

Increasing Equity, Access, and Inclusion through Organizational Change: A Study of Implementation and Experiences Surrounding a School District's Journey Towards Culturally Proficient Educational Practice

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This qualitative case study investigated the implementation and experiences of access and equity work in a suburban, public K-12 school district in the Midwest United States. While the literature regarding educational leadership, student educational gaps, and school change is prolific, inequities in policy and practice perpetuate predictable failure for some of our nation's youth. Using the lens of the Cultural Proficiency Framework, this study aimed to address the research questions by examining (1) the educational leader's role in school change; (2) policies and practices used in the school district; (3) the ways in which implementation of the Cultural Proficiency Framework influenced change; and (4) challenges educational leaders face during the work of Cultural Proficiency. The findings of the study revealed consistency among three emergent themes for successful culturally proficient practice and policy implementation including outcomes from professional learning communities, diverse family and community involvement, and continuous school improvement towards student achievement. Implications of this study suggest application of the Four Tools of Cultural Proficiency with contextual usage of the emergent themes for leading organizational change towards increased equity, access, and inclusion.

Keywords: educational leadership, equity, cultural proficiency, organizational change, family and community engagement, professional learning communities, school improvement

For decades, educational leadership has served as a catalyst for reform efforts across education (Fullan, 2016; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Murphy & Datnow, 2003; Tucker, 2019). Since the *Coleman Report* (1966) was published, access, opportunity, and achievement gaps between and among students of diverse racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds, have been the focus of research and goals of educational reform efforts across the United States (Apple & Beane, 1995; Fullan, 2000; Jencks, 1972; Sarason, 1996). While the roles of educational leaders have undergone fundamental change with increased focus on instruction and learning (Cotton, 2003; Glatthorn, 2000; Smith and Andrews, 1989), it is important to note that culturally proficient educational leaders have led the way through transformative leadership in standing firm against oppressive educational systems by fighting for those students who have historically been underserved due to their racial and ethnic identity and/or social class (Terrell, Terrell, Lindsey, & Lindsey, 2018). The increasing concern regarding inequitable student outcomes, that presage predictable failure for these students, have led educational leaders across the country and those responsible for leadership preparation programs to seek knowledge and skills related to developing equitable policies and practices within their districts, schools, and classrooms.

Research related to evidence-based practice is necessary for our society to disrupt access and educational gap trends and empower leaders to implement and sustain equity work into the everyday practices of their districts and schools. Many, like Eaveston School District leaders, are implementing the equity framework of *Cultural Proficiency* to address inequities found in their service to diverse populations, improve school effectiveness, and fulfill the moral imperative of education (Fullan, 2003; Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, Terrell, & Lindsey, 2019).

Conceptual Framework

Miles and Huberman (1994) described a conceptual framework as a tool for explaining the main concepts studied in research including key factors, constructs, and variables. The conceptual framework used in this qualitative case study sought to describe the relationship between cultural diversity, economics, power, policy, pedagogy, school improvement, and student achievement outcomes. The research analysis integrates these constructs with the equity framework of Cultural Proficiency (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Issacs, 1989).

The *Cultural Proficiency Framework* is an interrelated set of four tools that assist educational leaders in performing tasks such as developing and implementing school board policies, allocating resources, using assessment data, delivering curriculum and instruction, interacting with parents and community members, and planning and delivering professional development (Lindsey et al., 2019). One tool, *the Barriers to Cultural Proficiency*, leads educators to understand how to overcome resistance to change in schools. Another tool, *the Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency*, guides the development and implication of positive personal values and organizational practices and policies to counter the systemic nature of the barriers. *The Cultural Proficiency Continuum* is a third tool comprised of six points, three negative and three positive, that depict the range of unhealthy to healthy practices and policies. In using the Continuum and the fourth tool, *the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency*, educators identify practices and policies that produce equitable outcomes and those in areas of needed improvement. Ethical decisions and intentional actions lead to organizational change (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019).

As educational leaders consider systemic, transformative organizational change to improve outcomes and create effective schools (Lezotte & Synder, 2011; Sergiovanni, 1989), increase equity, and serve all, they must keep constant vigilance of self in their roles as change agents (Gay, 2000; Howard 2006; Nelson & Guerra, 2014). The starting point for long-term, systemic change does not begin with changing the system or others around us. It is commenced by change within ourselves (Dilts, 1990; Fullan, 1997; Gardner, 2004; Lindsey et al., 2019).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the implementation and experiences of cultural proficiency work in a suburban, public K-12 school district in the Midwest United States. The following research questions were used as a guide to fulfill the objectives of this study:

1. How do educational leaders report/describe their role in school change for culturally proficient practice?
2. What policies and practices are used in the school district related to culturally proficient practice?
3. In what ways do the school district's implementation and experiences influence changes regarding culturally proficient practice to serve all students?
4. What challenges do educational leaders face during the work of cultural proficiency?

Review of Related Literature

The foundations of education are rooted in a belief that educated children become better citizens. Although diversity holds great importance in democracy, too many schools in this country continue with systems, policies, and practices that largely reflect the values, behaviors, and aspirations of the most powerful groups (Apple & Beane, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1995; Ravitch, 1985; Sarason, 1990). Systemic oppression, policy impacts on marginalized students, and privilege and entitlement limit educational outcomes and the reality of access and equity for all (Lindsey, Karns, & Myatt, 2010). The continuous oppression of students of diverse race, ethnicity, and social class has perpetuated inequities and educational performance deficits (Banks & Banks, 1995; Friere, 1970; Hammond, 2015; Howard, 2006; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera, 2008).

Recently, scholars indicated culturally proficient educational leaders are advocates for learning with the intent to meet the needs of all students using an inside-out process. With the moral imperative, knowledge, and skills, effective educators examine their values, behaviors, and beliefs, as well as their organization's policies and practices (Lindsey et al., 2019). Thus, professional learning focusing on Cultural Proficiency is essential for educational leaders dedicated to serving all students.

The Importance of Educational Leadership in Student Achievement

Research presents a correlation between school leadership and student achievement (Byrk & Schneider, 2002; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Fullan (2003) posited the moral imperative of educational leadership is for leaders to introduce new elements into the setting, intended to influence behavior for the better, all while

managing different interests, economic situations, cultural origins, religions, ethnicities, and races. Leaders are responsible for fostering social unity in our society of increasingly diverse students, families, and educators. Concurrently, leaders must maintain focus on educational reform through continuous improvement efforts so all children of our nation are afforded the intended outcomes of public school. The correlates of effective school research (Edmonds & Frederiksen, 1978) identified the primary aim of public schools to reach the intended outcomes as teaching and learning (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). Educational leaders' focus on teaching and learning is essential.

The moral imperative requires collective efficacy; combined efforts for making a difference in the lives of students, building relationships, and monitoring one's responsibility and contributions in closing educational gaps. Research findings suggest collective efficacy has strong correlative effects on student achievement (Donahoo, 2016; Eells, 2011; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004; Hattie, 2012). Defined by Bandura (1997) as "a group's shared belief in its conjoint capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment," (p. 477) collective efficacy influences the personal culture, how one thinks and behaves, and the school culture, which indirectly impacts student achievement (Donahoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2018). Educational leaders play an integral role in building the collective efficacy. Fullan suggested, the moral imperative involves leading cultural change that activates passions and commitments of stakeholders, such as teachers and parents, to improve the learning of all students, including closing the achievement gap (2001; 2003).

Building relationships is another critical factor in student achievement and school success (Milner IV, 2013). Educational leaders are expected to take risks toward change by assessing cultural knowledge and learning from each other, thus becoming more aware of the personal lives and interests of teachers, staff, students, and their families (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Wagner & Kegan, 2006). In a meta-analysis, Marzano et al. (2005) identified relationships as a part of school leadership impacting the effectiveness of many other tasks and responsibilities completed at the school. The study identified behaviors and characteristics applicable to relationships between administrators, teachers, and their students and families, all of which influence school effectiveness and student achievement.

Because of the strong correlation between educational leadership and student achievement, educators who monitor their own responsibility and contributions in closing the educational gaps are essential. While the research on the effect size of school and environmental factors, as they relate to student achievement is ongoing, it is greatly debated because there is not a definitive answer for closing the educational gaps. Barton and Coley (2009) and Murphy (2009) have written extensively about educational gaps and declared the solution is complex and cannot be managed by one focused effort. However, school leaders can contribute by ensuring teaching is disproportionately advantaging students on the lower end of the educational gaps. Race and socioeconomic status are critical issues, and equitable learning outcomes can be actualized as leaders accept responsibility for performance and development of themselves, teachers' performance, and students' achievement and growth (Murphy, 2009). Overall, school leaders are responsible for promoting a collaborative culture and monitoring the collective impact of teaching on student achievement (Donahoo et al., 2018; Lezotte & Snyder, 2011).

Educational Leaders and Organizational Change towards Continuous Improvement

The educational system must change in one way or another, backwards to intellectual and moral standards of pre-scientific age, or forward to the development of the possibilities of growing and expanding experience (Dewey, 1938). Educational leaders acknowledge change is inevitable and necessary for improvement in any school system. Each year school leaders complete school improvement plans, providing a roadmap with goals of increasing student achievement; thus, changing the organization. While well-planned initiatives are paramount, the process of involving stakeholders at the district and building levels, as well as families and community members, is equally valuable in developing a shared meaning in the continuous improvement process (Epstein, 2019; Lezotte & Snyder, 2011; Marks & Pinty, 2003). Fullan (2016) further described stakeholder involvement in the change process as the shaping and reshaping of good ideas, while building capacity and ownership among participants.

Moreover, Dilt's model of *nested levels of learning* provides further awareness of the importance of professional learning and collaboration necessary for organizational change and gains in student achievement. The five levels of organizational change identified by Dilt (1990) are: (a) identity, b) belief system, (c) capabilities, (d) behaviors, and (e) environment. It is vital educational leaders understand change begins with identity, the individual's and/or group's sense of self, and one's own lived experiences, as Dewey noted.

Educational Leaders and Culture, Race, and Poverty in Student Achievement

Research on the topic of culture presents ideas and concepts related to race, ethnicity, social class, language, ability, gender, age, and religion. In fact, culture has broadly been defined by a person's identity constructed of the above mentioned concepts, as well as one's beliefs, norms, customs, traditions, values, and behaviors (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Fraise & Brooks, 2015). Culture plays an integral part in our society, thus impacting interactions between school leaders, teachers, students, and family members, and consequently, student achievement in all educational settings. Stakeholders in an organization enter into a setting with their individual and shared history, beliefs, values, and patterns of behavior. These differences give rise to cultural-based conflicts in which the educators of the institution respond based upon their experiences, beliefs, and values. Often times, those responses are inadequate in that they unknowingly and unwittingly perpetuate a predictable failure for students who are culturally different from the dominant group (Lindsey et al., 2019). As Murphy (2009) suggested, educational leaders focused on increasing student achievement and closing educational gaps are attentive to racial and socioeconomic status identities of the students the organization serves.

Race. Educational opportunity has been inequitable throughout the history of the United States. For the past century and a quarter, our country's courts and legislators, at all levels, have wrestled with educational equity issues in decisions such as *Plessy v. Ferguson*, *Mendez vs. Westminster*, and *Brown v. Board of Education*. While the 1960's and decades since have brought integration movements and federal government-led reform efforts such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the educational inequities and racial segregation in schools persist (Howard, 2010; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Poverty. Socioeconomic status is a distinct demographic group that intersects with other cultural identifications such as race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. Often students living in poverty have different experiences in the world related to limited

access to experiences and opportunities afforded to many of their school-age peers. Kimberle Crenshaw (2016) coined the term *Intersectionality* by the way in which individuals see where power comes, collides, interlocks, and intersects. While Crenshaw directly discerned interlocking social identifiers of race and gender, it is important to note how interlocking systems of power impact historically marginalized groups and focus on the ideology of social identifiers, namely race and social class. Deficit thinking surrounding poverty can give way to asset-based thinking and action when educators examine their own assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors, focus on relationships, and model resilience and promotion of self in the context of society (Lindsey, Karns & Myatt, 2010).

The aforementioned literature review provided a summary of comprehensive consideration of the literature relative to the object of study. Three themes were included within the review of literature: (a) educational leadership and student achievement, (b) educational leadership and organizational change towards continuous improvement, and (c) educational leadership and culture, race, and social class in student achievement. The purpose of this study and research questions were designed to fill the gaps in literature around outcomes related to implementation and experiences surrounding a school district's journey towards culturally proficient educational practice and student achievement. While extensive literature exists regarding educational leadership, student achievement, and organizational change for school reform, there is little evidence of practical application for utilizing an equity framework at the school district level, namely the Cultural Proficiency Framework, to create organizational change and increase student achievement.

Research Methodology and Design

A descriptive case study was employed in order to investigate the implementation and experiences of Cultural Proficiency work in a suburban, public K-12 school district in the Midwest United States. Merriam (2001) described case study as a design “employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (p.19). The qualitative study included data collection and analysis of interviews with district stakeholders, who hold leadership roles, and are involved in the work of Cultural Proficiency, observations of meetings and professional learning events related to Cultural Proficiency, and associated district documents. Themes and insights emerging from case study data collection and analysis can directly influence policy, practice, and future research for school organizations.

Case Description

With the intent to investigate the implementation and experiences of cultural proficiency work, Eaveston School District, pseudonymous for a suburban, public K-12 school district in the Midwest United States, was selected according to the methodology of the study. Merriam (2001) differentiated case studies from other types of qualitative research in that they present rich descriptions and analyses of a single, bounded system. The rationale for selecting this unique, bounded system to address the research questions includes (a) the school district's history of change among student demographics in regards to race and social class, and its increase in student achievement over the last two decades; (b) the school district's implementation of professional learning using the Cultural Proficiency Framework at the district and building levels; (c) the school district's high level of cultural, racial/ethnic, and social class diversity; and (d) its proximity to a

metropolitan city with racial and social class implications on governmental, political, and educational contexts.

Eveston School District, established in 1879, is “A Place to Live, Learn, and Grow.” With almost 6,000 students, Eveston School District has one high school, two middle schools, one traditional school (PreK-8), 5 elementary schools, as well as preschool and alternative education settings (6-12). Situated in a metropolitan county of more than one million people, Eveston School District encompasses 27 square miles and stands among many businesses, factories, casinos, and an international airport, receiving approximately 90% of funds from local sources. With 46% white, 34% African-American/black, 11% Hispanic, 5% multi-racial, and 4% Asian, the student population represents 78 different countries, 48 languages, and is rated the most diverse school district in the state. With intersectionality at the heart of the access, opportunity, and achievement gaps, it is important to note 49% of Eveston School District’s students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, hence, living at or below the United States defined poverty line.

The mission statement, “That all will learn to become responsible citizens in a nurturing environment where diversity means strength, knowledge means freedom, and commitment means success,” has proven successful despite the rise of challenges from major geographical and economic changes to the school district in the last two decades. Increased diversity in culture, race, social class, and mobility provided context for challenges, but through adaptive, transformational, and culturally proficient leadership, the district has defined diversity as a contribution to the values and assets of the school district. Gains in the district’s performance standards and indicators including state achievement tests, college entry exams (i.e. ACT, SAT), completion of advanced courses, college placement, graduation rates, attendance rates, and subgroup achievement, have led to Eveston School District being recognized as the No. 6 best school district in the state and by *U.S. News and World Report* as a *Best High School in the U.S.*

Population and Sample

The population for this case study research consisted of two groups. The primary population included 55 stakeholders in Eveston School District, who serve as members on the district Cultural Proficiency Committee. The term *leader*, used throughout this study, refers to district stakeholders who serve in any traditional or non-traditional leadership role. The population and sampling of these leaders do not solely include administrators, but rather stakeholders that are leading the efforts in the work of Cultural Proficiency. These stakeholders, including but not limited to teachers, building and district administrators, staff, parents, and community members, participated in quarterly, full-day professional learning events during the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years. The second population included 70 middle school teachers and administrators, who engaged in bi-monthly professional learning events related to Cultural Proficiency in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years.

The sampling of this study was from the population, a total of 72 participants. In qualitative studies, a researcher uses purposeful sampling to investigate with the intent of maximizing findings and learning (Merriam, 2009). The researcher conducted interviews with 14 participants who volunteered. The participants included representatives from the population groups: building and district office administrators, teachers at all school levels, and parents with diversity among race/ethnicity and gender.

Instrumentation

The researcher developed three instruments and utilized them to collect data in this study: (a) an interview protocol; (b) an observation guide; and (c) a document retrieval form. An interview protocol, with 10 questions, was developed and used to ask questions and record answers during the qualitative interviews (Creswell, 2014). The researcher audiotaped the interviews for transcribing, coding, and analysis. Additionally, the researcher developed an observation guide to collect data during cultural proficiency professional learning events at the district and building levels. The observation guide included a single page with a dividing line down the middle to separate descriptive notes from reflective notes (Merriam, 2009). Similar to the observation guide, the third instrument used during the case study included a document retrieval form to mine data from various documents such as policies, handbooks, online materials, and brochures.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection in qualitative research is a complex research process that includes various steps to ensure reliability, validity, and ethical considerations. It includes gaining permissions, having a reliable sampling strategy, developing means of recording information, and storing the data (Creswell, 2013). The data collection phase of this case study was conducted as a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering information to answer the research questions. According to Merriam (2009), data collection in case study research usually involves three strategies: interviewing, observing, and analyzing documents. During a one-year data collection process, the researcher's purposeful selection of data led to rich, descriptive findings around the conceptual framework, purpose, and research questions of the case study. Data was stored electronically, organized, and protected.

The final step in completing this case study was to analyze and interpret the collected data to answer the research questions and draw conclusions. Creswell (2014) described analysis as preparing and organizing the data, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes. An abundance of data and correlative themes were produced from the case study, thus requiring a triangulation of the data to validate the findings. The researcher triangulated the themes from the three sources of data to develop validity in the conclusions and implications for the field.

Findings and Analysis

The findings of this qualitative study are organized by research question. Table 1 summarizes the themes that emerged from vivo coding and triangulation of the three data sources. The themes are presented in detail throughout the analysis. Educational leaders and educational leadership professors can utilize the concepts presented through these themes to promote equity, access, and inclusion work in their schools, organizations, and institutions by utilizing the Cultural Proficiency Framework.

Table 1

Research Questions' Relationship to Themes

Research Questions	Themes
(1) How do educational leaders report/describe their role in school change for culturally proficient practice?	Involvement, Collaboration, Interaction, Communication, Inquiry, Self-Focus, Role Model, Vision and Mission, Growth and Improvement
(2) What policies and practices are used in the school district related to culturally proficient practice?	Professional Learning, Innovative Strategies, Programs, Communication, Family/Community Involvement, Continuous Improvement, Diversity, Student Achievement
(3) In what ways do the school district's implementation and experiences influence changes regarding culturally proficient practice to serve all students?	Professional Learning Communities, Action, Student Achievement, Excellence, Individual Students, High Expectations, Professional Development, Family/Community Involvement, Decision Making
(4) What challenges do educational leaders face during the work of Cultural Proficiency?	Barriers (Resistance, Unawareness), Time and Resources, Building Site-Specific Capacity

Research Question 1

The first research question explored educational leaders' perceptions of their own roles in school change related to culturally proficient educational practice. The emergent themes include: (a) being present and involved in the work; (b) collaborating, interacting, and communicating; (c) serving as a role model by helping and supporting others on the journey; and (d) focusing on the vision and mission of the school for continuous growth and improvement.

Being present and involved in the work. Educational leaders can have a vision of a culturally proficient school or district, but without intentional actions to ensure a presence and involvement in the work, there is little change or measurable progress. In the case of Eaveston School District, leaders have taken a stance on the importance of being present and involved in equity work using the Tools of Cultural Proficiency for building an organization of equity and excellence for its diverse student population. The Assistant Superintendent for Learning and Teaching, who has been involved extensively with the Cultural Proficiency Committee, described her role:

It's my job to work collaboratively with various components that we have in the teaching and learning department to find out what is it we can do to support administrators and teachers who ultimately support all of our learners. I always feel like it's important for me to be as involved as I can in learning, growing, and developing myself because if I can't talk the talk and understand the equity work using the Tools of Cultural Proficiency, then how can I support it? It's important that I'm there with them learning, especially on topics that maybe I'm not as proficient in myself.

Eaveston School District takes pride in its family involvement. Valuing diversity is essential to the Cultural Proficiency Committee's desired equity outcomes and goals in guiding Eaveston to achieve its vision and mission. One school's PTO President commented about his involvement regarding the vision of serving all students.

My role is being as active in the work as possible: from the PTO, to my children's academic and extracurricular activities, to the Cultural Proficiency Committee. My general practice in helping any cultural diversity situation is to be present because I feel people lack experience. This is what helps to build really true cross-cultural proficiency. It's an academic process of understanding history, but personal interaction, and actually, presence, is probably where people become most proficient. Being an ethnic minority, I have life experience that isn't necessarily understood by the majority culture, so just being present and being active is a way I feel I can participate.

Those who are present and involved in the work in Eaveston embody the personal nature of the inside-out approach of transformative change. By focusing on core values, they are better able to identify personal and institutional barriers to access and achievement that have perpetuated the inequitable outcomes for many students of color and those living in poverty.

Collaborating, interacting, and communicating. Eaveston School District educators approach the work of Cultural Proficiency with a mentality of "We're in this together." Cultural Proficiency Committee members rely on the Essential Elements for continuous planning and growth towards organizational change for the district. Collaboration and communication are key for interactions that work to promote equitable outcomes for all students of Eaveston. District leaders, including the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and executive directors have noted the collaborative relationships and progress with the Cultural Proficiency Committee. An executive director commented:

I am very impressed regarding the facilitation of the Cultural Proficiency training. I have observed people's willingness to open up and share their experiences and be willing to have some tough conversations. The district is moving forward with having those tough conversations and wanting to find ways to take that work and expand it to all.

District administrators acknowledge there is a need to move forward with the collaborations and involve all educators and employees in the district; while at the same time, they are trying to balance the varying perspectives and points along individuals' cultural proficiency journeys, which are embodied by the faculty and staff at Eaveston School District. Cultural Proficiency Committee members agree this work be done with urgency and by all employees of the district, but they also acknowledge the challenges present in planning for and sustaining the work in the upcoming years. An executive director reflected, "We have to respect the balance of inviting people in and not forcing it on people all at the same time, which could actually deteriorate the work being done by people who are passionate about it."

One special education teacher, who serves on the district's Cultural Proficiency Committee, relies on collaboration and communication to increase her awareness and understanding of individuals with differing cultures from her own:

I try to do an even better job of communication in my own work: trying to observe more; trying to learn more; trying to have more conversations with people about difficult issues for me. Some topics are not easy to talk about, and I've had to educate myself on some aspects of culture, thus assessing cultural knowledge. Leaders need to be aware of the fact that what something means in one culture, might not mean the same thing in another culture. Really, we just need to talk with people in a way that we can start to see into somebody else's experience and perspective a little better.

The Board of Education and district officials in Eaveston are committed to providing resources to ensure educators in all departments and across buildings are provided opportunities to collaborate around the equity work. These collaboration efforts are focused on communication through

reflection and dialogue, which allow stakeholders to assess their cultural knowledge and move towards transformative change in practice.

Serving as a role model by helping and supporting others on the journey. Change leadership and learning requires modeling. Administrators and teachers in Eaveston School District, who are most involved in the equity and access work, realize their role in modeling culturally proficient educational behaviors and practices, while supporting others on the journey. An elementary principal described her role:

I want to be a role model in the Cultural Proficiency work, I want to be that individual that is walking the talk, and my staff, students, families, and community members are able to see that we don't just go around saying, 'Diversity is our strength.' Honestly, I believe I want to show growth towards cultural proficiency in everything I do, in everything I say, every single day. A teacher at Eaveston believes she has to model continuous learning around culture, diversity, equity, and access:

I just try to keep learning and talk with people in a way that we can start to see into others' experiences and perspectives a little better. One of the most difficult challenges in this work is the realization that everyone is on a journey of Cultural Proficiency, some much further along on the Continuum than others. I serve as a role model by being a reminder to all that we are all at different points on the Continuum of Cultural Proficiency. My responsibility is to be calm and effective in conversations with others. Serving as a role model and supporting others on their journeys is vital for building the critical mass in Eaveston School District. We need to be cognizant that some staff members are not as comfortable with certain conversations related to culture as others. We have to find a way to try to make them feel comfortable. This work is urgent.

Educational leaders in Eaveston have a defined sense of self, others, and the ability to be supportive by relieving others from being forced to change by modeling behaviors that breakdown the barriers for underserved populations. They model strategies for managing the dynamics of difference and resolving conflict by listening, learning, and changing the way things are done.

Focusing on vision and mission for continuous growth and improvement. Historically, Eaveston School District stakeholders have experienced what many tend to find true about continuous improvement efforts for closing access and achievement gaps. Frustration and anger have followed some sluggish, slow, delayed, and disjointed efforts; however, the Cultural Proficiency Committee keeps the vision and mission at the forefront of goal setting and action planning. Being in the top 1% of diverse school districts in the state, Eaveston School District administrators and teachers focus efforts on valuing diversity through the mission. A teacher, who serves on the district's Cultural Proficiency Committee, discussed the urgency of relying on the mission of the school district:

What do we do next? We can take something (cultural proficiency training) that has been challenging and insightful and make it work without being overly simplistic or reductionist, or doctrinaire to the point of alienating people instead of inviting them to reconsider some of their assumptions. We go back to our mission and our sense of really trying to understand students as they intersect and collaborate with others of differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds and identities.

While it is difficult to find a school district who doesn't express value towards "educating all," educators in Eaveston, deeply committed to removing barriers for children of color and/or those living with socioeconomic disparities, have focused on one question: *Do the behaviors of*

individuals and the policies and procedures implemented, executed, or enforced reflect the values and mission of Eaveston School District?

Research Question 2

The second research question was used to explore the practices and policies used in the school district related to culturally proficient educational practice. In service of answering this research question, the emergent themes have been divided into policy and practice. The findings under policy cover themes related to student achievement, diversity, high expectations, continuous improvement and needs-based programming. Similarly, the findings under practice are divided into three themes related to innovative strategies and programs, professional learning, and communication and collective family and community involvement.

School board policies to support cultural proficiency. Eaveston School District, like many public school districts, is guided by policies written by school district stakeholders and adopted, reviewed, and rewritten by the local elected school boards. The board policies are typically adopted or revised according to state guidelines or mandates, state and federal legislative decisions, and sometimes when the district experiences a convergence of differences that requires clear written language for governing the school district. School board members who rely on the Guiding Principles and Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency set up procedures for reviewing policies to address the needs of all demographic groups of students. The school board policy for developing school board policies is written to include language addressed in core values - the Guiding Principles, and action - the Essential Elements. The text has been italicized to point out the related language:

The Board of Education shall determine the policies to *serve as a basis for the administration of the school district*. The formulation, development, adoption and revision of written policies is a Board function, and adopted policies are among the Board's governing documents.

The district's *policies shall be consistent with the philosophy, goals and objectives of the district*. In the event of a discrepancy between written materials in the district, Board policy will take precedence.

The Board will *review its policies on a continual basis in an effort to ensure that they are current* and in compliance with the most recent federal and state regulations, statutes and court decisions.

Lindsey, Karns, & Myatt (2010) described culturally proficient policy development with two components for school leaders to consider. First, educational leaders should consider supporting values and policies by deeply considering the Guiding Principles and Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency. By examining personal and organizational values in this process, stakeholders have improved language in some of their policies to address barriers that may be obstructing the lived mission of the school district. Secondly, school leaders in Eaveston intentionally engage in reflection and dialogue around policies to ensure the language written is to promote action, monitoring, and continuous improvement.

Throughout the cultural proficiency work in the district, educators, families, and community members regularly come to the table to discuss the status and outcomes of policy and measurable plans of action. The creation of goals and action steps is important for ensuring all students in Eaveston learn in a safe and productive environment without barriers to each child realizing their potential and experiencing high levels of achievement and success during their time

in the district. Overall, school board members and school leaders in Eveston School district are committed to prioritizing efforts that focus on the big picture through the comprehensive school improvement plan. As written on the school board's webpage:

The Eveston School District Board of Education is committed to providing exemplary educational opportunities for ALL children. In order to accomplish this goal, partnerships with parents, business leaders, and district patrons must continue to be actively developed in order to engage the entire community as the district strives for educational excellence.

Practices to support culturally proficient educational practice. The researcher encountered an abundance of practices in Eveston School District related to cultural proficiency throughout the study. The following themes emerged among the practices: (a) innovative strategies and programs; (b) professional learning; and (c) communication and collective family and community involvement. School leaders in Eveston are cognizant of opportunities and experiences afforded to the children that attend their schools. They have an understanding that challenges, caused by differences in social class and other demographic groups, require a mindset to treat each child individually, accurately assess needs, and develop programs accordingly. One elementary principal, who leads in a building that piloted a competency-based learning model for the district, described the mental model his staff holds about individual students:

The staff I have has a mental model that they're lucky that they get to work with the kids here. Our motto is 'think different, learn different, and teach different.' They go to where the individual child is instead of an old school, traditional model of fitting a kid into a program that already exists. We need to adapt differently to the product coming into our schools from a public school standpoint. Every child is different and everybody has their own story. We take that and build from that to make our community better.

Additionally, the district has taken the competency-based learning model and expanded it into a personalized learning initiative. In 2018, the district took the comprehensive school improvement plan and updated it to include the following task, "Design a competency-based, personalized learning environment in preschool through 12th grades that leads students to be ready for high school course content and, ultimately, success after graduation." In order to do so, the district outlined innovative strategies and programs in the school improvement plan to meet all students' needs such as a five-year personalized learning plan.

Another theme related to culturally proficient educational practice is the professional learning opportunities that are available to administration, faculty, and staff. There are frequent opportunities for professional learning related to student achievement, trauma-informed responsiveness, restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and equity. For the past two years, the district has made professional learning related to equity a priority by allocating time and resources to build capacity and embed the work of cultural proficiency in all aspects of the district. Specifically, school leaders at all levels, are working to increase learning and skills in utilizing the Tools of Cultural Proficiency to increase the effectiveness of the school district. Professional learning related to cultural proficiency occurs regularly among the district's Cultural Proficiency Committee, in individual schools among groups of administrators, teachers, staff, and parents, in new teacher trainings, and in integrated, district-hosted events such as the Fall Professional Development Day and Spring Rally, where edcamp-style professional development is available to all employees of the school district. Although the process has varied in each of these settings, the district's Cultural Proficiency Committee committed to learning the Tools of Cultural Proficiency and created an action plan with three targets: (a) impact disparities in

discipline; (b) promote and support further Cultural Proficiency training; and (c) support and grow staff diversity. The focus of this culturally proficient educational practice is to continue the work, build capacity and the ‘critical mass,’ and focus on accountability and sustainability of the work.

The third emergent theme of practices examined in this study is communication and involvement with families and community members. Educational leaders in Eaveston recognize the importance of having families, students, and community members participate as much as possible on committees that impact student learning. Stakeholders from across these categories are regularly invited to participate on committees such as the Strategic Planning Committee and the Cultural Proficiency Committee. While involvement does not look the same for all families in Eaveston, school leaders are attentive to the needs of families and try to get to know them so they can forge towards greater understanding and better partnerships.

Research Question 3

The third research question was used to investigate the ways in which educational leaders have implemented and experienced the work of cultural proficiency to influence change and serve all students. In reviewing the participants’ responses, observing meetings and professional learning events, and mining documents for data for changes in policies and practices, two themes emerged from the data. The themes include: (1) professional development through professional learning communities (PLC) with sub themes of high expectations, individual students, student achievement and excellence; and (2) dialogue and action with family and community involvement.

Professional development through PLC. Educational leaders in Eaveston are focused on increasing equity, inclusion, and access for its students in the district by providing opportunities to all staff members and encouraging collaboration through professional learning communities. From interviews, observations, and documents, there are many opportunities for staff members to collaborate with others in the district around topics such as restorative practices, trauma-informed care, social-emotional learning, personalized learning, and Cultural Proficiency. While some trainings are required, Eaveston grants autonomy in working towards cultural proficiency through choice in professional learning and topics of discussion in professional learning communities. New teachers and staff to Eaveston engage in reflection and dialogue in an introductory session related to the Tools of Cultural Proficiency. There are opportunities presented through the year in which they attempt to build capacity to use the framework through introductory sessions for those who have not been able to be apart of the district’s Cultural Proficiency Committee or in buildings where it is being implemented. One middle school teacher reflected on her professional learning at Eaveston:

We engage in professional development on students of trauma, understanding cultural proficiency, and how that affects your discipline and how it affects how you

communicate with students. We have professional development on making sure that what’s present in our literature and books is reflective of a variety of cultures.

We get cultural proficiency training from a lot of different angles. We have speakers and small groups. We have someone come in and talk to us about it, and we’ve tried to have staff members talk to staff members about it. We’ve had it district-wide and building-wide.

We have it every year, and multiple times it's offered.

Additionally, district administrators have realized the importance of being involved in the district level professional learning events and utilizing the tools in their discussions with the Board, families, and community members.

Dialogue and action planning with family and community involvement. Reflection and dialogue are key components of equity work. Eaveston School District has experienced change in the organization through reflection and dialogue in using the Four Tools of Cultural Proficiency. Members of the district's Cultural Proficiency Committee utilized the Continuum of Cultural Proficiency to address areas of needed improvement in the district that are most urgent. The key to success in working towards achieving the goals of the committee is involving families and community members in these discussions and work. An example of utilizing the community includes bringing in experts to facilitate conversations about restorative practices and strategies for managing students facing trauma. These are two ways the district is making gains in one of the goals related to discipline disparities. A middle school assistant principal reflected:

We have identified our black students, particularly our black boys, being disciplined at a greater number than any other race and gender. I take a lot of pride in our staff for learning how to change with our students. Just the other day, we had a situation where lots of things were going wrong with behavior and discipline. All of a sudden, I had four students in my office. Each one of the four sat down with the teacher(s) and talked with them; it was a one-on-one conversation using restorative practices, where there was respect coming from both parties. What could have turned into this teacher writing four referrals, turned into repairing relationships and everyone walking away happy and ready to start again the next day in class.

As for promoting and supporting further cultural proficiency training, the district is making plans to build capacity among the district's committee by increasing opportunity for reflection and dialogue so that all school buildings in the district gain support in implementing the Tools of Cultural Proficiency to promote equity, access, and inclusion.

Research Question 4

The final research question of this qualitative study focused on the challenges educational leaders face during their work of cultural proficiency. Participants throughout the district discussed three themes, and observational data illuminated similar contexts within meetings and professional learning events. The themes include: (a) barriers to cultural proficiency; (b) availability of time and resources; and (c) building site-specific capacity to implement and sustain the equity work across the district.

Barriers to cultural proficiency. Educational leaders and stakeholders in Eaveston School District acknowledged the barriers to becoming culturally proficient. Participants discussed four barriers they encountered including the unawareness of the need to adapt, resistance to change, historical mistrust formed from a previous social justice training, and historical, social, and racial segregation contexts in Eaveston's metropolitan area. By relying on the guiding principles and core values, district leaders have built trust and empowerment of all voices on the Cultural Proficiency Committee through reflection, dialogue, and action.

Availability of time and resources. Time and resources are always a factor in society, education, and organizational change. Some participants interviewed felt time and resources have been a challenge for implementing this work in a way that would lead to the most impactful changes. The district committee utilized four, full-day professional learning experiences during each of the last two years, which required approximately 30 substitute teachers in classrooms each session. Consequently, individual schools were also left shorthanded by administrators being gone during these days. The school-site committees utilized grade level time twice a month for

professional learning and dialogue related to equity, access, inclusion, and student achievement. The reality has set in for many of the educators that this work is challenging, and it is a journey. With the right people in leadership positions, the priority will remain in utilizing time and resources to build capacity and embed the work in all aspects of Eaveston School District. Leaders want to ensure that there is an understanding that this work is here to stay, and cultural proficiency is not going to be a place in which the district arrives, but the journey of educating Eaveston's youth.

Building site-specific capacity to implement and sustain the equity work across the district. Research (Lambert, 1998; Reeves, 2009; Stringer, 2013) claims building capacity among those in a system is vital in implementing change and sustaining the work for continuous improvement. Participants in the study discussed the challenge of balancing the urgency of spreading the equity work beyond the district's Cultural Proficiency Committee and throughout the district. We know many decisions of schools are made at the site level, which means different cultures, people, practices, values, and beliefs, and behaviors. The district's progress is challenged by implementing professional learning with urgency, but not in a way that causes an increase in resistance, protest, and unrest within the larger system. Participants held views that a "top-down" or a "one size fits all" decision on the logistics of implementation would lead to no progress, and maybe even destruction of the progress gained over the last two years.

Conclusions

The findings of this study are important to the field of education because of the long standing opportunity, access, and achievement gaps that have been perpetuated by inequitable policies and practices in our systems, the increase in student diversity, barriers to equity and access such as systemic oppression and resistance to change, and the need for the continuation and strengthening fight for social justice. This study investigated (a) the educational leader's role in school change; (b) policies and practices used in the school district; (c) the ways in which implementation of the Cultural Proficiency Framework influenced change; and (d) challenges educational leaders face during the work of Cultural Proficiency. The analysis of data from interviews, observations, and documents provided explanations that can be insightful to educational leaders and educational leadership professors preparing educators to lead change for increasing equity, access, and inclusion.

The main ideas and explanations of the findings, which are related to factors and emergent themes of the study include professional learning communities, family and community involvement, and continuous school improvement towards student achievement. These explanations are discussed in four conclusions corresponding to the research study's conceptual framework: (a) Overcoming the Barriers to Cultural Proficiency; (b) Relying on core values using the Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency for organizational change; (c) Telling our stories and changing the conversation with the Continuum of Cultural Proficiency; and (d) Committing to standards of change through improvement and growth through the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency. Figure 1 represents the emerging themes discussed in the conclusions drawn from the case study findings in Eaveston School District.

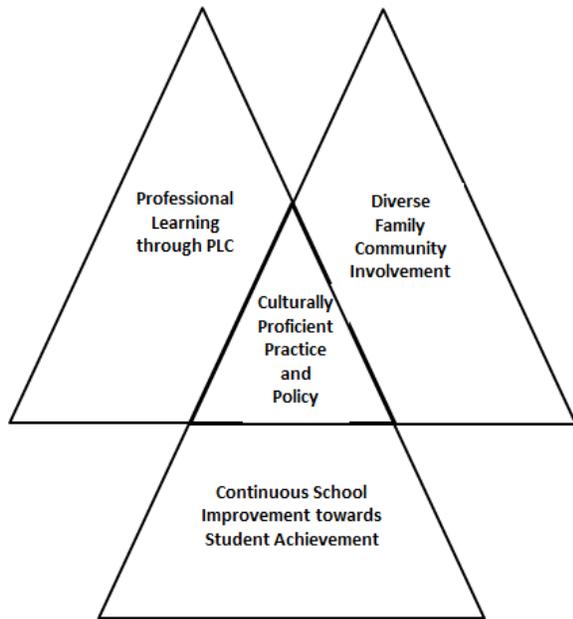


Figure 1. Triangulated diagram representing the power of emergent themes from the data collection and analysis.

The conclusions drawn from the case study that investigated implementation and experiences surrounding a school district’s journey towards culturally proficient educational practice and organizational change included emphasis on professional learning through professional learning communities, diverse family and community involvement, and continuous school improvement towards student achievement. School leaders’ focused on these areas of emphasis while utilizing the Cultural Proficiency Framework are able to experience effective organizational change towards increasing culturally proficient practices and policies.

The first conclusion regarding successful implementation and experiences of cultural proficiency work is acknowledgment of systemic barriers and challenges. Resistance to change, unawareness of the need to adapt, a sense of privilege and entitlement, and systems of oppression are the identified barriers to cultural proficiency. These Barriers push against the historic ideals in most school districts across the country and lead to denied access for some students through inequitable policies and practices (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019).

Educational leaders’ success in implementing the work of cultural proficiency, and creating organizational change that provides equitable outcomes, depends on honoring individual stories through continued learning in varied professional learning communities. A collaborative culture and sense of collective responsibility in professional learning communities (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016) can support school leaders in effective dialogue and reflection of their own behaviors and practices that may be perpetuating unintended outcomes. Culturally proficient learning communities deepen commitment and provide clarity through intentionality in acknowledging systemic barriers and challenges (Lindsey, Jungwirth, Jarvis, & Lindsey, 2009). Furthermore, educational leaders encourage family and community partnerships in professional learning and decision making (Epstein, 2019; Lezotte & Snyder, 2011) to ensure a diverse group of stakeholders are present and involved in the work. Valuing diversity brings in varying perspectives for decision making purposes, thus increasing the ability to engage in dialogue that

may acknowledge the Barriers to culturally proficient practice and policy. Embedding the work in all aspects of the district and building capacity for continuous school improvement through a collaborative culture focused on student achievement allows educational leaders to overcome the Barriers and increase equitable outcomes (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011; Lindsey et al., 2019).

Another conclusion of implementing and experiencing the work of cultural proficiency is to rely on the core values of the organization and use the guiding principles of cultural proficiency to promote transformational changes to the organization (Arriaga & Lindsey, 2016; Lindsey et al., 2019). The vision, mission, core values, and comprehensive school improvement plan are integral parts in the implementation of the work of cultural proficiency. It is imperative that all involved, including family and community members, know the mission and core values of the district and are able to offer diverse ideas and reactions towards setting goals and changing policies and practices that will increase student outcomes and improve their schools (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Epstein et al., 2019).

Diversity, knowledge, commitment, care, learning, freedom, and success are overt core values of Eaveston School district, but more important than stating them, is creating accountability measures around them for continuous improvement through the mission and vision (Allen 2001; Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). Culturally proficient educational leaders committed to building knowledge around the diversity of its students, rely on the Guiding Principles to promote equitable and inclusive practices and policies to increase learning outcomes (Lindsey et al., 2019). As educators lead efforts to examine the current policies and practices through professional learning communities, comprised of school and community partners, the Guiding Principles can aid in the actualization of the deep work necessary to promote changes to policies and practices that make educational outcomes more equitable, accessible, and inclusionary.

The third suggested conclusion in effective implementation of the work of cultural proficiency is continuous improvement efforts towards increasingly culturally proficient educational practices and policy development using the continuum. The focus for educational leaders should be to create opportunities where all have a voice, the ability to tell their personal stories or lived experiences, come to new understandings, and change the conversation. The Continuum of Cultural Proficiency is a way for all stakeholders to have a voice in what is most needed for all students to learn and achieve at high levels (Lindsey et al., 2019). Those practices, policies, behaviors, values, and beliefs that appear on the left side of the continuum and are identified by stakeholders as destructive, blind, and incapacitating can lead educators to further their reflection and dialogue to produce goals for continuous improvement (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019). Once goals are established using this data along the continuum, educational leaders have the ability to form actionable steps aimed at achieving the goals and increasing student outcomes through learning in various professional learning communities and through parent and community partnerships.

Lastly, a suggested conclusion based upon the findings of this study is that successful implementation of the work of cultural proficiency requires an understanding of the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency and a commitment to standards of change through improvement and growth. The Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency include assessing cultural knowledge, valuing diversity, managing the dynamics of difference, adapting to diversity, and institutionalizing cultural knowledge (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019). It is important educational leaders know these actions are not necessarily linear, but cyclical because the work of cultural proficiency is never over, and student and staff diversity is constantly evolving. To truly achieve the moral imperative of education in which all students achieve at high levels in our

society, it is critical we use these actions in our everyday practices (Lindsey et al., 2019). Professional learning opportunities and professional learning communities, with family and community involvement, bring together sources of knowledge, power, and experiences that can formulate and fulfill actions to help educate all students, especially those who have been historically underserved by our systems. DuFour et al. (2016) identified results orientation, a focus on student learning, and collaborative culture as key ideas that drive the work in professional learning communities. Educational leaders and professors preparing educational leaders are vital in sustaining the work through continuous improvement action plans, partnerships, and capacity building.

Implications for Educational Leaders and Preparation Programs

Based upon the findings and conclusions from this case study in Eaveston School District, the following are implications for educational leaders and educational leadership professors responsible for fulfilling the moral imperative of education. These implications suggest using the Tools of Cultural Proficiency can directly impact the ways in which students experience education. There should be an intentional alignment of the school district's strategic plan, professional learning design, and policy review. The use of the Tools of Cultural Proficiency should not be separate from the long-term planning for the district, nor the day-to-day operations. In order for educational leaders to build capacity in their districts and schools, there must be a common language around the Framework and use of data to drive the change. In building capacity, all must be invited to change the lives of students through academic, social, emotional, and physical development programs, practice, and policies, but most importantly, educational leaders and educational leadership professors must be active role models and change agents in using the Cultural Proficiency Framework. The creation of opportunities for faculty and staff to come together with families and community partners serves as the collective commitment to equity, access, and inclusion for all.

Superintendent and principal preparation programs should also embed formal training related to the understanding and utilization of the Tools of Cultural Proficiency throughout the program. Experience with reflection and dialogue with others in cross-cultural situations can only improve efforts to manage the dynamics of different cultures and increase efforts to achieve the moral imperative of education in that all students will learn. It is further suggested that preparation program faculty and staff reflect on their own cultures in preparing those who will lead efforts of adapting to diversity and institutionalizing that change in our schools. As our schools grow more diverse, the moral imperative for educational leaders is to change the context; change the mindset; and engage stakeholders in an embedded, continuous effort to change practices and policies that have historically underserved groups of students in the organization.

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