

School Principal Cultural Proficiency and Transformational Leadership

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between school principal cultural proficiency and transformational leadership. A purposeful sample of 166 school principals, employed in school districts in the southeastern region of Texas, completed the *Educator Cultural Proficiency Insight Tool* and the *Successful School Leadership Survey*. Using a culturally responsive leadership framework, findings suggested that a positive relationship existed between cultural proficiency and transformational leadership. Principals with high expectations for students, ownership and responsibility for student learning outcomes, and recognized presence of racism were more likely to exhibit transformational leadership behaviors creating implications for school districts around hiring and capacity building towards working with diverse stakeholders.

Key Words

culturally responsive leadership, cultural proficiency, transformational leadership

Introduction

The principal is described by Sturgis et al. (2017) as a catalyst, influencing to prepare students for a global society with transformational leadership (Burns, 1978) and a safe and responsive school where cultural practices are acknowledged (Bond, 2017; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Although there is no intellectual difference in kids before they begin formal schooling, research shows that students of different cultural backgrounds underachieve compared to their classmates, further creating an "achievement gap" (Cummins, 2015; Ford et al., 2008; Holihan, 2022; Jackson & Howard, 2014).

Culturally diverse students find it challenging to connect when their cultural practices are misunderstood, as a significant number of these students drop out before graduating (Gray-Nicolas & Miranda, 2020; Riele, 2006). A student's socioeconomic status and demographics will not be the only deciding factors in their achievement especially if immersed in effective instruction (Arneback & Jamte, 2022; Spring, 2008). Within the scope of culturally responsive leadership (CRL), studies reveal the importance of developing and analyzing culture and leadership as a dimension of learning and academic achievement (Khalifa et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Smith-Maddox, 1998). As a result, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between school principal cultural proficiency and transformational leadership.

Review of Literature

Cultural proficiency

Incorporating cultural proficiency as the capacity for cultural responsiveness, educators must reflect and consider cultural awareness and diversity (CAD) (Buck, 2016; Cobanoglu, 2021; Gay, 2015; Welton et al., 2015). Similarly, Siwatu (2011) examined preservice

teachers' cultural proficiency and found that they were confident in their ability to teach. However, they scored lower in culturally responsive practices, where there was discomfort in aligning their teaching to understanding of culture and exposure to student disparities.

Attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning (ABESL) refers to educators wanting students to learn beyond their potential, understanding their students and how they express knowledge, and what student interests can make learning fun (Miller, 2011). Attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning are part of culturally responsive caring, which Gay (2010) described as the most effective in supporting students to learn within a diverse environment. Other factors of ABESL include motivating students to grow (Davis & McIntosh Allen, 2020), creating fun, yet rigorous learning opportunities (Montgomery & Rubin, 2022), and maintaining a positive view towards diverse students (Abdulrahim & Orosco, 2020). Cultural responsiveness is the state of mind that educators possess when addressing cultural interest and ABESL.

Educators who connect with diverse students at a level that shares attitudes, expectations, and behaviors engage in ownership and responsibility (Gay, 2010). These educators often treat students with respect, as if they were their own children to make them successful (Gray et al., 2022; Steketee et al., 2021). Culturally responsive educators showcase high responsibility for the success and failure of their students (Davis & McIntosh Allen, 2020) while keeping students accountable (Neri et al., 2019).

Diverse students who engage with inclusive educators increase their achievement, and vice-versa opposing views increase social

deficiencies in those students (Whitford & Emerson, 2019). Therefore, authentic “recognition of racism” by educators is essential because addressing bias within a school district correlates to growth in marginalized learners (Duncan, 2019; Verow, 2022). An educator who recognizes racism prevents racial bias (Russell et al., 2019), cultural racism (Nardi et al., 2020), and preventing institutional racism (Elias & Paradies, 2021).

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership started with Burns (1978), who set concepts of effective leadership behaviors that are transformational in nature. Burns (1978) deduced that leaders and their followers influence each other to achieve success and raise motivation. A transformational leader reshapes culture by increasing inspiration and setting direction towards a shared goal (Allen et al., 2015; Ibarra, 2008; Kitur et al., 2020; Raolina et al., 2021; Sturgis et al., 2017; Suraya & Yunus, 2012).

School leaders who define a common goal, create an instructional climate that builds teacher capacity producing resilient environments increasing job performance and leading to improvement. (Chen & Yang, 2022; Danbaba & Panshak, 2021; Mullen et al., 2021; Raolina et al., 2021; Sebastian et al., 2016).

Principals that build capacity share tasks and responsibilities while motivating colleagues to work effectively and efficiently to achieve goals. This leadership behavior is crucial within campus culture as flexible teachers can beat all obstacles (Mullen et al., 2021). The principal’s ability to be competitive and support teachers comes from setting policy that is cognizant of diverse thinking in developing effective schools especially connected the ability to redesign the

organization with the amount of trust the teachers had on campus with their principal (Coban et al., 2020; Khusni & Mahmudah, 2020). Research elucidates a successful redesign involving good relationships with stakeholders, being ethical and building towards instruction while choosing to work in conditions that are collaborative (Liu, 2021; Schrik & Akinyi-Wasonga, 2019).

Cultural proficiency and transformational leadership

When defining CRL studies reveal the importance of developing and analyzing leadership as a dimension of cultural responsiveness for the success of students (Cardona, 2023; Gorski, 2016; Lewis Chiu et al., 2017).

Leaders who connect with minoritized youth, show pride in their community, and meet their cultural needs become involved in resolving inequities simply by acknowledging cultural diversity (Hanson et al., 2020; Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). Miller (2020) suggests leaders must recognize students' diversity as an asset rather than a burden and analyze the intersectionality of their race and daily self-awareness.

Communities of students have been targeted through injustices and can be supported through the creation of school level culturally responsive spaces (Lomotey, 2019). found Principal leadership behaviors such as (a) reflection and adjustment by correcting her own biases, (b) using data-driven decision-making to support the campus vision, (c) cultivating diversity within her campus by being an obstacle to oppression systems, and (d) always prioritizing the needs of her diverse parents and students helped build a culturally responsive environment at school (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020; Madhlangobe & Gordon.

2012. Principals who acknowledge students' cultural needs are likely to have a greater influence on their campus when they lead.

Theoretical Framework

Culturally responsive leadership incorporates leadership philosophies, methods, and policies that create inclusive learning environments for students and families from marginalized backgrounds (Khalifa et al., 2016). It was initially framed from a lens of cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 1994).

Culturally responsive leadership requires that school principals understand and emphasize high expectations for student achievement (Johnson et al., 2011; Young, 2010), infusing into the curriculum the history, principles, and cultural understanding of the students' lived experiences (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Howard, 2001), cultivating the social and political mindfulness (Hernandez et al., 2013; Jackson, 2011), and creating culturally aware leaders (Gorski, 2016; Lewis Chiu et al., 2017).

Cultural responsiveness and school leadership have merged into CRL as a framework where leaders prioritize high standards for student academic achievement, demonstrate ethics, support instructional strategies, and collaborate with all stakeholders (Bottiani et al., 2018; Burns, 1978; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2011; Khalifa, 2020; Khalifa et al., 2019). In addition, CRL emphasizes improving educational outcomes and experiences for all students, especially those historically marginalized in the educational system (Howard et al., 2019; Johnson & Fuller, 2014).

Method

Participants

The participants were 166 K-12 school principals in a service region in Southeastern

Texas. Most of the respondents were female (69.3%), while the remaining were male (30.7%). Of those, 35.5% were White, 34.9% Hispanic, and 27.7% Black. The majority of principals reported less than 10 years of experience as a principal (83.1%), followed by 10-19 years (13.9%), 20-29 years (1.2%), and 30-39 years (1.8%). The mean administrative experience was 6.3 years.

Instrumentation

Educator cultural proficiency insight tool.

The *Educator Cultural Proficiency Insight Tool* (ECPIT) was developed to precisely measure the cultural proficiency of educators based on factors and characteristics (Miller, 2023). The ECPIT consists of 31-items used to measure four different factors of cultural proficiency: (a) Cultural Awareness and Diversity ($\alpha = .878$), (b) Attitudes, Beliefs, and Expectations of Student Learning ($\alpha = .784$), (c) Ownership and Responsibility ($\alpha = .715$), and (d) Recognition of Racism ($\alpha = .918$). Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with the item practices using a 4-point Likert scale (1=*Strongly disagree*; 6=*Strongly Agree*). Higher scores indicate higher cultural proficiency.

Successful school leadership survey. The *Successful School Leadership Survey* (SSLS) was developed to examine transformational leadership behaviors (Leithwood et al., 2023). The items selected measured four dimensions of transformational leadership (a) setting the direction, (b) developing people, (c) redesigning the organization, and (d) improving the instructional program. Participants were asked the extent to which they, as school leaders, engage in the practices with the anchors reduced to a 4-point Likert scale (1=*Completely Disagree*; 4=*Completely Agree*). Higher scores indicate a higher frequency of transformational behaviors of leaders. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients ranged between .91-.94.

Data Collection Procedures & Analysis

After IRB approval, the researcher obtained a database of school principals in Southeastern Texas, and emailed a link containing the two electronic surveys and cover letter. The survey responses were collected over a six-week time frame. Upon completion of data collection, data were uploaded to IBM SPSS. Research questions were addressed using regression analysis. To measure cultural proficiency, all four independent variables were entered as a block. A significance value of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance and adjusted- R^2 was used to calculate effect size.

Findings

Principal's ability to set directions

Findings indicated that a relationship existed between cultural proficiency and a principal's ability to set directions, $F(4,165) = 3.214$, $p = .014$, adjusted- $R^2 = .051$. Approximately 5.0% of the variance in a principal's ability to set directions can be attributed to their level of cultural proficiency. Only one of the four cultural proficiency subscales, *Attitudes, Beliefs, and Expectations of Student Learning*, was found to have a statistically significant positive relationship with a principal's ability to set directions ($p < .05$).

In other words, as a principal's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning increase, so does their ability to set directions.

Principal's ability to develop people

Findings indicated that a relationship existed between cultural proficiency and a principal's ability to develop people, $F(4,165) = 4.563$, $p = .002$, adjusted- $R^2 = .080$. Only one of the four cultural proficiency subscales, *Attitudes, Beliefs, and Expectations of Student Learning*, was found to have a statistically significant

positive relationship with a principal's ability to develop people ($p < .05$).

In other words, as a principal's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning increase, so does their ability to develop people. Eight percent of the variance in a principal's ability to develop people can be attributed to their level of cultural proficiency.

Principal's ability to redesign the organization

Findings indicated that a relationship existed between cultural proficiency and a principal's ability to redesign the organization, $F(4,165) = 4.793$, $p = .001$, adjusted- $R^2 = .084$. Only two of the four cultural proficiency subscales were found to have a statistically significant positive relationship with a principal's ability to redesign the organization, *Attitudes, Beliefs, and Expectations of Student Learning* ($p < .05$) and *Recognition of Racism* ($p < .05$).

In other words, as a principal's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning and recognition of racism increase, so does their ability to redesign the organization. Approximately 9.0% of the variance in a principal's ability to redesign the organization can be attributed to their attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning and recognition of racism.

Principal's ability to improve the instructional program

Findings indicated that a relationship existed between cultural proficiency and a principal's ability to improve the instructional program, $F(4,165) = 12.774$, $p < .001$, adjusted- $R^2 = .222$. Only two of the four cultural proficiency subscales were found to have a statistically significant positive relationship with a principal's ability to improve the instructional

program, *Attitudes, Beliefs, and Expectations of Student Learning* ($p < .001$) and *Ownership and Responsibility* ($p < .05$).

In other words, as a principal's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning and ownership and responsibility for student learning outcomes increase, so does their ability to improve the instructional program. Approximately 22.0% of the variance in a principal's ability to improve the instructional program can be attributed to their attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of student learning, and ownership and responsibility for student learning outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that a relationship existed between cultural proficiency, principal's ABESL, and a principal's ability to set directions. These results are similar to research that discusses the importance of principals having a clear shared vision for schools (Gurr et al., 2006; Mombourquette, 2017).

The link in making schools successful is for leaders to be student focused, collaborative, and shared values. Principals that utilize data for student-centered decisions create the driving force of having high expectations for students. The results are also consistent with the findings by Brown et al. (2022) where a relationship exists between cultural proficiency, principal's ABESL, and a principal's ability to develop people. Leaders who are empathetic listeners and view cultural diversity as a strength in instruction created opportunities for professional development. Supporting diversity in this way further expounding on building teacher capacity.

Study results also highlighted a relationship between cultural proficiency,

ABESL and recognition of racism, and a principal's ability to redesign the organization similarly to research that found principals who believed all students could learn were more likely to engage in organizational redesign efforts (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020). As part of any redesign effort, Verow (2022) elucidates the need to engage educators in conversations about racism, examine implicit biases, and celebration of school diversity. The principals who recognize the presence of racism in their school are more likely to address it.

Finally, a relationship exists between cultural proficiency, ABESL and ownership and responsibility, and a principal's ability to improve the instructional program. Similar studies demonstrated that educators who took ownership and responsibility for the instructional program, rather than delegating responsibility to others, were more effective at improving student learning outcomes (Marks & Printy, 2003; Schrik & Akinyi-Wasonga, 2019; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

The relationship between principals' cultural proficiency and transformational leadership supports an existing gap that has previously been qualitatively demonstrated but not quantified (Brazill & Ruff, 2022; Demery, 2022; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Magno & Schiff, 2010; Wilson, 2022).

However, a relationship was not found to exist between cultural awareness and diversity and transformational leadership, which is in direct conflict with Khalifa et al. (2016), who claims it is a foundation of the culturally responsive leadership framework. One possible reason would be that school principals often think of their success as a whole, digging deep into individual cultural awareness and diversity, and not as a campus wide initiative.

Implications

As a result of this study's findings, implications for superintendents and school principals emerged.

It is important for school superintendents to understand that a school principal's cultural proficiency can be used to influence the principal's ability to carry on effective transformational leadership because this understanding can inform the selection and development of effective leaders in the education system.

This understanding can support superintendents in the hiring process of principals with a mindset of high beliefs and ownership for student learning. A principal's culturally responsive leadership allows them to create school culture that thrives in student ownership, supportive improvement and high innovative expectation within the campuses.

Superintendents need to be aware that principals who carry on culturally responsive leadership practices will create high teacher effectiveness, and sustainable school success. When principals develop their ability to guide a campus through a common goal, they can create high expectations monitored around goal attainment in benefit of students, and teachers.

It is imperative that superintendents understand the magnitude of the relationship between school principal cultural proficiency

and transformational leadership for the success of their school communities.

As school principals grow to understand and value diversity, they contribute to the growth and success of their school community. In part, by creating equitable environments where marginalized groups of staff and students can be successful.

When principals have a high cultural proficiency, they are more likely to engage diverse stakeholders, grow positive relationships and interactions with stakeholders for the betterment of the school culture focused on diversity and success.

Principals who are self-efficacious in cultural responsiveness prioritize the development of school-wide supportive curriculum linked to personalized student interest, and their lived experience.

They practice inclusive acknowledgment and respect for all student learners. They develop teacher capacity and engage teachers in professional development to address instructional strategies with improved teacher job satisfaction and retention rates.

The understanding of the relationship between a principal's cultural proficiency and transformational leadership is crucial for their own success and influence in meeting the vision and mission of their school.

Author Biographies

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