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## Developing Culturally Proficient Leaders Through Graduate Coursework: Examining Student Perspectives

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## **Developing Culturally Proficient Leaders Through Graduate Coursework: Examining Student Perspectives**

The rapidly changing demographics in the United States underscores the need for educational leaders capable of developing the cultural proficiency needed to effectively lead diverse schools. For many, engaging in graduate coursework aimed at developing cultural competence may be their only opportunity to explore issues related to diversity in a scholarly setting. The present study examines the perspectives of students enrolled in a doctoral diversity course in Spring 2021.

### **Background and Context**

Public schools in the United States have become more racially and ethnically diverse in the last decade. Between 2009 and 2018, the percentage of White students enrolled in public schools has decreased from 54% to 47% while the percentage of non-white students has risen from 46% to 52% during the same time frame (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). For the first time in history, students of color make up most of the population served by public schools. However, this demographic shift has not been accompanied by an increase in teachers and leaders of color (Schaeffer, 2021). The most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicates that in 2017-2018, the percentage of teachers who identified as White was 79%, and principals who identified as White was 78% (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Public schools also serve students from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. The NCES data from 2019 indicates that 16% of children in the United States live in families with incomes below the federal poverty line (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The percentage of White students living in poverty in 2019 was 10%. However, the percentage of African American and Native American children living in poverty is nearly double the percentage of White children. The percentage of Hispanic children living in poverty is more than twice the percentage of White children living in poverty. Children from low-income homes often face a unique set of challenges such as poor health care, food insecurity, and higher rates of school tardiness and absenteeism (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). Studies have repeatedly found that socioeconomic status (SES) correlates with academic success. Children from higher SES backgrounds consistently perform better academically than their peers from lower SES backgrounds (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). Children from low SES backgrounds are also more likely to be placed in special education (Goodman, 2018). Educators working with students from poverty typically live above the poverty line and may struggle to make meaningful connections with students from low-income homes.

Diversity is not limited to differences in race and socioeconomic status. Language, gender, and sexual orientation are all parts of students' identities that may create challenges for teachers who have little experience with those elements of personal and cultural identity. For example, the U.S. Department of Education reported that in 2018, Spanish was the home language of 3.8 million English Language Learners, representing 7.7% of the public school population. These students are often placed in classrooms with teachers who have been inadequately trained to meet their language needs, leading to misidentification and special education placement (Hulse, 2021).

Gender and sexual orientation are other aspects of diversity that present challenges for educators. Male students experience disproportionate levels of discipline when compared to their

female counterparts (Nowicki, 2018). According to the NCES, nearly 76% of public school teachers are female (U.S Department of Education, 2020). The lack of male teachers could be partially responsible for the disproportionate disciplining of boys in schools. Public schools can also be hostile environments for students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ+). Schools are largely heteronormative environments where LGBTQ+ students face both overt and subtle discrimination (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). Educators often have no connection to LGBTQ+ issues and are not prepared to support the needs of these students.

Equity and excellence in education will remain elusive goals if educators are unable to bridge the cultural gaps between themselves and the students that they serve. The literature and demographic statistics underscore the importance of developing an educator workforce capable of educating students from cultures different from their own. The term culture is used frequently with varying definitions depending on the context in which it is used (Romanello & Holtgreffe, 2009; Vassallo, 2015). Though culture and diversity are sometimes used interchangeably, Romanello and Holtgreffe (2009) make an important distinction between the two. Culture, they argue, involves the similarities within a group of people while diversity focuses on differences between groups of people. Culture encompasses shared values, traditions, and experiences that bind a group together (Altugan, 2015; Romanello & Holtgreffe, 2009; Vassallo, 2015).

The cultural mismatch between students and educators can manifest itself in a variety of ways that are damaging to students. Perhaps most damaging to students are the well-documented inequitable disciplinary practices that occur in public schools (Ware, 2017). The most recent data on school discipline from NCES (2019) indicates that Black male students received the highest percent (17.6%) of out-of-school suspensions of any racial/ethnic group. This percentage was more than twice the percentage of all male students suspended. These decades-long discipline disparities are persistent reminders that many educators in public schools are ill-prepared to effectively interact with students from cultural backgrounds different from their own (Warner, 2020, Kemp-Graham, 2015).

School leaders are critical stakeholders in ensuring that students are treated equitably in the educational setting (Minkos, et.al, 2017). Though they serve as gatekeepers for equity, their own cultural backgrounds and experiences inform their responses to issues related to equity and diversity within the school context (Evans, 2007). Given the long history of racial discrimination, biases, and stereotypes in the United States, it is unreasonable to assume that school leaders are exempt from holding and perpetuating negative ideas about students that come from cultural backgrounds that are different from their own (Carter et al., 2017). Unless given opportunities to reflect and engage in coursework or training related to diversity and inclusive practices, leaders will remain complicit in perpetuating practices and behaviors that make schools hostile for students from underserved communities.

Educational leadership programs can help to address some of the challenges that emerging school leaders face in becoming culturally proficient. The Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL) are developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) and exist to ensure that educational leaders are well prepared to meet the demands and challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century school setting. (NPBEA, 2015). The 2015 update to these standards now includes Standard 3, which states:

Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Effective leaders:

- a) Ensure that each student is treated fairly, respectfully, and with an understanding of each student's culture and context.
  - b) Recognize, respect, and employ each student's strengths, diversity, and culture as assets for teaching and learning.
  - c) Ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic and social support, and other resources necessary for success.
  - d) Develop student policies and address student misconduct in a positive, fair, and unbiased manner.
  - e) Confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture, and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status.
  - f) Promote the preparation of students to live productively in and contribute to the diverse cultural contexts of a global society.
  - g) Act with cultural competence and responsiveness in their interactions, decision-making, and practice.
  - h) Address matters of equity and cultural responsiveness in all aspects of leadership.
- (p.11)

While Standard 3 provides general guidance for educational leadership programs, it does not provide concrete examples or serve as a "how-to" guide. Specific coursework completed in pursuit of educational leadership and school improvement degrees can provide opportunities for emerging educational leaders to engage in the reflection, discourse, and research that will aid in their development as culturally proficient leaders.

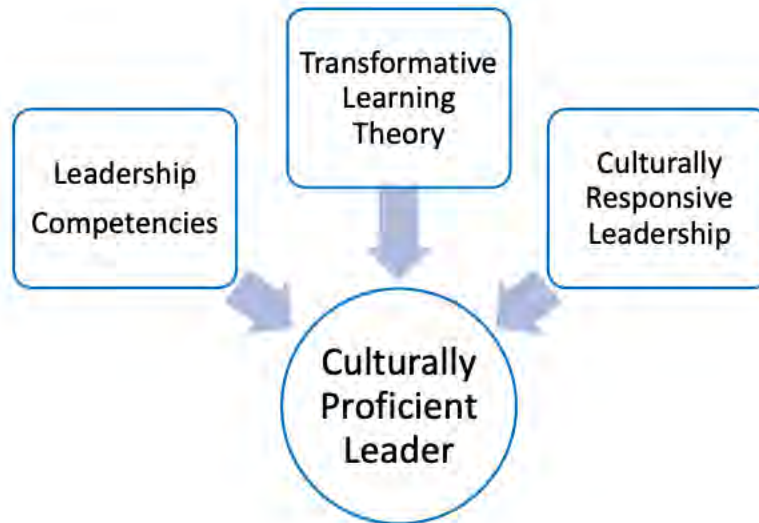
The graduate classroom provides fertile ground for exploring issues related to equity and diversity. Giroux (2013) suggests that higher education courses should function outside of traditional notions of faculty-student hierarchy and encourage open discourse wherein students are empowered. However, care must be taken to ensure that *all* students feel empowered and that the coursework does not lead to micro-aggressions, reinforce stereotypes or silence student voices. Roland et al. (2021) argue that "Students and faculty must work together to recreate knowledge through individual and collective reflection and action to challenge the status quo" when engaging in coursework around equity and diversity (p. 3). Faculty must have a clear understanding of who their students are and the level of emotional awareness that they possess (hooks, 2010). This means that faculty should take the time to assess their students and their level of comfort in discussing issues related to diversity, culture, and equity while remaining present in the classroom as a participant in the learning process. Since graduate programs are instrumental in preparing culturally proficient leaders, we offer a culturally proficient leader framework that engages culturally responsive leadership, transformative learning theory, and the leadership competencies provided by the NPBEA to examine students' perceptions of a doctoral-level diversity course.

## Conceptual Framework

The culturally proficient leader displays qualities that foster the success of the overall learning community, uses culturally responsive practices, and experiences a profound shift in their worldview and practice.

**Figure 1**

*The Culturally Proficient Leader Framework*




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### ***Educational Leadership Competencies***

The PSEL standards are organized around the leadership qualities that contribute to students' academic success and overall well-being (NPBEA, 2015). Students learn and grow when educational leaders create and foster a caring, supportive, school culture that prioritizes the learning and the overall well-being of their students. Competent educational leaders are focused on strengthening the relationships between themselves, teachers, students, families, and the community at large. Ethical decision-making, personal integrity, and cultural responsiveness are also key components of a competent school leader (NPBEA, 2015). Effective leaders can communicate their vision for student success to all stakeholders and work to ensure that the operation of their school is aligned with their school's mission. They believe that their school can always improve and dedicate themselves to continuous improvement (NPBEA, 2015).

### ***Culturally Responsive Leadership***

Cognizant of the increasing diversity in schools today, a successful school leader should engage in culturally responsive practices. Taliaferro (2011) extends the work of Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1992) on culturally responsive teaching pedagogy to explain culturally responsive leadership. Culturally responsive leaders validate interactions between everyone within their educational community by recognizing varied cultural differences and ensuring that there is a connection between how these experiences inform educational practices. Taliaferro further highlights that the culturally responsive leader is aware that the comprehensive and

multidimensional facets of schooling are pivotal to the success of the school community. A successful leader empowers teachers to remain committed to their work so that students are motivated and equipped for success (Gay, 2000; Taliaferro, 2011). A culturally responsive leader draws on transformative practices that examine cultural barriers that impede student success and implements emancipatory policies that improve achievement (Gay, 2000).

### ***Transformative Learning Theory***

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) is an adult learning theory developed by American sociologist Jack Mezirow in the 1980s-90s. The overarching purpose of TLT is for adult learners to experience a profound shift in their worldview and practice. The goal of TLT is to uncover and clarify the adult learner's presumptions about the world and to transform those presumptions into new understandings (Mezirow 1991, 2012). Mezirow (1997) argues that "we transform our frame of reference through critical reflection on assumptions" (p. 7). Critical reflection is a major component of TLT because it prompts the learner to examine, acknowledge and reframe their beliefs as they develop new understandings. Liu (2015) argues that the learner's growth after the acquisition of new beliefs ultimately leads to transformation (Liu, 2015). Another key component of TLT involves "rational discourse through communicative learning" (Merzirow, 1991, p.78). Rational discourse requires students to engage with others to seek shared understanding.

The purpose of this study is to examine students' perceptions of an online doctoral-level diversity course. The research questions guiding this inquiry are:

1. In what ways did the EDSI 9923 course materials influence student views about diversity and inclusion in the educational setting?
2. How did students' personal experiences with diversity influence their responses to the course materials and discussions?
3. How did EDSI 9923 shape students' approaches to school improvement?

### **Methodology**

This phenomenological study engaged the cultural proficient leader framework to examine graduate students' perception of an online diversity course. This qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) allowed us to capture and interpret the voices of educational leaders who for the first time were having difficult conversations and reflections on diversity issues.

### **Participants**

We used purposive sampling to recruit participants for the study. In addition to participants' willingness to be a part of the study, the following eligibility criteria guided participant recruitment: 1) an educational administrator, 2) previously enrolled in the course "The Culturally Proficient Leader" in the spring of 2021, and 3) not a current student of the primary researcher. This criterion reduced the number of participants from the target goal of ten to eight, a sample which included four females and four males, representing one-third of the total students who were enrolled in the course. Table 1 is a bio chart of the participants.

**Table 1.**  
*Bio Chart of Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Leadership Position</b>
Amy	White	Female	Assistant Principal
Brad	White	Male	Assistant Principal
Carl	Black	Male	Head of School
Darren	White	Male	Principal
Ellen	White	Female	Staff Development Specialist
Fiona	White	Female	Exceptional Learners Specialist
Greg	Black	Male	Educational Consultant
Helen	Black	Female	Assistant Principal

### **Setting**

The current study examined the perceptions of doctoral students enrolled in The Culturally Proficient Leader: Building Inclusive Environments, a course offered during spring 2021. This course is required for students pursuing an Ed.D. in school improvement at a university in the southeastern United States. The goal of the course is to develop K-12 leaders who are prepared to disrupt and address the systemic inequities that plague public schools.

Dividing the course into six learning modules was intentional (Table 2). The semester began with a self-reflective module designed to have students reflect on their own positionality and experiences with culture and diversity. Students were instructed to complete this module alone. The key assignment from Module 1 was the Identity Sketch, a self-reflective narrative that students completed after they finished the resources. The instructor also completed the Identity Sketch and posted it for students to read in the online discussion forum. Students were required to post their Identity Sketch for the class to see. The Identity Sketch served three specific purposes. First, it provided students an opportunity to reflect on their lived experiences. Second, it served as a personal introduction for participants in the class. Finally, it provided the instructor with a writing sample from students at the beginning of the course so that targeted assistance

with writing could be provided to students who needed it. After the first module, the course proceeded through various facets of identity, beginning with socioeconomic status, and ending with immigration.

**Table 2**  
*Course Structure*

<b>Module Number</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Key Assignments</b>
1	Privilege and Identity	Articles Interviews TED Talks Privilege Questionnaire	Identity Sketch
2	Socio-Economics	Caste: The Origins of our Discontents Articles TED Talks Annie E. Casey Kids Count Data	Caste Discussion Posts Module Discussion Posts
3	Race	Caste: The Origins of our Discontents Articles TED Talks Harvard Bias Test Race: The Power of an Illusion Documentary	Caste Discussion Posts Module Discussion Posts
4	Gender	Caste: The Origins of our Discontents Articles TED Talks	Module Discussion Posts Caste Discussion Post  Book Review
5	Sexual Orientation	Student Selected Book Articles TED Talks	Module Discussion Posts Mini-Methods Paper
6	Immigration	Student Selected Book Articles TED Talks	Module Discussion Post Course Reflection

### **Procedures**

Data for the study were generated from individual one-on-one semi-structured interviews which lasted 30- 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, we used analytic memos and student data from the course. During two cycles of coding, we



independently analyzed the data sources, then met to discuss the generated codes. After the first cycle, we realized that the first author conducted in vivo coding while the second author applied thematic coding techniques. As a result, the second author repeated the first cycle of coding using in vivo coding. We met and discussed in vivo codes and identified similarities of words and generated phrases that focused on participants' perceptions. The second cycle of focused coding (Charmaz, 2014) included the categorization of the initial codes. The salient attribution of codes to the interview data (Saldaña, 2021) during each coding iteration allowed to categorize the data into four themes.

### **Findings**

Data analysis revealed four key themes: *course conundrums: encounters with course materials, journey into personal and professional growth, students' positionality, and negotiating with the African American woman professor*. These themes explained how participants' lived experiences influenced their perception of diversity in their leadership.

#### **Course Conundrums: Encounters with Course Materials**

The first theme explores students' reactions to the course materials. The course materials at times made the students uncomfortable and they were open in discussing how it affected them. When asked about the impact of the course material, Darren responded "At times I was uncomfortable, and that's okay. I think that you grow when you're uncomfortable." Brad stated, "it was one of the most challenging courses because it pushed me in a direction that made me uncomfortable, but in a good way." Participants were willing to examine their emotional responses during the interview process.

Participants indicated that some of the course readings were challenging to process. Many noted that they were unaware of the breadth of inequities that still exist in the United States. This comment by Brad in reference to the required text summarized many of the reactions to some of the articles provided in the course:

It was, yeah, it was difficult. I found myself kind of sometimes being paralyzed with emotion, because, on one hand, I had felt pretty good about my life experiences and my choices and beliefs and understandings of the values that I have had throughout my life but on the other hand, I felt guilty because, it felt like..... I remember specifically mentioning this in one of the discussions or the assignments, at the end of the day, it wasn't me because I wasn't alive, but it *was* directly my ancestors.

These reactions to the course content reveal the struggle to reconcile their lived experiences and the lived experiences of others different from them.

Many participants also spoke of the impact of the TED Talks used during the course. When asked what material she found most meaningful during the course, Ellen responded:

It was definitely the TED Talks. I love TED Talks. I enjoyed listening to real humans talk, real talk. And they just had very concise messages, things that you could transfer and walk away with. It's almost like you were changed in less than 20 minutes after listening to that talk.

Fiona also noted the value of the TED Talks and stated, "I love TED Talks in general, just from an educational standpoint, because it's such a digestible chunk." These meaningful videos

provided context to the topics visited during the course.

The discussion posts were also useful in facilitating students' understanding of diversity issues. Amy indicated that the discussion was very helpful in working through the content by stating,

That discourse with your classmates and your colleagues, that's where I learned so much, you know, you can have me read pages out of a textbook, I can watch PowerPoints, I can do all of that. But that discussion and that discourse, ummmm at this point in my career, and in my educational life, is where it is...in those discussion points, I had a better idea of where they [classmates] were coming from because they had to be open and they had to share whereas, in most online closed classes, we don't know that much about each other. Definitely not like that.

The students all noted that the discussion posts were very powerful opportunities to examine the topics explored.

One of the most influential resources used during the course was the book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Wilkerson, 2020). Every participant explained how it affected them as they read it. Many of them acknowledged that it was a "hard read" but were grateful for the knowledge it exposed and the awareness it evoked. Brad reacted to the book in this way, "Caste was one of the best and most powerful books that I've ever read. And again, I don't say that just lightly, it was just, it was a game-changer in terms of my understanding." Carl, an African American student, described his emotional reaction to the book in this way:

Sometimes I had to close the book and had to walk around. Only because the truth is real, and it hurts. And it's just one of those things where you realize, you wonder, is there ever going to be a point where we don't have to fight? You know that is who we are since we've touched this soil. And it was frustrating because we're reading this, we're actually living through some of this. And we're sitting here talking about it.

Ellen also described her emotional turmoil while engaging with the book, she noted: "There were moments where you would just have to close the book and sit because it was so much to take in and to believe that our country is so united, yet we are not, we're just not." Helen also acknowledged the impact of the book and indicated that she recommended it to her colleagues at the school where she works. The issues explored in the text were significant in facilitating student understanding of cultural diversity through a historical lens.

The participants were also able to make real-world connections by anchoring the course content in contemporary issues. Some students used the content to understand the current political environment. For example, Amy stated, "I am sure, in reading some of the posts, and automatically applying a layer of my own political ideology and things like that, that probably made a difference in how I was interpreting and taking in some things." In referencing the current political climate, Ellen noted "Well, I think if the course had happened before all of that we wouldn't really have anything to anchor the learning in." Other participants indicated that the course equipped them with the knowledge useful in addressing current issues in their professional practice. Students enjoyed being able to relate the course material with the real world, or as Greg stated, "We talked about the real-life things that impact the classroom and in fact the school." Being able to make real-world connections with the issues of diversity explored during the course was important to participants.

Students also reacted strongly to the identity sketch assignment. The opportunity to publicly discuss their positionality and reflect on its impact on their ideology set the stage for examining one's own bias and how it impacted the diversity narrative. Darren expressed that the assignment allowed him to examine different layers of diversity and the importance society places on race, gender, SES, etc. He noted,

The identity sketch I liked, and it really helped me. I think a part of that growing up as a white male, I had two parents you know we were lower middle class, probably lower class and so you know, I guess I checked some boxes, but you know, I got kind of a chip on my shoulder, because I don't check a lot of [them], I mean, I was low socioeconomic.

A pivotal moment during the course was when the instructor shared her own identity sketch. Students appreciated her vulnerability and felt more comfortable sharing their own. Helen stated "Because it seemed like you wanted us to really put it out there. It really helped me to say, okay, she wants to connect on that level with us." Amy expressed her appreciation in this way, "It made a difference in that, you were the first example of how honest we needed to be. While the assignment required a critical examination of oneself, participants appreciated how it set the tone for interacting with the course content.

### **Journey into Personal and Professional Growth**

This theme details the commitment participants made to effect change in their personal and professional practice. Most participants made declarative statements indicating a willingness to address issues of diversity in their personal lives. Amy expressed her commitment to making changes with her family in this way, "we have a six-year-old son that's in first grade. And so I have tried to focus on what kind of world are we raising him to be in." When reflecting on the impact of the course, Darren stated "and I'm trying to learn, I'm trying to understand and appreciate other people's views. And so I think in that way I did grow and change." Most of the participants noted that after taking the course, they were now deliberately working to address diversity issues. When speaking of the impact of the course on his professional practice, Darren remarked,

Yes, I think that that it's made me more prepared to have those conversations with my staff and administrative team in terms of thinking through an equity lens and understanding the needs of our students, especially our diverse students, not necessarily racially and socioeconomically. We deal with LGBTQ students and their needs. They're all super complex issues and we need to support all kids.

During her interview, Ellen voiced her commitment to professional practice by stating, "Now I've talked to people about knowing where my biases are. So, I think as a professional in the central office of the school system, when calls come in, I have a different context filter that I use to listen." Despite some pushback from her superiors, Fiona confidently declared "Now I look at things and I ask more questions than I would have previously. [The course] definitely encouraged me." After the course, participants appeared to have found a new trajectory in their personal and professional lives guided by an awareness of the nuances inherent in issues of diversity.

### **Students' Positionality**

This theme examined the participants' lived experiences and how those influenced their personal ideology. Some participants were open about how their upbringing shaped their worldview. For example, Brad highlighted,

Alot of it, on my values and the core beliefs that I have, they were passed down to me through my parents, and then I've also worked hard to pass down to my own children.... I felt like that I had a pretty strong viewpoint because I was very blessed with parents who were educators and their core beliefs of inclusion, tolerance, diversity, and equality.

A critical aspect that influenced students' worldview was their race. Some participants were reflective of how their race shaped their worldview and how it influenced their navigation of the course content. Amy said, "for me, it is a course that I have internalized and continue to internalize in terms of my role as a privileged white woman." Brad reflected on his positionality in this way, "it was it was just powerful as a white male, as a white heterosexual male, and made me feel guilty that I had not known this degree of racism even though I've always prided myself on being very open, tolerant and progressive in understanding of all races." Carl believed that "the conversations were intense." He felt that Black people consistently discuss race, yet the conversation has resulted in little change over the years.

The ways in which participants' gender influenced their ideology was also apparent during their interviews. In discussing how the module on gender caused her to examine her role as a woman, Helen stated "as a female, woman, just female, oh my gosh, how different people looked at people because of their gender." Although she was aware of her gender, the course content caused her to take a deeper look at the nuances of the gender category. Darren struggled with whether traditional gender roles were a good or bad thing. He stated, "I'm teaching my son that boys, boys play sports and these types of things. Is it bad to teach your boy to teach your son to be tough?" Darren's struggle was indicative of the male participants' discomfort when discussing gender roles.

Some other important elements of students' positionality that influenced how they negotiated the course included their SES, sexual orientation, religion, and their geographical location. In reflecting on how the socio-economic module and ways in which marginalized populations continue to struggle, Carl was able to view the content through the lens of his prior experience with poverty by stating, "You know, I grew up into projects. Been on food stamps. We robbed Peter to pay Paul." Fiona discussed how her sexual orientation allowed her to bring a different perspective during class discussions, she noted, "I also felt as a queer human with a sexuality that was not you know, hetero-normative, it was important for me to be like, hey, have y'all considered this?" Fiona also highlighted the impact of not only her religious upbringing but her geographic location in her course encounters with other students, she remarked, "Um, I was also regionally happy that there were a few southeastern humans in [the course] as well because they had the same religious undertone to their raising." Inherent in the participants' responses were the ways in which their intersecting identities influenced how they negotiated the course.

Some students highlighted their own intersectionality and how it affected their course interactions. Greg believed his multiple identities allowed him to not only relate to the course content but to make a meaningful contribution in exchanges with his classmates. Greg stated "but you know, we started looking at being an African American male, straight married children, economically disadvantaged at one point. So, it's almost like I've had enough life experiences to

compensate for the class.” When reflecting on the course content in relation to her own intersectionality, Ellen surmised,

People assume that because I'm a white female, who is married to a man and has a home, that it's just easy. And I think it's, you know, some people think, well, you've had an easy life, because you're white middle class, and it's just the opposite. And I am classified in that group of people for whom things come easy, but I am offended by that. I think that the assumption that because of my skin color, that I've had an easy life is false.

The course modules encouraged students to reflect on how their positionality was influenced by their multiple identities.

### **Negotiating the Course with an African American Woman Professor**

The final theme analyzed how the instructor's identity as an African American woman influenced how students approached the course. In discussing the impact of the professor's race on his negotiation of the course Brad reflected,

I felt more comfortable being honest, given the nature of the subject. And it also challenged me to be more honest. Whereas if it were a, you know, white instructor per se, I don't know if I would have necessarily felt challenged. I think, for me, it pushed the honesty a little bit more acutely.

When considering the instructor's positionality, Ellen stated,

I think I was more enthusiastic because it meant that I was getting a perspective that--- this is gonna sound weird. It was your job. So, I was not putting emotional labor on you when I was asking questions that I would be putting on my peers. Because part of your job is if we say something real dumb, or if we do something, you could point it out and be like, okay, maybe we need to reframe. And that made me even more comfortable. Because if I made a mistake, if I said something that wasn't appropriate, or if I was looking at something the wrong way, I had an instructor who had personal knowledge, not just knowledge from a study, to help me reframe, but it also wasn't taking advantage of a friendship or taking advantage of a relationship outside of academia.

Other participants discussed their appreciation of the instructors' expertise and familiarity with the course content. Darren expressed his appreciation in this way, “I think that you obviously have a passion for this.” Amy said, “I had to really kind of take that in because here you're an educated woman, you're my professor, you're saying these things, of course, I believe them.” Participants appreciated the instructor's willingness to expose her vulnerability especially in posting her own identity sketch as an example. Students conveyed that they appreciated the instructor's honesty, even though it meant talking about things that were uncomfortable. Ellen said, “This [the classroom] is a good, safe place.” Students felt comfortable discussing diversity issues in the safe place the instructor created.

### **Discussion**

The study findings highlight that culturally proficient leaders are needed to ensure the success of schools. Culturally responsive leaders are better able to meet the needs of the

increasingly diverse student population. Including a course that examines issues centered in culturally responsive practices strengthens leadership preparation programs (Taliaferro, 2011). The instructor ensured that the course content not only educated students but encouraged them to be reflective of how the information can inform their practice as educational leaders. Participants indicated that the instructor empowered them by not only sharing her vulnerability but encouraging open and honest discourse. This open dialogue supports Giroux's (2013) call for higher education faculty to dismantle hierarchical norms and encourage open communication where students are empowered to relay their thoughts.

As respondents struggled to engage with the course content and reacted emotionally to the course content, it questions the number of leaders who are well equipped to deal with the current educational climate (Ware, 2017). Many participants however made a strong commitment to improve their professional practice and engage in culturally responsive practices. Based on participants' perceptions, the course facilitated transformative learning as the school leaders experienced a significant shift in their worldview and practice (Mezirow, 2012). The opportunity for students to examine their positionality and how it shapes the way they lead is pivotal to employing culturally responsive practices. As Taliaferro (2011) notes, culturally responsive leaders are aware of the cultural differences between their students, teachers, and community and examine their own culture to ensure that they employ multidimensional and comprehensive practices that contribute to students' success.

### **Implications**

Our research has multiple implications for practice. First, our findings highlight the importance of engaging school leadership students in activities that allow them to experience a variety of cultural perspectives. Students in this study repeatedly indicated that the selection of course materials they encountered enhanced their understanding of their cultural identity and the identities of the students that they serve. The rapidly changing demographic landscape of the United States makes it imperative that emerging educational leaders are prepared to lead schools with diverse populations of students and teachers. Coursework that prioritizes gaining cultural competency is essential to developing well-prepared leaders who have the skills to navigate the challenges that diversity can bring.

Our findings also underscore the importance of the professor's role in educational leadership courses focused on educational equity and cultural competence. Professors must first consider whom they're teaching, why the content matters, and how their own experiences shape their approach to the content. This is critical considering how polarizing and divisive issues related to identity and privilege can be. Professors should be careful to structure these courses in ways that promote productive discourse without sacrificing important content. This can be done by setting the tone for the course and not shying away from one's own positionality, as evidenced by the students' response to the black woman professor in this study.

Finally, these findings show that the use of self-reflection and reflective writing is a powerful tool in helping students grapple with their own cultural identity. The ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from different cultures or belief systems begins with an understanding of one's positionality. Reflective writing assignments help students to understand themselves better. When these assignments are coupled with course materials from a variety of perspectives and discourse with classmates with different backgrounds, it creates a rich and immersive learning experience.

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