

School Leaders' Use and Value of Culturally Proficient Educational Practice in Rural, K-12 Public Schools Across the United States

Jaime E. Welborn
Saint Louis University

This convergent parallel mixed methods study investigated rural K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding the degree to which they use and value practices related to cultural competence in their roles as school leaders. While an abundance of literature regarding leadership in rural education, student educational gaps, and school change exists, inequities in policy and practice perpetuate academic and social setbacks for some of our nation's youth, including those who attend rural schools that are often racial/ethnically homogeneous and laden with socio-economic disparity. Using the lens of the Cultural Proficiency Framework, specifically the Essential Elements, this study aimed to address the research questions and add to the literature by examining (1) the school principals' value in using culturally competent practices; (2) the school principals' use of culturally competent practices; and (3) culturally competent policies and practices used in rural, public schools across the United States. The study's findings revealed the most and least important culturally competent practices to rural school principals. They identified culturally competent practices they use most and least frequently in their roles. Three themes emerged from the data: student support services, professional learning communities to support instruction and assessment, and a lack of diversity warranting little need for culturally competent practice. Conclusions were drawn from a convergence of the findings from the data analyses, and implications suggest that applying the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency to school improvement efforts can yield increased equity, access, and inclusion for our rural youth in all regions of the United States.

Keywords: educational leadership, rural public education, equity, cultural proficiency, organizational change, policy and practice

One of the most significant challenges faced in the educational system in the United States is the disparities in student outcomes in public schools. Since the publication of the *Coleman Report* in 1966, research and educational reform objectives have centered around mitigating the disparities in access, opportunity, and educational outcome gaps (Apple & Beane, 1995; Fullan, 2000; Jencks, 1972; Sarason, 1996). Coleman et al (1966) identified educational achievement gaps between and among students of diverse racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds, specifically concluding that differences in outcomes between racial/ethnic groups were primarily associated with socioeconomic differences. Educational gaps persist when poverty prevails in rural settings as well (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017; National School Board Association, 2023). Thomas and Fry (2020) reported that in 2019, 14% of children under age 18, or 10.5 million children, were living in poverty. The Children’s Defense Fund reported that in 2021, 1 in 7 children were poor; approximately 72% were children of color, and 2 of 3 lived in working families with most being female-headed households (2023). Further, nearly 1.8 million children lived in poverty in rural communities (Children’s Defense Fund, 2023, p. 2). Given the complexities of cultures and demographic realities in current rural communities, socioeconomic status must be approached as a demographic group with our schools that intersect with, and yet are distinct from, the cultural groups of race, ethnicity, language acquisition, gender, and ableness” (Lindsey et al., 2010).

There are approximately 25,200 rural schools in the United States. Nearly 9.3 million students attend these schools, and according to the most recent nationwide data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly one in every five students in the United States attends a rural school. "This means that more students in the U.S. attend rural schools than in the nation's 85 largest school districts combined" (Showalter et al, 2019, p. 1). For this study, *rural* is defined using the three rural "locale codes" determined by the U.S. Census Bureau and the rural category defined by the National Center for Education Statistics as a human population from 1 to 24,999 (NCES, 2007). "Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster" is considered fringe rural, whereas a "Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster is considered remote rural. (NCES, 2022). Regarding proficiency in reading and mathematics academic performance, as assessed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), "data show that states with high racial/ethnic diversity and high poverty levels have more low-performing students in rural schools. The achievement gap among rural students is an issue of educational equity for this country" (National School Board Association, 2023, p.8).

Given this educational context, school leadership is one of the most critical factors in influencing student outcomes (Byrk & Schneider, 2002; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). Just as each school has its own culture laden with policies, practices, and behaviors of the individuals comprising the school community, the school leader's culture, identity, beliefs, and values inform behaviors consequential for the students who attend their schools (Welborn et al., 2022). Rural schools require transformational school leadership to improve student outcomes. However, rural school leaders are faced with many challenges, such as poverty, lower per-pupil expenditure rates, lack of resources, limited access and opportunity with course offerings, extracurricular activities, college and career support, mental and physical health support, and recruiting, hiring, and

retaining quality teachers (Arsen et al., 2021; Gibbs, 2000; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Further, a lack of cultural diversity, cultural knowledge, and cultural experiences, resulting from the isolation of rural areas, often leads to an unawareness of the need to adapt policies, practices, and behaviors that may be perpetuating the inadequate outcomes of historically marginalized youth in rural schools (Welborn et al., 2022).

It is essential to highlight that culturally proficient educational leaders have led the way through transformative leadership. They have courageously disrupted oppressive educational systems by advocating for students who have historically been underserved (Terrell et al., 2018; Welborn et al., 2022). Educational leaders' practices and behaviors impact student outcomes, as well as students' opportunities to thrive in the K-12 system and beyond. Given this rationale, it is a moral imperative that rural educational leaders, regardless of their culture and the cultures of the populations they serve, invest in building their capacity to lead change in their schools using culturally competent educational practices. Through the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency, school leaders are called to action to develop plans and approaches for transforming policy and practice, thus opening the doors to opportunity and access for all students receiving a rural education (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022).

Conceptual Framework

The *Cultural Proficiency Framework* is an interrelated set of four tools that assist educational leaders in building a mindset of continuous improvement towards equitable outcomes for students (Lindsey et al., 2019). Using the Reflection, Dialogue, and Action (RDA) Process, educators can apply the tools to educational practice and policy in efforts to overcome barriers and transform the system so all students thrive (Welborn et al., 2022). One tool, *Overcoming the Barriers to Cultural Proficiency*, serve as personal, professional, and institutional impediments to moral and just service to a diverse society. Teams work to overcome barriers of culturally proficient practices by understanding how those barriers inform all negative, unhealthy, and inequitable policies, practices, and behaviors in the system. Another tool, *the Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency*, provides a moral framework for conducting oneself and organization in an ethical fashion. Teams rely on the guiding principles to counter the barriers and to understand how those beliefs inform all positive healthy, and equitable policies, practices and behaviors, or the change towards increased equity. *The Cultural Proficiency Continuum* is a third tool comprised of six points, three negative and three positive, that depicts people and organizations who possess the knowledge, skills, and moral bearing to distinguish between equitable and inequitable policies and practices. The Continuum guides educators in a systematic review of policies, practices, and behaviors that produce inequities and deny access to the education the system provides. The fourth tool and conceptual focus of this study is the *Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency*. This tool guides a team's actions and planning for increasing equity, access, and inclusion by transforming policy and practice. (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate rural K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding the degree to which they use and value practices related to cultural competence in their roles. The following research questions were used as a guide to fulfill the objectives of this study:

1. What do rural K-12 public school principals report regarding their value for using culturally proficient practices?
2. What do rural K-12 public school principals report regarding their use of culturally proficient practices?
3. What are rural K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding the cultural competent policies and practices in their schools?

Review of Related Literature

Rural Education and Student Outcome Disparities

Rural Education in the United States is a complex system that is defined by its own challenges and contextualized by our understanding of the term *rural*. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the term *rural* is defined by the U.S. Census Bureau's locales that categorize a territory anywhere from less than 5 miles to more than 25 miles from an urbanized center (NCES, 2022). Nearly 25,200 rural schools exist nationwide, and 20% of our nation's youth attend a rural public school. This population increases for many states, such as Alabama, Maine, Mississippi, South Dakota, and Vermont, with numbers ranging up to 35% - 56% of elementary or secondary-aged youth attending a rural school (NCES, 2018).

Research, policy, and reform efforts have long avoided attention to the most significant issue plaguing rural school communities – student educational gaps (Croft & Moore, 2019; Lavalley, 2018; Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017). These gaps were exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic (Diemer & Park, 2022). Educational inequities in access to digital learning were disproportionately available across social class communities; access to breakfast and lunch opportunities was disproportionately experienced among social class communities; and access to health care was disproportionate across social class communities (Welborn et al., 2022).

The disparities and inequitable outcomes, often synonymous with rural schools, negatively impact the access, opportunity, and overall quality of education for its youth. Academic data collected for reading and mathematics in Grades 4, 8, and 12 by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that states with high levels of racial/ethnic diversity, as well as high poverty levels have more low-performing students in rural schools (National School Board Association, 2023). Freire (1970) asserted that societal conditions for those living in poverty and oppressed were created by man and can only be changed by man. This assertion in the context of rural education focuses the attention on rural school leaders' practices to address disparities in student outcomes.

Challenges for Rural School Leaders

Rural public education comes with many challenges. One of the most significant challenges for rural school leaders comes from poverty within many small communities. Often, in impoverished communities, more funding is required due to the state funding formulas (Chingos & Blagg, 2017). Many times, the per-pupil expenditure rate is much lower in rural area schools (Dhaliwal & Bruno, 2021), which leads to a lack of resources and ability of course and extracurricular offerings. Students who attend rural schools often have fewer, or less quality materials, including technology compared to their suburban and urban counterparts (Croft & Moore, 2019). Rural districts often have a more difficult time recruiting, hiring, and retaining high quality teachers and staff (Lavalley, 2018). Professional development may be sparse in supporting the learning and continuous growth of educators as well (Erikson et al., 2012). Further, the lack of access and opportunity to a quality education often lends itself to post K-12 life experiences in college and a career that are less adequate (Roberts & Grant, 2021).

Educational Leadership for Student Achievement

For decades, many prominent scholars have identified the association between school leadership and student achievement (Byrk & Schneider, 2002; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). Leithwood et al. (2004) concluded, “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn in school” (p.5). Grissom et al. (2021) published a report with the Wallace Foundation that added to the connection between school leadership and student achievement by expanding the investigation with consideration to the differences in school leadership from their original report in 2004. Specifically, the report cited changes to leadership including an increase in female principals, lower levels of experience because of high-needs schools, changes in the racial and ethnic demographics of student populations, further dispersing the racial gaps between principals and teachers, and the students they serve (Grissom et al., 2021). Following their synthesis of 6 studies, Grissom et al (2021) concluded that principals matter substantially. To explain, they found that 1 standard deviation increase in principal effectiveness would increase a student’s achievement by 0.13 standard deviations in reading and 0.09 standard deviations in mathematics (p.xiii). Further, Edmonds & Frederiksen (1978) identified the goal of public schools was to reach the intended outcome of teaching and learning with their research on the correlates of effective schools (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). Although the effect of educational leadership on student achievement is indirect, compared to the direct effect classroom teachers have on students, the way school principals lead policy and practice implementation and improvement in their schools matters immensely.

The abovementioned 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: (1) student outcome disparities in rural education, (2) rural education and challenges for school leaders, and (3) educational leadership in student achievement. The purpose of this study and research questions were designed to fill the gaps in literature around outcomes related to rural school principals’ use of and value for culturally proficient educational practice and application of the Essential Elements for continuous improvement and increased

equitable outcomes. While extensive literature exists regarding educational leadership, student achievement, and organizational change for school reform, additional research and scholarship is needed to understand the cultural context in rural communities and provide support for school leaders in closing the educational gaps that exist between and among the students in their schools.

Research Methodology and Design

A convergent transformative mixed methodology was employed to investigate rural K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding the degree to which they use and value practices related to cultural competence in their roles. The aim of convergent transformative mixed methods research designs is to transform society by addressing inequities or injustices experienced by specific groups. Creswell (2014) defined transformative mixed methods as,

A form of mixed methods design in which the research identifies one of the qualitative theoretical frameworks (e.g. indigenous populations, females, racial and ethnic group, disable individuals, and so forth) and uses the framework through the mixed methods study, such as to established the research problem, the questions, the data collection and analysis, interpretation, and the call for action. It is used in conjunction with explanatory, exploratory, and embedded designs (p. 249).

For the purpose of this study and the Conceptual Framework of Cultural Proficiency, the intersectionality of all identities that make up each individual was identified as the theoretical framework. The transformative mixed methodology approach was not used to determine specific methods of data collection and data analysis, but rather to inform the convergence and interpretations of the data in purporting a call to action.

The concurrent methods, often referred to as convergent methods, used a QUAN + QUAL method. "QUAL and QUAN capitalization indicates an emphasis or priority on the quantitative or qualitative data, analysis, and interpretation in the study" (Creswell, 2014, p. 228). For this study, the quantitative and qualitative data collection, analysis, and interpretation received the same priority. QUAN + QUAL data were collected by survey from rural K-12 public school principals. The QUAN survey data were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis, encompassing measures of frequency, mean, and standard deviation. The QUAL data analysis from the open-ended questions on the survey were coded using emergent themes. The analyses of the qualitative and quantitative data were integrated, allowing for interpretation of the convergent databases and a call for action to influence policy, practices, and future research for rural schools across the United States.

Population and Sample

The population for this study consisted of United States K-12 public school principals, whose names and email addresses were publicly available in September 2022 through the State Education Departments. The following table shows the states included in the study by Census Region of the United States.

Table 1*Regional States Included in the Study*

WEST	NORTHEAST	MIDWEST	SOUTH
Alaska	Connecticut	Illinois	Alabama
Arizona	Maine	Indiana	Arkansas
California	Massachusetts	Iowa	Georgia
Idaho	New Jersey	Kansas	Louisiana
Nevada	Rhode Island	Michigan	Mississippi
New Mexico	Vermont	Missouri	
Oregon	Virginia	Nebraska	
Utah		Ohio	
Washington			

While the survey was sent to all K-12 public school principals listed in the State Departments' databases (N = 50,504), the sampling of this study was from those school principals, who identified the location of their school as rural (total town or community population outside of an urbanized center between 1 and 24,999). A total of 112 individuals responded to the survey with this demographic identification. This is in comparison to the 13,521 rural public schools accounted for through the National Center for Educational Statistics, yielding a marginal response rate. Out of the 112 participants, sixteen respondents served as school principals in the West; 55 served as school principals in the Midwest; 6 served as school principals in the Northeast; and 35 served as school principals in the South Region.

Instrumentation

The researcher developed a three-part survey titled, *Culturally Proficient Educational Practices in Public K-12 Schools across the United States* and utilized it to collect data in this study. Part I of the survey included characteristics of the school administrator and site. Data were collected by role, classification of the school site (public, charter, or other), number of students enrolled, location of the school site (urban, suburban/large city, mid-size city/large town, rural), and state census region (West, Midwest, Northeast, South).

Part II of the survey collected quantitative data regarding school principals' perceptions of their value for and use of specific culturally competent practices. This part of the survey, including the culturally competent practices, was adapted from the *Cultural Competence Self-Assessment* (Lindsey et al, 2019). "The purpose of the original self-assessment is to provide a baseline of information and a starting point for conversation about becoming culturally proficient" (p. 345). The self-assessment included 31-items divided among the five Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency. The researcher narrowed the 31-item self-assessment down to 22-items to increase response rates, while maintaining the value of the culturally competent practices divided among the action-based Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency. An expert panel was used to validate the content of the modified survey. "Using a panel of experts provides constructive feedback about the quality of the newly developed measure, as well as objective

criteria with which to evaluate each item” (Rubio et al., 2003, p. 4). A user panel was used for increasing reliability of the instrument.

In addition, Part II included duplicative Likert scales, one for value and one for use of the culturally competent practices. Participants were asked to respond regarding the degree to which they value the practices using the following as the scale: (1) Not Important, (2) Slightly Important, (3) Important, (4) Very Important, (5) Extremely Important. Participants were also asked to respond regarding the degree to which they use the practices with the following as the scale: (1) Rarely, (2) Seldom, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often, (5) Usually.

Part III of the survey collected qualitative data regarding rural K-12 public school principals’ perceptions regarding the cultural competence in their schools. The first open-ended question asked, “From your perspective, what policies or practices exist in your school or district that led to equity, access, and inclusion so all students to thrive?” The second open-ended question allowed for participants to contribute any other information regarding culturally competent educational practices at their school sites.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection in a convergent parallel mixed methodological research study should be designed to collect quantitative and qualitative data from the same construct. In this approach the research collects both sets of data, analyzes them separately, and then looks for findings that confirm or disconfirm each other (Creswell, 2014). The data collection phase of this study was conducted by distributing the *Culturally Proficient Educational Practices in Public K-12 Schools across the United States* survey to the population of rural school principals, whose contact information was publicly available or retrievable through the State Departments of Education in September 2022 using Qualtrics. A reminder email was sent out to all participants in the last week of September to encourage them to respond. In this convergent parallel data collection process, both quantitative data and qualitative data were collected. Data were stored electronically, organized, and protected.

The analysis step of convergent mixed methods study warranted analyzing the QUAN and QUAL data separately. The QUAN data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reporting the mean, standard deviation, and variance for the 22 Likert-scale statements on the survey for both the perceived value of culturally competent practices and the reported use of culturally competent practices. The QUAL data were analyzed using in vivo coding. 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. The final step in completing this convergent parallel mixed methods study was to interpret the QUAN and QUAL data to confirm or disconfirm each data set, answer the research questions, and draw conclusions.

Findings and Analysis

The findings of this convergent parallel mixed methods study are organized by research question. Table 2 highlights the most and least used culturally competent practices, the most and least important culturally competent practices, and then, summarizes the themes that emerged from in vivo coding. The frequency of use, perception of importance, and emergent

themes of culturally competent practice 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 2
Research Questions' Relationship to Use, Value, and Emergent Themes

Research Questions	Use, Value, and Emergent Themes
(1) What do rural K-12 public school principals report regarding their value for using culturally proficient practices?	<p>Most Important</p> <p><i>I recognize conflict as a normal part of life.</i></p> <p><i>I work to develop skills to manage conflict in productive ways.</i></p> <p><i>I speak up if I notice that a policy or practice unintentionally discriminates against or causes an unnecessary hardship for a particular group in my organization's community.</i></p> <p>Least Important</p> <p><i>I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.</i></p> <p><i>I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.</i></p> <p><i>I recognize when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well.</i></p>
(2) What do rural K-12 public school principals report regarding their use of culturally proficient practices?	<p>Most Frequently Used</p> <p><i>I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.</i></p> <p><i>I recognize conflict as a normal part of life.</i></p> <p><i>I work to develop skills to manage conflict in productive ways.</i></p> <p>Least Frequently Used</p> <p><i>I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.</i></p> <p><i>I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.</i></p> <p><i>I recognize when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well.</i></p>
(3) What are rural K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding the cultural competence in their schools?	<i>Lack of Diversity, Student Support Services, Policy, Beliefs, Collaboration, Professional Learning, Interventions</i>

Research Question 1

The first research question explored rural K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding their value for using culturally proficient practices. Table 3 includes the descriptive statistical analysis of the data collected from 112 rural school principals who responded to the survey. The mean was derived from the average using the following scale: (1) Not Important, (2) Slightly Important, (3) Important, (4) Very Important, (5) Extremely Important. The standard deviation and variance values are used to indicate the variability in school principals' beliefs regarding the importance of these practices in their roles.

Table 3

Rural School Principals' Value for Using Culturally Competent Practices (N = 112)

Survey Prompt	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
<i>I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.</i>	3.17	1.33	1.76
<i>I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.</i>	3.35	1.39	1.94
<i>I recognize when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well.</i>	3.83	1.12	1.26
<i>I seek to learn about the cultures of my organization's clients.</i>	4.08	0.98	0.96
<i>I anticipate how my organization's clients and employees will interact with, conflict with, and enhance one another.</i>	4.15	0.90	0.80
<i>I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting.</i>	4.35	0.86	0.75
<i>I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.</i>	4.33	1.02	1.04
<i>I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings.</i>	4.35	0.84	0.71
<i>I work to develop a learning community with the clients (internal and external) I serve.</i>	4.31	0.75	0.57
<i>I teach the cultural expectations of my organization or department to those who are new or who may be unfamiliar with the organization's culture.</i>	3.92	0.96	0.91
<i>I proactively seek to interact with people whose backgrounds are different from mine.</i>	3.92	1.02	1.04
<i>I recognize that conflict is a normal part of life.</i>	4.47	0.85	0.72
<i>I work to develop skills to manage conflict in productive ways.</i>	4.45	0.71	0.51

<i>I help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture.</i>	3.82	1.06	1.11
<i>I check myself to see if an assumption I am making about a person is based upon facts or upon stereotypes about a group.</i>	3.92	1.18	1.40
<i>I accept that the more diverse our group becomes, the more we will change and grow.</i>	4.15	1.01	1.03
<i>I am committed to the continuous learning that is necessary to deal with the issues caused by differences.</i>	4.31	0.89	0.79
<i>I know how to learn about people and cultures unfamiliar to me without giving offense.</i>	4.00	0.90	0.81
<i>I speak up if I notice that a policy or practice unintentionally discriminates against or causes an unnecessary hardship for a particular group in my organization's community.</i>	4.44	0.80	0.63
<i>I take advantage of teachable moments to share cultural knowledge or to learn from my colleagues.</i>	4.11	0.95	0.91
<i>I advocate for the marginalized in my school/district among my colleagues, the students, and their communities.</i>	4.34	0.91	0.84
<i>I seek to create opportunities for my colleagues, managers, clients, and the communities we serve to learn about one another.</i>	4.11	0.84	0.71

The culturally competent practice school principals reported as the most important included *I recognize conflict as a normal part of life*. This practice had a mean of 4.47, a standard deviation of 0.85, and a variance of 0.72, which means rural school principals believe this practice is between very important and extremely important, and the variability in scores shows most values are fairly consistent and not widely dispersed from the mean. Approximately 88% of respondents indicated this practice is very important or extremely important in their roles as rural school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Managing the Dynamics of Difference.

The second most important culturally competent practice school principals reported was *I work to develop skills to manage conflict in productive ways*. This practice had a mean of 4.45, a standard deviation of 0.71, and a variance of 0.51, which means rural school principals believe this practice is between very important and extremely important, and the variability in scores shows most values are fairly consistent and not widely dispersed from the mean. Approximately 87% of respondents indicated this practice is very important or extremely important in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Managing the Dynamics of Difference.

The third most important culturally competent practice school principals reported was *I speak up if I notice that a policy or practice unintentionally discriminates against or causes an unnecessary hardship for a particular group in my organization's community*. This practice had a

mean of 4.44, a standard deviation of 0.80, and a variance of 0.63, which means rural school principals believe this practice is between very important and extremely important, and the variability in scores shows most values are fairly consistent and not widely dispersed from the mean. Approximately 89% of respondents indicated this practice is very important or extremely important in their roles as rural school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge.

Conversely, the culturally competent practice school principals reported as the least important included *I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader*. This practice had a mean of 3.17, a standard deviation of 1.33, and a variance of 1.76, which means rural school principals believe this practice is important, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 17% of respondents indicated this practice is not important; 8% indicated slightly important; 35% important; 19% very important; and 21% of respondents believe this practice to be extremely important in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Assessing Cultural Knowledge.

The culturally competent practice school principals reported as the second least important included *I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting*. This practice had a mean of 3.35, a standard deviation of 1.39, and a variance of 1.94, which means rural school principals believe this practice is important, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 14% of respondents indicated this practice is not important; 14% indicated slightly important; 22% important; 21% very important; and 29% of respondents believe this practice to be extremely important in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Assessing Cultural Knowledge.

The third to last important culturally competent practice school principals reported included *I recognize when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well*. This practice had a mean of 3.83, a standard deviation of 1.12, and a variance of 1.26, which means rural school principals believe this practice is between important and very important, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 5% of respondents indicated this practice is not important; 5% indicated slightly important; 30% important; 24% very important; and 37% of respondents believe this practice to be extremely important in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Assessing Cultural Knowledge.

Research Question 2

The second research question explored rural K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding their use of culturally proficient practices. Table 4 includes the descriptive statistical analysis of the data collected from 112 rural school principals who responded to the survey. The mean was derived from the average using the following scale: (1) Rarely, (2) Seldom, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often, (5) Usually.

Table 4*Rural School Principals' Use of Culturally Competent Practices (N = 112)*

Survey Prompt	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
<i>I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.</i>	3.03	1.17	1.37
<i>I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.</i>	3.28	1.32	1.73
<i>I recognize when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well.</i>	3.52	1.04	1.07
<i>I seek to learn about the cultures of my organization's clients.</i>	3.84	0.99	0.98
<i>I anticipate how my organization's clients and employees will interact with, conflict with, and enhance one another.</i>	3.87	0.98	0.97
<i>I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting.</i>	4.06	1.10	1.20
<i>I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.</i>	4.25	1.02	1.03
<i>I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings.</i>	4.16	0.92	0.85
<i>I work to develop a learning community with the clients (internal and external) I serve.</i>	4.17	0.82	0.67
<i>I teach the cultural expectations of my organization or department to those who are new or who may be unfamiliar with the organization's culture.</i>	3.66	0.94	0.88
<i>I proactively seek to interact with people whose backgrounds are different from mine.</i>	3.71	1.06	1.12
<i>I recognize that conflict is a normal part of life.</i>	4.22	0.87	0.76
<i>I work to develop skills to manage conflict in productive ways.</i>	4.34	0.79	0.63
<i>I help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture.</i>	3.56	1.10	1.21
<i>I check myself to see if an assumption I am making about a person is based upon facts or upon stereotypes about a group.</i>	3.66	1.21	1.48
<i>I accept that the more diverse our group becomes, the more we will change and grow.</i>	3.88	1.07	1.14
<i>I am committed to the continuous learning that is necessary to deal with the issues caused by differences.</i>	4.13	1.01	1.02
<i>I know how to learn about people and cultures unfamiliar to me without giving offense.</i>	3.73	0.96	0.91

<i>I speak up if I notice that a policy or practice unintentionally discriminates against or causes an unnecessary hardship for a particular group in my organization's community.</i>	3.98	1.08	1.17
<i>I take advantage of teachable moments to share cultural knowledge or to learn from my colleagues.</i>	3.84	1.01	1.02
<i>I advocate for the marginalized in my school/district among my colleagues, the students, and their communities.</i>	4.09	0.95	0.90
<i>I seek to create opportunities for my colleagues, managers, clients, and the communities we serve to learn about one another.</i>	3.83	0.89	0.80

The culturally competent practice school principals reported they use the most included *I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity*. This practice had a mean of 4.25, a standard deviation of 1.02, and a variance of 1.03, which means rural school principals reported the frequency to which they use this practice is often, and the variability in scores shows most values are fairly consistent and not widely dispersed from the mean. Approximately 83% of respondents indicated they use this practice often or usually in their roles as school principals. This practice of recognizing that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Valuing Diversity.

The culturally competent practice school principals reported as using second most frequently was *I recognize conflict as a normal part of life*. This practice had a mean of 4.22, a standard deviation of 0.87, and a variance of 0.76, which means rural school principals reported they use this practice often, and the variability in scores shows most values are fairly consistent and not widely dispersed from the mean. Approximately 80% of respondents indicated they use this practice often or usually in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Managing the Dynamics of Difference.

The third culturally competent practice school principals reported they use most frequently in their roles was *I work to develop skills to manage conflict in productive ways*. This practice had a mean of 4.34, a standard deviation of 0.79, and a variance of 0.63, which means rural school principals reported they use this practice often, and the variability in scores shows most values are fairly consistent and not widely dispersed from the mean. Approximately 86% of respondents indicated they use this practice often or usually in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Managing the Dynamics of Difference.

Conversely, the culturally competent practice school principals reported they use the least in their roles was *I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader*. This practice had a mean of 3.03, a standard deviation of 1.17, and a variance of 1.37, which means rural school principals use this practice sometimes, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 14% of respondents indicated they rarely use this practice; 16% reported they seldom use this practice; 33% sometimes; 28% often; and 9% of respondents reported they use this practice usually in their roles as school principals.

This practice aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Assessing Cultural Knowledge.

The culturally competent practice school principals reported they use the second least included *I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting*. This practice had a mean of 3.38, a standard deviation of 1.32, and a variance of 1.73, which means rural school principals use this practice sometimes, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 14% of respondents indicated they rarely use this practice; 16% reported they seldom use this practice; 17% sometimes; 34% often; and 19% of respondents reported they use this practice usually in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Assessing Cultural Knowledge.

The third lowest frequently used culturally competent practice school principals reported included *I recognize when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well*. This practice had a mean of 3.52, a standard deviation of 1.04, and a variance of 1.07, which means rural school principals' use this practice between sometimes and often. The variability in scores shows less dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 6% of respondents indicated they rarely use this practice; 8% reported they seldom use this practice; 27% sometimes; 44% often; and 14% of respondents reported they use this practice usually in their roles as school principals. This practice aligns with the Essential Element of Culturally Competent Practice: Assessing Cultural Knowledge.

Research Question 3

The third research question was used to investigate rural K-12 public school principals' perceptions regarding culturally competent policies and practices in their schools. Eighty-six rural school principals responded to the qualitative portion of the survey. In reviewing the participants' responses for culturally competent policies and practices, three themes emerged from the data. The themes include: (1) student support services; (2) professional learning communities to support instruction and assessment; and (3) a lack of diversity warranting little need for culturally competent practice. The following section includes responses collected from the qualitative portion of the survey aggregated by theme.

Student support services. Rural K-12 school principals were asked to identify their school's policies or practices that they believe lead to equity, access, and inclusion. While the definition of student support services may vary from state to state or school to school, those participants interviewed identified many of the same services such as English Language Learner Programs, Federal Programs such as Title I, Head Start, Migrant, Homeless Education, Special Education, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, and Restorative Practices. One principal responded, "All students have access to support services." Another wrote, "We provide different services to students, faculty, and staff to meet their needs." A third quote worth mentioning is, "Our school focuses on meeting the needs of the whole child; thereby families and the community are involved in our school."

Another theme that was grouped with student support services was social-emotional learning. While several participants identified social-emotional learning as an equitable practice, one rural school principal expanded upon the concept in detail by writing,

We have started daily social emotional learning (SEL) groups and hope that by students working in small mixed grade level groups they will learn more about each other and the differences as well as the similarities they have with each other.

It was acknowledged by several respondents that their schools focus on individual students' needs and provide support services accordingly.

Professional learning communities to support instruction and assessment. A second theme that emerged from the qualitative data in which rural school principals were asked to identify their school's equitable policies or practices was the concept of collaboration through professional learning communities to support instruction and assessment. Participants identified many of the same programs and practices related to intervention services such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Response to Intervention (RTI), Title I Schools (Federal funding often used to support low-performing students instructional programming in high poverty schools), and Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS). One principal responded, "We practice tiered intervention for all our students who are at risk of not being successful academically. We work with each other, and our equity lens in decision making on a regular basis." Another discussed the bi-weekly data team meetings to discuss progress of students based upon the interventions provided. A third principal mentioned, "Our response to intervention or multi-tiered support system is structured to be as subjective as possible, serving students based on need rather than status."

A theme that converged with the notion of professional learning communities is the number of principals who talked about practices related to diversity training. It should be noted that some rural school principals talked about diversity training as a common practice, while others expressed the need to better understand culture through continuous diversity training. One principal wrote, "Required district diversity training; established by the district. Policies are in place to protect staff and students." Another principal listed specifics of continuous learning around diversity, "Diversity Training for the entire district, Speaker series on diversity, Respect & Dignity Initiative." Additionally, one school principal expressed the beginning of diversity training, "We are a small rural district with a small diverse population that has taken an initiative to bring in programs to better understand all students." Another mentioned the need to increase diversity training, "There is a growing need (for cultural competency) in our community." Others discussed a need for more commitment and a call for more training and understanding of culture.

A lack of diversity warrants little need for culturally competent practice. The final theme that emerged from the qualitative data focus on the belief of what is not needed, rather than an answer to the question regarding the current culturally competent policies and practices that are implemented in rural schools. Many rural school principals acknowledged a lack of diversity in the rural communities. One principal wrote, "Our district is not very diverse. This creates obstacles because people don't see it as a need." Another principal responded with, "We are not diverse. Our biggest current diversity issue is gender identity. We have no policy on it." A third wrote, "We are a small rural school located in the Midwest. Although we do have a small amount of diversity in our school we typically just don't see or experience a lot of cultural differences."

Conversely, one principal went on to discuss no need for culturally competent practice, "As a small school, all kids are "our" kids. Don't need policies or practices, just good, honest, committed professionals who love kids." Several other respondents support the notion of focusing on all students rather than naming culturally competent practices or programs to

support the individual needs of students based upon difference. Despite the belief that the work of Cultural Proficiency is not needed; it is important to note that some rural principals acknowledged that the lack of diversity is diminishing. "We live in a very rural area and know most everyone in the school. After COVID, many people began moving into our area from different areas of the country and beyond, it has become increasingly difficult to "really" get to know our families and their cultures, but we continue to work toward that!"

Conclusions

The findings of this study are important to the field of education, both for scholars and practitioners, because of the persistent disparities in opportunity, access, and educational gaps. Inequitable or unfair policies and practices in our rural educational systems, the increasing diversity of student populations, and lack of resources have sustained the need for continuous improvement and school reform. Barriers to equity and access such as systemic oppression, privilege and entitlement, unawareness of the need to adapt, and resistance to change continue to emphasize the ongoing effort towards building a culturally competent organization, led by culturally competent school leaders. The Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency, action verbs for change, serve as standards by which rural school leaders can accept the call to action to open the doors of opportunity and access for all in their rural communities.

This study investigated (1) the school principal's value of culturally proficient practices; (2) the school principal's use of culturally proficient practices; and (3) culturally competent policies and practices used in rural, public schools across the United States. The analysis of data from the survey provided explanations that can be insightful to educational leaders and educational leadership professors preparing educators to lead change for increasing equity, access, and inclusion in rural areas throughout the United States.

The convergent main ideas and explanations of the findings, which are related to the use and value ratings of culturally competent practices and emergent themes of the study are grounded in the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency. The Essential Elements are: (1) Assessing Cultural Knowledge; (2) Valuing Diversity; (3) Managing the Dynamics of Difference; (4) Adapting to Diversity; and (5) Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). The following discussion includes the interpretations of the findings and integrated conclusions from the quantitative and qualitative data sets. These explanations are discussed in three conclusions corresponding to the research study's conceptual framework: (1) Rural School Principals' Management of the Dynamics of Difference; (2) Rural School Principals' Disregard in Assessing Cultural Knowledge; and (3) A Call to Lead School Change Using the Essential Elements.

Rural School Principals' Management of the Dynamics of Difference

Culturally competent school leaders are prolific at managing the dynamics of different people, ideas, beliefs, and behaviors. Effective school leaders are problem solvers. It is estimated that school leaders spend between 20 and 40 percent of a day managing conflict between teachers, parents, and students (Johnson, 2003). Examining the integration of the quantitative and qualitative data, school leaders indicated that the culturally competent practices that they use

and value the most for meeting the needs of their rural student populations include “recognizing conflict as a normal part of life” and “working to develop skills to manage conflict in productive ways.” Further analysis indicated culturally competent practices that exemplify managing the dynamics of difference including the emerging theme of the database: decision-making, collaborating around interventions and working with others to solve problems and meet the needs of students.

Managing the dynamics of difference allows educators to frame the conflicts that are caused by difference (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). This Essential Element of culturally proficient practice serves as a standard for change by compelling school leaders to learn effective strategies for resolving conflict, particularly among people whose racial and social class backgrounds and values are different (Welborn et al., p. 166). Other specific leadership behaviors that one might see when observing rural, culturally competent leaders is one who facilitates, challenges, and provokes positive conflict and discussion about difficult topics and issues; seeks difference over commonality by helping the group to learn from dissonance and to forge new, more complex, agreements and capabilities that transform the organization to be able to respond to multiple perspectives and voices; acknowledges historical inequity for some groups; and recruits, hires, and promotes people who think and act differently from those already in the system (Lindsey et al., 2005).

Rural School Principals’ Disregard in Assessing Cultural Knowledge

The second conclusion drawn from this study is that rural school principals tend to disregard the importance of using culturally competent practices that require them to assess cultural knowledge. The Essential Element, assessing cultural knowledge, exemplifies the inside out process of Cultural Proficiency and allows school leaders to claim difference between and among group and realize the impact those difference have on the situation or outcomes (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). Assessing cultural knowledge is about rural school principals recognizing how their cultural identities, values, beliefs, and behaviors affect others. They often can describe the complexities of cultural norms of the school or district, and they typically understand how the organizational culture of their school affects others in various cultural groups (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 166).

This conclusion is drawn from the integration of both a quantitative and qualitative data in the study. The survey data indicated while rural school principals believe that the culturally competent practices in which they assess cultural knowledge is important, they rated their value for and use of the following three practices as least: *Thinking about their own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader; using their knowledge of the effect their culture and ethnicity may have on other people in their work setting; and recognizing when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well.* In paralleling the qualitative data, certain rural principals talked about the lack of diversity and isolation of their rural schools; therefore, negating the need for culturally competent practices or the need to address one’s own culture or focus on difference. One rural school principal indicated, “As a small school, all kids are “our” kids. Don’t need policies or practices, just good, honest, committed professionals who love kids.” Another mentioned, “Culture should seek to accept our differences and look for ways that we are the same. We should be more concerned in moving in the same direction and looking for what we have in common

than to be hyper focused on how we are different. Seems we could be more productive in that regard. This is evidenced by the rifts we have created in society -- we have never been more divided than we are now, and we are more concerned now about our differences (identity politics perhaps) than ever before. That should tell us something.” Policy and practice informed by beliefs and behaviors, such as the aforementioned, are regarded as culturally blind using the Conceptual Framework of Cultural Proficiency. Culturally blind behaviors demonstrate a refusal to acknowledge the culture of another by acting as if one does not see difference or does not recognize there are differences between and among cultures. “Cultural blindness includes both an ability and a pretense to not see the differences that their racialized identity and social class bring into the school system” (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 141).

A Call to Lead Change Using the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency

The third conclusion drawn from this study is a call to action for rural school leaders to use the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency in addressing the needs of all students. The Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency are “an interdependent set of standards that are distinguished by five action verbs to create change in school policies and practices, and individuals” behaviors (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 164). Applying the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency allows rural school leaders to learn about the change process; conduct self-assessment for leading change and increasing culturally competent practices; support change through dialogic processes, develop a strategic action plan, and monitor progress toward equity and access goals (Welborn et al., 2022).

The integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study overarching conclusion is that rural school principals do believe culturally competent practices are somewhat important. While some practices were rated more important and more used than others, the disparities that exist in rural education can be mitigated by using the Essential Elements: assessing cultural knowledge, valuing diversity, managing the dynamics of difference, adapting to diversity, and institutionalizing cultural knowledge. Together these five actions constitute a change process for improving policies and practices that are currently perpetuating the educational gaps experienced by our rural youth.

Rural school principals acknowledge the challenges they experience in their schools. They are also committed to all students. With a focus on action and continuous improvement process using the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency, rural school principals can open the doors to access and opportunity for all of their students more than ever before (Welborn et al., 2022). The call-to-action challenges rural school leaders to systematically, examine, challenge, and change policies, practices and individual behaviors by adopting the mindset of Cultural Proficiency, so that we view everything we do through a lens that is transformative in nature. Identifying and acknowledging the barriers that perpetuate educational gaps among and between students in rural schools is essential, and the Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency can help us respond in a way that opens the door to opportunity by increasing culturally competent practices (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022).

Culturally competent rural school principals are called to engage their school communities in continuous reflection, dialogue, and action processes to open the door for opportunity and mitigate the educational gaps, despite all the challenges of rural education. We

must go beyond culturally competent practices mandated by law and those that have the attention as the latest, greatest practice in education. While the sample size of this mixed methods study was not large enough to be a representative sample of the entire nation, evidence from rural school principals in all four census-defined regions of the United States contributed to the findings, exemplifying the importance of use and value of culturally competent practices in their roles at school rural leaders. Further research is warranted to investigate rural education in the context of culturally competent practice in a nationwide study.

As for educational leadership preparation programs, professors are called to consider the use of the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency as they relate the change process in courses that address school improvement, school change, equity in education, and the ethical foundations of educational leadership. While this study focused on rural school principals, all school leaders can benefit from learning how to apply the Essential Elements for change through a continuous reflective, dialogic, and action-based process. Examining, challenging, and changing policies, practices, programs, and individual's behaviors can increase opportunity, access, and a deep sense of belonging for all students in our school organizations.

Drawing from the findings and conclusions of this convergent transformative mixed methods study, the following are implications for rural educational leaders and educational leadership professors responsible for upholding public education in a way that advocates for equitable and inclusionary outcomes for all students through continuous improvement using culturally proficient educational practice. It is when we, as educators, come together and work towards the call to action for prioritizing efforts that target those in our rural communities who have been historically marginalized, that we reach the moral imperative of educating all well. These implications suggest using the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency can directly impact the ways in which students experience education. As we experience the continuous expansion and diversification of student population in rural schools, the moral imperative for educational leaders is to change the context (Fullan, 2001); change the mindset (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn, 2022); and engage stakeholders in an ongoing, continuous effort to reflect, discuss, and act on policies and practices that continue to deny a high-quality education to historically underserved groups of rural students in the United States.

References

- Apple, M., & Beane, J. (1995). *Democratic schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Arsen, D., Delpier, T., Gensterblum, A., Jacobsen, R., & Stamm, A. (2021). Rural communities need better state education policies. *Phi Delta Kappan* 103(4), 8-14.
- Byrk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage.
- Children's Defense Fund. (2023). *The state of America's children 2023*. Retrieved from <https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SOAC-2023-Tables.pdf>
- Chingos, M., & Blagg, K. (2017). *Do poor kids get their fair share of school funding? The Urban Institute*. Retrieved from https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/90586/school_funding_brief_1.pdf
- Coleman, J., Campbell, E., Hobson, C., McPartland, J., Mood, A., Weinfeld, F., & York, R. (1966). Equality of educational opportunity (No. FS5.238:38001). Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics, Office of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publication, Inc.
- Croft, M., & Moore, R. (2019). *Rural students: Technology, coursework, and extracurricular activities. Insights in education and work*. ACT Research & Center for Equity in Learning. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED596140.pdf>
- Cross, T., Bazron, B., Denis, K., & Issacs, M. (1989). *Towards a culturally competent system of care*, Volume 1. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Child Development Center, CASSP Technical Assistance Center.
- Dhaliwal, T., & Bruno, P. (2021). The rural/nonrural divide?: K-12 district spending and implications of equity-based school funding. *AERA Open*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858420982549>
- Diermer, A., & Park, A. (2022). The impact of rural and urban school opening on Missouri students. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Urban%20and%20Rural%20School%20Reopening%20in%20Missouri.pdf>
- DuFour, R., & Mattos, M. (2013). How do principal really improve schools? *Education Leadership*, 70(7), 34-40.
- Edmonds, R., & Frederiksen, J.R. (1978). *Search for effective schools: The identification and analysis of city schools that are instructionally effective for poor children*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for Urban Studies.
- Erickson, A. S. G., Noonan, P. M., & McCall, Z. (2012). Effectiveness of Online Professional Development for Rural Special Educators. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 31(1), 22-32.
- Friere, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.

- Fullan, M. (2000). The return of large-scale reform. *Journal of Educational Change*, 1(1), 5-28.
<http://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010068703786>
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gibbs, R. (2000). The challenge ahead for rural schools. *Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy*, 15,(1), 82-87.
- Grissom, Jason A., Anna J. Egalite, and Constance A. Lindsay. (2021). "How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research." New York: The Wallace Foundation. Available at
<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/principalsynthesis>.
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R.H. (1996). Reassessing the principal's role in school effectiveness: A review of empirical research 1980-1995. *Education Administration Quarterly*, 32(1), 5-44.
- Jencks, C. (1972). *Inequality: A reassessment of the effect of family and schooling in America*. New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc.
- Johnson, P. (2003). Conflict and the school leader: Expert or novice. *Journal of Research for Educational Leaders*, 1(3), 28-45.
- Lavalley, M. (2018). *Out of the loop: Rural schools are largely left out of research and policy discussions, exacerbating poverty, inequity, and isolation*. National School Board Association. Retrieved from <https://www.nsba.org/-/media/NSBA/File/cpe-out-of-the-loop-report-january-2018.pdf>
- Leithwood, K., Seashore-Louis, K., Anderson S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *Review of research: How leadership influences student learning*. Retrieved from
<https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/How-Leadership-Influences-Student-Learning.pdf>
- Lezotte, L., & Snyder, K. (2011). *What effective schools do: Re-envisioning the correlates*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Lindsey, R., Karns, M., & Myatt, K. (2010). *Culturally proficient education: An asset-based response to conditions of poverty*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Lindsey, R., Nuri-Robins, K., Terrell, R., & Lindsey, D. (2019). *Cultural proficiency: A manual for school leaders* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Lindsey, R., Roberts, L., & CampbellJones, F. (2005). *The culturally proficient school: An implementation guide for educators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Logan, J., & Burdick-Will, J. (2017). School segregation and disparities in urban, suburban, and rural areas. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 674(1), 199-216.
- Marks, H.M., & Printy, S.M. (2003). Principal leadership and school performance: An integration of transformational and instructional leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(3), 370-397.
- Marzano, R., Water, T., & McNulty, B. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD and Aurora, CO: Mid-content Research for Education and Learning.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *Exhibit A: NCES's urban-centric locale categories, released in 2006*. Status of Education in Rural America. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

- National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). *Table 4: Number of city, suburban, town, and rural regular, operating public elementary and secondary schools with student membership and percentage distribution of students in membership, by state or jurisdiction: School year 2015–16*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Locale classification and criteria. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/docs/LOCALE_CLASSIFICATIONS.pdf
- National School Board Association. (2023). *Educational equity for rural students: Out of the pandemic, but still out of the loop. Part I: Growing diversity of rural students*. Retrieved from <https://nsba.org/-/media/CPE-Growing-Diversity-of-Rural-Students.pdf>
- Roberts, J., & Grant, P. (2021). What we know and where to go: A systematic review of the rural student college and career readiness literature and future directions for the field. *The Rural Educator*, 42(2), 72-94, <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v42i2.1244>
- Rubio, D., Berg-Weger, M., Tebb, S., Lee, E., & Rauch, S. (2003). Objectifying content validity: Conducting a content validity study in social work research. *Social Work Research*, 27(2), 94-104.
- Sarason, S.B. (1996). *Revisiting "the culture of the school and the problem of change."* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Showalter, D., Hartman, S., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019). *Why rural matters 2018-2019: The time is now: A report of the rural school and community trust*. Alexandria, VA: Rural School Community Trust. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED604580.pdf>
- Terrell, R., Terrell, E., Lindsey, R., & Lindsey, D. (2018). *Culturally proficient leadership: The personal journey begins within*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Thomas, D. & Fry, R. (2020, November 30). *Prior to Covid-19, child poverty rates had reached record lows in the U.S*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/30/prior-to-covid-19-child-poverty-rates-had-reached-record-lows-in-u-s/>
- Tieken, M., & Montgomery, M. (2021). Challenges facing rural schools in America. *State Education Standard*, 21(1), p.6-11.
- Welborn, J., Casey, T., Myatt, K., & Lindsey, R.B. (2022). *Leading change through the lens of cultural proficiency: An equitable approach to race and social class in our schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.