



# *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*

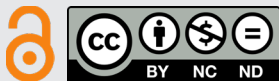
Volume 37 (2023)

## **Cowboy epistemology: Rural school and district leadership for diversity and social justice**

William T Holmes

*University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, USA*

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DOI: 10.2478/jelpp-2023-0003

Published by sciendo

[www.https://sciendo.com/](https://www.sciendo.com/)



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# Cowboy epistemology: Rural school and district leadership for diversity and social justice

William T Holmes

*University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, USA*

## ***Abstract***

*This qualitative study focuses on the intersectionality of race and rurality by looking at the responses of Wyoming principals and superintendents to the issues of diversity and social justice within Wyoming. The responses are presented and analyzed through a new framework called Cowboy Epistemology, and the Cultural Competency Continuum (Lindsey et al., 2009). It appears that despite double-digit increases in diversity between 2010 and 2018, some Wyoming school and district administrators continue to demonstrate actions and practices congruent with the demographic divide, cultural homophily, and Whiteness along with cultural worldviews that suggest a failure to: (1) value diversity, (2) engage political organizations and individuals in a manner that advocates for the needs of diverse students, (3) implement multicultural instruction beyond superficial means, and (4) engage the community in tolerance for others who are different from the traditional White Wyoming ranching, conservative, materials extraction, isolationist way of life. While outliers and standards for social justice and diversity exist in Wyoming among and for administrators, more needs to be done to prepare and train administrators to engage in culturally proficient and sustaining instructional leadership so that administrators can serve all students, engage in community leadership, and resist the negative influences of Cowboy Epistemology, demographic divide, cultural homophily, and Whiteness. Chief among the more needs to be done for Wyoming administrators is the adoption of culturally responsive school and culturally sustaining instructional leadership practices and training on the culturally proficient continuum.*

**Keywords:** *Cowboy epistemology; demographic divide; cultural homophily; Whiteness; principal;superintendent*

## **Introduction**

Rural communities within Wyoming [USA] are becoming increasingly ethnically and racially diverse, and Wyoming's primarily White rural school and district administrators find the increasing diversity challenging. The sources of this challenge include the presence of cultural homogeneity; poorly received culturally proficient professional development by those with deficit and racist mindsets; and school, district, and community cultures that are exclusionary and isolated spaces rich in the ignorance of issues surrounding social class, race, and culture that

are common across other states that are experiencing an increase in rural diversity within their student populations (Howley et al., 2014). Duncan and Stock (2010), talking about Wyoming schools and principals, stated:

Schools are seeing increased diversity in their student populations and now cater to transient students, immigrants, and students from widely differing socioeconomic classes, which creates a vastly different context “for teachers and principals who were socialized in homogenous settings with students of the same race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and language” (Crow, 2006, p. 315). Principals must be sensitive to cultural differences and the various instructional approaches required. Not all principals feel equipped to lead in such complex, changing environments. (p. 296)

Additionally, in a study conducted in the Rocky Mountains, Hesbol et al. (2020) found a lack of pre-and in-service training and education in the areas of diversity, social justice, and race for school and district administrators; this constrains the ability of school and district administrators to work with issues of diversity and social justice across the region. Further, not all rural administrators recognize, welcome, or come prepared for the “browning” of their communities and increasing diversity within their states, particularly with regards to English language learners (Reyes, 2006). The term “browning” comes from Dr. James Johnson, an African-American demographer from the University of North Carolina (USA) who discusses both the Browning and Graying of America as two powerful demographic processes driving dramatic change in American society (Columbus Metropolitan Club, 2017). Specifically, the Browning of America is the rapid increase in immigration-driven population change coming from Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East that outpaces the growth of the White population due to increases in marriage and birth rates. See Table 1 for data on the Browning of Wyoming communities (93% of Wyoming’s population growth comes from Non-white/Hispanic) and Table 2 for the Browning of Wyoming schools (White less than 2% vs. Hispanic over 18%, for example).

Wyoming appears to be one of the states that does not consistently recognize, welcome, or engage the increasingly diverse population within the state, based on the statements and actions of Wyoming principals and superintendents (Castaneda et al., 2006). This qualitative study was designed to investigate Wyoming educational administrators’ views on diversity and the intersection between race and rurality among central figures in the success of rural districts and schools—district superintendents and school principals. Therefore, the study’s research question focuses on how a new, emergent framework called Cowboy Epistemology in Wyoming affects school principals’ and district superintendents’ efforts to promote awareness and change around diversity and social justice issues.

### The Wyoming context

Wyoming is a top-ten state in K-12 education, ranked number seven nationally in 2018 [scoring highest among all the western states, first nationally in school finance, eighteenth nationally in student achievement, and ninth nationally in addressing the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers] (Quality Counts, 2018). As a state, Wyoming increased its diverse population from 2010 to 2018 according to U.S. Census data as shown in Table 1 (Data courtesy F. H., personal communication, November 9, 2020) and educationally according to the Wyoming Department of Education as shown in Table 2.

Table 1. The Browning of Wyoming: United States Census Bureau Data

<b>Demographic Category</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>Net Change</b>	<b>% Change</b>	<b>% of Net Change</b>
Total population	564,460	577,737	13,277	2.4%	100.0%
White alone	484,183	485,040	857	0.2%	6.5%
Non-White and/or Hispanic	80,277	92,697	12,420	15.5%	93.5%
Black or African American alone	4,512	3,102	-1,410	-31.3%	-10.6%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	12,637	14,292	1,655	13.1%	12.5%
Asian alone	3,803	5,612	1,809	47.6%	13.6%
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander alone	347	1,065	718	206.9%	5.4%
Some other race alone	190	537	347	182.6%	2.6%
Two or more races	8,095	10,194	2,099	25.9%	15.8%
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	50,693	57,895	7,202	14.2%	54.2%

*Note: Source of the 2010 data is the 2010 U.S. Census. The source of the 2018 data is the Census Bureau's 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates Comparison (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).*

Table 2. The Browning of Wyoming: Wyoming State and District Fall Enrollment by Ethnicity Data

<b>Demographic Category</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>Net Change</b>	<b>% Change</b>
Total enrollment	88,165	93,029	4,864	5.2%
White	71,450	72,477	1,027	1.4%
Black or African American alone	1,009	1,007	-2	-.1%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	2,856	3,091	235	7.6%
Asian alone	716	781	65	8.3%
Pacific Islander alone	115	149	34	22.8%
Two or more races	1,192	2,592	1400	117.4%
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	10,827	13,332	2,505	18.8%

*Note: Source of the 2010 and 2018 data is the Wyoming Department of Education Stat 2- School District Enrollment and Staffing Data Website <https://edu.wyoming.gov/data/statisticalreportseries-2/>. The data comes from the School and District Level Fall Enrollment by Ethnicity and Gender reports for 2010–11 and 2018-19.*

Wyoming is a rural state with two population centers larger than 50,000 (U.S. Census, 2010) and 19 out of 23 counties identified as Frontier Counties (Rural Health Information Hub, Frontier Counties Map, 2010). Wyoming is home to two Native American tribes, the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho, which share the Wind River Indian Reservation located within a small portion of Fremont and Hot Springs counties. Additionally, over 95% of Wyoming educational administrators are White (Holmes, 2021), with a ratio of two-to-one male/female (Wyoming Department of Education Stat 2, 2018), working in a rural politically Republican state characterized by a conservative demographic divide (Han et al., 2015), and operating in an ultra-conservative and individualistic political culture (Fowler, 2013) that avoids conversations regarding diversity and racism. Further, Wyoming has been slow, and at times resistant, to embrace diversity and culturally responsive teaching stances (Han et al., 2015) despite Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) educational leadership standards adopted at preservice instruction and state licensing certification to support culturally responsive instruction at the school and district levels (NPBEA, 2011a, 2011b).

### **Conceptual framework: A cowboy epistemology**

Han et al. (2015) described the landscape in Wyoming as a demographic divide characterized by an ultra-conservative orientation, a top-ten ranking as one of the ten Whitest states in the United States, a sociopolitical culture adverse to government intervention, and a resistant racial climate that is often hostile to diversity and diversity issues. This description was further expanded upon by Han and Leonard (2017), writing about preservice education, K-12 education, and higher education in Wyoming, when they stated, “Whiteness and its dominating effects are clear in historical and the present time. Learning critically and more deeply about institutional racism, Whiteness, and White privilege are unpopular and avoided topics in most institutional spaces” (p. 116). Han et al. (2015), in discussing preservice teachers in a rural Wyoming setting that was over 90% White, found preservice teachers lacked exposure to diversity, were unaware of their self and other racial identities, and demonstrated a “White-superior view coupled with a savior mindset” (p. 642). This finding is consistent with Nelson and Guerra (2014), who worked with teachers (60% White) and educational administrators (80% White) in Texas and found that those educators who were not aware of culture held “numerous and more negative deficit beliefs” (p. 86) as opposed to those educators who were more culturally aware or culturally responsive and that teachers held “more severe deficit beliefs than [educational] leaders” (p. 88).

Rural principalships in Wyoming, and many Western rural locations, are often filled by local educators supported by a “grow your own” mentality that aligns with academic and cultural homophily practices in which rural “hiring committees and superintendents often select applicants that match their own characteristics and experiences rather than optimum criteria” (Pendola & Fuller, 2018, p. 3). In doing so, superintendents respond to community pressures for familiar faces and families that “fit in” to the local social community context, perpetuating local cultural and racial practices and stereotypes. Additionally, Pendola and Fuller (2018) noted that rural principals are leaders in the local community and must engage the community in a manner consistent with the community’s values and expectations to maintain trust, connection, and effectiveness with community members. Woodson (2015) noted that cultural homophily is an attraction between like-minded people based on shared cultural traits and, as a result, helps individuals interact and feel at ease with one another.

Congruent with the demographic divide positionality described by Han et al. (2015) and the effects of cultural homophily upon the rural principalship noted by Pendola and Fuller (2018) is the issue of Whiteness. The positionality of Whiteness in this manuscript and Wyoming is one of White supremacy and White superiority. White supremacy, in this case, is not associated with hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan but is best defined by Ansley (1997) as:

A political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority

and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (p. 592)

With Whiteness as a positionality of superiority and rhetoric of inclusion (or exclusion) driven by social institutions and practices placing White individuals in positions of power, supremacy, and privilege as well as distance from those who are Colored, Whiteness is a critical lever in the educational resistance to diversity.

The fusion of the demographic divide, cultural homophily, and Whiteness leads to a new framework called Cowboy Epistemology. The University of Wyoming's symbol of "Cowboy Joe," a cowboy riding a bucking bronco horse, is ubiquitous throughout Wyoming, as common as the American flag and representative of the Wyoming way of life. Strongly connected to Cowboy Joe as a representative of Wyoming is the University of Wyoming motto, "The World Needs More Cowboys." This motto represents the calling by those in power in Wyoming to reproduce and sustain the current status quo in Wyoming, thereby, resisting increases in diversity, reversing the rural brain drain (individuals leaving rural locations for more suburban and urban areas), and stemming the growing resistance by young people in Wyoming to the rural lifestyle of their parents. According to Khalifa (2018), "Epistemology is concerned with anything that informs or influences us in how we learn and understand what we believe is real" (p. 11). Thus, the following baseline stances are initially the elements that inform and influence the understandings, beliefs, and mindset of Cowboy Epistemology in Wyoming:

- A fierce resistance among the populace and local and state political leaders to Federal government intrusion and participation in local and state government and regulation areas.
- A far-right positionality in areas of politics and conservatism characterized by Wyoming Republican party leaders settling disagreements with physical altercations (Rosenfeld, 2018, March 18; Reynolds, 2020, June 28; Reynolds, 2020, June 29). And, the censuring of Rep. Liz Cheney, the third-highest ranked Republican in the House of Representatives, for her impeachment vote of President Trump despite Wyoming being the least populated state in the Union with only one voice/vote in the House of Representatives threatening to reduce Wyoming's voice, impact, and influence on the national political stage.
- An over-reliance by political and business leaders on the fossil fuel industries of oil and coal despite a strong presence and potential for future growth of wind energy and other alternatives, and evidence of climate change for educational and other governmental funding.
- A rural and isolated way of life that is characterized by ranching and agricultural jobs and lifestyles.
- A territory and state settled as a result of Manifest Destiny primarily by White Anglo-Saxon settlers who believed they were anointed as a "special" race and superior to those they

encountered (Native Americans and Hispanics) in order to spread the Christian faith and democracy and to do so by force if needed.

School and district administrators are positioned within the emergent Cowboy Epistemological reality to varying degrees based upon the following:

1. By the degree to which demographic divide, cultural homophily, and Whiteness have manifested themselves and become fused together within their local communities,
2. By the local level of resistance to Federal government intrusion and participation in state and local politics and regulation,
3. By the degree or amount of far-right positionality in the areas of politics and conservatism expressed within their communities,
4. By the local level of influence and reliance upon the materials extraction industry (oil, coal, etc.),
5. By the local level of ruralness and isolation connected to ranching and agricultural jobs and lifestyle, and
6. The degree to which the historical effects of Manifest Destiny continue to play out within the values and beliefs of the community.

In addition to this initial positionality in Cowboy Epistemology is the placement of school or district administrators along the cultural proficiency continuum by Lindsey et al. (2009), ranging from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency.

Why cultural proficiency? According to Lindsey et al. (2009):

The key to understanding cultural proficiency begins with recognizing of different worldviews. Differing cultural worldviews become problematic when one's worldview causes one to judge a culture as "inferior" or "less than" rather than "different." Cultural worldviews range from seeking to eliminate other cultures to seeking to interact with other cultures in a way that builds on the best of both worlds. This range of worldviews is reflected in the points along the cultural proficient continuum. (p. 57)

The cultural proficiency continuum gives leaders and stakeholders a working vocabulary to discuss and explore unhealthy and healthy values and behaviours of individuals and policies and practices of organizations as well as a way to assess the limitations of current practices and behaviours along with a method to make recommendations for future growth and development (Lindsey et al., 2009). The cultural proficiency continuum ranges from the negative perspectives of cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, and cultural blindness to the positive perspectives of cultural precompetence, cultural competence, and cultural proficiency. Thus, with cultural proficiency, school or district administrators can "either reinforce existing structures or promote change through dialogue and collaboration" (Lindsey et al., 2009, p. 54) within the local variations of Cowboy Epistemology.



## Methodology

The following research question guided this study:

How does a new, emergent framework called Cowboy Epistemology in Wyoming affect school principals' and district superintendents' efforts to promote awareness and change around diversity and social justice issues?

### Survey description, response rate, and select demographics

An IRB-approved online survey consisted of 11 questions. There were three close-ended demographic questions, three open-ended items, and five close-ended items. In the informed consent of the study, the researcher notified participants that the data from the study could be used for scholarship, service, and research, and the primary intent of the study was to gather the “voices” of educational leaders across the State of Wyoming to better inform the instructional programming and redesign of the Educational Leadership Program at the University of Wyoming using critical partners and stakeholders to inform curriculum and course delivery. The researcher used the following open-ended question for the study:

As a public school administrator in the State of Wyoming, what do you see as a major issue in the area of diversity and/or social justice within education currently or in the future impacting the state? (Please feel free to define diversity as you see appropriate.)

The study was distributed electronically to 47 out of 48 Wyoming superintendents and 312 out of 320 Wyoming principals in Fall of 2018 via their publicly available email addresses. One district out of the 48 school districts statewide refused to participate in the survey due to the superintendent's policy refusing to participate in educational research from the University of Wyoming. After the initial distribution of the survey, two additional email reminders were sent approximately one week apart. The response rate was 22%, with 82 out of 359 possible survey responses. Morton et al. (2012) noted that, in the twenty-first century, studies with 20% response rates can be just as accurate as studies with 60% response rates and provide as consistent results.

Demographically, 20 (42%) superintendents and 62 (20%) principals statewide responded. There were 59 (72%) male and 23 (28%) female respondents. Regarding district size, according to the number of students, 39 (47%) of the sample indicated “Less than 750,” 14 (17%) mentioned “751 to 1,500,” and 29 (35%) said “1,501 or more” students.

### Data analysis

A qualitative methodological approach was used to analyze the open-ended responses (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Initially, the researcher used the margins to capture coding (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016, p. 48) based on the conceptual framework. Then open coding was used to categorize data.

Based on this analysis, similar codes were grouped into themes that led to establishing “a structure of thematic ideas in relation to it” (Gibbs, 2009, p.60). To ensure the research was conducted rigorously and methodically “to yield meaningful and useful results” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 1), the researcher used several validation strategies. The techniques included describing researcher bias, searching for rival evidence, providing detailed descriptions, and maintaining an audit trail (Creswell & Poth, 2016, pp. 259–263).

### **Positionality statement**

The author is a former school and district administrator from a large urban school district rich in diversity. The author’s last principalship comprised over 600 ELL students, over one-fifth of all ELL students in Wyoming (~ 2700) in 2018. Additionally, as a Native American (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma) educator, the author is keenly aware and involved in issues surrounding diversity, social justice, and instructional leadership that is culturally driven and sustaining (see Holmes and Young, 2018, for more information). As a school and district administrator and assistant professor of educational leadership, the author is deeply involved in the training, teaching, and professional development of culturally proficient educational leaders and not educational managers. Finally, the author was an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of Wyoming and, at the time of this study, was a new program coordinator for the educational leadership program at the University of Wyoming; therefore, he engaged in the development of principals and superintendents across the state.

### **Findings**

The findings of this study were centered around the research question and reported by theme.

### **Research question**

The research question was: how does a new, emergent framework called Cowboy Epistemology in Wyoming affect school principals’ and district superintendents’ efforts to promote awareness and change around diversity and social justice issues? The themes that emerged through the categorization of codes (Gibbs, 2009) were in the following areas (1) diversity, (2) political, (3) instructional, and (4) community/socioeconomic. The author has chosen to provide samples of Wyoming administrator quotes/responses to illuminate each theme, provide context, and uncover the intersection between issues of race (diversity and social justice) and rurality.

### ***Diversity***

The area of diversity was a major theme that emerged from coding. The majority of responses by Wyoming educational leaders in this area were consistent with cultural blindness, as noted on Lindsey et al.’s (2009) culturally proficient leadership continuum. For example, a Wyoming

principal noted, “I see less and less diversity. This is becoming an issue in areas as people do not value other ideas, and they only see one view and value views that are similar to theirs.” A Wyoming principal stated, “It [diversity] is not a problem,” and this was echoed by a Wyoming superintendent who stated, “It [diversity] is not a major issue.”

To the contrary and acting as outliers, two Wyoming educational leaders called for a more expansive view of diversity. A Wyoming principal indicated a need to “define ‘Equality’ in the Equality State more broadly [Wyoming is known as the Equality State for giving women the right to vote in 1869]. We historically view this as a gender-based distinction. It should now include many more qualifiers.” A Wyoming superintendent commented:

There is not a lot of racial, political, or religious diversity in our community. This is both a blessing and a curse for grown-ups and students. We get very comfortable with sameness, and this can, at times, breed misunderstanding of others. That being said, I think our students and staff, as well as the community as a whole, are very tolerant of others who look different.

### ***Political***

A second central theme that emerged from coding was political in nature. The majority of responses by Wyoming educational leaders in this area were located in “the first three points along the [culturally proficient] continuum [which] are comprised of unhealthy values, behaviours, policies, and practices that emerge from barriers to cultural proficiency” (Lindsey et al., 2009, p. 6). A Wyoming principal provided an example of cultural destructiveness, who stated, “I feel that the national emphasis on it [diversity] could well spill over into our state. Taking valuable time and resources away from the classroom to pursue non-academic hot-button issues.” Multiple administrators noted examples of cultural incapacity and the resulting conflict when discussing diversity as part of their micropolitical role. For example, “helping board, community, and some staff understand the needs of diverse students gives conflicting priorities over the state and nation.” A Wyoming principal echoed this, citing, “[The] overarching reach of political party ideology that drowns out individual constituency discussion.”

A second political theme concerned resource allocation. Specifically, a Wyoming principal stated, “In the area of social justice, I feel budget cuts have impacted students with diverse needs.” This was echoed by a Wyoming principal who noted:

After working in two school districts, I feel the accountability for students considered “others” are not addressed at the level that they could be—especially students that are English Learners, low-SES, American Indian/Alaska Native, etc. There is a lack of exposure to diversity for educators and legislators—some are isolated and do not know what challenges educators face.

Therefore, Wyoming school and district administrators must advocate and speak up for those most in need of help and resources in this area.

### ***Instruction***

The area of instruction emerged as a significant theme during coding. The majority of responses by Wyoming educational leaders in this area were consistent with cultural precompetence, as noted on Lindsey et al.'s (2009) culturally proficient leadership continuum. Specifically, Wyoming administrators were concerned with Wyoming students' lack of exposure to diverse students, experiences, cultures, and ideas within the instruction space. A Wyoming principal stated:

I see the major issue being the ability of our students to work with a diverse group. Given the lack of diversity in many of our communities, our students simply don't have the exposure that would aid in this process. Finding a way to support the soft skills our students will need to work in a team with people from diverse backgrounds is important.

A second Wyoming principal echoed, "I think the time invested in teaching/standards/assessment and being in such a remote, vanilla location drowns out working on issues of diversity and social justice." Another Wyoming principal asserted:

I think the challenge is to open students' minds to the outside world when we live in such a rural and generally homogeneous state. I don't like the term social justice, but I do think we need to constantly work to expose students to different ideas and the world that exists outside Wyoming borders.

What is concerning about instruction and cultural precompetence is that it is inconsistently progressing, as noted by the following comments. A Wyoming principal noted:

I really don't see any major issues. However, I would comment that we have a lack of diversity in Wyoming schools. In our area, students are either White or Hispanic. We love having foreign exchange students in our school to expose students to different cultures.

A different Wyoming principal commented, "I am an elementary principal. Our focus is reading, writing, math, and science. I do not perceive diversity or social justice as a major issue for elementary education." An outlier in this area was a Wyoming principal who acknowledged the shortcomings in this space: "At this point, the issue is awareness for students in terms of diversity and social justice. Many of our schools do not educate students in these areas so that they have a clear sense of acceptance and tolerance." The lack of instruction in the areas of diversity and social justice perpetuates the cycle of Whiteness, cultural homophily, and demographic divide and reinforces the mindset of Cowboy Epistemology within the state of Wyoming.

### *Community/Socio-economic*

The final area that emerged as a major theme during coding was community, particularly in socio-economics and tolerance. The responses by Wyoming educational leaders in socio-economics sat across the culturally proficient leadership continuum. For example, in terms of cultural proficiency, a Wyoming principal remarked, “I feel lucky to be a part of a district that has focused on social justice, especially in our dual immersion school. I feel competent at blending social justice and appreciation for diversity into our daily academics.” Two Wyoming principals in the space of cultural precompetence noted, “Wyoming lacks racial diversity, but it does have ample economic diversity,” and “Wyoming is slow to change and is not bringing in enough people to diversify our economy. This leads to a lack of diversity which is harmful to our students not only academically but socially.” However, in regard to cultural incapacity and cultural destructiveness, Wyoming administrators acknowledged the following troubling issues in community and tolerance. A Wyoming principal stated:

The lack of diversity in our schools and the ultraconservative nature of some of our adult patrons is worrisome. I worry that there is a growing lack of tolerance in our state and that that may result in the marginalizing of some sectors of our population.

A Wyoming superintendent echoed, “I see the biggest issue is people’s lack of acceptance of people with differences. Civility is eroding, not just in schools, but in society as a whole.” Finally, a Wyoming superintendent noted, “At this point, the issue is awareness for students in terms of diversity and social justice. Many of our schools do not educate students in these areas so that they have a clear sense of acceptance tolerance.”

### **Discussion**

The discussion is centered around the research question and reported by theme.

### *Diversity*

The major finding in diversity was the non-recognition of diversity as an issue despite the double and triple-digit growth of students of color (see Table 2) and educational leadership standards promoting diversity [ELCC building and district level standards] within the state of Wyoming. This cultural blindness by Wyoming educational administrators reinforces the existing structures of demographic divide, cultural homophily, and Whiteness in Wyoming and are evidence that the foundational frameworks of Cowboy Epistemology have taken root in the offices of school and district leaders in Wyoming. This finding suggests that much work needs to be done.

Fortunately, outliers exist within the state of Wyoming to the cultural blindness exhibited by educational administrators. The ideas of redefining equality in the Equality State and expanding the definition of diversity are important findings as educational leaders in Wyoming adopt new

educational leadership standards [NELP building and district level standards] (NPBEA, 2018a, NPBEA 2018b). These two findings set the stage for Wyoming educational administrators to (1) climb the culturally proficient leadership continuum; (2) alter the discourse surrounding Cowboy Epistemology; (3) change the adverse effects of the demographic divide, cultural homophily, and Whiteness; and (4) respond appropriately as leaders in the Equality State to changes in diversity within their schools and districts.

### ***Political***

Within the space of politics and micropolitical leadership, educational administrators in Wyoming either avoid, suppress issues of diversity, or face resistance and potential conflict as they work to inform and advocate for diverse learners due to local and state political climates impacted by the national political dialogue, positionality, and power. As Wyoming principals and superintendents do this, they operate in the first three negative points along the cultural proficient continuum. A Wyoming principal insightfully stated, “I think schools in general in Wyoming focus less on diversity due to community pressures and the current political climate.” Thus, as Wyoming administrators strive to avoid conflict within their communities and maintain positive working relationships with the majority of their internal and external stakeholders, they fail to adequately respond to the diverse stakeholders as well as prepare their students to properly engage with diverse stakeholders, thereby reinforcing the fusion of demographic divide, cultural homophily, and Whiteness as well as giving the elements of Cowboy Epistemology the opportunity to take further hold.

A second political finding compounds the initial political finding that resources, accountability, and expectations differ for diverse Wyoming students. While Wyoming administrators felt that budget cuts, accountability, and expectations were not at the levels they should be, they also did not advocate for resources, budgets, accountability, and expectations at or above the levels they should be for diverse students. Additionally, Wyoming administrators indicated that those in political power, such as legislators, were not diverse or educated about the needs of diverse students within the state, which supports the Holmes (2021) finding that Wyoming superintendents preferred to work with internal stakeholders before engaging with external stakeholders such as legislators and political officials.

### ***Instruction***

As instructional leaders, educational administrators in Wyoming find themselves aligned with what Ladson-Billings (2014) identified as a fixed mindset in the area of culturally relevant instruction due to a lack of depth and relevance in multicultural classroom instruction and avoidance of instruction in the areas of diversity and high student interest such as politics, global warming, and “real” American history. The comment by the Wyoming elementary principal that there is no room for diversity and multicultural instruction in the elementary curriculum is wrong and uninformed, and when coupled with the comments regarding the lack of student exposure to issues of diversity and

social justice, creates students with the potential to perpetuate racist, bigoted, hate-filled attitudes in settings beyond the K-12 classroom. An example of this is reflected by multiple students who, on the 2020 University of Wyoming Climate Survey, identified their gender as Apache Attack Helicopters (Swinton & Van Brunt, 2018). Additionally, due to the lack of diversity within classrooms and exposure to diversity outside of classrooms, the instruction delivered by educators in Wyoming reinforces a Wyoming-centric stay-at-home mentality and focus that is aligned with the assertions made by Howley et al. (2014) regarding fracking and extraction economy influence on rural communities. However, Wyoming educational administrators largely differ from Howley et al.'s (2014) suggestion to resist the influences of the extraction economy and, in turn, support these efforts within their communities. This reinforces the cycle of isolation, lack of exposure to diversity, and instruction that is multicultural “light” and further strengthens the reins of Cowboy Epistemology around education. These efforts continue the findings of Shannon (2014), who found Wyoming administrators in the beginning stages of working with cultural and linguistic diversity. She noted: “The voices of the participants had an excitement and pride in the responses as to their actions with EL students. There was much rhetoric that matched what research has said is on the most basic of levels” (p. 210).

### ***Community***

While Wyoming has communities that are focused on and engaged in the work of diversity, i.e., dual-language schools, these communities are rare. The majority of communities in Wyoming experience a lack of diversity and a lack of tolerance for those who are different from them in ways that go beyond race, color, and gender. There is a general lack of acceptance of differences, an eroding of civility within communities across the state, and an absence of discourse on a wide variety of opposing views. In large part, Wyoming administrators choose to accept these community values, mores, and norms of behaviour, and channel their energies and efforts into other areas. Again, this runs counter to the Howley et al. (2014) call for rural educational administrators to leverage the power of social capital, high expectations, and community culture work to create opportunities for change. The work of culturally responsive school leadership (Khalifa, 2018) and culturally sustaining instructional leadership (Holmes & Young, 2018) that are focused on community engagement and embeddedness, respectively, are key resources to support Wyoming educational administrators to change the course of communities in Wyoming and loosen the reins and hold of Cowboy Epistemology on education and educational administrators.

### **Implications, limitations, and next steps**

The diversity and social justice implications for educational administrators in Wyoming are significant in these times of multiple pandemics. In order to move from blind and adverse stances on diversity, politics, instruction, and community, educational administrators across the state of



Wyoming must adopt more competent, asset-oriented, and culturally aware/proficient leadership positions that stop “ignoring issues of social class, race, and culture” (Howley et al., 2014, p. 627). This requires educational administrators to engage in culturally relevant and sustaining leadership professional development and education, lead their communities in critical conversations, and develop long-term advocacy-centered relationships with critical internal and external stakeholders.

In terms of limitations, this study is confined to the boundaries of the state of Wyoming and the principals and superintendents within; thus, while there is a great deal to be learned from this study, the study has limited generalizability. Additionally, the study is limited in data collection as the participants completed an online questionnaire focused on a wide variety of topics in which diversity and social justice were only one question out of eleven. Further, as the study is based on participants’ self-reporting, the data must be taken at face value. Finally, the population surveyed had been subjected to frequent requests for research participation and had indicated through feedback via professional organization leadership that research fatigue had set in upon many in the population (membership); therefore, the researcher, in order to improve the response rate, asked for limited demographic information to provide for greater participant anonymity and confidence when asking potentially controversial subjects.

Just as Cowboy Joe is the universal symbol for the state of Wyoming, so is the motto of the University of Wyoming, “The World Needs More Cowboys.” No! The world *does not* need more Cowboys if they are racist, sexist, and White supremacists. The world needs more black, brown, LGBTQ+, poor, Latinx, and Native Cowboys and Cowgirls. The world needs Cowboys of every race, color, and creed, from every background, and every walk of life. So, as next steps, educational administrators in the state of Wyoming at every level, in every district, and in every school need to embrace diversity, need to adopt culturally relevant and culturally sustaining instructional and leadership practices, and need to take pro-diversity leadership stances as leaders in their communities, creating safe spaces and places for those who buck the traditional Wyoming mold. In order to assist educational administrators in Wyoming to do this, those who train and prepare educational administrators must: (a) provide professional development, education, and preservice development training on the culturally proficient continuum, culturally responsive school leadership, and culturally sustaining instructional leadership and (b) connect and expose Wyoming educational administrators to content, individuals, and resources beyond Wyoming’s borders. In doing so, they will expand, enrich, empower, and enable Wyoming educational administrators to act in the best interests of ALL students and members of their communities and resist the influences of Cowboy Epistemology as well as those of the demographic divide, cultural homophily, and Whiteness.

Finally, this study shows that a new, emergent framework called Cowboy Epistemology in Wyoming does affect school principals’ and district superintendents’ efforts to promote awareness



and change around diversity and social justice (Research Question). The factors at play are issues surrounding diversity recognition and acceptance, political avoidance and resource allocation, inappropriate multicultural instruction, and lack of tolerance within the community, to name but a few. Further exploration and research needs to be done into the nature of Cowboy Epistemology and its existence beyond Wyoming's borders in locations where it aligns with areas of "Cowboy Culture" (Wide Open Country, 2021), such as New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Utah, Colorado, Montana, Idaho, Louisiana, and North and South Dakota.

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**Author**

**William (Toby) Holmes** EdD is an asistant professor of educational leadership in the Department of Teacher Education and Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of New Mexico. He is a former principal of a five-star elementary school in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA. Dr. Holmes is a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, primarily focused on research and teaching in leadership communication, motivating language theory, culturally sustaining instructional leadership, and issues focused on rural leadership.

Email: [wtholmes@unm.edu](mailto:wtholmes@unm.edu)

ORCID: 0000-0001-6846-722X

Department of Teacher Education and Educational Leadership and Policy  
College of Education and Human Sciences  
University of New Mexico  
Hokona Hall 380  
MSC05 3044  
1 University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, NM 87131  
United States of America