates all school communication in Spanish. Some parents complained and asked to be removed from school communication. Another participant shared how his recognition of educational inequities drives lesson design in the PLCs on his campus. His belief that every student must be engaged in order to feel connected to the courses, the school, and the learning is supported in his practice of requiring
teachers to delve into lesson design. Another participant noted several times the importance of PLCs in removing barriers to educational equity. She was emphatic in her belief that PLCs must be conducted with fidelity. Her consistent presence in classrooms enables her to gauge the culture of her campus and, at times, steers the direction of professional learning that occurs at her school. While every participant cited analysis of data as a means to promote dialogue and invoke change, one principal participant far exceeded the other participants of this study with regard to the extent to which she has engaged in institutionalizing cultural knowledge. She has conducted campus equity audits of race, gender, socioeconomic status, language, and religion. Her audit included library resources related to topics of religion, race, and sexual orientation. The findings of her audit continue to be presented to her staff and drive professional learning on her campus.

The successful implementation of institutionalizing cultural knowledge was evident in three of the participants, as noted in Table 3. It was not surprising to note these three participants engaged in the use of all five of the essential elements. Table 4 shows the other two participants’ use of the five essential elements.

Conclusion

This body of research provides insight into the personal and professional experiences of school principals identified as social justice leaders in pursuit of equitable educational opportunities for students. Their narratives answered the questions regarding how their experiences have strengthened or hindered their leadership toward developing culturally proficient schools. The data gathered in this study offered obstacles they encountered, as well as practices they employed. The personal and professional experiences of these principals reveal
the role of race as an important factor in their lives. They all endured personal identity struggles that served to influence their development as leaders. The abundance of empathy possessed by each of the participants was striking and manifests itself in the leadership qualities and actions of these principal participants. The findings of this research demonstrate that, while principals may care deeply about providing equitable opportunities for students, the interest does not supplement knowledge, skills, experience, and support. In assessing the extent to which the five essential elements of cultural proficiency have been employed by the principal participants, it is clear some principals are further along the continuum than others, as shown in Table 3.

At the point of data collection, Maria demonstrated evidence of assessing culture and adapting to diversity. Doug demonstrated evidence of assessing culture, valuing diversity, managing dynamics of difference, and adapting to diversity. Frances, Jeremy, and Stella demonstrated evidence of all five essential elements. Stella has embedded more evidence of utilization of the five essential elements. Though she is a passionate advocate for social justice, when I remarked how surprised I was that she is so far along, she shared the work she has completed in her current doctoral program.

Through our conversations, it became clear Stella’s doctoral program established the expectations of leaders who realize their inherent responsibility in equity advocacy. More importantly, she has been provided with the tools and knowledge to begin the work of a social justice leader. I believe it is important to note that Maria and Jeremy pointed out they did not have any coursework in their principal preparation program or doctoral program specifically related to educational equity, social justice, or cultural proficiency. This, coupled with the recognition of minimal support they received from the school districts in which they served, highlights the necessity of greater support from school districts and universities.
### Table 3

**Responsibilities of Culturally Proficient School Leaders -- School Site Administrators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Access Culture</th>
<th>Value Diversity</th>
<th>Manage the Dynamics of Difference</th>
<th>Adapt to Diversity</th>
<th>Institutionalize the Cultural Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| School Site Administrators | Assess the culture of the school and articulate the cultural expectations to all who interact there. | • Articulate a culturally proficient vision for the school.  
• Work with educators and staff to establish standards for holding one another accountable for the vision. | • Provide training and support systems for conflict management.  
• Help faculty and staff learn to distinguish between behavioral and cultural differences. | Examine policies and practices for overt and intentional discrimination and change current practices when appropriate. | Model and monitor schoolwide and classroom practices. |
| Lead and Supervise    |                                     |                                                                                  |                                                             |                                                                                     |                                        |
| **Frances**           | Cultural Awareness of Community     | Home Visits                                                                      | Implicit Bias                                               | Hiring for Diversity; Changes to access to general education classes for students who receive special education services. | Translation of written communication to parents in Spanish |
|                       |                                     |                                                                                  |                                                             |                                                                                     |                                        |
| **Jeremy**            | Cultural Awareness of Community     | Student group discussion of needs                                                | Poverty Simulator; Removing barriers for parents afraid of deportation | Hiring for Diversity; Removed contract for advanced level classes                   | Professional Development that addresses inequities |
|                       |                                     |                                                                                  |                                                             |                                                                                     |                                        |
| **Stella**            | Cultural Awareness of Community     | Home Visits                                                                      | Implicit Bias Test; Restorative Practices; DACA email       | Hiring for Diversity; De-tracking classes; Dual Language Program                   | Equity Audits; PLC with fidelity; Extensive and consistent presence in classes |
|                       |                                     |                                                                                  |                                                             |                                                                                     |                                        |
| **Doug**              | Cultural Awareness of Community     | Hiring Committees                                                                | Student contracts for loan to participate in band.          | Hiring for Diversity; Identified and enrolled marginalized students in advanced level courses |                                            |
|                       |                                     |                                                                                  |                                                             |                                                                                     |                                        |
| **Maria**             | Cultural Awareness of Community     |                                                                                  |                                                             | Hiring for Diversity                                                              |                                        |

*Note. Essential Element of Cultural Proficiency. Adapted from Lindsey et al. (2009, p. 132).*
Additionally, colleges and universities are failing educational leaders when their programs offer superficial exposure to equity, social justice, and cultural proficiency. The fidelity of leadership programs requires a more intensive focus on these issues. It is a testament to these participants that they are as far along as they are in their pursuit of cultural proficiency.

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

Though these participants are personally and professionally vested in their growth as social justice leaders, it is important to recognize the limitations when their desire is not met with support. Grogan’s (2014) argument that we cannot simply rely on school leaders’ lived experiences to get them beyond the threshold of ineffective practices is supported in the findings of this research. Universities must scrutinize their educational leadership programs and move beyond that scrutiny and make changes. Furman (2012) called for leadership programs to be explicitly designed to encourage all school leaders to embrace a social justice perspective. I would argue programs must require leaders to embrace a social justice perspective and the programs must equip rising leaders with the knowledge and skills to pursue social justice through the application of tools of cultural proficiency. It would behoove university graduate school programs to increase the course offerings related to equity and increase the rigor of those courses. The work of a school principal as a social justice leader is cumbersome as it is plagued with resistance and lack of understanding. Instead of leaving principals to navigate the treacherous and sometimes unchartered waters proverbially, universities must assume the role of lighthouse in guiding them safely to shore.

The moral impetus to pursue educational equity cannot be separated from the personal and professional experiences of the principal participants. However, this research highlights that
moral impetus must be coupled with the tools to overcome the barriers to equity. This responsibility to provide school leaders with the tools is also assumed by school districts. Like Grogan (2014), I agree we have become so steeped in the argument of being constrained by state and federal policy, we lose sight of the recognition that local school districts have the authority and responsibility of implementing policy and practices that minimize opportunities for inequities to persist. There are opportunities for districts to employ practices that move towards educational equity. In conducting this research study, it quickly became apparent that each of these participants have background experiences that fuel their desire to serve as advocates for students. The degree of empathy each principal participant possesses is profound. Realizing that, I believe school districts would benefit from the creation and implementation of screening instruments that gauge the level of empathy prospective school leaders possess. The level of acquisition of cultural proficiency did vary among the principal participants. I recommend school districts gauge interest and experience in the utilization of culturally proficient practices as part of the interview process. This would prove beneficial in assessing the equity fitness and interest of prospective school leaders.

Because such great support for principals is needed, it is incumbent upon school districts to assume the lead in equipping school leaders in their pursuit of cultural proficiency. R. B. Lindsey et al. (2009) provided this understanding in their table of Responsibilities of Culturally Proficient School Leaders. An adaptation of this table, shown in Table 4, reiterates the necessity of school district leaders to assume their responsibilities. Assumption of this role of district leadership must be manifested in the dedication of personnel at the district level, whose responsibility is to lead school principals in intensive, ongoing training, guidance, and support in the development of culturally proficient practices.
### Table 4

**Responsibilities of Culturally Proficient School Leaders – District Administrators, School Site Administrators, and Teachers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access Culture</th>
<th>Value Diversity</th>
<th>Manage the Dynamics of Difference</th>
<th>Adapt to Diversity</th>
<th>Institutionalize the Cultural Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>District Administrators – Implement Policy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess culture of the district and the administrator’s role in maintaining or changing it</strong></td>
<td>Provide guidelines for culturally proficient practices and establish standards for appraisal</td>
<td>Provide resources for developing and establishing new conflict management strategies, including culturally specific mediation techniques</td>
<td>Assess policies and propose changes when appropriate</td>
<td>Propose and implement culturally proficient policies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Site Administrators – Lead and Supervise</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess the culture of the school and articulate the cultural expectations to all who interact there.</strong></td>
<td>Articulate a culturally proficient vision for the school.</td>
<td>Provide training and support systems for conflict management.</td>
<td>Examine policies and practices for overt and intentional discrimination and change current practices when appropriate.</td>
<td>Model and monitor schoolwide and classroom practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers – Observe and Instruct</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess own culture and its effect on students.</strong></td>
<td>Teach all subjects from a culturally inclusive perspective.</td>
<td>Use conflict as object lessons.</td>
<td>Learn own instructional styles</td>
<td>Teach students appropriate language for asking questions about other people’s cultures and telling other people about theirs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assess the culture of the classroom.</strong></td>
<td>Insist on and model classroom language and behaviors that value differences</td>
<td>Teach students a variety of ways to resolve conflict.</td>
<td>Develop processes to enhance them so that they meet the needs of all students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support students in discovering their own cultural identities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Help students to understand why things are done in a particular way.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Essential Element of Cultural Proficiency. Adapted from Lindsey et al. (2009, p. 132).*
Recommendations for Further Research

As a current school principal and doctoral student, my interest in learning more about social justice leaders who implement culturally proficient practices was piqued at the beginning of my doctoral journey. Admittedly, framing this research study was challenging due to my superficial understanding of social justice leadership and cultural proficiency. However, I gleaned so much from the review of literature and the process and findings of this study. Based on this experience and the findings of this research study, the following recommendations for further research are offered.

1. A longitudinal study on school leaders who have completed university educational leadership programs that place a substantial emphasis on educational equity would prove beneficial and enlightening.

2. A research study of school districts in Texas that currently emphasize culturally proficient leadership would contribute to the current literature.

3. A longitudinal research study on school leaders who completed their dissertations on topics related to social justice leadership in education or culturally proficient school leaders would prove to be valuable in determining if they serve as social justice leaders who engage in culturally proficient practices.

Scholars have a wealth of opportunities to contribute to the current research of culturally proficient social justice leaders. Recognizing that current practices within educational leadership continue to perpetuate the marginalization of students whose cultures predetermine the inequities they experience, there is ample justification for further research of cultural proficient leadership.
APPENDIX A

NOMINATION FORM
Delores and Randall Lindsey (2014) stated:

*Effective school leaders understand and recognize the importance of addressing diversity in all its cultural, linguistic and human forms as assets within the school community, rather than deficits and problems to be solved*

In considering practicing principals with whom you are familiar, please nominate principals you feel embody the ideal as stated above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nominated by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominee:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominee Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominee Address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominee School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominee Phone Number</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reason for recommending this nominee:**

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**COMPLETED BY RESEARCHER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Nominee Contacted:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominee Indicated Interest:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominee Declined Interest:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

PRINCIPAL PARTICIPANT SCREENING INSTRUMENT
Principal Participant Screening Instrument

Please respond to the question below. Please limit your response to one page.

How do you influence the culture of your school in responding to cultural diversity?

Please consider how your leadership reflects the following:

1. How do you assess the culture of your campus and communicate cultural expectations for staff, students, and families?

2. What practices demonstrate that diversity is valued on your campus?

3. How do you manage challenging situations that relate to cultural differences?

4. What practices or policies reveal that the school culture adapts to diversity?

5. How do you ensure that the practices noted in question #4 are being institutionalized?
APPENDIX C

PRINCIPAL SCREENING RUBRIC
Question for Principals:

How do you influence the culture of your school in responding to cultural diversity?

The response must reveal the Five Essential Elements of Cultural Competence. These standards, as explained by Terrell and Lindsey (2009) include:

- **Assessing Cultural Knowledge** - Leading the learning about others’ culture, about how educators and the school as a whole react to others’ culture, and what you need to do to be effective in cross-cultured situations. Also, leading for learning about the school and its grade levels and departments as cultural entities.

- **Valuing Diversity** - Creating informal and formal decision-making groups inclusive of people whose viewpoints and experiences are different from yours and the dominant group at the school, and that will enrich conversations, decision making, and problem solving.

- **Managing the Dynamics of Difference** - Modeling problem solving and conflict resolution strategies as a natural and normal process within the organizational culture of the schools and the cultural contexts of the communities of your school.

- **Adapting to Diversity** - Being the lead-learner at your school about cultural groups different from your own and the ability to use others’ cultural experiences and backgrounds in all school settings.

- **Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge** - Making learning about cultural groups and their experiences and perspectives an integral part of the school’s professional development.
APPENDIX D

CULTURAL PROFICIENCY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Note: I will begin the interview by thanking the interviewee for their time and sharing about myself. I will provide the interviewee with the purpose of the study, which is exploring how your personal and professional experiences have influenced your leadership and how your leadership encourages culturally proficient schools. I will reassure the participants that each question posed is designed to illicit discussion pertinent to the research questions guiding this study.

An explanation will be provided regarding the audio-recording of the interview and that responses will be strictly confidential. They will also be informed that if there is something they would like to say off audio-recording, I will oblige by stopping the recording midstream for their commentary. I will also inform the interviewees that once the interviews have been transcribed, I may follow up with a short phone conversation, seeking clarity if needed. This will also afford the interviewees an opportunity to extend on a discussion point. I will reassure the interviewees that the objective is to capture their responses as they intended.
1. Describe your career path to date. (background)
   a. How long have you served as a school principal?
   b. How long have you been the principal at your current campus?
2. Please describe your leadership style. (indirectly relates to research question 2)
3. Please describe the extent to which your principal preparation program increased your knowledge of how to meet the needs of a culturally diverse students? (research questions 2). **Probes:** How would you characterize the effectiveness of the preparation? Describe professional learning at the school district level that has assisted in your understanding of serving culturally diverse students? (research question 2) **Probe:** How would you characterize the effectiveness of training(s)?
4. Please describe a time when you felt you were advantaged due to an aspect of your cultural identity (examples include age, gender, race, religion, sexual identity, sexual orientation, ability, socioeconomic background). (research questions 1 and 2) **Probes:** What, if any, impact did this recognition have on you? To what extent do you believe this experience(s) has shaped you as a school leader?
5. Please describe a time when you felt that you were marginalized due to an aspect of your cultural identity (examples include age, gender, race, religion, sexual identity, sexual orientation, ability, socioeconomic background). (research questions 1 and 2) **Probes:** What, if any, impact did this recognition have on you? To what extent do you believe this experience(s) has shaped you as a school leader?
6. Please describe a time when you recognized that a staff member was culturally insensitive to students, colleagues, and/or parents. (research question 2) **Probe:** How did you respond to the situation?
7. What are some of the challenges you encounter in meeting the needs of diverse students? (research question 2) **Probes:** How do you respond to these challenges? How do you engage the school community (students, staff, and parents) in meeting the needs of diverse students? How do district leaders support you in these challenges?

8. What assets do culturally diverse students bring to the learning environment? (research question 2) **Probe:** Please describe an example of how sharing of culture is encouraged?

9. Please discuss the influence that your own “cultural” story has on your ability to create a school environment that advocates for diverse student populations. (research questions 1 and 2)

10. Please describe how you build relationships of trust with students and staff. (research question 2)

11. Please describe the impact cultural diversity has on the instructional materials used on your campus. (research question 2)

12. Discuss how you lead teachers in the development of curriculum, assessment, and instruction that is culturally relevant. (research question 2)

13. Please share the academic supports you provide in meeting the needs of diverse students. (research question 2)

14. Please describe the behavioral supports you provide in meeting the needs of diverse students? (research question 2)
Research Questions

Cross-references of interview questions with the research questions:

How do the experiences of socially just leaders strengthen or hinder their leadership toward developing culturally proficient schools?

1. How have the personal experiences of socially just leaders strengthened or hindered their development of more culturally proficient schools?

2. How have the professional experiences of socially just leaders strengthened or hindered their ability to be socially just leaders?

Note: I will conclude the interview by extending my appreciation to the participant for his/her time and valuable input.
APPENDIX E

CULTURAL PROFICIENCY FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL
Note: I will begin the interview by thanking the focus group for their time and sharing about myself. I will provide the focus group with the purpose of the study, which is exploring how your personal and professional experiences have influenced your leadership and how your leadership encourages advocacy for all cultures. I will reassure the participants that each question posed is designed to illicit discussion pertinent to the research questions guiding this study.

I will provide time for introductions, as well as stressing the confidential nature of this focus group interview. I will remind the participants that they have been chosen to participate because of their commitment to the intentional process of advocating for all cultures. I will reassure the participants that each question posed is designed to illicit discussion pertinent to the research questions guiding this study.

An explanation will be provided regarding the audio-recording of the focus group interview and that responses will be strictly confidential. Participants will also be informed that if there is something they would like to say off audio-recording, I will oblige by stopping the recording midstream for their commentary. I will remind the participants that the voice of each participant is vital to the overall richness of the focus group interview. Participants will be encouraged to contribute to the discussion without judgement of one another and what is shared.

Focus Group Questions

1. Please describe your role in the district. (Question 1)

2. Please describe the strengths and challenges at your campus. With teachers? With students? With parents? (Question 2)

3. Describe an instance when you were either marginalized or you witnessed the marginalization of another person or group. (Question 1 and 2) Probe: How did you respond in action or in feeling?
4. Have you encountered acts of marginalization on your campus? How do you facilitate crucial conversations in these types of situations? (Question 2)

5. What resistance or barriers you have encountered when trying to advocate for those who are marginalized? (Question 2) Probe: How have you responded to these barriers?

6. How does your school district support your advocacy efforts? (Question 2) Probe: Are there external supports? (Question 1) If so, what are they?

7. To what extent do you believe accountability has impacted your pursuit of advocacy efforts? (Question 2)

8. How does your campus reflect acceptance of various cultures? (Question 3)

9. If your campus utilizes the Professional Learning Communities model, to what extent is your PLC used to facilitate dialogue about serving diverse student populations? (Question 2)

10. Describe your experience in raising expectations for students who are traditionally underserved in advanced academic opportunities such as AP, GT, IB courses. (Question 2)

11. How do you support your ELL learners? (Question 2)

12. How do you foster a safe learning environment for LGBT students? (Question 2)

Research Questions

Cross-references of interview questions with the research questions:

How do the experiences of socially just leaders strengthen or hinder their leadership toward developing culturally proficient schools?

1. How have the personal experiences of socially just leaders strengthened or hindered their development of more culturally proficient schools?
2. How have the professional experiences of socially just leaders strengthened or hindered their ability to be socially just leaders?

Note: I will conclude the interview by extending my appreciation to the participants for their time and valuable input.
APPENDIX F

CULTURAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY
Purpose: Terrell and Lindsey (2009) remind us that cultural proficiency is an *inside-out* process; it’s who we are. As you reflect on your own life experiences, consider your family background, your race/ethnicity, gender, language, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic background and ability. Recognizing that our identity shapes our beliefs, values, and experiences, it is important to reflect on those aspects of our culture and background. For this research study, I hope to gain insight into your journey of cultural identity. I recognize this is a highly personal exercise. Please note that there is no judgement of your experiences or critique of your expression in writing.

Description of assignment: Write an essay (2-4 pages) that serves as a journey of self-discovery. You may consider an isolated event that was shaped by one or more aspects of your social identity or generally focus on one or more aspects of your cultural/social identity. Examples include:

- What it was like growing up in the south as a young African American male
- Remembering the first time you recognized race as a privilege or obstacle
- Recognizing as a woman, that you feel inherently at risk of physical harm

This autobiography can also be a free-flowing recollection of the development of your own racial and cultural identity.
APPENDIX G

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

INFORMED CONSENT NOTICE
Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

**Title of Study:** A Qualitative Study on Socially Just Principals’ Pursuit of Cultural Proficiency

**Student Investigator:** Beth Kelly, University of North Texas (UNT), Department of Educational Leadership.

**Supervising Investigator:** Dr. Miriam Ezzani

**Purpose of the Study:** You are being asked to participate in a research study, which involves exploring how your personal and professional experiences have influenced your leadership and how your leadership encourages culturally proficient schools.

**Study Procedures:** You will be asked to participate in an interview about your experiences and discuss your leadership as it applies to the pursuit of cultural proficiency.

- There will be audio recordings of the interviews and the focus group interview.
- The interviews and focus group interview will be transcribed by Beth Kelly, the student investigator.
- Transcriptions will be coded by utilizing NVivo software to assist in identifying themes.
- The themes will be used to report out findings and recommendations and will be reported in chapters four and five of the dissertation.
- Records will be maintained on the UNT campus for three years past the end of the study. Audio tapes will be erased and destroyed. Any records that are paper will be shredded.
- Follow-up questions may include a phone interview, which will not exceed 30 minutes; the focus-group interview will be a minimum of 60 minutes; and the composition of the Cultural Autobiography will take between 1-2 hours for each participant. The participants will write the Cultural Autobiography on their own, as their time allows.
- The interview will take 60 minutes. Participants may withdraw at any time from the study.

**Foreseeable Risks:** No foreseeable risks are involved in this study.

**Benefits to the Subjects or Others:** This study is not expected to be of any direct benefit to you; but we hope to learn more about the experiences, characteristics, beliefs and actions of socially just school leaders towards the pursuit of culturally proficient schools. Districts can guide their
hiring practices through the creation and utilization of a list of characteristics commonly ascribed to culturally proficient school leaders. Additionally, recognition of these characteristics allows for personal and professional cultivation which may prove valuable to the individual, district, and school. Furthermore, this research will enable the design of more purposeful professional development opportunities for educational leaders in meeting the needs of a culturally diverse student body.

**Compensation for Participants:** You will not receive compensation for your participation.

**Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records:** The confidentiality of your individual information will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study. Names of participants and school will not be used; pseudonyms will be assigned to protect identities. All records and information will be kept on a remote storage device and locked in the office of the Supervising Investigator. As per federal regulations, the research participants’ information will be maintained for three years and then will be deleted.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Beth Kelly at bethkellydukefan@gmail.com and Dr. Miriam Ezzani at miriam.ezzani@unt.edu.

**Review for the Protection of Participants:** This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-4643 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

**Research Participants’ Rights:**

Your participation in the survey confirms that you have read all of the above and that you agree to all of the following:
• Beth Kelly has explained the study to you and you have had an opportunity to contact her with any questions about the study. You have been informed of the possible benefits and the potential risks of the study.

• You understand that you do not have to take part in this study, and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.

• You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.

• You understand your rights as a research participant and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

• You understand you may print a copy of this form for your records.

______________________________             __________
Signature of Participant      Date

For the Student Investigator or Designee:

I certify that I have reviewed the contents of this form with the subject signing above. I have explained the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study. It is my opinion that the participant understood the explanation.

______________________________                    __________
Signature of Student Investigator    Date
REFERENCES


Clark, M. C., & Sharf, B. F. (2007). The dark side of truth(s) ethical dilemmas in researching the personal. Qualitative Inquiry, 13(3), 399-416.


