Journal of Critical Issues in Educational Practice

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From the Editors

Editorial Board Members

There are those who believe that all of the issues we face in education are at some level critical. Though we do not entirely disagree, we think some are in more urgent need of our attention than others. In this issue of the Journal, four articles have been selected that meet this criterion. In addition, we paid tribute to our colleague, Dr. Brett Nelson.

Supporting student work is an important priority in the university. The first article is student research supported by university faculty and an exemplar of this type of collaboration. Dr. Sue Singh, supported by Dr Ayako Schweikle, Dr. Debra Cote, and CSUSB college Dr. Shannon Sparks, investigated the use of positive reinforcement in behavior management. The ongoing issue of classroom management has been addressed with findings that provide guidance to support the effective implementation of Positive Behavioral interventions and Supports (PBIS).

Drs. Welborn and Flores examine the important issue of culturally proficient educational practice. The extent to which this conceptual framework is used by principals represents an important element of our efforts to promote equity in educational access and outcomes. The utility of this framework for principals is a necessary component of school improvement.

CSUSB faculty, Drs. Lorraine Hedtke (Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation and Counseling) and Arianna Huhn (Department of Anthropology) report on INTO LIGHT, a project that created a venue to rescue the living stories of those who died of drug overdose. This exhibit hosted by California State University's Anthropology museum put a human face on substance abuse as a method to erase the sigma and shame that often accompanies this disorder. This partnership is a hopeful sign of progress and the benefit of bringing this issue INTO LIGHT.

Dr. Ruby Lin considers issues affecting first-generation college students. Absent a family tradition, many of these students are considered more vulnerable and in need of alternative support systems. This became increasingly apparent during the COVID shutdowns and what was might be learned from that experience has implications for how these students can be successful. A model of this type of support is examined.

And finally, we pay tribute to our colleague, Dr. Brett Nelson, Professor of Education in the CSUSB School Psychology Program, who passed away on October 11, 2023. The memoriam was written by Dr. Shane Jimerson, faculty at UC Santa Barbara, and captures the esteem in which Dr. Nelson was held and the importance of his professional contributions. We have reprinted Dr. Jimerson's remarks in its entirety.

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A Mixed Method Study of Teachers' Perception of Positive Reinforcement for Behavior Management

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Abstract

Positive reinforcement is a behavior management technique supported by empirical evidence, known to enhance student performance and their outcomes (Alberto et al., 2022; Fabiano & Pelham, 2003; Scheuermann et al., 2022). However, many teachers encounter difficulties in effectively implementing this tool in their everyday classroom teaching practices. This mixed methods study aimed to contribute to existing literature focusing on instructional behavior of credentialed teachers. The findings revealed that teachers who received training in PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) observed the following: (1) the overall benefits of rewarding appropriate student behavior with activities, (2) the significance of having adequate resources and school supports to reinforce desirable student behavior, and (3) the necessity of providing reinforcement exclusively for engaging in appropriate behavior. Additionally, the number of years of teaching experience demonstrated significant correlations with: (1) the ease with which teachers found rewarding students, (2) the availability of time to reinforce on-task behavior, and (3) the availability of resources to reinforce desirable behavior. Teachers who reported prior experience in special education classrooms exhibited significant correlations with: (1) the helpfulness of using individual rewards to motivate their students, and (2) the presence of staff in supporting and reinforcing appropriate behavior in the classroom.

Teachers' Perception of Positive Reinforcement for Behavior Management

Johnny is a seven-year-old boy who constantly shouts out during class time. When his teacher, Ms. Smith, does not promptly respond to him, Johnny proceeds to scream, cry and throw his materials. Dealing with Johnny's behavioral episodes takes time away from teaching the lessons; additionally, he distracts other students and rarely finishes his own work. When Johnny does not get his way, he becomes aggressive towards his teacher and his classmates. On two occasions Johnny even ran out of the classroom and Ms. Smith had to run after him. Despite multiple warnings and reminders of class rules, Johnny continues to struggle in class.

Disruptive behaviors such as Johnny's tantrums, aggressions and elopements are a challenge to teachers everywhere. Research has shown that 17 percent of teachers can lose up to four hours of instructional time each week due to students' disruptive behaviors (Sulaimani & Bagadood, 2020). One characteristic of successful teaching is an educators' ability to effectively manage student behaviors and to minimize future episodes. It is a common challenge to manage maladaptive behaviors that impede learning.

Positive Reinforcement and Overall Benefits

Positive reinforcement has been found to increase motivation and contribute to students overall learning (Scheuermann et al., 2022). Using rewards have been found to be a simple way to motivate students to complete tasks, transition between activities, and engage in social interactions they may likely want to avoid. While some researchers support the idea that reinforcement promotes skill acquisition, some assert that reward systems may decrease one's intrinsic motivation to engage in activities and make the individual dependent on extrinsic reinforcers (Scheuermann et al., 2022).

Positive reinforcement is particularly relevant for individuals with disabilities who may lack initial intrinsic motivation. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), a science dedicated to understanding and improving human behavior, commonly utilizes positive reinforcement in skill acquisition (Cooper et al., 2007). Positive reinforcement has been successfully used in school settings for children with disabilities to help manage challenging behaviors (Alberto et al., 2022; Conroy et al., 2009). Research also suggests that positive reinforcement is equally effective with children in general education settings (Hoff & DuPaul, 1998; Sugai & Horner, 2002).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA, initially known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), was created in 1975 to provide Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to individuals aged 3-21. The law has undergone many revisions over the years (Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015). To qualify for special education under IDEA, an individual must have a condition or disorder that significantly affects their academic achievement (IDEA, 2004; Katsiyannis et al., 2002). These disorders often disrupt processes required for language use, including speaking, listening, processing, reading, writing, and math (Downs, 2016; Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015; Katsiyannis et al., 2002).

IDEA encompasses six pillars aimed at providing children with disabilities the same educational opportunities as their typical peers. These pillars include Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs), access to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), education in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), appropriate evaluations, parent and teacher participation, and procedural safeguards (Friend & Bursuck, 2021). The IEP is the most critical pillar, requiring schools to create customized plans to meet the individual's specific needs. However, many children with disabilities often lack appropriate reinforcement systems and motivating environments in their educational settings, which pose challenges to their skill acquisition and task completion.

Despite differing opinions on reinforcement, many educators have continued to use it as a tool to increase motivation and compliance among students receiving special education services. However, implementing positive reinforcement can be challenging, particularly in the school setting (Alberto et al., 2022). A reinforcer is a stimulus change that increases the future frequency of a behavior that precedes it (Robinson et al., 2019; Scheuermann et al., 2022). Teaching is an emotionally charged occupation, and changing teaching practices can be quite demanding (Scott & Sutton, 2009). This study aimed to contribute to the existing literature by focusing on teachers' instructional behavior, enabling them to rely more on and effectively implement positive reinforcement strategies.

The purpose of this study was to examine the obstacles encountered by teachers when implementing positive reinforcement, with the intention of fostering comprehension and self-

reflection that could result in modifications to teachers' instructional behavior regarding the use of positive reinforcement. The following research questions were:

1. What are the teachers' perceptions of (a) positive reinforcement for behavior management, (b) their implementation of positive reinforcement, and (c) the enabling and constraining factors to their implementation of positive reinforcement?
2. How do the qualitative results explain the enabling and constraining factors to the implementation of positive reinforcement?

Methods

A mixed method approach was used to investigate teachers' perceptions of positive reinforcement to better understand the barriers teachers face in implementing positive reinforcement within the school setting. The explanatory sequential design included four steps (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). The first step was designing and implementing the quantitative phase of the study. This entailed obtaining permission from the school districts to use staff as participants, identifying the participating individuals, next creating a survey that would be used for data collection, and lastly analyzing the data through statistical analysis methods. The second step of the design was to create a connection from the quantitative results to the analysis through qualitative exploration. To do this, it was deemed necessary to determine what quantitative results would be further explored in Phase Two of the study. Additionally, a second step used the quantitative results to identify which participants were to be used for the qualitative portion of the design. Participants were asked if they were open to being interviewed and participating in a survey. Step three explored and identified patterns using a qualitative approach that was to be used to gather information from the data. During this step, open-ended data were collected with protocols guided from Phase One results (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). The last step involved interpretation of the results from both phases of the design. Next, qualitative results helped clarify and further explain the quantitative outcomes.

Data Collection

Data were collected from credentialed teachers who taught in K-12 elementary and high schools. Participants were from five districts in Southern California. A non-probability sampling method was utilized. Non-probability sampling methods uses a subset of the population that represents the larger population; therefore, generalizations from the subsample can be made from the larger population (Bickman & Rog, 2013).

Phase One

Phase One, data were collected via Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2019). Participants were provided with a link to the survey. The survey was comprised of 8 demographic questions and 15 survey questions. The questions revolved around the theme of teacher perception of positive reinforcement. Questions were answered on a 5-point Likert scale. Items focused on how much the teachers endorsed these items and described the implementation of positive reinforcement.

Phase One data were analyzed by running two types of regression analyses (Statistic Solutions, 2013). The first type of regression employed a simple linear regression. The second regression model used was the multiple regression.

Phase Two

For Phase Two, interviews were conducted by ZOOM. Using ZOOM's chat room option, interviews were conducted with participants. All interviews were recorded to facilitate the transcription of the content. Data analysis consisted of two procedural phases. In the first phase, data were prepared for analysis. The second phase of qualitative data analysis required development of a qualitative codebook. Analyzing the data took multiple steps: (1) coding the data, (2) assigning labels to each code, (3) grouping codes into emerging themes, (4) analyzing the themes in order to create subset themes, and (5) inputting the data into a software program. The transcriptions were then uploaded into Dedoose (SocioCultural Research Consultants, 2018) which searched for key words and themes. The information was categorized into emerging forms of data or a priori, meaning predetermined themes (Bickman & Rog, 2009).

Results

A total of 104 credentialed teachers participated in the survey portion of the study. One hundred thirty-six surveys were delivered, and out of these 71.47% (104) of the teachers returned the survey for analysis. Nine of the 24 survey questions asked the participants demographic related questions. The remaining 15 questions were written with the intent of gaining an understanding of teachers' perceptions of: (a) positive reinforcement for behavior management, (b) their implementation of positive reinforcement, and (c) the enabling and constraining factors to their implementation of positive reinforcement. Table 1 presents the results of participant feedback on the implementation of positive reinforcement and the hindering factors in their classroom. The survey used a Likert scale ranging from "Disagree" to "Agree". See Table 1.

Table 1

Protocol Questions Descriptives: Minimum, Maximum, Mean and Standard Deviation

Protocol Question (PQ)	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q1. Positive reinforcement techniques (e.g., reward) are easy to use	2	5	4.34	.745
Q2. It is beneficial to use group rewards to motivate my students	1	5	4.11	1.044
Q3. Using individual rewards to motivate my students is helpful	1	5	4.43	.799
Q4. I find it easy to reward my students	2	5	4.13	.915
Q5. Rewarding appropriate student behavior with tangibles (i.e., stickers, prizes) is feasible	1	5	4.10	.995
Q6. Rewarding appropriate student behavior with activities is advantageous	2	5	4.29	.812
Q7. Rewarding appropriate student behavior with praise is natural to me	3	5	4.73	.548
Q8. It is helpful to teach students to recognize acceptable student behaviors	3	5	4.70	.582
Q9. Reminding my students of consequences for appropriate behavior is effective	2	5	4.40	.736
Q10. I have time to reinforce on-task student behavior	2	5	4.16	.887
Q11. I have resources to reinforce suitable student behavior	1	5	4.01	1.006

Correlations between variables were noted, before conducting the next regression analyses. Tables 2 and 3 detail the correlations between the survey items and demographic questions asked of participants. Specifically, Table 2 indicates the correlation between number of male/female participants, their training in positive behavioral intervention supports/special education and experience teaching special education. Further, Table 3 indicates the correlation between participant and teaching experience.

Table 2

Correlation for Survey Items and Gender, Training in PBIS/SPED and Has Taught SPED

Survey Items Measuring Teachers Perceptions on Positive Reinforcement	Gender	Training in PBIS/SPED	Taught SPED
Positive reinforcement techniques (e.g., reward) are easy to use	.128	.081	-.029
It is beneficial to use group rewards to motivate my students	-.018	-.041	.062
Using individual rewards to motivate my students is helpful	.177	-.198	-.230*
I find it easy to reward my students	.185	-.085	-.021
Rewarding appropriate student behavior with tangibles (i.e., stickers, prizes) is feasible	.208*	.013	-.013
Rewarding appropriate student behavior with activities is advantageous	.085	-.207*	-.122
Rewarding appropriate student behavior with praise is natural to me	.120	-.087	-.025
It is helpful to teach students to recognize acceptable student behaviors	.000	.170	.021
Reminding my students of consequences for appropriate behavior is effective	-.129	.068	-.139

I have time to reinforce on-task student behavior	-.044	-.072	.123
I have resources to reinforce suitable student behavior	-.001	-.212*	.035
I have school support (e.g., admin) to reinforce acceptable student behavior	.075	-.281*	-.134
I have staff support (e.g., aide) in the classroom to reinforce appropriate student behavior	-.031	-.129	-.276**
Students must receive reinforcement only for engaging in appropriate behavior	-.040	-.219*	-.171
Rewarding students with positive reinforcement takes away from their intrinsic motivation	-.035	.022	.156

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3

Correlations Between Survey Question Items and Age and Years Teaching

Survey Items Measuring Teachers Perceptions on Positive Reinforcement	Age	Years Teaching
Positive reinforcement techniques (e.g., reward) are easy to use	.087	.149
It is beneficial to use group rewards to motivate my students	.183	.093
Using individual rewards to motivate my students is helpful	.019	.077
I find it easy to reward my students	.243*	.213*
Rewarding appropriate student behavior with tangibles (i.e., stickers, prizes) is feasible	.128	.146
Rewarding appropriate student behavior with activities is advantageous	.105	.111
Rewarding appropriate student behavior with praise is natural to me	.040	.031
It is helpful to teach students to recognize acceptable student behaviors	.052	.010
Reminding my students of consequences for appropriate behavior is effective	.131	.076
I have time to reinforce on-task student behavior	.069	.232*
I have resources to reinforce suitable student behavior	.196	.210*

I have school support (e.g., admin) to reinforce acceptable student behavior	.123	.191
I have staff support (e.g., aide) in the classroom to reinforce appropriate student behavior	-.054	-.080
Students must receive reinforcement only for engaging in appropriate behavior	-.022	.001
Rewarding students with positive reinforcement takes away from their intrinsic motivation	.006	.081
Note: *$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, ***$p < .001$		

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

Interviewees talked about factors as being barriers to the use of positive reinforcement in the school setting. Phase Two was able to identify the factors that hindered implementation of positive reinforcement. Participants identified the following as facilitating influences to implementing positive reinforcement: (1) consistency across staff, (2) positive reinforcement being an evidence-based practice, (3) easy to implement and (4) training and implementation checks. Participants identified the following as barriers to the employment of positive reinforcement: (1) inconsistency of implementation, (2) lack of resources, (3) positive reinforcement is time consuming, and (4) the overall lack of training. Table 4 codes the total number of times during the semi-structured interview that the following factors were identified. For example, *consistency across staff* was noted a total of 10 times; *ease of implementation of positive reinforcement*, a total of 21 times. See Table 4.

Table 4

Code Application of Interviews

Media	Facilitating Factor	Consistency Across Staff	EBP	Ease of Implementation	Training & Implementation	Hindering Factors	Consistency of	Resources	Time consuming	Training	Totals
Interview 9			1	1	1		1			1	5
Interview 8			1	1	1		2	1	1	1	8
Interview 7		2	2				1			3	8
Interview 6		1	1	2			1	2	2		9
Interview 5		1	1	1	2				1	1	7
Interview 4			4	4	2					7	17
Interview 3				3			1	2			6
Interview 2		3	2	2	1				2		10
Interview 11			1	3			2		2	2	10
Interview 10		3		2			2		1		8
Interview 1			2	2			3		4		11
Totals		10	15	21	7		13	6	13	14	

Participants were asked six open-ended questions as part of the semi-structured interview (i.e., Phase Two). The semi-structured interviewed questions were: (1) How easy is using positive reinforcement in your classroom?, (2) How beneficial do you find the use of rewards to be for your students?, (3) When do you use reinforcement in the classroom?, (4) How do you support your student's identification of appropriate reinforcement?(5) What factors most support your use of reinforcement?, and (6) What factors least support your use of reinforcement? These questions further examined two overarching themes: facilitating factors to implementation of positive reinforcement and hindering factors to implementation of positive reinforcement. A few major themes emerged from the data collected during Phase One and Two of the study. The first was whether a teacher's training in PBIS correlated with more positive perceptions of positive reinforcement. Teachers who had training in PBIS or special education talked about seeing direct results from their practice of reinforcing students' behaviors. A second theme was the influence of how many years an instructor had been teaching. Gender correlated with one survey item (i.e., rewarding appropriate student behavior is feasible). Results revealed that participants who identified as female were more likely to score this item higher (e.g., majority of participants identified as female in this study). Per the descriptive data for this sample, out of the 104 participants only 21 identified as male. This translates into 79.8% of the participants being female and 20.2% participants being male. The disproportion, however, is reflective of the teacher gender gap (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Current research shows that educators rely heavily on personal experiences and traditions to guide their work; teachers continue to struggle with implementation of positive reinforcement (Cook et al., 2008; Cook et al., 2013; Sugai & Horner, 2009; Wheeler & Richey, 2019; Wong et al., 2013). Teacher training in PBIS is crucial to the implementation of behavior management techniques in the classroom setting. Future research must investigate sources that teachers use to inform themselves and emphasize continuing education on making teacher informed evidence-based practices (e.g., professional development, professional literature, and organizations).

The educational system as a whole has changed greatly in the last three decades and encountered major difficulty in keeping up with the diverse needs of students in the classroom. One way to meet the needs of our diverse students is to use evidence-based practices in the classrooms (Wong et al., 2013). Studies have shown the use of positive reinforcement to be an effective, evidence-based tool for behavior management (Cook et al., 2008; Cook et al., 2013; Sugai & Horner, 2009; Wheeler & Richey, 2019; Wong et al., 2013). Research demonstrates that behavior interventions are helpful in reducing maladaptive student behavior and increasing academic achievement in students (Alberto et al., 2022; Scheuermann et al., 2022).

It is recommended that future research explore the effectiveness of behavior management techniques and the efficacy on teacher attrition. Although this research adds valuable information to the literature, hopefully it will guide and aide teachers to become effective in their own classrooms when it comes to positive reinforcement. The dynamic environment surrounding our educational system demands that educators and educational leaders operate with an inquiry stance. It is imperative that teachers and supporting staff approach maladaptive behavior with evidence-based practices and a solution focused mindset. Teachers must facilitate behavior that

will be conducive to academic achievement, social integration in the classroom and promote independence. The educational system will benefit from having teachers that employ behavior management techniques proven to be effective across culturally and linguistically diverse student populations, such as positive reinforcement.

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Self-management as an evidence-based practice for students with autism spectrum disorder الإدارة الذاتية كممارسة قائمة على الأدلة للطلاب ذوى اضطراب طيف التوحد. *Journal of Special Education and Rehabilitation, 11*(39), 1-25. Retrieved from: https://sero.journals.ekb.eg/article_126444_1001c172744a2c69542e7cb2a07674f1.pdf

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Equity Requires Action: Principals' Use and Value of Culturally Proficient Educational Practice

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Abstract

This quantitative, descriptive study investigated 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 education, disparities in educational outcomes, and school change exists, inequities in policy and practice perpetuate academic and social setbacks for some of our nation's youth 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) the differences in principals' perceptions across urban, suburban, and rural locale. The study's findings revealed the most important and most frequently used culturally competent practices to school principals were associated with valuing diversity. Conversely, the least important and least frequently used culturally competent practices to school principals were associated with assessing cultural knowledge. Conclusions suggest that applying the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency allows for paradigms shifts to praxis, where theory becomes practice through action towards equity and inclusion.

Introduction

One of the most critical issues in education is student achievement in public schools across the United States (Barton & Coley, 2009; Chubb & Loveless, 2002; Coleman, 1966; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner IV, 2013; Murphy, 2009). Despite national, state, and local laws, mandates, and school reform initiatives, the disparities in education across cultural diversity of our students prevail. From *Mendez v. Westminster*, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Title I, Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, No Child Left Behind, and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, national assessment data continue to highlight the disparities and educational gaps among and between various racial, ethnic, social class, and ability populations (Ferguson, 2008; Hammond, 2015; Howard, 2006; Jencks et al., 1979; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera, 2008; Wagner, 2008).

When disaggregated data show that groups of students continue to wane decade after decade, it is often of great concern for the students, their families, the school site, the principal, the research community, and beyond. Research has provided evidence that data-based decision-making is key to increasing student outcomes (Bernhardt, 2015; Hyson et al., 2020; Pelusi, 2015; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Schildkamp et al., 2013; Schildkamp et al., 2019), but the focus is why we have not actualized positive student outcomes for all. We have reorganized professional learning communities, instituted character education, restorative practices, and intervention models, such as Response to Intervention, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, and Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS); we have enhanced special education models, invested in enrichment programs, afterschool programs, and extracurriculars; we have provided food

security, health care services, hired directors and coordinators of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and even spent billions of dollars on professional learning trainings to increase awareness of diversity, bias, and other equity-based practice models. The question remains: What is the catalyst for equitable outcomes in our urban, suburban, and rural public schools?

Educational leaders are called to shift this landscape annually with comprehensive school improvement planning and fundamentally opening access and opportunity for those on the lower end of educational gaps. Numerous scholars (Byrk & Schneider, 2002; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Grissom et al., 2012; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005) have demonstrated the strong effect a school principal has on school policies, practices, and even influencing behaviors, that often act as barriers, but ultimately hold the keys to educational equity. Leithwood et al. (2004) wrote, "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn in school" (p.5). Hattie (2012) found that the school principal/leader has a 0.36 effect size. Urban, suburban, and rural school principals who engage in the work of access and equity and see transformative and organizational change don't just *talk the talk* but also *walk the walk*.

Singleton (2018) wrote, "Systemic equity transformation requires a shift in the organizational culture and climate of school systems, and schools that shift must flow from the highest-ranking leadership to and between staff in all divisions of the district" (p. 30). This notion reiterates the importance of the school site leader. This shift in organizational culture and climate requires an inside-out approach to equity. Cultural Proficiency is an inside-out approach that allows individuals the opportunity to explore their own personal values, behaviors, and beliefs.

> Cultural Proficiency is a paradigm shift that allows you as a leader to view those who are culturally different from you as an asset to your life rather than an opposing person who is different, threatening, or even untenable to work with in any setting. (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 4)

The Conceptual Framework of Cultural Proficiency provides a framework and tools for leaders and staff to acknowledge and overcome barriers by ensuring action is taken in the pursuit of equitable outcomes (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). Praxis allows for the *talk* to become the *walk* through action. Specifically, the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency include five action verbs school principals can use to transform policies, practices, and behaviors and ultimately change a system where inequities in education no longer exist.

"Culturally competent school leaders understand that effective leadership in a diverse environment is about changing how we work with those culturally different from ourselves. Personal transformation that facilitates organizational change is the goal of cultural competence" (Lindsey et al., 2005, p. 79). School principals who develop the capacity to lead change with a mindset and an inside-out approach to Cultural Proficiency know the importance of assessing their cultural knowledge and valuing diversity throughout the system (Lindsey et al., 2019). "Culturally proficient leaders use the "inside-out" approach of transformational change for the planning process and focus on "doing their own work first" before taking the work outside of the planning team" (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 69). Prominent scholars (Dilts, 1990; Fullan, 1997; Gardner, 2004; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2006; Lindsey et al., 2019; Nelson & Guerra, 2014) have referenced the critical component of reflection of self-identity, experience, and behavior required for change.

Dilts (1990) developed a model including nested levels of organizational change that guide leaders in transforming systems by identifying leverage points for adapting policies, practices, and behaviors that produce or perpetuate inequitable outcomes (Welborn et al., 2022). Dilts's model's leverage point of *identity* references the individual or group's sense of self, answering the question: Who are we? Or Who am I? School leaders who leverage change in this level of Dilts's model first have greater success in transforming the organization's belief systems, capabilities, behaviors, and environment (Garmston, 2004). The approach school principals use in leading policy and practice implementation and organizational change in their schools, matters, especially for those who have been historically marginalized.

The abovementioned introduction and literature review provided a summary of comprehensive consideration of the literature relative to the object of study. The purpose of this study and research questions were designed to fill the gaps in the literature around outcomes related to school principals' use of and value for culturally proficient educational practice and application of the Essential Elements for transformative organizational change. While extensive literature exists regarding educational leadership, student achievement, and organizational change for school reform, further research is needed to investigate the cultural context in urban, suburban, and rural schools and the degree to which school principals value and use culturally competent practices to support change and mitigate the educational gaps that exist between and among the students in their schools.

Conceptual Framework

Cultural Proficiency is a mindset and inside-out approach of "the personal values and behaviors of individuals and the organization's policies and practices that provide opportunities for interactions among students, educators, and community members" (Lindsey et al., 2010, p. 12). The *Cultural Proficiency Framework* is comprised of four tools educational leaders can use for school improvement reform efforts aimed at improving student outcomes for all (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). The four tools include: (1) *Overcoming the Barriers*; (2) *Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency*; (3) *Cultural Proficiency Continuum*; and (4) *Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency*.
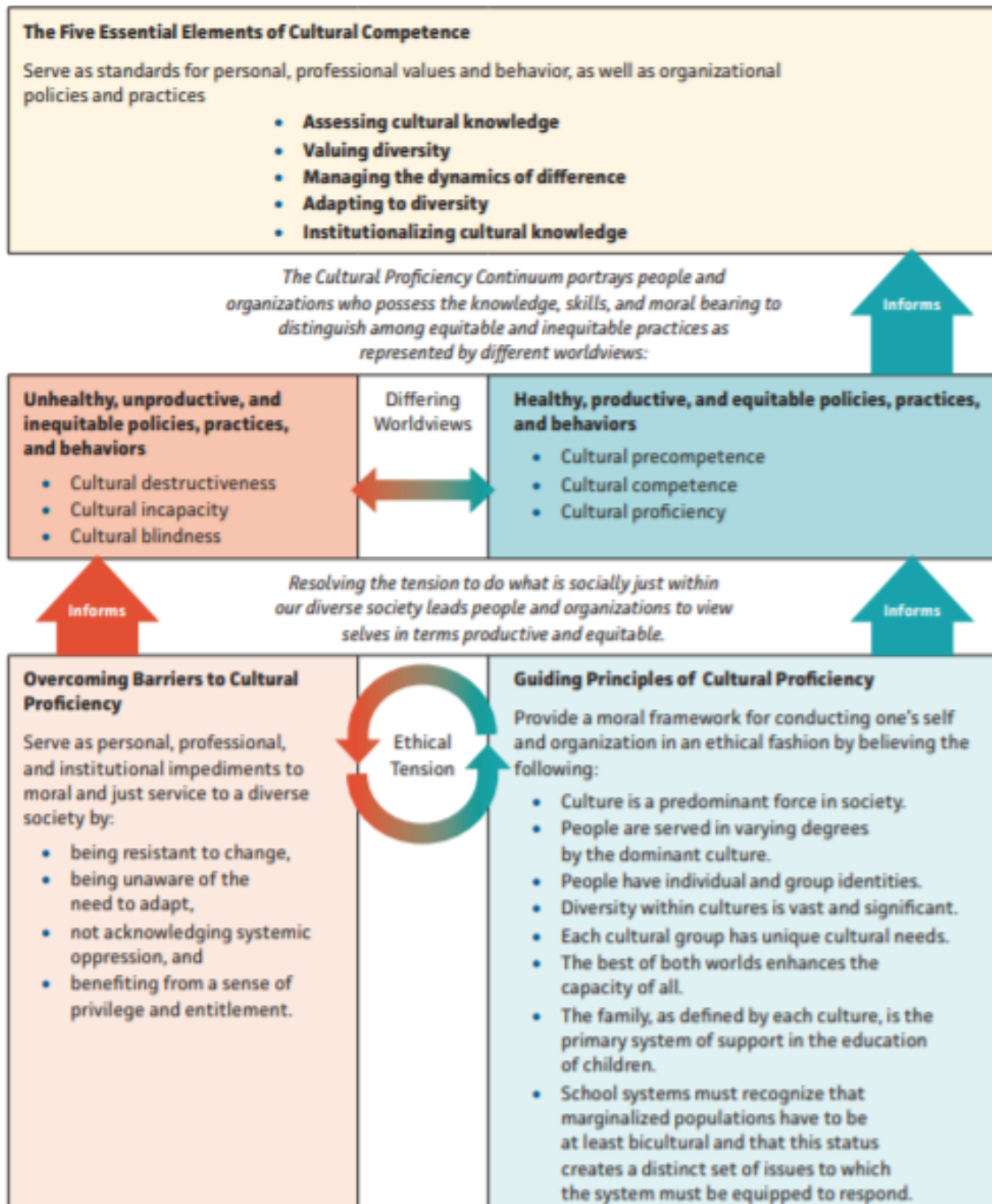
The framework is structured with two of the tools serving as the foundation of culturally proficient educational practice. The tool on the left, bottom side, as displayed in Figure 1, is the negative side. This tool, *Overcoming the Barriers to Cultural Proficiency*, serves as personal, professional, 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 (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 20). Conversely, the right side of the framework is positive (see Figure 1). This 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 (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 20).

In Figure 1, informative arrows move upward into *The Cultural Proficiency Continuum.* This tool includes six bulleted points, three negative and three positive, that allow educators to use self-reflection and dialogue to distinguish between equitable and inequitable policies and practices in their organizations. 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 (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 20).

The final Tool of Cultural Proficiency, and arguably the most important for actualizing equitable outcomes, 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). Welborn et al., (2022) identified five purposes of applying the Essential Elements: (1) To learn about the change process; (2) To conduct a self-assessment for leading the work; (3) To support change through dialogue; (4) To develop a strategic action plan; and (5) To monitor progress toward equity goals (p. 167). *The Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency* are the conceptual focus of this study and were used as a *priori* themes in the analysis and discussion because of their relationship to the culturally competent practices identified in the data collection survey instrument.

To further explain, the first Essential Element of Cultural Proficiency is *assessing cultural knowledge*. Assessing cultural knowledge is about claiming your differences in cultural identity and behavior. Individuals and team assess culture knowledge by recognizing how their identity and behavior affects others; describing the complex nature of the school's culture and understanding how the culture of the school affects others (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). Once actions are taken to assess cultural knowledge, the focus then moves to *valuing diversity.* This Essential Element is about naming the differences. Individuals and teams who value diversity celebrate and encourage the presence of people from a variety of cultures in all activities. They recognize differences in cultural identities and behaviors are not inappropriate or wrong, but merely an asset, and they also accept that cultures do find some values and behaviors more important than others (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). *Managing the dynamics of difference* is another Essential Element in which individuals and teams learn effective ways to resolve conflict. To ensure praxis and the continuation toward change, once conflict is resolved, leaders apply another Essential Element, *adapting to diversity*. Actions for adapting to diversity relate to changes in the way things are done to acknowledge the complexity of diversity such as developing skills for intercultural communication and implementing cultural interventions to resolve conflicts. The final Essential Element, and one that is often overlooked or abandoned because of the sustainability required is *institutionalizing cultural knowledge*. This action completes the change process in that the changes are driven in the systems of the organization. Cultural knowledge is incorporated into the organization and becomes the norm. Staff development is ongoing around cultural changes, effects, and conflicts, and *Cultural Proficiency* is embedded in all aspects of the organization (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022).

Figure 1

The Five Essential Elements of Cultural Competence

Serve as standards for personal, professional values and behavior, as well as organizational policies and practices

- **Assessing cultural knowledge**
- **Valuing diversity**
- **Managing the dynamics of difference**
- **Adapting to diversity**
- **Institutionalizing cultural knowledge**

The Cultural Proficiency Continuum portrays people and organizations who possess the knowledge, skills, and moral bearing to distinguish among equitable and inequitable practices as represented by different worldviews:

Informs

Unhealthy, unproductive, and inequitable policies, practices, and behaviors

- Cultural destructiveness
- Cultural incapacity
- Cultural blindness

Differing Worldviews

Healthy, productive, and equitable policies, practices, and behaviors

- Cultural precompetence
- Cultural competence
- Cultural proficiency

Resolving the tension to do what is socially just within our diverse society leads people and organizations to view selves in terms productive and equitable.

Informs

Informs

Overcoming Barriers to Cultural Proficiency

Serve as personal, professional, and institutional impediments to moral and just service to a diverse society by:

- being resistant to change,
- being unaware of the need to adapt,
- not acknowledging systemic oppression, and
- benefiting from a sense of privilege and entitlement.

Ethical Tension

Guiding Principles of Cultural Proficiency

Provide a moral framework for conducting one's self and organization in an ethical fashion by believing the following:

- Culture is a predominant force in society.
- People are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture.
- People have individual and group identities.
- Diversity within cultures is vast and significant.
- Each cultural group has unique cultural needs.
- The best of both worlds enhances the capacity of all.
- The family, as defined by each culture, is the primary system of support in the education of children.
- School systems must recognize that marginalized populations have to be at least bicultural and that this status creates a distinct set of issues to which the system must be equipped to respond.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Given the rationale for this study and the conceptual framework of Cultural Proficiency, the purpose of this study was to investigate 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:

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1. What do K-12 school principals report regarding their value for using culturally proficient practices?
2. What do K-12 school principals report regarding their use of culturally proficient practices?
3. How do K-12 school principals' perceptions differ across locale?

Research Methodology

To answer the research questions, the researchers employed a quantitative descriptive study methodology using survey research. Descriptive research was best suited for this study to examine and try to make sense of school principals' beliefs regarding their value for and use of culturally proficient practices across urban, suburban, large-town, and rural locales in the United States. Data was collected from a sample of individuals that are presumed to represent the larger population using a questionnaire (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). An analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, with the aim to contribute to efforts to solve the research problem of disparities in student educational outcomes, through the interpretation of the data that were gathered (Leedy & Ormrod).

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			

The questionnaire was sent to all K-12 public school principals listed in the State Departments' databases. A total of 383 individuals responded to the questionnaire with 323 indicating traditional public, 27 indicating they serve in a charter school, and 26 classifying their school as *other* than traditional public or charter. Out of the total population, 107 principals identified their school site as existing in an urban area (population equal to or greater than 250,000); 124 as suburban/large city (population 50,000 – 249,999); 40 as mid-size city/large town (population 49,999 – 25,000); and 112 as rural (population 1 - 24,999). As for the location in the United States, 37 respondents served as school principals in the West; 200 served as school principals in the Midwest; 37 served as school principals in the Northeast; and 79 served as school principals in the South Region.

Instrumentation

The researcher developed a three-part questionnaire 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 questionnaire 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, locale (NCES, 2007) 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 questionnaire collected quantitative data regarding school principals' perceptions of their value for and use of specific culturally competent practices. This part of the questionnaire, 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.

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 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. The data in Part III were not used for the purpose of this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection in descriptive research should be designed to collect quantitative data with the intent to describe a set of data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). 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* questionnaire to the population of school principals, whose contact information was publicly available or retrievable through the State Departments of Education in September 2022 using Qualtrics. In this data collection process, both quantitative data and qualitative data were collected, but for the purpose of this study and focus of this article, only the quantitative data were analyzed. Data were stored electronically, organized, and protected. Leedy & Ormrod (2019) noted that written questionnaires can be distributed to many people, but questionnaires can have their drawbacks due to the lower return rate (p. 154). The lower return rate serves as a limitation of this study, meaning the findings are necessarily representative of all school principals in the United States. Nevertheless, the use of descriptive analysis procedures allows for seeking an answer to the research questions and larger problem of disparities in educational outcomes in public schools.

The analysis step of this descriptive research study warranted analyzing the quantitative data collected by questionnaire around points of central tendency, amount of variability in the data, and the extent to which variables are associated with one another. "Statistics related to central tendency and variability help us summarize our data" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 323). The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reporting the mean, standard deviation, and variance for the 22 Likert-scale statements on the questionnaire for both the perceived value of culturally competent practices and the reported use of culturally competent practices. Determining the standard deviation and variance allowed the researchers to determine the amount of variability in the data or the amount of dispersion in the data or deviation from the mean. To answer the third question in a descriptive manner, the researcher calculated the mean scores for all survey items associated with value, and then again for use, and compared the most and least valued and used practices clustered by the Essential Elements among the urban, suburban, large town, and rural locales, as shown in *Table 5*. The final step in completing this descriptive study was to interpret the data, answer the research questions, and draw conclusions.

Findings and Analysis

The findings of this descriptive 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, provides a comparison of perceived use and value and culturally competent practices among the four locales: urban, suburban, large town, and rural. All findings are based upon the perceptions of school principals who participated in this study. It is important to note the data were not analyzed using inferential statistics due to the purpose of the study. The sample size was not large enough to warrant statistical differences between variables. The frequency of use, perception of importance, and comparisons in relation to the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency are presented in detail throughout the analysis. Educational leaders can utilize the concepts presented through these *a prioi* themes to promote equity, access, and inclusion work in their schools, organizations, and institutions by utilizing the Cultural Proficiency Framework.

Table 2

Research Questions' Alignment to Findings Regarding Use and Value

Research Questions	Use and Value
(1) What do K-12 school principals report regarding their value for using culturally proficient practices?	**Most Important** • *I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting.* • *I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.* • *I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings.* **Least Important** • *I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.* • *I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.* • *I help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture.*
(2) What do K-12 school principals report regarding their use of culturally proficient practices?	**Most Frequently Used** • *I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.* • *I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings.* • *I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting.* **Least Frequently Used** • *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 think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.* • *I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.*

	Urban
(3) How do K-12 school principals' perceptions differ across locale?	*Most Valued EE – Valuing Diversity*
	Least Valued EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge
	Most Used EE – Valuing Diversity
	Least Used EE – Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge

<div align="center">

Suburban

</div>

Most Valued EE – Valuing Diversity

Least Valued EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge

Most Used EE – Valuing Diversity

Least Used EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge

<div align="center">

Mid-Size City/Large Town

</div>

Most Valued EE – Valuing Diversity

Least Valued EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge

Most Used EE – Valuing Diversity

Least Used EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge

<div align="center">

Rural

</div>

Most Valued EE – Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge

Least Valued EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge

Most Used EE – Adapting to Diversity

Least Used EE – Assessing Cultural Knowledge

EE – Essential Element

Research Question 1

The first research question explored 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 383 school principals who responded to the questionnaire. 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

School Principals' Value for Using Culturally Competent Practices (N = 383)

Questionnaire Prompt	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.	3.74	1.18	1.40
I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.	3.85	1.15	1.33
I recognize when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well.	4.22	0.91	0.82
I seek to learn about the cultures of my organization's clients.	4.39	0.82	0.68
I anticipate how my organization's clients and employees will interact with, conflict with, and enhance one another.	4.29	0.81	0.66
I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting.	4.65	0.67	0.44
I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.	4.64	0.72	0.52
I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings.	4.59	0.68	0.46

I work to develop a learning community with the clients (internal and external) I serve.	4.15	0.67	0.45
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.	4.22	0.89	0.80
I proactively seek to interact with people whose backgrounds are different from mine.	4.22	0.86	0.73
I recognize that conflict is a normal part of life.	4.51	0.76	0.58
I work to develop skills to manage conflict in productive ways.	4.54	0.66	0.44
I help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture.	4.00	0.92	0.85
I check myself to see if an assumption I am making about a person is based upon facts or upon stereotypes about a group.	4.24	0.96	0.92
I accept that the more diverse our group becomes, the more we will change and grow.	4.44	0.79	0.63
I am committed to the continuous learning that is necessary to deal with the issues caused by differences.	4.53	0.74	0.55
I know how to learn about people and cultures unfamiliar to me without giving offense.	4.25	0.81	0.66
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.	4.45	0.72	0.53

I take advantage of teachable moments to share cultural knowledge or to learn from my colleagues.	4.37	0.79	0.63
I advocate for the marginalized in my school/district among my colleagues, the students, and their communities.	4.51	0.74	0.55
I seek to create opportunities for my colleagues, managers, clients, and the communities we serve to learn about one another.	4.26	0.86	0.74

The culturally competent practice school principals reported as the most important included: "I *welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting"*. This practice had a mean of 4.65, a standard deviation of 0.67, and a variance of 0.44, which means 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 91% 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: *Valuing Diversity*.

The second most important culturally competent practice school principals reported was: "*I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity"*. This practice had a mean of 4.64, a standard deviation of 0.72, and a variance of 0.52, which means 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 92% 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: *Valuing Diversity*.

The third most important culturally competent practice school principals reported was:*"I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings."* This practice had a mean of 4.59, a standard deviation of 0.68, and a variance of 0.46, which means 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 91% 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: *Valuing Diversity*.

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 3.74, a standard deviation of 1.18, and a variance of 1.40, which means school principals believe this practice is important, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 7% of respondents indicated this practice is not important; 8% indicated slightly important; 24% important; 29% very important; and 33% 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 3.85, a standard deviation of 1.15, and a variance of 1.33, which means school principals believe this practice is important, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 6% of respondents indicated this practice is not important; 7% indicated slightly important; 19% important; 32% very important; and 36% 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 help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture.* This practice had a mean of 4.00, a standard deviation of 0.92, and a variance of 0.85, which means school principals believe this practice is very important, however, the variability in scores shows a small dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 1% of respondents indicated this practice is not important; 5% indicated slightly important; 18% important; 42% very important; and 33% 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: *Managing the Dynamics of Difference.* Figure 2 shows the mean score for school principals' value for culturally proficient practices for each Essential Element. Overall, practices associated with *valuing diversity* had the highest mean score, while those associated with *assessing cultural knowledge* were rated lowest regarding school principals' value.
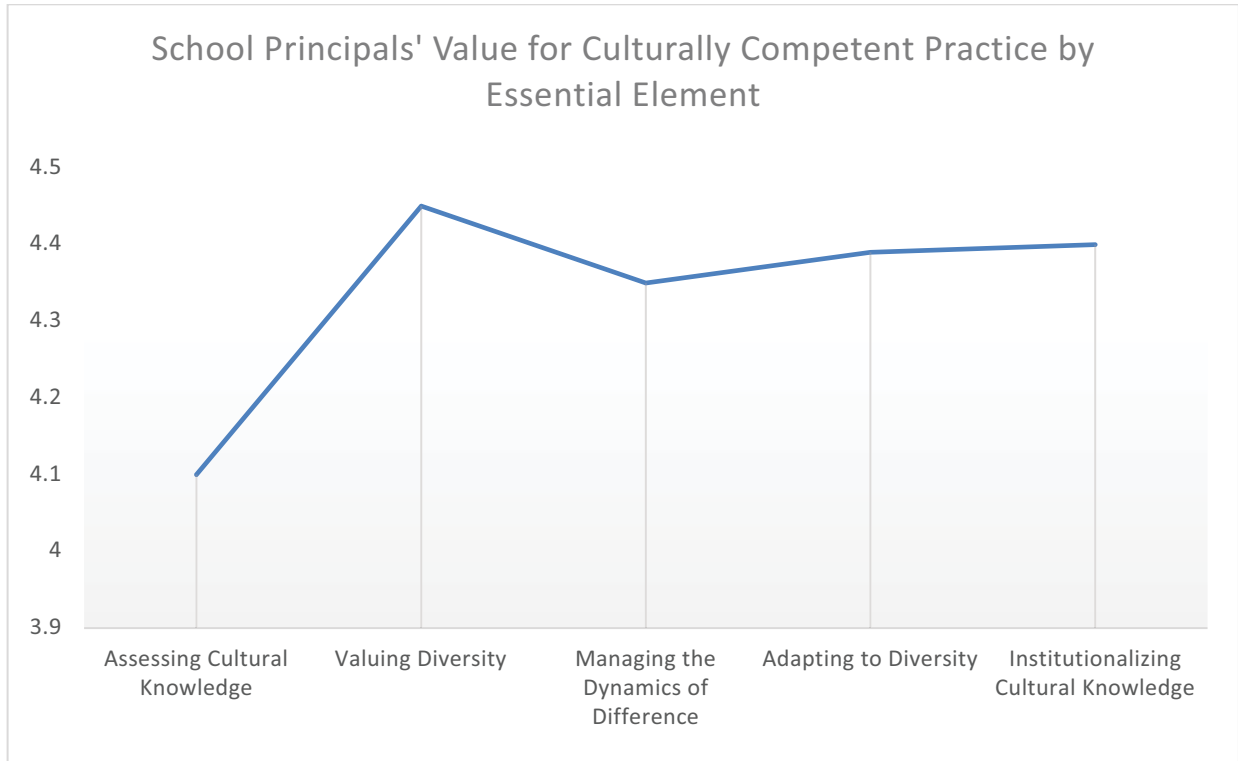
Figure 2

Figure 2. School Principals' Value for Culturally Competent Practice by Essential Element. The line represents the reported mean score for school principals' value for practices for each Essential Element.

Research Question 2

The second research question explored 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 383 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

School Principals' Use of Culturally Competent Practices (N = 383)

Questionnaire Prompt	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.	3.64	1.14	1.29
I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.	3.74	1.15	1.32
I recognize when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well.	3.86	0.95	0.91
I seek to learn about the cultures of my organization's clients.	4.12	0.90	0.81
I anticipate how my organization's clients and employees will interact with, conflict with, and enhance one another.	4.00	0.92	0.84
I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting.	4.41	0.86	0.74
I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.	4.50	0.78	0.61
I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings.	4.41	0.75	0.56
I work to develop a learning community with the clients (internal and external) I serve.	4.29	0.77	0.59
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.	3.84	0.98	0.96

I proactively seek to interact with people whose backgrounds are different from mine.	3.91	0.96	0.93
I recognize that conflict is a normal part of life.	4.31	0.80	0.64
I work to develop skills to manage conflict in productive ways.	4.37	0.78	0.61
I help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture.	3.53	1.11	1.23
I check myself to see if an assumption I am making about a person is based upon facts or upon stereotypes about a group.	3.93	1.04	1.07
I accept that the more diverse our group becomes, the more we will change and grow.	4.20	0.92	0.85
I am committed to the continuous learning that is necessary to deal with the issues caused by differences.	4.29	0.87	0.76
I know how to learn about people and cultures unfamiliar to me without giving offense.	3.98	0.86	0.73
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.	4.06	0.97	0.95
I take advantage of teachable moments to share cultural knowledge or to learn from my colleagues.	4.04	0.92	0.84
I advocate for the marginalized in my school/district among my colleagues, the students, and their communities.	4.30	0.84	0.70

I seek to create opportunities for my colleagues, managers, clients, and the communities we serve to learn about one another.	3.95	0.97	0.94

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 4.50, a standard deviation of 0.78, and a variance of 0.61, which means 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 90% 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 learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings".* This practice had a mean of 4.41, a standard deviation of 0.75, and a variance of 0.56, 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 89% 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: *Valuing Diversity*.

The third culturally competent practice school principals reported they use most frequently in their roles was: "*I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting".* This practice had a mean of 4.41, a standard deviation of 0.86, and a variance of 0.74, 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 87% 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: *Valuing Diversity*.

Conversely, the culturally competent practice school principals reported they use the least in their roles was: "*I help my colleagues to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in personal or organizational culture".* This practice had a mean of 3.53, a standard deviation of 1.11, and a variance of 1.23, which means school principals use this practice sometimes or often, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 4% of respondents indicated they rarely use this practice; 14% reported they seldom use this practice; 41% sometimes; 29% often; and 23% 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: *Managing the Dynamics of Difference.*

The culturally competent practice school principals reported they use the second least was: "*I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader".* This practice had a mean of 3.64, a standard deviation of 1.14, and a variance of 1.29, which means school principals use this practice between sometimes and often, however, the variability in scores shows a greater dispersion in value from the mean. Approximately 7% of respondents indicated they rarely use this practice; 8% reported they seldom use this practice; 23% sometimes; 38% often;

and 24% 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 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 3.74, a standard deviation of 1.15, and a variance of 1.32, which means 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; 9% reported they seldom use this practice; 19% sometimes; 37% often; and 29% 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*. Figure 3 shows the mean score for school principals' use of culturally proficient practices for each Essential Element. Overall, practices associated with *valuing diversity* had the highest mean score, while those associated with *assessing cultural knowledge* were rated lowest regarding school principals' value.

Figure 3
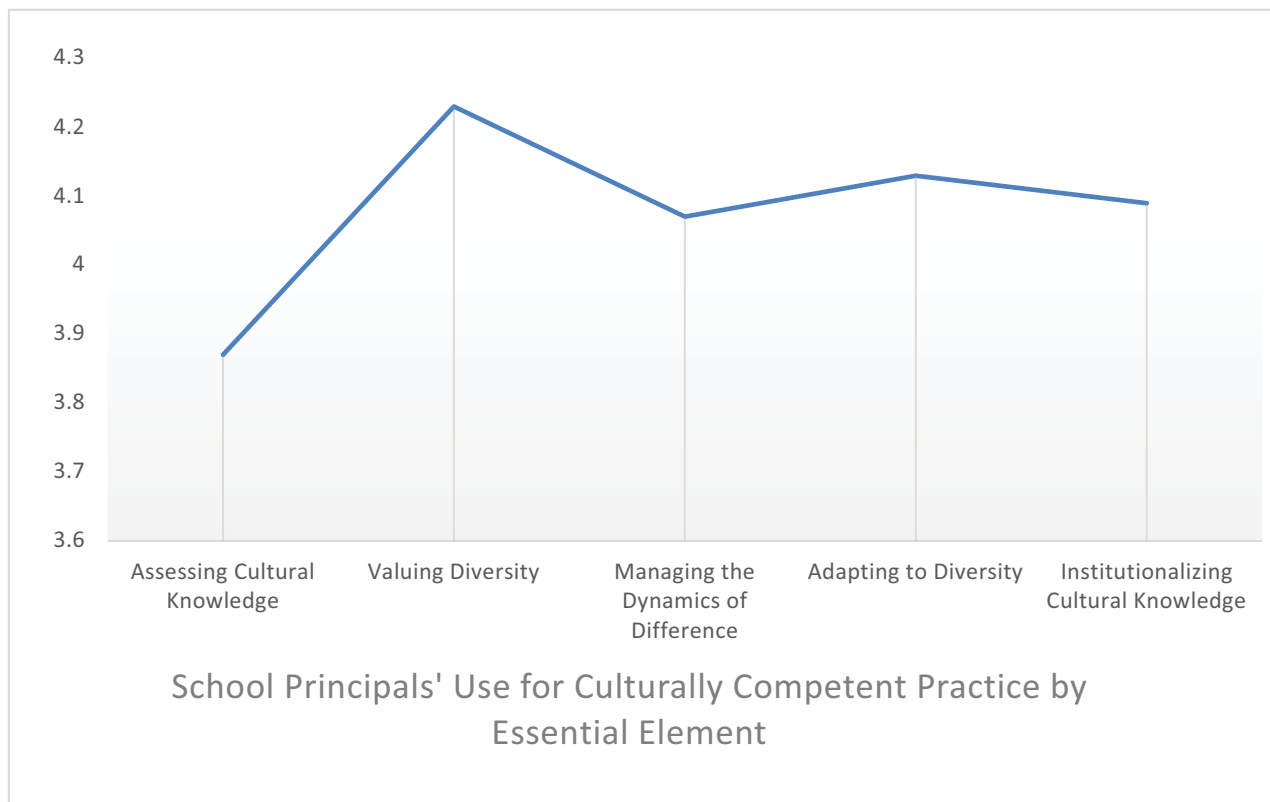
Figure 3. School Principals' Value for Culturally Competent Practice by Essential Element. The line represents the reported mean score for school principals' use of practices for each Essential Element.

Research Question 3

The third research question was used to investigate how K-12 school principals' perceptions of value and use of culturally competent practices differ across the urban, suburban, large town, and rural locales. The means were calculated and analyzed for each Essential Element of Cultural Proficiency for use and value of culturally competent practices. Table 5 includes the means of the value and use for all principals, urban principals, suburban principals, large town principals, and rural principals for each Essential Element. Cells shaded indicate a mean score less than 4 for value and less than 4 for use.

Table 5

Use and Value Mean Scores by Essential Elements Construct and Locale

	Assessing Cultural Knowledge	Valuing Diversity	Managing the Dynamics of Difference	Adapting to Diversity	Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge
All Value	4.10	4.45	4.35	4.39	4.40
All Use	3.87	4.23	4.07	4.13	4.09
Urban Value	4.27	4.65	4.54	4.56	4.51
Urban Use	4.26	4.43	4.28	4.30	4.24
Suburban Value	4.13	4.43	4.29	4.40	4.36
Suburban Use	3.80	4.20	3.97	4.11	4.04
Large Town Value	4.34	4.67	4.54	4.55	4.63
Large Town Use	4.13	4.45	4.24	4.38	4.29
Rural Value	3.71	4.20	4.15	4.16	4.25
Rural Use	3.51	4.00	3.93	4.12	3.94

The culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Valuing Diversity* were valued the most by all principals with a mean of 4.45, urban principals with a mean of 4.65, suburban principals with a mean of 4.43, and large town principals with a mean of 4.67. These mean scores warrant the findings that overall, public, K-12 school principals value practices associated with *Valuing Diversity* the most. The mean scores 4.43 – 4.67 indicate they believe those practices are somewhere between very important and extremely important in their roles as school leaders. Examples of these practices include:

- I welcome a diverse group of clients and colleagues into the work setting.
- I recognize that diversity is more than gender and race/ethnicity.
- I learn from both the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings.
- I work to develop a learning community with the clients I serve.
- 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 proactively seek to interact with people whose backgrounds are different from mine.

Conversely, rural school principals' value for culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge* the most with a mean of 4.25, and *Valuing Diversity* a close second with a mean of 4.20.

The culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Assessing Cultural Knowledge* were valued the least by all principals with a mean of 3.87, urban principals with a mean of 4.26, suburban principals with a mean of 3.80, and large town principals with a mean of 4.15, and rural principals with a mean of 3.51. These mean scores warrant the findings that overall, public, K-12 school principals value practices associated with *Assessing Cultural Knowledge* the least. The mean scores 3.51 – 4.26 indicate they believe those practices are somewhere between important and very important in their roles as school leaders; however, they believe the practices associated with *Assessing Cultural Knowledge* are less important than the practices associated with the other four Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency. Examples of these practices include:

- I think about my own culture and ethnicity as an educational leader.
- I use my knowledge of the effect my culture and ethnicity may have on other people in my work setting.
- I recognize when cultural norms do not serve everyone in the organization well.
- I see to learn about the cultures of my organization's clients.
- I anticipate how my organization's clients and employees will interact with, conflict with, and enhance one another.

The culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Valuing Diversity* were also rated as being used the most by all principals with a mean of 4.23, urban principals with a mean of 4.65, suburban principals with a mean of 4.43, and large town principals with a mean of 4.20. These mean scores warrant the findings that overall, public, K-12 school principals use practices associated with *Valuing Diversity* the most. The mean scores 4.23 – 4.65 indicate they believe they use those practices somewhere often and usually in their roles as school leaders. Conversely, rural school principals reported they use culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Adapting to Diversity* the most with a mean of 4.12, with *Valuing Diversity* a close second with a mean of 4.00.

The culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Assessing Cultural Knowledge* were also rated as being used the least by all principals with a mean of 3.87, suburban principals with a mean of 3.80, and large town principals with a mean of 4.13, and rural principals with a mean of 3.51. These mean scores warrant the findings that overall, public, K-12 school principals use practices associated with *Assessing Cultural Knowledge* the least. The mean scores 3.51 – 4.13 indicate they believe they use those practices somewhere sometimes and usually in their roles as school leaders. On the other hand, urban school principals reported they use culturally competent practices associated with the Essential Element of *Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge* the least with a mean of 4.12, with *Assessing Cultural Knowledge* a close second with a mean of 4.26.

Figure 4 includes a bar graph that compares the mean scores of school principals' perceptions regarding their value for culturally competent practices, separated by the urban, suburban, large town, and rural locales. Figure 5 includes a bar graph that compares the mean scores of school principals' perceptions regarding their use of culturally competent practices, separated by the urban, suburban, large town, and rural locales.

Figure 4
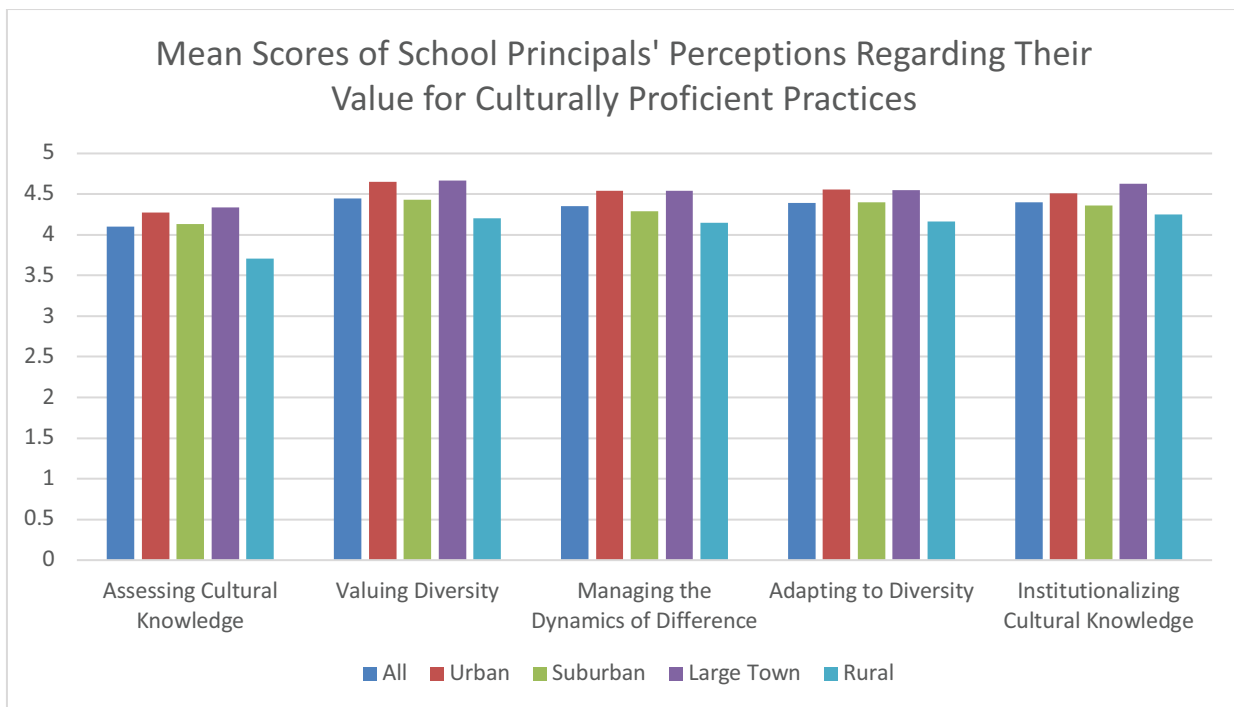
Figure 4. Mean Scores of School Principals' Perceptions Regarding Their Value for Culturally Competent Practice by Essential Element and Locale. The bars represent the reported mean score for school principals' value of practices for each Essential Element, compared by locale.
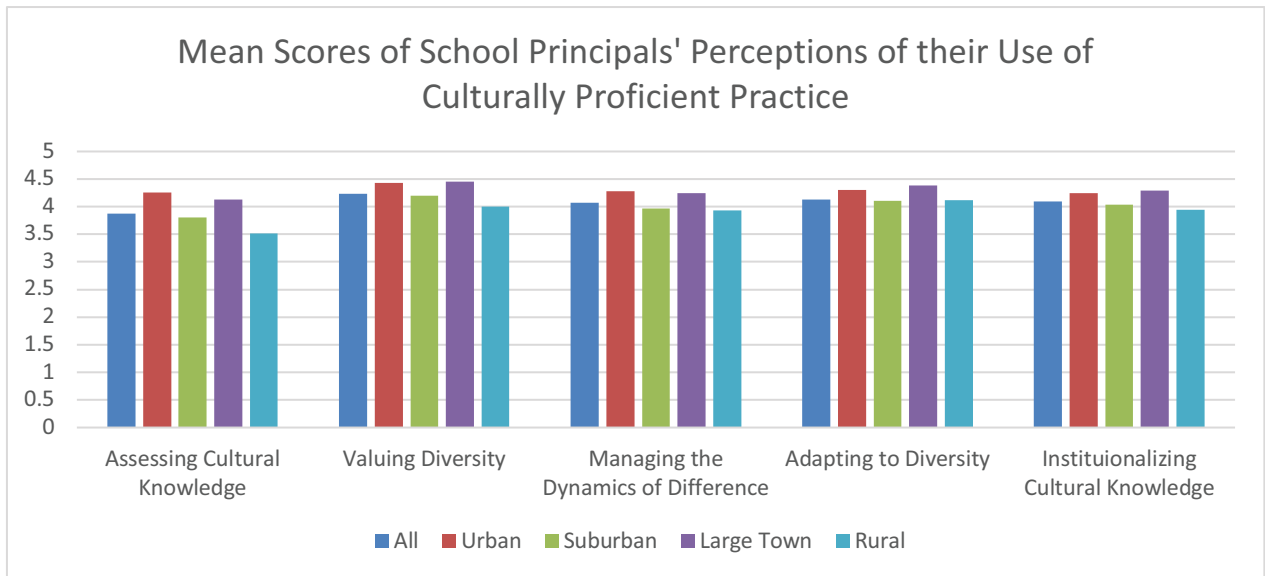
Figure 5

Figure 5. Mean Scores of School Principals' Perceptions Regarding Their Use for Culturally Competent Practice by Essential Element and Locale. The bars represent the reported mean score for school principals' use of practices for each Essential Element, compared by locale.

The findings of this study are important to the field of education, both for scholars and practitioners leading schools, because regardless of the locale of school and demographics of student populations in those schools, cultural diversity exists and disparities in opportunity, access, and educational gaps continued to be evidenced by outcome data. School leaders are called to focus on school reform and continuous improvement efforts annually by managing the dynamics of increasing diversity at their sites, mitigating inequitable or unfair policies and practices in our educational systems, and efficiently using a lack of resources to accomplish these tasks. Addressing barriers in schools does vary across urban, suburban, and rural contexts, however the Barriers of Cultural Proficiency, such as systems of oppression, a sense of privilege and entitlement, an unawareness of the need to adapt, and resistance to change inform policies, practices, and behaviors that ultimately produce the same results. Transformative school change is necessary. Simply stated by W. Edwards Deming (n.d.), "every school system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets." Praxis is the key to transforming urban, suburban, and rural school sites so that those students who are on the lower end of educational outcomes year after year rise. This change requires intentional, systematic action. By embracing the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency, action verbs for change, school leaders can transform organizations by building more inclusive and equitable educational environments where each and every student can realize their potential and thrive.

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) the difference in school principals' perceptions across urban, suburban, large-town, and rural locales across the United States. The analysis of data from the survey provided findings that can be insightful to educational leaders regarding the critical issue in educational practice of school improvement for equitable outcomes. The explanations of the findings, which are related to the use and value ratings of culturally competent practices are grounded in the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency. The Essential Elements include *Assessing Cultural Knowledge*; *Valuing Diversity*; *Managing the Dynamics of Difference*; *Adapting to Diversity*; and *Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge* (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). The following discussion includes the interpretations of the findings and conclusions from the data sets. These explanations are discussed in four conclusions corresponding to the research study's conceptual framework: (1) School Principals' Value for Diversity; (2) The Need for School Principals to Assess Cultural Knowledge; and (3) A Paradigm Shift to Praxis: Theory to Real Change.

School Principals' Value for Diversity

Valuing diversity in our schools is about naming the differences that exist between and among all students, their families, staff, and the community, and celebrating and encouraging the presence of people of the varied cultural backgrounds in all activities (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). School principals, who value diversity genuinely accept that each person in uniquely human and their cultural behaviors are informed by the intersectionality of their identities such as race/ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, language, and ability. Because of each person's distinctive experiences, each culture finds some values and behaviors more important than others. A leader who "walks the walk" of valuing diversity makes decisions that account for the embraced assets diversity filtrates into the school community, rather than trying to create change aimed at attacking inappropriate responses to the environment from the cultural difference (Lindsey et al., 2019). Therefore, school principals demonstrate their commitment to valuing the diversity among their staff, students, and their families. They lead by modeling behaviors informed by respect and dignity, acknowledge and celebrate differences, foster trust, nurture relationships, and build an inclusive culture and climate where all students thrive because they know they are valued and belong to the school community.

This conclusion is drawn from the integration of the data in the study regarding use and value of culturally competent practices. The school principals overall believe that the practices associated with *valuing diversity* are most important in their roles. The mean score of 4.45 demonstrates a belief in value between *very important* and *extremely important*, and a mean score of 4.23 demonstrates the reported use of practices associated with *valuing diversity* as often. In examining the value for diversity as being the highest, yet the need for assessing cultural knowledge as the lowest, it is important to consider the degree to which these results, as well as the day-to-day actions of school principals, are based on accountability, mandates, and to a high degree, social acceptance versus reflection, dialogue, and continuous improvement through actions that seek to institutionalize cultural knowledge. Benjamin (2010) wrote,

> The notion of 'valuing diversity' is attractive. It offers the possibility of reconceptualizing human difference as something to be celebrated in a plural society, and it appears to present a departure from the categorical thinking that has resulted in the separation and

hierarchization of particular groups. It suggests that everyone is different, everyone is unique, and everyone is valuable for who they are. (p. 309)

This quote supports the conclusion that the mean scores for value and use of culturally competent practices were highly favorable, ranging from 3.51 to 4.67. One reason for this is genuine care school leaders have for students. Research supports the idea that many educators go into the field because they love children and want to make a difference in their lives. Fullan (2001) emphasized effective leaders operating with moral purpose demonstrate a "making-a-difference" sense of purpose. Essentially, they care; they build relationships, and they perceive they highly value their students, regardless of difference.

Expanding on the moral imperative, relationships, and care, Smylie et al., (2016) wrote, "From years of studying school leadership and reform, working with practicing educators, and participating in education policy development, we have come to conclude that caring lies at the heart of effective schooling and good school leadership" (p. 1). In their conceptualization of caring leadership, Smylie et al., (2016) noted, "Caring is a quality of relationship, the matter, manner, and motivation of personal and professional action and interaction" (p.6). School principals who value diversity intentionally develop, retain, and continuously reflect to improve a quality of relationship for a particular matter, in a particular manner, and with motivation to build an inclusive school community where all belong.

Another reason for the highly favorable scores may be because the "attractive" reporting by self is socially desirable. Phillips & Clancy (1972) defined social desirability bias as "the tendency of people to deny socially undesirable traits or qualities and to admit to socially desirable ones" (p.923). Brenner & DeLamater (2016) found that identity is a cause of measurement bias. They denoted, "Survey respondents overreport their activity to bring into congruence the ideal self, which includes many such internalized norms, and the survey report of behavior; in essence, bringing prominence and salience into consonance" (p. 12). The prominence and salience of school leaders may in fact have a bearing on their report of the degree to which they value diversity and use practices that demonstrate that value for diversity.

The Need for School Principals to Assess Cultural Knowledge

Assessing our cultural knowledge requires starting with recognizing how our own culture and our understanding of it influences and impacts students' and families' educational experience. This critical analysis will have a profound impact on those who we consider to be different than us or that belong to the less dominant or marginalized demographic groups. This begins with being able to describe our own culture and recognize how it can impact the cultural and social norms and values of our schools and districts, as well as the individual stakeholders, namely, students in the organization. This important foundational action is an important step to continuous improvement toward creating transformative change that will, through our *actions*, demonstrate how we value and adapt to diversity (Lindsey et al, 2019; Shields, 2018).

Review of the data as to how school principals *Value Diversity* (highest use and value) and the need for school principals to *Assess Cultural Knowledge* (lowest use and value), it is imperative we consider the irony of this leadership challenge, or in our opinion, dilemma. A fundamental precept of Cultural Proficiency is that it is an "inside-out" approach that focuses first on those who are insiders to the school by encouraging them to reflect on their own

individual understandings and values. This is why it is so important that education leaders begin with their own understanding of culture and the role it plays in developing an organizational culture that can serve all students (Lindsey et al., 2019).

The conclusion drawn from the data and our experiences is that these perspectives are based more on accountability mandates, and to a high degree, what is professionally and socially expedient and acceptable versus Freire's (1970) notion of *conscientization*, which is a critical approach to *transformative* leadership comprised of a four-action step process: critical awareness, critical reflection, critical analysis, and critical action. Action that more closely aligns with activism to recognize the need for deep and equitable change (Shields, 2018). This reflection will allow for educators to deconstruct knowledge frameworks (e.g., meritocracy and neoliberal ideologies and colorblind discourse) that can perpetuate cultural blind spots, to unconscious bias, prejudice, and deficit thinking of those who differ from the dominant culture (Briscoe, 2012, Desai, 2010, Flores, 2020; Hursh, 2007; & Mijs, 2016).

The conceptual framework for culturally proficient educational practice requires that educators constantly, and throughout this *transformative* process of continuous improvement, invoke and evoke a process comprised of reflection, dialogue, and action (RDA) that implements the five essential elements of cultural competence (Welborn et al., 2022). These five essential elements serve as standards for personal and professional values and behaviors, as well as organizational policies and practices, that begin with and continuously require that we recognize the importance of assessing cultural knowledge to improve, create, and maintain opportunities to demonstrate how we as individuals and as an organization both value and adapt to diversity.

As such, our analysis of these initial results, based on our professional knowledge of the Cultural Proficiency Framework combined with our practitioner's experience as K-12 teachers, site, and district administrators, are that the principals who participated in this study, may have answered more based on career preservation, what is deemed professionally and socially acceptable, and through a lens of compliance towards maintaining the status quo. As compared to the inverse of a process of continuous improvement through self-reflection, dialogue, and *praxis* or action with the goal of challenging existing educational systems for the purpose of closing and eliminating, achievement, opportunity, and equity gaps.

Analysis of these results indicate respondent's perspectives and depth of knowledge of culture and diversity may be surface level relegated to basic foundational knowledge as it pertains to race and ethnicity and cultural characteristics and aspects such as traditions, heroes, holidays, and food. What is required is a deeper understanding of intersectionality that includes socio-economic status, class, language, gender and gender identity, and special needs that are necessary to providing a quality education so that all students can reach their full potential (Franco, Ott, & Robles, 2011).

Today's student generation, consisting of a rapidly changing multi-racial student demographic that requires transformative educational leaders with the capacity to recognize the need to lead praxis for equity and access. As Shields (2018) stated, "The leader, therefore, must also be engaged with the wider society in order to understand how best to educate all children" (p. 20). This requires an awareness by leaders to challenge one's own biases, both conscious and unconscious, cultural blind spots, stereotypes, and prejudices that can negatively influence or limit our perspectives of diversity, inclusion, and belonging. This "inside-out" or internal

awareness strengthened by our understanding of foundational leadership concepts, and the Conceptual Framework for Culturally Proficient Practices, will help develop a new generation of leaders. Leaders that will lean into challenging individual beliefs and values, existing knowledge frameworks, perspectives, and ideologies that have not served all students. This call to action does not have to wait for state, county, or district initiatives. Educational leaders just need to build within themselves the capacity to reflect and act. As Freire (2015) stated,

> Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of *praxis*: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. (p. 51)

To this point, our nation's public schools desperately need a paradigm shift toward transformative leaders with knowledge frameworks for equity and social justice, who are capable of leading institutional and organizational change in a way that knows how to assess culture, value diversity, manage the dynamics of difference, adapt to diversity, and institutionalize cultural knowledge.

A Paradigm Shift to Praxis: Theory to Real Change

Today's educational leaders needs to adopt a *Freireian* sense of praxis for social justice to effectively address dynamic institutional change for an educational landscape that no longer resembles the student generational demographic for whom it was originally created. Shields (2018) stated, "It is not an exaggeration to suggest that educational leaders are complicit (often unintentionally) in the perpetuation of today's educational shortcomings" (p. 5). The Conceptual framework for Culturally Proficient Educational Practice is an important framework for developing transformative leaders with the capacity to create praxis for equity and access. This requires an evolution of leadership from transformational to transformative. Presently, the term often used in describing our current leadership focus is described as *Transformational* leadership. It is our assertion that today's educational leaders need to move from transformational to transformative leadership to guide organizational change and educational reform. Hewitt et al. (2014) stated, "Transformational leadership, in other words, involves reforming or improving the status quo while ultimately maintaining it and reproducing it" (p. 228). Research on the combined dynamics of leadership and cultural competence as praxis for equity could finally be the right leadership approach to finally close achievement, opportunity, and equity gaps.

This leadership approach directly answers the emphasis on accountability that continues to lead the discussion surrounding school improvement. Allen et al. (2015) proclaimed "that leadership is an important area of focus for researchers, especially given the current emphasis on school accountability" (p. 3). Educational leaders in charge of policy and practice for today's schools face distinct challenges relative to issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Shields (2010) pointed out that today's leadership needs to evolve to where it synchronizes and establishes a correlation between the educational organization and wider society.

Workman & Cleveland-Innes (2012) asserted that education's outdated legacy models and structures are responsible for preventing its own transformation into contemporary learning models due to a lack of visionary leadership capable of creating transformative change. It has been our experience that learning is reciprocal. That as educators and teachers we tend to teach how we were taught, and as administrators, we tend to lead based on both these teaching

experiences and our observations of other school leaders. This is how institutional ideologies of the dominant culture tend to unconsciously influence and shape our educational cultural perspectives which may not align with those of the existing generation of students. This creates what we call a "closed loop" leadership approach and perspective to education that not only maintains but perpetuates a flawed institutional status quo.

We are often reminded; we have a broken public education system. We tend to disagree with this statement and instead suggest that our present-day public education system is actually giving us the outcomes it was designed to deliver. This is why even a focus on being data-driven has not significantly closed existing achievement, opportunity, and equity gaps. Our assertion is that our public schools need culturally competent educators that recognize and understand how to assess culture, value diversity, manage the dynamics of difference, adapt to diversity, and institutionalize cultural knowledge. The Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency are key. We need educational leaders who recognize the importance of a paradigm shift from being school-centric to student and school-community centric. Transformative leaders will be able to lead praxis towards creating an organizational culture that values diversity, inclusiveness, equity, and access. This leadership approach is what Furman (2012) referred to as Social Justice leadership *as praxis* which leads to what Shields (2018) described as Transformative leadership where "the leader, therefore must also be engaged with the wider society in order to understand how best to educate all children" (p. 20). Transformative leaders are culturally proficient educators drawn naturally to praxis across personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological dimensions (Furman, 2012). The future of high-quality, public-school education for *all* students will depend on transformative leaders who can lead praxis for change towards a global society in a rapidly changing and diverse world.

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INTO LIGHT California: A University-Community & Interdepartmental Collaboration

Lorraine Hedtke, MSW, ACSW, Ph.D., and Arianna Huhn, Ph.D.

Abstract

INTO LIGHT California was a unique service learning and university-community partnership involving a counseling program, a campus museum, a local artist, a not-for-profit national organization, and forty families. Graduate students used innovative narrative counseling practices to guide interviews with individuals who lost a loved one to a drug overdose or drug poisoning. Stories that emerged became the basis for written narratives that were paired with original portraiture and placed on display. Shining light on deaths often relegated to the shadows betrayed and combated the silencing stigma of substance abuse, as well as broadening student perspectives on deaths that are often relegated to the shadows of grief.

Introduction

On September 9th, 2022, the Anthropology Museum at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) Opened an exhibition entitled INTO LIGHT California. The exhibition featured biographical narratives, hand-drawn portraits, and the personal belongings of forty-one individuals who lost their lives to a drug overdose or drug poisoning.[1] Forty of these individuals lived in California. The last individual is Devin Hart Bearden, the son of Theresa Clower, who is the founder of non-profit organization INTO LIGHT Project. Clower was inspired by the grief she experienced at the loss of her son to take up portraiture – first drawing Devin, and later expanding to others who passed away in similar circumstances. Her passion evolved into a national agenda to open a unique exhibition in each US state, all featuring Devin alongside forty individuals with connections to the host state, with the goal to "put a human face on the disease of addiction" and erase the stigma and shame of Substance Use Disorder (SUD).[2] INTO LIGHT California was the seventh INTO LIGHT exhibition, following Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Florida. The California show was followed by one in Delaware and another in Colorado, with other states in various stages of planning.

While there are certain aspects of each INTO LIGHT exhibition that are the same – the name (INTO LIGHT plus the state in which the exhibition is prepared), the color scheme (black, white, gray, red), and the format of graphite portraits paired with biographical narratives – each exhibition is also uniquely created to fit the venue and the host organization's own capacities and goals. For the California exhibition, project directors Arianna Huhn (Department of Anthropology) and Lorraine

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[1] While both the terms "drug overdose" and "drug poisoning" refer to a person ingesting more of a substance than their body can safely process, the term "drug poisoning" distinguishes situations where a lethal substance was unintentionally ingested, for example fentanyl-laced drugs. This project followed the lead of participants in using terminology that reflected their emotions and descriptions rather than imposing our own.

Hedtke (College of Education, MS Counseling program) innovated and prioritized service learning opportunities for CSUSB students; participants representing the diversity of the state of California; the incorporation of objects from participating families; sharing the exhibition beyond museum walls; K12 outreach; and robust programming partnerships. Each of these objectives was accomplished, sometimes with growing pains as Huhn and Hedtke learned to merge and balance disciplinary standards, and academic protocols butted up against INTO LIGHT Project's organizational norms and business practices. This paper will speak to the process of organizing and justification for the exhibition, the exhibition's impacts for student learning, participant healing, community-building, and stigma reduction, as well as noting some of the benefits and challenges of collaboration between a university and a non-profit with overlapping agendas but distinct best practices and norms to achieve them.

The Overdose Epidemic and INTO LIGHT Project

There is an epidemic of people dying from drug overdose, and specifically synthetic drugs like fentanyl. Drug overdose has been the leading cause of unintentional injury deaths in the United States since 2013, when the numbers first surpassed vehicle accidents (Olaisen, et al., 2019). The most recent, provisional data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggest that the epidemic is only deepening, with a record high of 93,331 drug overdose deaths recorded in 2020. This number is more than 20,000 above the previous high, set only a year before (Baumgartner and Radley, 2021), and preliminary data from subsequent years indicate a continued upward trend. Synthetic opioids (such as fentanyl, methadone, pethidine, levophanol, tramadol, and dextropropoxyphene) are currently the leading driver of drug overdose deaths. These are laboratory-produced drugs that mimic the analgesic effects of natural opioids (like opium, heroin, and morphine). No corner of the United States, no racial groups, nor gender markers, nor economic status, has escaped the tragedies of drug addiction and drug overdose and death.

In the Inland Empire (San Bernardino County and Riverside County, the service region of CSUSB), soaring overdose deaths mimic national patterns. Between 2017 and 2020, fentanyl-related deaths increased by 808% in Riverside County and 960% in San Bernardino County. In Riverside County, a Fentanyl Awareness Task Force was organized in June 2021. In the same month, San Bernardino's James Ramos introduced AB-1373 in the state legislature to demand investigations into criminal liability for unintentional fentanyl ingestion. The issue of drug overdose is particularly relevant for the Latinx population, which has experienced a rapid increase in overdose deaths across the state (Drug Policy Alliance, 2021).

One reason addiction and drug deaths have taken such a tremendous toll in this country is the connotation of a personal failing or deliberate choice, rather than seeing addiction as a disease or culturally produced experience. Persons with Substance Use Disorder (SUD) are conceived as dangerous and morally bereft, which leads to negative attitudes that can fuel general discrimination and social distancing of family and friends. Stigma is also associated with structural barriers to treatment, and the connotations of addiction lead to suboptimal care. Alexander C. Tsai and

colleagues (2019) write that the many dimensions of addiction stigma – structural, public, enacted, internalized, and anticipated – "serve to reinforce each other, resulting in poorer health outcomes" (2019: 7). They conclude, "These dimensions of stigma must be overcome to facilitate the requisite policy and programmatic changes needed to effectively address the opioid overdose crisis" (2019: 2). Similarly, Sarah E. Wakeman and Josiah D. Rich (2018) find that despite evidence on the effectiveness of lifesaving medications for SUD, access is limited because of the separation of addiction treatment from the rest of the medical system. "Even the widely adopted terminology to refer to opioid agonist therapy, medication-assisted treatment, implies that medications are an adjunct to treatment rather than lifesaving interventions in and of themselves," they write. In sum, "Stigma is a major driver behind the lack of access to opioid agonist therapy" (2018, p. 330).

Research on stigma reduction is underdeveloped, but a recent National Endowments for the Arts (2020) report provides preliminary evidence that the arts can affect substance abuse treatment and prevention, including stigma reduction. Likewise, the arts are being explored as an effective mechanism for decreasing and combating societal biases and negative connotations for other stigmatized conditions (Gaiha, et al., 2021). Randomized message-testing experiments suggest that sympathetic narratives emphasizing societal factors (such as poverty, trauma, and structural barriers to treatment) rather than individual choices also show promise for combating stigma (McGinty and Barry, 2020).

INTO LIGHT Project puts these experimental and promising techniques for stigma reduction to work through exhibitions that center on sharing the personal stories of individuals lost to the overdose epidemic, highlighting their unique character and identity outside of addiction. These are memories that the bereaved often do not have the chance to share, as their loved ones are seen as complicit in their own death and moral judgment is levied against the deceased and their living family and friends. Those grieving "bad deaths" are, in fact, frequently left with negative images and perceptions that truncate the stories that they tell themselves and others about the person's life. Their own suffering, worsened by rumination that replays events and by searching for clues as to why it happened and how things could have turned out differently, is compounded by exposure to stigmatizing comments that blame them or the deceased for the death and a general absence of acknowledgment and support beyond pity. The situation can lead to marginalization and deepened grief (Feigelman, Feigelman, and Range, 2020; Feigelman, Jordan, and Jordan 2011; Templeton et al., 2016).

Emergent research suggests that crafting new meanings and connections with those no longer with us, thus continuing and enhancing relationships with the dead rather than letting go of them, can provide a healthy and effective framework for grieving (Hedtke and Winslade, 2017; Hedtke, 2020; Neimeyer, 2015). This approach draws from the work of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1986) who was researching relations practices in an elderly Jewish community in Venice Beach, California. Specifically, Myerhoff attended to how people perpetually shifted and reaggregated the membership in their life story as "re-membering." Social worker and family

therapist Michael White (1997) adapted Myerhoff's ideas for counseling purposes through a narrative therapy that consciously constructs the membership of an individual's "club of life" (the persons who matter most to us and influence our identities) in recognition that who we are is crafted through our relationships with others, rather than an egocentric model where "self" is experienced in highly individualized terms. The method of re-membering was adapted as a grief counseling praxis to shift conversations about death in order to form recollections, support creative transformation in the subjunctive, and promote the possibility of new relational connections with those who have passed in physical form, rather than assign the memories to the past to be buried alongside the deceased (Hedtke and Winslade, 2005; Hedtke and Winslade, 2017). This shift is premised on recognizing that typical bereavement counseling guides individuals to a resolution of goodbyes that prematurely close off options for new stories to emerge — stories that might be useful for those living with ongoing emotional pain, and of particular import when the death overshadow the ways in which the person lived. Project lead Lorraine Hedtke is the leading international expert in this postmodern-informed grief counseling technique founded in narrative counseling.

Research on "counter-storytelling" (autobiographical narratives by those whose existence and experiences are silenced or made invisible by dominant discourse) stresses that the opportunity to speak one's truth and to de-naturalize and de-center majoritarian stories can also be profoundly empowering (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Wagaman, Obejero, and Gregory, 2018). Such narratives also impact listeners, facilitating emotional engagement in ways distinct from cognitive inquiry (Bonnell and Simon, 2007; Fischer, Anila, and Moore, 2017). While the effects of storytelling in museum contexts *specifically* are poorly documented (Arnold-de Simine, 2013), research from other fields demonstrates that narratives trigger the release of neurochemicals that support attentiveness, understanding, and action (Zak, 2015), make information more memorable, and can generate less defensive responses from listeners than other forms of communication (Bruner, 1990). Museums are also noted for their capacities to spark challenging conversations (Ellis, 1995; Cavness, 2019) and to position viewers in ways that precipitate critical consciousness (Bonnell and Simon, 2007). These features are related to positive public perceptions of museums as trustworthy sources of information (Merritt, 2015), making them safe and supportive atmospheres for meaningful experiences. Elena Gonzales (2020) draws from neuroscience to argue that museum-enabled, embodied, emotional responses can result in long-lasting memories, which are more likely than others to engender critical thinking that leads to action. In this way, narrative storytelling in museums has the potential for personal and societal transformation, drawing on the power of emotion as integral to the development of critical consciousness (Langstraat and Bowdon, 2011), for example, combating stigma. Project Lead Arianna Huhn has been honing the art of narrative storytelling at the CSUSB Anthropology Museum since 2016 (Huhn, 2018; Huhn and Anderson, 2021).

To collect the data and share stories of individuals who have died as a result of drug poisoning and overdose, care needs to be taken with the potential emotional tenderness for the

bereaved. To meet the requirements of kindness, respect, and counseling acumen that fit the demands of work with bereaved individuals, our research protocol specified that counseling program graduate students with specialized training and advanced skills in grief counseling and addictions counseling would complete the interviews. Drs. Hunn and Hedtke requested an institutional review of the project to ensure human subjects safeguards were also in place to conduct and transcribe interviews, to exhibit the likenesses and stories of those who have died and their loved ones, as well as to write about the exhibition in academic publications. All project personnel, including graduate students and INTO LIGHT Project staff with access to interview transcripts, completed training in research confidentiality and other precautions for working with human subjects.

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (FY2022-83) in November 2021, interviewees were recruited through campus listservs, outreach to counseling placement sites, using social media, and reviewing in memoriam websites and obituaries and directly reaching out to eligible participants with project information. INTO LIGHT Project has a set the number of persons represented each show at forty-one, which includes Clower's son, Devin, and this set the target number of participants. However, due to the voluntary nature of participation and the possibility of attrition, we prepared to interview up to sixty people. Individuals expressed their interest in participation by completing a Qualtrics survey that ensured they met the basic qualifications for project participation. This included a clear connection to the state of California, being over 18 years of age, and having lost a loved one to a drug overdose or drug poisoning. A follow-up phone call with prospective interviewees screened out anyone assessed to potentially find the interview to be too emotionally taxing, thereby potentially harming them. This included individuals who reported that they were or recently had been suicidal. All prospective interviewees were offered a resource sheet with information on counseling services and hotlines. New prospective participants were screened until we had completed our maximum number of interviews (40).

All forty individuals interviewed continued participation through to and including the exhibition, though several people did leave the project before the interview stage. In these cases, three follow-ups were made by email and by phone. If there was still no response after the third attempt, no further contact was made. Participants were required to sign a consent form before any data pertaining directly to the project were collected. In this consent form they agreed to their deceased loved one's full name and biographical details being publicly shared as a part of their participation. They also acknowledged that they understood their own name and image may be associated with the exhibition, and that data would also be used for academic publications and presentations. In cases where data gathered through interviews would be subject to analysis, however, participants were informed that they would be identified anonymously. The consent process was completed electronically, and the interviews were completed remotely to comply with University Covid-related restrictions on in-person research during the period of data collection.

Interviewers were provided a set of standard questions, though also encouraged to follow up where appropriate, making the sessions semi-structured. Some of the questions collected demographic information about the person who died (questions such as, "What was your loved one's name and what did they prefer to be called?" or "How long has it been since they died?") and information about the deceased person's relationship to addiction (for example, "How many years did they live with addiction?"), but most of the questions were posed to access stories about the aspirations, values, personality, and accomplishments of the deceased (like, "What were some of their accomplishments in life?", or "What kind of things did they value?"). While many of the INTO LIGHT California interview questions were provided by INTO LIGHT Project and standard to their operations, given the students' training and the expertise of project lead Hedtke, additional questions were developed to explore places where the legacy of the deceased could give way to opening an ongoing, posthumous, relational connection. Questions to this end were fashioned by our project team, such as, "How is it that your loved one continues to play a significant role in your life?". Additional questions folded the deceased into a posthumous future, for example, "How do you envision carrying their stories forward into your future?". Equally important was to inquire about who else knows the stories of the life of the deceased, intended to support noticing where new connections might give way to an ongoing team of people linked together by the life of this person who is no longer living. Questions such as "Sometimes, after the death of a loved one, we hear stories about how they influenced someone's life. Have you heard any stories like this about your loved one?", promoted the possibility of new communities and new knowledge about the ways in which a deceased loved one was admired and the way in which they lived. The ways in which the bereaved took up new tasks or had nascent purposes as a result of their loved one's death was also inquired about, for example questions such as, "Has having someone in your life [with substance use or abuse] changed how you speak or think about SUD or caused you to be an advocate around this issue?".

All interviews were fully transcribed using a voice-to-text system, and then manually checked and corrected for accuracy. Participant volunteers were provided a copy of their transcript for review if requested through the consent process, and they were able to add to their interviews after the conversations if they felt information had been left out, or if additional people wanted to add their voice in sharing the legacy of the person who died (in such cases, these additional persons also completed consent forms). Participants were contacted several months after the opening reception for a follow-up interview about their experience with INTO LIGHT California, and these conversations were also transcribed and are considered below.

From Interviews to Exhibition

In addition to broadly combating stigma through humanizing addiction, our project provided the opportunity for twelve MS Counseling students in the final semester of their three-year training (and thus poised to become professional counselors) to learn about addiction through deeply emotional, one-on-one conversations where their goal was to listen and to guide the drug

death bereaved toward re-membering (rather than forgetting, or only recollecting) those they have lost. The intention of this technique is to nuance the relationship the client has with the deceased as a member of their "club of life" (White, 2007), and to encourage a comforting, life enhancing, and sustaining approach to living with a socially stigmatized death. Specifically, eleven students served as interviewers, and one student oversaw logistics such as volunteer communications and scheduling, and interview transcription. As counselors-in-training, the students additionally were able to offer therapeutic support and relief to the bereaved. The methods thus incorporated service learning, with the project directly benefiting from the students' training in narrative counseling modalities through exposure to practice-based learning about grief, addiction, and counseling. Students were not given any financial compensation for their work but were able to use the experience towards required practicum hours. Students also had to complete project training and agree to weekly remote supervision sessions prior to conducting interviews. These activities were voluntary and outside of any individual class requirements.

Students met throughout the duration of the project to address topics that arose in their conversations with bereaved people they were speaking with and to talk through potential problem areas, whether logistical or related to counseling knowledge. Initially everyone met every other week, but during the concentrated interview schedule we shifted to meeting weekly. All meetings were conducted on Zoom and under the educational support and supervision of Dr. Hedtke. Students offered topics for discussion to improve their counseling and interviewing skills. Some of these topics included: the role of self-disclosure in counseling conversations; the complexities of non-Covid related deaths during the pandemic; addressing compassionate responses to tears in counseling conversations and interviews; practicing counseling skills of reflection; how to handle sensitive information such as when the people being spoken of were minors; assessing suicidality; providing therapeutic practices to support the witnessing of the deceased person's legacies; and therapeutic letter writing.

A therapeutic letter is a particular practice in narrative counseling that captures aspects of the conversation and reinforces the burgeoning preferred ways of being (Fox, 2003). With re-membering conversations, therapeutic letters are an opportunity to have the practitioner address the ways in which *they* have been changed by being the recipient of the stories. This removes the artificial construct that therapy is only benefiting the client when in fact the relational nature of counseling is a transformative process for both client and counselor, and in this case of graduate student and participant volunteers. Myerhoff (1980) speaks to reciprocal exchange exactly, "A story told aloud is of course more than a text. It is an event. when it is done properly, the listener is more than a mere passive receiver or validator, *he* [sic] is changed." Students wrote therapeutic letters for each person who they interviewed. These letters were not just a thank you note, but an acknowledgment of the ways in which the deceased person's stories impacted the writer. Notable excerpts include: "During our conversation we touched on so much about her life, but one thing I will always hold with me is the close relationship the two of you shared," and, "Your willingness to share his beautiful story moved me in ways that I didn't even know were there. I admired how you

share with your other children and am taking this to heart with my own children as memories arise." One letter that especially embodied the nature of therapeutic letters reads in part, "I just wanted to reach out and thank you for sharing your son's story with me. I was driving by a car dealership and it had the inflatable stick guy that dances. I instantly thought of him and I laughed to myself as I imagined him dancing along with it. As I see the state of the country, I remember your son and his willingness to stand up for the underdog and show compassion and kindness always. As I pursue a career in mental health, I hope to embody that compassion he always showed others. Please know that through this project, his story will continue to touch other people's lives, just as he has done mine. It was an honor to share space with you both." Each participant who attended the exhibition opening received their letter there, in many cases directly from the person who interviewed them. Those unable to attend received letters by mail.

As a part of our project protocol, and informed by best practices in community engagement work for museums, narratives composed based on volunteer interviews were provided for them to review and (if desired) to edit before they were incorporated into the exhibition. While some participants did not request changes, and others preferred to be surprised and read the narrative for the first time at the exhibition opening, many requested moderate or extensive revisions. While perhaps a sign that the narrative writing did not always capture what participants felt was important to include, this can also be used as a gauge of trust and true partnership, participants feeling heard and supported enough to bring up their concerns rather than worrying about the institutional and power hierarchies that often plague and bog down university-community co-creative activities. Participants were also provided with the option to leave the project at any time up through the exhibition opening, though none chose to. We believe this was reflective of the importance everyone involved with this project placed on honoring the deceased.

Responses to an anonymous visitor survey suggest that the resultant narratives made significant impacts on readers, with the depth and wholeness of each person's story helping to humanize addiction for both those with and without personal experiences with drug-related deaths. Below are just a few examples from the 135 responses received:

"As a student nurse here at CSUSB, I see the effects of addiction in my clinical hospital rotations … I've seen the effects of addiction, and what it looks like to relapse and struggle and re-enter a treatment facility. Addiction is a cruel problem, and one that seems so dark because it appears to be self-inflicted. This exhibit had me in tears, and wanting to know how to help."

" Today marks one year that I lost my dear friend to drugs / suicide and I was not expecting to be touched by the exhibit this deeply. My friend struggled with addiction and it led him to end his life similarly to the stories I read. I remember him as more than just his addiction. He was a beautiful soul and there was much more to his story that people don't know and might never know. I was comforted by the stories I read today because they depict people in a different light than what most people think an addict is. The people in

the exhibit are more than their addiction and I am extremely happy to see that is being portrayed in the exhibit."

"The exhibit presented addiction in an entirely different light, humanizing the victims of addiction rather than vilifying them. It exceeded my expectations and I would (and have) recommended the exhibit to others."

"I thought it was very eye opening to see everyone's narratives and how their drug addiction impacted them and their families. It was interesting to see how young most of the people were and really touched my heart. I will definitely be changing the conversation about drug addiction and help people realize it is an illness and not a sign of failure."

"I was moved to tears — I lost my brother to addiction and suicide — thank you for opening a door to show that people are more than one thing"

"It is a beautiful tribute to the people who had passed. We are too quick to judge people on drug uses when we don't know the stories that lead them to it. This museum does a great job humanizing their stories. I felt such a great sadness in my heart as I read each of their stories. I understood the hardships of life and the comfort some drugs can offer. I hope people see these types of museums as to show people that we are not so different and some people's roads are hard than others."

Also important to humanizing each individual represented in the exhibition was the black and white graphite portrait that accompanied each narrative. For previous INTO LIGHT exhibitions, founder Theresa Clower had personally drawn all or most of the portraits on display. For the California exhibition, we requested permission to use a local artist. This turned out to be an important move, as an arm injury during exhibition preparations meant that Clower would have been unable to draw the portraits herself, but it also added an important layer of intimacy and professionalism. The artist selected for the INTO LIGHT California portraits was Elizabeth Jones, a non-binary artist of Jamaican Creole descent who lived in Southern California. Jones' body of work is borne of their interest in the effects of isolation, and a fascination with healing from and living with trauma as a barrier to connection. They utilize a combination of portraiture, surrealism, abstractions, and interviews to explore neglect, food access, addiction, and interdependence, as well as examining generational trauma, seeking understanding and acceptance through open conversations about love, fear, and shame.

Jones aims to create art that portrays whole people, and this — in combination with a beautiful portfolio of portraiture — attracted us to their work. Jones was also very forthcoming about their own struggles with drug use. In an artist statement for the exhibition they explained, "Possibly the largest barrier to recovery from substance misuse for me was shame. In my upbringing, it wasn't normal to talk about and work through emotional pain … With INTO LIGHT California my hope is that by destigmatizing drug addiction we can have a collective conversation, out loud, that will make space to talk about these things in order to look directly at what isn't working in our society." Jones has since been added to a national team of INTO LIGHT Project artists,

who are taking on more and more of the portraiture work as the project grows. At the closing reception for INTO LIGHT the participants are always gifted the framed portraits that hung in the exhibition. At the closing reception in California, Jones directly handed each family their loved one's portrait in an emotional moment of joy, pain, and reflection.

Perla Mendoza receiving the portrait of her son, Daniel Elijah Figueroa. Artist Elizabeth Jones is in the background, left. Photo by James Trotter, CSUSB.
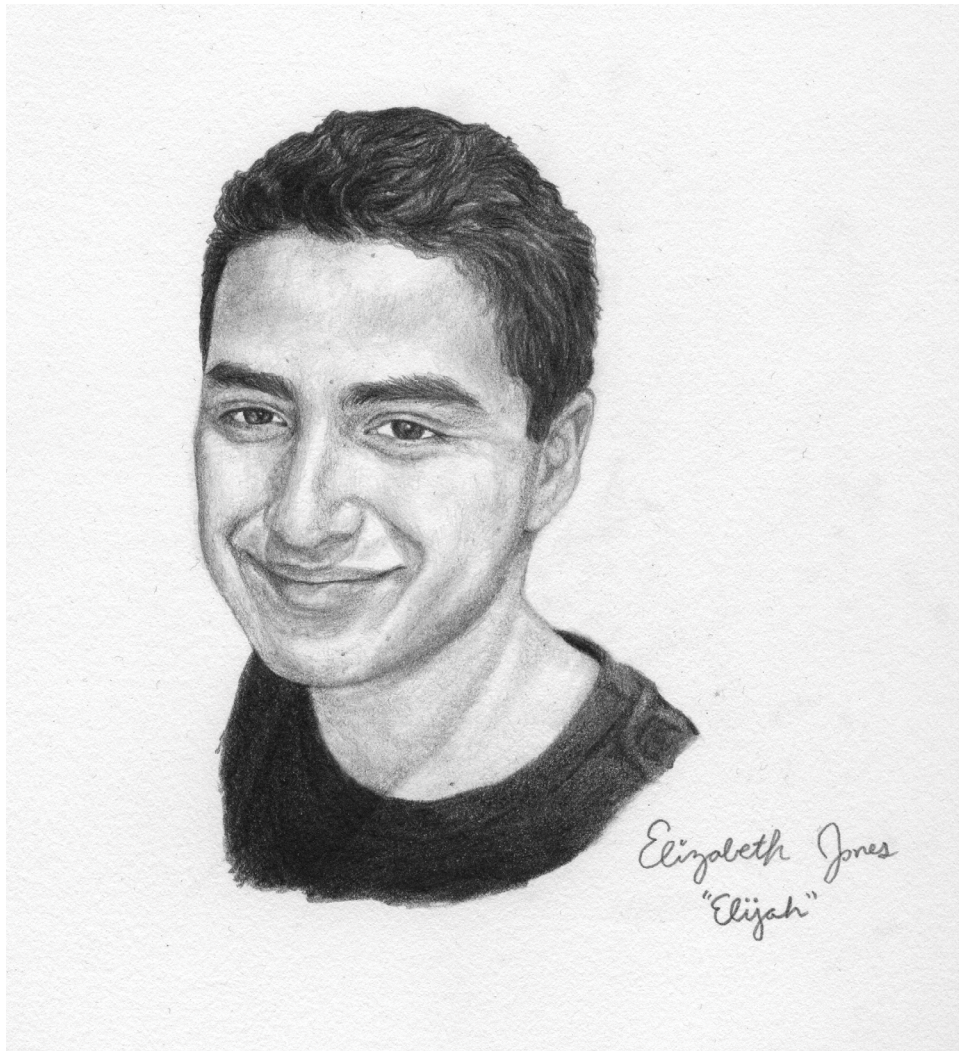
Portrait of Daniel Elijah Figueroa, by Elizabeth Jones.

Curating Community and Connection

The INTO LIGHT California exhibition opened September 9, 2022, and hung in the CSUSB Anthropology Museum through June 10, 2023. During this time there were over 2,000 visitors to the museum. Each individual featured in the INTO LIGHT California exhibition was represented by their fourteen by seventeen framed portrait and the interview-based, third-person biography. Half of interviewees additionally chose to loan to the museum an item of significance for their loved one, and these were displayed in cases alongside the portraits and narratives. Objects included the red wicker chair where Michael McCormick passed away, a poem composed by Michael Peña Jr., Alexander Neville's Lego set, and Kyle Dosskey's dobro.

Participants were invited to an opening reception to view the show, but also, along with their families and friends, to gather in a community of bereaved people with the shared experience of having lost someone to substance use. The event gave way to tender moments of hugs and tears

and at times a silent reverence for what we were all experiencing. In spite of this being a potentially emotionally heavy event, for many it also represented their first chance to speak of their lost loved one publicly. For some, this was because the death occurred during Covid, when logistics and gathering became prohibitive. Others had previously felt too heavy of a burden of stigma and shame to share the circumstances of their loved one's death with others. When interviewing participants about the opening evening a few months later, comments were overwhelmingly positive and spoke to the transformative impact of being in a space with others who had similar life events. One mother explained it this way: "We lost my son … to accidental fentanyl poisoning. It was the worst thing that ever happened in my life, and it is still. Sometimes I don't know how I'm even breathing. It was really helpful in meeting some of the other parents that were involved. Because then you didn't feel like you were so alone. So, I think it really does help with the stigma that's attached to addiction."

Jaime Puerta, father of Daniel Puerta-Johnson, and Steve Filson, father of Jessica Filson, embrace at the opening reception for INTO LIGHT California. Photo by CSUSB.

Wearable buttons to memorialize those featured in the exhibition further supported connections and conversation. Each button had the phrase, "Ask me about" and a picture of one person honored in the exhibition. Most attendees chose to wear the button of their loved one, and these served as entry points to connections and sharing of stories. One participant later took the concept further and designed a t-shirt featuring all 41 participants' portraits, which she then sold as a fundraiser, with all profits going to INTO LIGHT Project. She sold out twice. Families were also given physical copies of an INTO LIGHT California Catalog containing all forty-one portraits and narratives.

Following an initial gathering in the museum, attendees relocated to an auditorium for a handful of short speeches. Among these, Dr. Hedtke spoke directly to those who had lost someone to addiction:

> *If I may, I would like to speak directly to those here who are holding the stories of people who are no longer living; the stories of people who are physically no longer with us having suffered from the effects of addiction, drug use, overdose, drug poisoning, and even death.*

> *When we love and care for someone who is no longer living, we become the holders of their joy, as well as their trials in life. We are left to tend to their stories, looking after them as we step forward in ways that asks us to take care with their legacies. We become tasked with the weight of finding openings to transform the gifts that they brought both in life and in death so that we may give these gifts of legacy to others, and perhaps these gifts connect those to people who never met them in life. By sharing with more and more people, those who have died are introduced to others, their stories are bestowed as a living legacy that can have a new kind of life. This sharing can even have the power to shape new meanings, offering a new life for the person who has died and those who are living with grief. And sometimes, the gifting of their stories and these important introductions can help to ease the pain, and maybe answer the lingering questions that feel unanswerable.*

> *For those of you who have lost someone to the debilitating pain of drug addiction and drug poisoning, you have given all of us a gift. By sharing the stories of those who are no longer living, they have become a beacon of light that shines the direction on where and how their lives can live on. It is this beacon of light that has brought us here today, almost as if they have called us together, to give new purpose to their lives. By sharing their stories, you have spoken them into existence and spoken them into our lives. You have introduced them to those of us who are here today as well as all who will still come to the exhibition in the coming months. You have shared their stories about their talents and preciousness of their lives and your enduring love for them. It is this beacon of light that has rescued their words and their love from what could otherwise silence them in stories of shame, regret, and the depths of sadness. This light washes over all of the hardest of edges so that they may live in new possibility as we all carry them forward.*

These words continue to capture the authors' sentiments about the importance of this exhibition — for the participants, for the visitors to the exhibition, and for ourselves. But the most telling evaluative tool of this year-long endeavor has been participants' personal reflections. In the months that followed the exhibition opening, people who were originally interviewed for the project were contacted for a brief follow-up interview. Approximately one-half of the original forty participants were reached by a graduate student who was not involved with the original interviews. The short conversations were recorded and the questions designed to see if the project was useful or if there were places for improvement. For example: "Would you share your experiences about the project? It will help us understand the impact as to what worked and what can be improved," and, "What was it like to be involved in the INTO LIGHT Project?" and "Have you noticed any changes in your relationship with your loved one after your participation in this project?". The responses were exceptionally positive and enthusiastic, with many of the conversations going well beyond the anticipated twenty minutes. Below are a selection of quotes from these calls that are emblematic of the overall responses:

"I think having him honored in this exhibit really meant to me that he's not forgotten; that he is part of a bigger picture."

"I'm thinking it was healing, being honest, saying the truth. It made everything better for me, too."

"It was very therapeutic, and in the same sense it was uplifting, and it was hard. I say it was hard in the sense that it was emotionally hard, but at the same time it was very gratifying. Like, I feel like I had done something for my brother that allows his name and his story to live on, and at the same time helping raise awareness."

"It's hard to describe, but just that feeling that I've done something to help keep his memory alive. I don't know, that's just somehow – It's been helpful to me, and the thought that for over these next nine months that so many people are going to read his story – it's sort of like, you brought him back to life in some way, you know?"

"I don't want to say healing, but it was somewhat cathartic for me to participate in it. My grandson passed during Covid, so we weren't able to have a regular memorial service for him."

"… but just walking in, it's like you know when you're outside in the cold, and you walk in, and somebody's got the furnace on. It's like that blast of warmth. It was just as if emotions walking in there and seeing these parents and seeing pictures of kids that you feel like you already know. And you've known their whole life. But you really just have never met them before."

Other reflections were shared at a closing reception, where participants were invited to speak about their experiences with INTO LIGHT. One parent focused her comments on the unique approach of INTO LIGHT that made her feel that she was honoring her son: "When I lost my son, I pulled my love for him, my memories, everything so close to my heart, and I didn't want to let anything go. And then I heard about INTO LIGHT … and I knew that this was something that I wanted … to be a part of. And I knew that [my son] would be understood here, and he would be respected here, and he would be loved. And it's been that way every step of the process … It's just been a beautiful, beautiful experience." Another parent spoke about her appreciation of the project's unique approach to holistic representation: "I have to say that with the non-profit that I run … we present to schools. So often I'm talking about my grief for [my son] or how [my son] died. It's not often that I feel like people want to hear about [my son]. And what made [my son] [my son] … When I did my interview I truly felt like [the counseling student] really wanted to know [my son], like he was talking about his own family member. And it was such a privilege and an honor to walk in and see it so beautifully written, about who my son was, not how he died." This comment captures the heart of re-membering conversations that rescue the stories of relationship and life that become fodder for shaping a new kind of relational connection with those who have died. Still another parent spoke to the experience of reading the transcript of her interview, "Reading my story back, I didn't realize some of the things I'd said! But you guys got it with such good detail, and it was amazing. I was like, 'Oh, I didn't even know I talked about that.' So, thank you … for being so gentle with us."

Some families focused on the relief they felt in seeing their loved one's story reaching others, one parent stating that seeing his daughter's portrait in the show "assured our family that her death was not in vain … lives can and will be saved." Another echoed the point, sharing that

using the word "overdose" has been difficult because of the stigma, but the project changed this, knowing that "my son's story is saving lives, educating people, changing the way we look at overdose and addiction." Another parent stood only to say that INTO LIGHT was the beginning of her healing after losing a child to fentanyl, "Because of INTO LIGHT Project I am able to say, 'On June 18th 2021, my son passed away from an overdose,' without shame or fear of judgment." Another participant spoke of her brother's death, "I was dealing with the loss of the best little brother one could ever ask for, and I was doing it silently … I didn't know how to tell people he passed from fentanyl poisoning, and I felt helpless and alone. INTO LIGHT provided a community, and a medium to share his story, while giving me a better understanding of what I can do to ease the stigma of substance use disorder, with one hard and honest conversation at a time." Another parent spoke also to the sense of community gained through participation in the project, addressing the audience and stating "Now you all are our brothers and sisters, as we share a connection nobody else knows."

As discussed above, the palpable impact of this exhibition additionally extends to the students who conducted the interviews. In addition to their therapeutic letters, students reflected on the impact of completing the interviews as a part of the ongoing supervision discussions, where it became clear that they were transformed and transported to new thoughts as a result of talking with bereaved people. One student commented, "The conversation was heartwarming and easier than what I was imagining. It let me reflect on my own losses, including the death of my brother." Another stated, "Even though this sounds a bit weird when talking about death, the conversation was energizing. The way in which his mom responded to my questions gave me confidence and it was a great experience." Others shared, "each conversation was so moving and humbling," and, "It was great to not focus on the overdose, but speak about his life, what kind of person he was outside of the drugs, and it felt more loving than a typical grief conversation." Each student who participated in the interviewing has now graduated and gone on to counseling-related positions, many in schools and all in the university's service region.

The INTO LIGHT California exhibition also made possible unique cross-campus partnerships and community events. At the onset of the project, Dr. Huhn reached out to Dr. Hedtke based on her credentials as an international expert on grief, bringing together two campus units (College of Education and College of Social and Behavioral Sciences) that rarely collaborate. During our initial meeting, in the early fall of 2021, we discovered many points of intersecting interests that could support bringing the museum exhibition to life. Most notably, we discussed how to use our diverse skills and knowledges to coordinate and fold students into a successful project. This partnership fruited as the service learning project described above, and in joint project oversight.

The interdisciplinary collaboration was later extended to the College of Arts and Letters, and specifically Assistant Professor Kevin Zhang in the Department of Music. We asked Zhang to consider selecting music that could play during the exhibition's open hours. Zhang instead proposed to compose an original score for the exhibition, which he did by mapping the alphabet on a musical scale and then artistically playing the initials of the forty-one individuals represented in the INTO LIGHT California exhibition. The resultant ballad is haunting, and when the meaning of the music was revealed at an opening reception for the exhibition the crowd audibly gasped. One parent explained the impact of the music this way: "In grieving my son, I have a hard time but the music hit me on a different level and it was really moving to feel like I was experiencing something in a

different way. The music is just such a nice touch, adding on to everything else. And the whole thing is phenomenal, really powerful, in my opinion. But the music has this really nice additional element to it. It was very creative and very cool and just kind of like . . . On first listen to it, like, this sounds interesting, but then, like you read what the composer did with it. It's like, oh, dang, that's awesome."

Partnerships were also sought and secured to offer programming in collaboration with the university's offices of Pre-College Programs and Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). The Cal-SOAP (California Student Opportunity and Access) Program is a college readiness and access program that partnered with the INTO LIGHT California exhibition to host K12 school groups for a campus tour, museum tour, faculty-led lesson in storytelling (based on the INTO LIGHT exhibition), and a presentation by the local non-profit organization Inland Empire Harm Reduction. Through Cal-SOAP organized programming, over 400 high school students visited INTO LIGHT and deepened their knowledge, understanding, and thinking about Substance Use Disorder stigmas, treatment options, and mental health. Additional traffic by CSUSB students, staff, and faculty was brought into the museum through bi-monthly Wellness Workshop series programming offered by CAPS. The most popular of these programs for in-person attendance was by far the Fentanyl Awareness and Narcan Training workshop presented by Alexander Cordova of the San Bernardino County Department of Behavioral Health, which is the organization that fiscally sponsored the California exhibition.

The exhibition also served as a point of entry for a diverse array of class field trips and projects. Faculty in departments of Art, Sociology, Anthropology, Theatre, Art and Design, Nursing, Criminal Justice, Counseling, and Social Work all brought students through the exhibition for curricular activities during the academic year. One such example of this was an undergraduate course entitled "An Introduction to the Helping Professions (COUN 3101)." This course used visiting the exhibition as an assignment tied to understanding addictions and reflections about counseling practices that make a difference. Reflecting on the experience, one student shared, "Before visiting the Anthropology Museum, I wasn't prepared to be moved the way I was, I spent my afternoon reading each and everyone's story. Every story touched my heart and made me view the medical industry and the drug industry from a different perspective." A classmate reflected, "The exhibit was moving and heartbreaking as we saw the beautiful faces of 41 individuals who struggled with addiction and ultimately lost their life to it. The room felt heavy as I read each story. It included individuals with many different backgrounds and experiences. I hope that more people take a moment to learn and realize how addiction can occur anywhere." Another student stated, "All individuals displayed in the INTO LIGHT Project left a burning impression of the mental health struggle in the world."

The San Bernardino County Department of Behavioral Health (DBH), a major financial sponsor of the exhibition, also organized two resource fairs, bringing to campus dozens of local organizations offering addiction treatment, counseling, and other mental health services. DBH also offered five Naloxone (Narcan) distribution and training events, giving away hundreds of units to students, faculty, and staff. The success of these events caught the attention of Student Health Services, and a partnership is underway to ensure that Narcan and fentanyl testing strips are available on campus year-round. The work of DBH to support INTO LIGHT and to bring resources to the CSUSB campus was also noticed by the National Association of Counties, which recognized the

partnership with an Achievement Award in the category of Arts, Culture, and Historic Preservation in 2023. INTO LIGHT California has additionally inspired a county-wide drug death awareness and prevention campaign that features our participants, spreading their stories even more broadly and capping off our work with the assurance that the exhibition has extended its reach far beyond museum walls.

Finally, a partnership with Academic Technologies and Innovations (ATI) has preserved the exhibition in a way that will be accessible and long lasting, by developing a virtual 360 tour. This online resource uses the open-source software H5P to present HTML5 content with screen-reader-accessible text and meaningful descriptions of visual content in a photo-based environment. In this way the exhibition has created additional student learning opportunities in both content creation (through service learning) and also through content use, with faculty able to continue sending students through this virtual environment to experience the exhibition instead of only reading static content.[3] Thus while those interviewed and those completing the interviews were at the center of our project focus, the project's impact extended and continues to extend well beyond their powerful reports of transformational change as a result of participating in the project.

Lessons Learned

With any undertaking as large as this one has been, one would expect the need to adjust and adapt as the project unfolds. So was true for this project, as many people with differing backgrounds and stakeholders with separate agendas came together. This occasionally created challenges, but also made the project better and further reaching than what we could have imagined on our own. Here we focus on the unique challenges of a university project partnering with a not-for-profit, non-academic entity. Specifically, INTO LIGHT Project and California project leads Huhn and Hedtke were guided by differing goals and organizational structures that required negotiation of occasional divergent policies and protocols. The differences were not insurmountable, but required an appreciation for a shared vision to birth the exhibition in ways where all would feel like the mission of the project — to de-stigmatize drug related deaths and visibilize people who have died — was honored. The following are some of the places where we hoped to successfully join with the organization, which required addressing nuanced differences between our professional settings and standards, and which we hope can offer prognostication, ideas, and insights for others' university-non-profit co-creative partnerships:

- In line with the goal of reducing stigma surrounding drug overdose and drug poisoning deaths, INTO LIGHT Project typically requires that all project participants share their full name in connection with their loved one's narrative. The names of minors are also included by default when writing up the biographical narratives, with the understanding that it is important to family members to see their names as a part of their loved one's story. Additionally, contact information and participant files are maintained using standard business practices, rather than protocols of password-protection, substituting codes for participant names, and so forth, which are standard for protecting human subjects in an academic setting. As a stipulation to our partnership with INTO LIGHT, we required that participants be given the option to decide how they would like their

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[3] The H5P virtual tour for INTO LIGHT California, where the ballad composed by Kevin Zhang can also be heard, is available at https://csusb-ati.h5p.com/content/1291990990658279238.

name listed in association with the exhibition (most chose their full name, but not all). We also took the precaution of redacting the names of current minors when reviewing transcripts and before they were sent to INTO LIGHT for the development of narratives. In some cases, the names of minors were added into the narratives later, at the request of the interviewee, but in other cases they were not. All project files were password protected and labeled using a naming convention based on first names alone, which conflicted with INTO LIGHT Project's own naming conventions (and larger database of participants with many duplicate names). We also did not collect mailing addresses for participants, as this information was not integral to the research and so could not be justified in the protection of human subjects. These interventions created distress for INTO LIGHT Project, which relies on full contact information for communications (including the solicitation of donations), and they expressed hesitancy about future partnerships where IRB approvals are required. In an academic setting, contacting research participants to ask for financial contributions, or for any other purposes that extend beyond the originally explained research purposes, would be considered outside the bounds of the project, and potentially exploitative of the bereaved.

- INTO LIGHT Project typically collects from participants, on their own, the information that is needed to prepare each biographical narrative. This is sometimes done through a phone conversation, but more often through an online questionnaire. Either way, the process is geared toward extracting information in a structured format that is historical rather than generative. Because of our priority in creating opportunities for service learning and recruiting student interviewers who were trained in narrative counseling techniques, our approach to gathering information for the biographical narratives was distinct. First, the interviews were semi-structured and conversational, which elicited in many cases in-depth and lengthy discussions. Second, the interviews incorporated therapeutic techniques (as discussed above) that helped the participant to feel heard, understood, and cared for, and that encouraged speculation about continuing bonds with the deceased rather than recalling a historical relationship that ended at the time of death. As a result, each interview transcript, meticulously prepared, was lengthy and contained information that the INTO LIGHT narrative writers found to be superfluous and overwhelming to work through to extract the information needed for writing their standard narratives. This made development of narratives for the exhibition cumbersome and caused delays, which was certainly frustrating for both INTO LIGHT Project and for us.

- INTO LIGHT Project was founded with a mission to "put a human face on the disease of addiction" and to "change the conversation about drug addiction" (INTO LIGHT Project, n.d.). However, as the overdose epidemic has evolved since the founding of INTO LIGHT Project in 2019, many who are dying of a drug overdose, and especially drug poisoning, were never suffering from addiction. They may have used an illicit substance once, or by accident, or believed that they were purchasing a licit drug like Xanax or Adderall, though without a prescription and "off the street," but actually purchased an counterfeit version laced with or entirely made up of a deadly amount of fentanyl. For participant recruitment our original language, mirroring that of INTO LIGHT Project, focused on addiction and overdose. But, through pushback received from the drug death bereaved, and especially from those who rejected our solicitations, we began to understand that this language was not inclusive of all drug-related deaths. We made changes, including recognizing the distinction between the ways that "drug overdose" and "drug poisoning" are used

in the drug-death bereaved community and the oversized role of fentanyl in drug-related deaths. This decision to adopt the perspectives of the community that we intended to benefit was influenced by our training in Counseling and Anthropology (Hedtke and Huhn, respectively), but it did not completely overlap with the INTO LIGHT Project model. As a result, there were, throughout the project, moments where it felt like the organization and our participants were talking past one another, with INTO LIGHT Project hyper-focused on addiction whereas this was a concern of only some participants. By using our non-profit partner's general vision for the project but prioritizing the support of our participants over loyalty to the non-profit itself and adapting to the social landscape we encountered rather than assuming its contours, we found a point of tension that can arise between mission-driven non-profit work and academic fields like Counseling and Anthropology that focus on seeing things from the perspective of others. We anticipate that this is not unique to our partnership and could be something for others to consider when developing service learning projects.

Conclusion

INTO LIGHT Project, like many nonprofits, has an important mission that can dovetail with university interests in community partnership and student learning. INTO LIGHT Project specifically aspires to bring to light both those who are living with the depth of grief and those whose loss of life have been truncated to the circumstances of their death. Within the Counseling field, when someone we care about dies, common guidance is to encourage the bereaved that they need to "get over" the death of their loved one. Bereaved people are urged to "move on" and to "let go" so that the deceased may "rest in peace." This advice assumes that people had time to prepare for a death, to speak words of love before a death, and to even have a sense of completion in the living relationship that honors a well-lived life. This is often not the case when losing a loved one to addiction or drug poisoning, leaving the bereaved with layers of complex feelings and often at a loss at how to find comfort.

From a narrative counseling perspective, advice to "let go" can cut the bereaved off from comforting stories and from a continued relational connection between themselves and their loved one. This is especially the case with "bad," or stigmatized deaths such as drug-related overdoses. The INTO LIGHT California collaboration is a testimony to the many ways in which relationships do not die when a person dies. The experience of grief can be lessened when bereaved families and loved ones are guided to find meaning and comfort and to tell generative stories about those who have passed — in other words, to *not* "let go" and "move on." By speaking the words and savoring the images that connect with a person who has died, grief is lessened. In doing so, we also honor and celebrate the lives of those who we care deeply about. These possibilities for narrative counseling are compounded when combined with the power of narrative storytelling in a museum setting, which is a space that is generally trusted by the public and has an intrinsic ability to add weight and value to a subject.

This project has specifically used narrative counseling techniques and a museum setting, together with service learning and multidisciplinary partnerships, to uplift the stories of individuals who have died as a result of addiction and drug poisoning. It has been a project of restoring relationships between the living and the dead, creating new strength for those silenced by stigma, and bringing hope to places where pain has lived. It has been the express intention of all of us

involved in the project – through the interviews, the portraits, and the exhibition — to make visible the lives of people who mattered — to their loved ones, to larger communities of care, and now for all who have been witness to their stories in the museum in its physical and virtual iterations. Their stories will live on, carried with traces of their lives, touching hearts, and reminding us of the beauty that has lived, the power of love, and the strength of community.

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Persistence of First-Generation College Students

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Abstract

An emerging population of students in four-year higher education institutions are first-generation college students. A first-generation college student is defined as an individual whose parents did not complete a degree at a four-year college or university, so they are the first member of their family to attend college. More than one-third of students entering a four-year institution are considered first in the families to attend college (Catalidi, et al., 2018). In March 2020, seven participants who lived on campus were asked to physically leave their college campus. They were in the middle of their spring semester as first-year undergraduate students.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how campus closures due to COVID-19 impact the emotional and social well-being of first-generation college students. More information is needed in understanding how first-generation college students were impacted by the physical separation from campus resources, specifically peers, support staff, programs and professors induced by the pandemic while students were away from campus. These findings can inform higher education institutions and bring greater awareness on practices in how to sustain and support the social and emotional well-being of first-generation college students on the persistence track towards attainment of academic goals.

The lived experiences of seven participants were through a reflective response and a Zoom interview. The emerging theme revealed how the social and emotional support of faculty and the first-generation program were positive factors in their persistence through their second year of college. Although social emotional learning has been positively received at the K-12 education setting, limited research has been conducted on the role of social and emotional learning in higher education institutions, specifically from faculty and embedded programs. The findings from this study affirm how the social and emotional support first-generation college students received from faculty and the first-generation program created a sense of belonging and connection to the university.

The Role of Theory

This article draws from the work of Vincent Tinto (1975) who introduced the theoretical model of undergraduate retention. The major premise of the theory "can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college" (p. 94). An underpinning framing Tinto's model of persistence includes the importance of integration because college is viewed as both an academic and social system. His theory posits the stronger the individual's integration into both systems, the greater their commitment to the specific institution and the goal to complete college increases. The academic system includes an individual's academic performance and their intellectual development. The social system is described as an individual's interactions with peers and faculty. Tinto believed that a student could integrate into one of the systems, and not necessarily the whole, which served as enough of a positive factor (Mayhew et al. 2016). Most importantly, the perceptions

of the individual and their college experience has the most influence on their persistence or withdrawal from college.

The first-generation college students' experiences are often unique from their continuing-generation college peers at 4-year institutions. These differing experiences include socioeconomic status, academic preparation, social capital, levels of self-efficacy, integration into the academic and social environment, and sense of belonging (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons et al., 2019 Irelbeck, 2014). In addition, race and the intersectionality of multiple identities also impact their educational experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). With these possible variables that impact First-generation college students, supporting their persistence through college is essential.

Historically, first-generation college students have been considered a racially and economically marginalized population in higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Soria & Stableton, 2012; Terenzini et al., 1996). In 2015-2016, first-generation college students made up 48% of Pell Grant recipients. The Pell Grant is the largest federal financial aid grant based on household income for postsecondary students (National Center Education Statistics, 2016). As a result, first-generation college students often have no option but to work while being enrolled as full-time students (Adams & McBryer, 2020; Engle & Tinto, 2008). The juggling between multiple roles impacts their ability to fully concentrate on their academics and to immerse themselves in the college experience. Ongoing research stress how a sense of belonging is critical for students to integrate and feel valued in the college community and even more so for first-generation college students (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2017)

Possible Stressors for First-Generation College Students

The literature already confirms that first-generation college students continue to overcome barriers and obstacles to be the first in their family to work towards a college degree (Cataldi, et al., 2018) yet alarming trends of inequities that impact their mental health continue to surface in the stories shared. First-generation college students are more likely to experience exacerbated stressors compared to their continuing-generation college peers during COVID-19 (Liu et al., 2020; Soria et al., 2020). In another study conducted by the student experience in the research university consortium, surveyed 28, 198 undergraduate students between May through July 2020 at nine universities. Of those respondents, 26% identified as first-generation college students, and of those 56% identified as low-income and working class. First-generation college students reported experiencing additional stressors compared to continuing-generation students. They were more likely to experience living in unsafe environments, food insecurity, housing insecurity, higher rates of mental health disorders, and more challenges adapting to online instruction. These reported experiences are higher compared to their continuing-generation peers (Soria, et al., 2020).

Social Impact

Social wellness of college students adds concerns due to loneliness and isolation (Lee et al., 2021). Moving to remote learning altered the possible relationship developed with peers. In a survey of 200 students, attending a 4-year college in the U.S. were recruited before the COVID19 pandemic were surveyed through Pollfish (a survey research design platform that uses Random Device Engagement). One of the survey questions asked how Covid-19 impacted the

participants' relationships with friends. The results from the survey reveal 27.8% had improved, 45.7% had strained, and 26.5% had no impact on relationships with friends. The increased stress factors at home, distance and lack of communication due to COVID-19 were the causes of the strained friendships. The survey was done during the spring 2020 semester, so the longitudinal impact on friendships have yet to be fully explored. Another study conducted on the general public in China revealed that college students were more likely to experience stress, anxiety, and depression more than others during the pandemic (Li, et al., 2020). These stressors were caused by the isolation and separation from others.

Cultivating a Sense of Belonging

The perceptions of first-generation college students experiencing a sense of belonging is critical for their persistence through college. Cultivating this sense of belonging can also differ for students based on their race, generation status, and the intersection of both (Duran, et al., 2020). Using data from the Assessment of Collegiate Residential Environments and Outcomes, the researchers examined the environmental factors such as living on campus and perception of peer networks, contributing to belongingness. For two administrations of the survey, during spring 2017 and spring 2018, 59,364 students at two private and six public 4-year institutions across the United States participated. The findings revealed that white students indicated a higher sense of belonging compared to other students. African American/Black collegians indicate a much lower sense of belonging.

Similarly, those identified as first-generation college students reported lower perceptions of sense of belonging. To further the point of the intersection of social identities, both continuing and first-generation African American/Black students reported lower scores for sense of belongingness compared to other students. In contrast, continuing-generation White collegians indicate a higher sense of belonging. The limitations of the study include the ability to statistically generalize the findings based on campuses, since the study included several geographical locations. In addition, the data incorporated is cross-sectional, which limits the ability to make claims about student growth and change. These findings provide a critical lens in how privileged and marginalized identities intersect to construct unique experiences of belonging at 4-year institutions.

In this article, I connect the relevance of Tinto's retention theory of social integration and the critical role of faculty and first-generation programs (Strayhorn, 2019) in emphasizing social and emotional connection for first-generation college students, specifically during remote learning. The participants' social and emotional wellness was impacted by being physically disconnected from the university campus resources, faculty and peers for a long duration. In this study, connection is used to describe a sense of belonging. Recognizing the importance of sense of belonging, I wanted to capture their experiences in how campus closure impacted the social and emotional well-being. In the qualitative study, I sought to understand the question: In what ways are first-generation college students feeling connected to the university?

Methodology

For this study, a qualitative approach served to understand lived experiences and narratives of a marginalized population in higher education institutions (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). An openness to understanding rather than making assumptions is vital in framing the participants' experiences in the study (Denzin, 2016). Further, a qualitative study is the process of which explores how people and events impact each other (Maxwell, 2013), which is yet to be completely conveyed and understood with COVID-19. The design of the study aimed to bring greater context and understanding of campus closures through the perspective of first-generation college students. Using the Theory of Persistence (Tinto, 1975) to frame literature, methods of data collection, and analysis of data was to provide a foundation for understanding how higher education institutions' academic, social and financial support are instrumental in sustaining the overall mental health of first-generation colleges students, potentially impacting their attainment of academic goals.

Data was collected through two methods: (1) reflective prompt (2) interview. The first method of collecting qualitative data was providing a reflective prompt. The researcher provided participants with a reflective prompt to answer prior to the interview. Participants were asked to select a time and date during Fall 2021 for their Zoom interview. Once the participant selected an interview date, the prompt was emailed ten days prior to the interview. The reflective prompt was emailed to participants through a private Google document. Participants were given one week to complete the reflective prompt. Two days prior to the interview, the response was read and analyzed. The response by the participants was an exercise to encourage participants to reflect back to Spring 2020, since over a year had passed from the time they were asked to suddenly leave campus. The prompt was drafted with the research questions as the focal point.

Phase 1- Reflective Prompt

A reflective prompt was chosen to provide participants autonomy in time and space to reflect and convey their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. The prompt included the email sent to students by the president of the university asking them to leave campus immediately and additional written probes to engage the participant in possible reflections to consider in their response. Participants were encouraged to use phrases, words, or images in their response. Prior to the study, a pilot study was conducted on the reflective prompt during Spring 2021. The participants in the pilot study offered suggestions and feedback regarding the directions, the content, the flow, the length, and how they felt during their participation. Designed specifically for the study, the reflective prompt was included in the analysis. The reflective response served as a companion and introduction to the interview, adding depth and greater context.

Figure 1

Reflective Prompt & Directions

> In consultation with the good and thorough work of the COVID-19 University Response Team (C.U.R.T.), the President's Cabinet has made a number of decisions. These decisions were fully supported last night by the Board of Trustees Executive Committee. As we considered the impact they would have on our community, our overriding desire was for the health and benefit of our students, faculty, staff and others. These decisions were made seriously, and please know that as a Cabinet we have prayed, are praying and will continue to pray for divine wisdom and Spirit-led discernment in all we do. The following are our decisions as of March 17:
>
> - **We are instructing students to vacate Biola's residence halls and university-owned apartments, so that they may return home as soon as possible but no later than Sunday, March 22**. We believe this is in students' best interest as President Trump has hinted at restricting travel to and from California. We don't know how federal and state regulations might ramp up in the coming days. We also understand that students may have real and significant reasons why they cannot return home. Students who believe they must stay on campus and continue meals here due to extenuating circumstances should fill out the form Request to Stay. As all students are now being asked to return home, students no longer need to complete the "Plans for the Rest of Spring 2020" form. For students moving home, Biola will fully credit their student accounts for housing and meals on a prorated basis. This supersedes previous communication regarding housing cancellation costs. Housing and Residential Life staff will follow up later today with residential students via email to provide additional details on the move-out process as well as to provide support to students who need to remain on campus.

Note. The figure above is an excerpt taken from an email that the president of the university sent to all students living on campus on March 17, 2020.

Reflective Prompt

Attached to the excerpt was a reflection prompt that was intended to give participants time and space to reflect back on their feelings, thoughts and reaction to the email. Participants were asked to set aside approximately 10-15 minutes to reflect and record their responses on the Google document. The reflective prompt questions that were included:

Describe your feelings, thoughts and response when you first received the email about moving off campus.
- o What did you do next?

- What was most challenging?
- Did you have to make multiple living arrangements?
- Did anything surprise you?
- Who was the most supportive during the process?

Phase 2 - Interview Instrument

Qualitative research involves robust data collection (Bowen, 2009). A second source included in collecting qualitative data was interviews. The interview questions were drafted to ensure that the research questions would be the focal point. The interview protocol consisted of five questions. Probes were also included for the interview to minimize the interviewer effect by asking the same question of each respondent (Patton, 2002). Prior to the study, the interview instrument was piloted by first-generation college students from the target population during Spring 2021. These students met more than half the criteria as potential participants, which offered valuable reflections and feedback in how to adjust the interview instrument. Following the guidelines of IRB, I conducted all interviews through the virtual platform of Zoom. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide and were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Participants

Based on the methods of Lochmiller and Lester (2017), purposeful sampling, non-probability was used by the researcher to conduct the research. Purposeful sampling was selected for the study in trying to understand the experiences of a specific population; therefore, the sample population included in the study must meet a set of criteria. The criteria were included in the initial email to recruit participants. Participants meeting the criterion needed for the study includes:

- enrolled as a first-year student in fall 2019
- first-generation college student
- undergraduate
- had been living on campus
- ages 18-20

During the selection process, the director of the first-generation program became the contact person. The director initially emailed a cohort of approximately 35 first-generation college students who potentially met the criteria for the study. In the initial email, the director asked for consent for access to the names and emails of potential participants to be included in the recruitment email. Thirteen potential participants responded to the email from the director and gave consent to receive the recruitment email. A recruitment email was sent to the thirteen potential participants with the details and specific criteria for the study. Ten potential participants responded to the recruitment email. Of the ten potential participants, three individuals did not meet all the criteria as the requirement for the study.

In the final selection of the participants, seven individuals met all five criteria and provided consent to participate in the study. The seven participants were undergraduate students in their third or final year at a 4-year, private university in Southern California. Since the focus is on the

impact of social and emotional well-being of first-generation college students due to campus closure, the participants are represented by different races, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, and both genders. All participants were students of color. Of the first-generation population from the university, 61% are female, which was reflected in the ratio of five females and two males selected for the study. Table 1 is a chart describing the participants' major, anticipated and actual graduation date:

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant Name	Ethnicity	Major	Anticipated Graduation	Actual Graduation
Franco	Latinx	Business administration with concentration in analytics	Spring 2023	Fall 2022
Lisa	Asian	Psychology with minor in sociology	Spring 2023	Fall 2022
Kevin	Latinx	Psychology	Spring 2023	Spring 2023
Veronica	Latinx	Christian ministry and sociology	Spring 2023	Spring 2023
Katrina	Latinx	Communication science and disorder	Fall 2021	Fall 2021
Caroline	African American	Biological science (pre-med)	Spring 2023	Undetermined
Maya	Asian	Communication science and disorder	Spring 2023	Spring 2023

<div align="center">**Data Analysis**</div>

This study utilized a qualitative approach to data collection. The research questions served to guide the data analysis for the reflective prompt and interviews. In alignment with the design of the study, the reflective prompt and interview questions were crafted with a direct connection to the research questions. Both forms of data were reviewed, coded, and analyzed to answer the research questions.

Data was collected from reflective responses and interviews from the same participants. After each reflective prompt was submitted and interview conducted, the researcher wrote separate reports documenting any key findings and further questions for clarification for the follow-up email. In qualitative research, specifically populations that have been historically marginalized and silenced, being mindful and culturally sensitive was prioritized throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data (Milner, 2007). Making informed decisions based on continual conversations with individuals that represent the target population and piloting the data collection instruments prior to the study centered their narratives. Understanding the interpretations of the format, wording, and language incorporated in the data collection. As the interviews were transcribed, I assigned codes to themes that emerged. Based on codes, statements by participants were assigned accordingly. As new themes emerged from reading through the transcription multiple times, several codes were merged that were aligned with prominent themes or noted as a divergent perspective.

Engaging in self-reflection, member checks, and peer review encourages accountability for personal bias and minimizes possible assumptions during the analysis (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All of the responses from the interviews were transcribed and systematically coded. Further, I read through the transcripts and listened to the interviews multiple times to develop possible ideas regarding themes and relationships (Maxwell, 2013). Similarly, the reflective responses were systematically analyzed in the same manner. I extracted emerging themes and patterns from the reflective responses that were congruent and/or diverging from the interview analysis. The analysis of the reflection responses served to guide the opening questions of the interviews, add any new contextual information or fill in any possible gaps from the literature (Bowen, 2009). Throughout the process, the confidentiality of each participant and their responses were maintained.

Experiences of the Participants

Before campus closure, five out of the seven participants had a sense of belonging to the university. Kevin had just started a job he had wanted. Veronica and Katrina were both invested and deeply involved with the first-generation program. They had developed friendships and were enjoying a college experience. Participants described the emotional and social impact of having to leave campus.

The Emotional Impact

A sense of loss was described by three of the participants. Being first in their family to attend college is significant, so they were excited to have the college experience. Lisa described her feelings:

And so, college was my one chance to finally be in the same place for four years, and I told myself I am not transferring because the longest I've ever been in a place was less than two years, in the past. So yeah, I just really wanted to be in one place, and then I just felt so robbed. I was preparing for this my whole life, for all 18 years. I was so excited for four years, in the same place, with the same people—being super excited, and that did not get to happen.

Lisa described the feeling as being 'robbed' from the college experience she worked her whole life to attain the opportunity to attend college, especially being first in her family. Growing up she moved 17 times and never lived in the same location for more than two years. She thought attending college would give her the opportunity to stay in the same location for four years. In her words, "I had barely adjusted to being a freshman in college and I suddenly had to move back home. I felt robbed of something that I had worked towards my entire life, especially coming from a first-gen background." Lisa was robbed of the opportunities she had been anticipating with campus closures. The most difficult part was the suddenness of it all. From her reflection response, there was no time to grasp the events that followed, while having to physically leave campus suddenly. Participants had to react and respond to the expectations of the university to abide by the shelter in place mandates.

Veronica described having to mourn the loss of the stages and experiences in college. Second year students in the first-generation program on campus are asked to be a mentor to first- year students, but she did not get that opportunity to do this in-person. She described her initial feelings in an excerpt taken from her reflection response:

I think the most challenging thing for me was what ended up happening after I left campus. The physical packing and saying goodbye initially were not difficult. I had prayed the morning before, so I was emotionally able to continue the day. I look back now and didn't realize most of the people I had said goodbye to would have already graduated by the time September 2021 came along. I think the challenge was mourning different things as the year unfolded.

Veronica was really looking forward to that second-year experience, but had to finally come to terms with the loss of experiences and opportunities. According to her reflective response, Veronica expressed that she did not realize this would be the last time she would see certain friends. By the time students would return to campus for in-person learning, these friends had graduated.

To further elaborate on these feelings of sadness and loss, Katrina provided imagery in her reflection response. She described the imagery of a storm cloud hovering over her. The entire college experience was taken away from her so suddenly. She further explained in the reflective response:

Everything changed and everything was like falling apart. Everything was —I was being sent home. I was told I had to do school online. I couldn't see any one and definitely that took a big toll on me and because community is like insanely huge for me. So, it gave me more issues with mental health.

Lisa, Veronica, and Katrina had to process those feelings of loss and disappointment of all the possible opportunities they were anticipating for their college experience. Being first in the family to attend a 4-year institution is quite significant, and with every missed opportunity signifies a

loss that holds personal value and meaning for the participants. Building a social community was important to the participants. The opportunities that create social connections through residential events, participating in on-campus clubs, dining on campus, living on campus, and meeting professors for office hours are considered a loss from campus closures. The missed experiences could not be replicated for the participants because the uncertainty of having that opportunity again was part of their grieving process.

The Social Impact

The findings for the social impact of campus closures were both a mix of negative and positive. Five out of seven participants described the difficulty of being physically separated from their friends. Kevin spent time recalling his feelings and explained:

> It was just really depressing because I'm one of those social people. So, I like being around my friends and all that stuff, and I like being around my family. But it's just like being locked up in my room or my house. Altogether, for like weeks on end, without really going out. It just really got worse. I would say, it was pretty consistent, just feeling depressed. My friends are right there, but we can't just go out and hang out. I just can't really get out of the house.

They acknowledged that Facetime and Zoom were available, but this did not feel the same as seeing friends and professors in person. Veronica explained that she thrived off being around people and not being around people made her forget who she was before campus closures. She states, "It really tested my friendships, so a lot of friendships just went away." Caroline elaborated on the same point that "Friendships were hard to maintain during remote learning."

Kevin did not anticipate the lengthy duration of shelter in place. He struggled with not being able to physically hang out with his friends. Katrina had the opportunity to move back on campus during spring 2021. Despite being on campus, she had to live by herself in a suite because of social distancing restrictions. As a result, she experienced panic attacks because of the isolation. Caroline expressed the difficulty in maintaining friendships during remote learning. Friendship connections made her first year on campus just tapered off.

A few participants expressed positive experiences in their social life during campus closures. Franco had a difficult adjustment moving back home to live with his parents, so he described his friends as being a 'safe spot.' He would connect with them while playing video games and online chats. The time with his friends online was an opportunity to talk about other things besides school and for him to just be himself. He noticed the time spent with them online would go by so quickly. Lisa described that most of her friendships were made during remote learning because she did not prioritize friendships when on campus. During campus closures, she connected with friends by playing online games and responding to friends' social media posts.

Feelings of Connection

Participants described their experiences with their level of connection during the year and a half of a closed campus. Their experiences and perceptions varied depending on location and involvement with the university clubs or jobs. Through the findings, a few major themes emerged in regard to perceptions of connection.

Connection and Location

Feelings of connection are closely linked to being physically in the same location. Franco states, "Connection is when you are not alone." Four out of the seven participants defined connection as being physically in the same environment to have human connection. The on-campus clubs and residence halls offered virtual activities to try to keep students connected. Some participants attended what they called 'huddles,' but eventually they stopped attending. At the initial stages of campus closure, participants tried to stay connected to their friends from the university through facetime, texts, phone calls or Zooms. Eventually, this became difficult with conflicting schedules and making the effort. The relationships were hard to maintain once they were off campus. Virtual activities could not replace the human connection participants feel while being physically together. Kevin explained:

> Connecting is being able to hang out with friends. Go to different places on campus - cafeteria, grab coffee, or hang out at his apartment. Talking and hanging out with professors. Attend clubs in person. Not being on Zoom. Virtual activities were not effective. No one attended.

Katrina also defined connection as being physically in the same environment, and once she moved off campus, she did not feel connected to the university. Her perspective of needing human connection was also solidified when she moved back on campus during Spring 2021. Katrina had the opportunity to be on campus for one of her classes that needed to meet in-person. Although she was physically back on campus, she felt isolated and alone for the first time in her life.

Veronica identified a change in her sense of belonging to the university. She states, "No, I did not feel it at all. It was almost as if I lost my identity as a student of the university. I just felt like a student." From her perception, everyone was living their own life and doing their own thing. Not being in the same physical location became a common theme as to lack of connection for Veronica, Kevin, and Katrina.

Connection and Involvement

Participants felt a level of connection to the university depending on their involvement. During the interview, Lisa defined connection by stating, "Knowing that the school cares about you. Not being afraid to reach out to somebody. Mostly just the school is really caring, like seeing me as a person, not just as tuition money." Feelings of connection were different for the participants that had a campus job and were involved with a campus club or activity. These jobs were considered campus jobs even though they were still being done remotely. Lisa's perceptions of connection to the university were related to their jobs. Before leaving campus in March 2020, she received the role of pure wellness ambassador. This position would start her second year of college. During her training and meetings, she was able to feel cared for by the administration, faculty, and staff. Her director would check in on her wellness often. Prior to getting the pure wellness ambassador position, Lisa was considering transferring to a different university. She had been accepted into an out-of-state, prestigious university, and her parents were encouraging her to transfer. During the interview, she also explained, "I really think getting the job. Having students ask me questions, realizing that I can answer them and that I am

passionate about helping students. I think that really validated me, and I am actually helpful." Lisa realized the position brought her validation and value. The ability and opportunity to support other students provided a level of connection to the university.

For first-generation college students, their social integration has great significance as part of the college experience. They have a strong desire to become part of the campus life and also contribute to the university community. Lisa found this connection and experience when she got her new position through the university. The pure wellness position represented connection, validation of worth, and ultimately prevented Lisa from transferring to a different university.

Feelings of connection were stronger through involvement with a campus club and student government. She got to be a huddle group leader and part of the student government on campus. Caroline explained that she felt most connected to the university through her job and involvement with a campus club. With her role as a huddle group leader, she was asked to plan virtual activities for students to participate in during campus closure. She described her role:

> I had to plan some for one of my jobs. I had to be a huddle group leader. We met once a month or so. We showed up—just a space for people to talk, play games and just get to know each other. Being part of the student government offered her insight into decisions being made at the university level.

In fall 2020, Caroline, along with other student government leaders had the opportunity to sit in on a meeting with the president of the university to express their concerns. Being in student government also allowed her the opportunity to move back into on campus, residential housing by spring 2021.

Feelings of Connection Fluctuate

Franco's feelings of connection were dependent upon the interactions within his Zoom classes. He noticed his feelings would change. During the interview he explained the feelings of connection:

> Just not being around my friends made it difficult, but still being able to see everybody in the classes still made it feel like I was connected in some way, especially when everybody participated, and it was a really good class.

The weekly Zoom classes enabled Franco to feel engaged and connected with his classmates. He particularly enjoyed the classes when students were talking over each other because in essence, there was a feeling that his classmates were not in individual rooms, but in a physical class setting. The loudness and talking created an energy that imitated the environment of the classroom. Those types of moments during Zoom class created a connection for Franco.

Three participants experienced a sense of connection with the university prior to campus closure. Kevin was at a great place in his life before campus closure. He had just been hired as part of campus safety, a job he had been waiting for, and he had established solid friendships, but this was all disrupted suddenly. Kevin explains, "When I was online, I just did not feel like I was part of the campus any more or part of that university experience." He also described how returning to campus fall 2021 was difficult because he had to start all over again in making those connections with people and even where places were located around campus. Prior to campus closure, Veronica described herself as a "social bird." Before going to remote learning, she specifically stated five people she had made connections with, and desired to get to know them

better. Reflecting back, she was saddened by a lack of connection with them now. Katrina was also quite involved with the first-generation program and campus life before campus closure. She really enjoyed talking with classmates and meeting professors for office hours in-person. These were ways she felt connected, but these feelings of connection changed when she moved away from campus. In her perspective, feeling connected became challenging and she no longer felt like a college student.

Support Through Faculty and First-Generation Program

The participants most felt supported by the university through the efforts of the professors. Six out of the seven participants remarked how they felt supported by their professors. At the beginning of remote learning, professors were extremely patient and understanding. They understood that remote learning was new for many students and not every student had reliable Wi-Fi. In support of their social emotional learning, professors made themselves available to talk, opened up time during class for students to share how they are doing, to ask questions about COVID-19, prayed for students and acknowledged their feelings. In support of their academics, professors were flexible in assignments, made exams open book, provided more study sessions, and made themselves more available to students.

A noticeable finding was the level of support perceived by participants in the first generation program. All seven participants, who are part of the first-generation program on campus, had direct contact from the directors. The first-generation program directors would consistently call, text and email to check in on the participants in the program. Five out of the seven participants stated they received some type of support through the first-generation program on campus. For Veronica, the support from the program was significant, especially with the difficult living environment. She expressed how the leader of the first-generation program checked in on her wellness:

> Xavier does a really good job at being intentional. I guess because he knew, at least in my cohort, we had more students of color, so he knew the groove of my cohort. He would always be intentional about contacting us, and how we are doing in our individual living situations. Asking us if we needed anything. He was very helpful.

On a regular basis, she would talk to Xavier, her mentor, to process the challenging circumstances at home. Katrina also expressed that she is so grateful for the support from the first-generation directors. She explains, "Xavier and Aurora were my biggest support. I don't know what I would have done without them." Having the social and emotional support of the directors allowed her to persevere through her struggles and challenges.

The first-generation program was also a source in providing social and navigational capital. Lisa believes that her lifelong friends are through the first-generation program. Firstgeneration students have the opportunity to participate in a summer bridge program leading into their first-year at the university. They are given support through resources, mentorship and mentoring opportunities, seminars, academic advising, and networking opportunities with the directors, staff and faculty. Caroline utilized several of the resources that the first-generation program had offered and recommended through the summer bridge program. The directors of the program were intentional in reaching out to the participants to check on their well-being. The

type of support also included regular check-ins, mentoring, and access to resources. The firstgeneration program offered and provided a variety of support to the participants.

Persistence through Campus Closure

The discourse surrounding first-generation college students include perceptions of deficit and disadvantages (Schelbe, et al., 2019). Contrasting these perceptions, this study revealed the resilience and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) of the seven participants. The semester after returning to campus, one participant graduated early by Fall 2021. In Fall 2022, two participants graduated. As of Spring 2023, three participants graduated. One participant took one semester off for health reasons and is returning back to school in Fall 2023 to finish their undergraduate degree. These seven participants persisted.

Discussion

The findings for the type of support participants received are alignment with the research from Tinto (2017) and Strayhorn (2019). Faculty and staff are influential in the ways they establish a culture of care and positive learning experiences for students. They must be committed to promote a sense of belonging and positive learning outcomes, especially for the retention of students from diverse learning backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and socioeconomics (Tinto, 2017). The faculty at the university were able to provide the level of support that participants mentioned. Focused programs can also serve in creating support and a sense of belonging for first-generation programs (Strayhorn, 2019). The first-generation program at the university has been committed to the academic success and well-being of first-generation students. To take the case in point, participants noted the level of support they received through the program and program directors. Specific research is still needed on cultivating cultures of care within 4-year institutions that integrate social-emotional learning as a means to address how college is a distinct place for academics and a social support system that Tinto (2017) emphasized. I recognize that the lived experiences reflect a small sample of the first-generation college student population at a private institution. The experiences are limited and may not transfer to other higher education institutions. More of their experiences can be explored and need to be understood as first-generation college student transition into recovering from the pandemic.

Implications for Education Practices

First, higher education institutions should consider a holistic approach in teaching college students. The social and emotional support are necessary in promoting the academic growth and achievement of students, specifically for first-generation college students (Strayhorn, 2019). Social-emotional learning has been successful in the K-12 setting (Weissberg et al., 2015); therefore, this mindset of social-emotional learning could transfer into higher education settings. Fostering places for young adults to manage, cope and communicate their feelings is needed during significant transitions and changes in college. The pandemic brought to light that social and emotional factors impact the sense of belonging perceived by students and their persistence through college. Perhaps, this is an opportunity to pivot towards social-emotional learning in higher education settings.

Second, findings from participants in the study suggest how faculty can integrate classroom practices to address the social-emotional needs of students. Building capacity in

faculty to address needs beyond academics and classroom interactions require a comprehensive approach. During the interviews, participants recount how professors cultivated a sincere care for students by intentionally pausing in class lectures, discussions and activities to inquire about student wellbeing. Responsive faculty who prioritized the social-emotional needs of firstgeneration college students offer another layer of support that could sustain their overall social and emotional well-being. The reprioritizing of social and emotional needs affirms the holistic care of students and centers their humanity in higher education institution spaces.

Third, a growing number of 4-year universities offer programs such as summer bridge and first-year seminars, which aim to support their social and emotional growth at the beginning of college (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013; Howard & Sharpe, 2019). As many institutions have shifted back to in-person learning, mitigating gaps in connection by creating specific opportunities to feel connected and supported throughout the college experience are paramount. Growing research indicates that feelings of connection can fluctuate. Higher education institutions can consider consistent approaches to strengthen social and emotional connection for students. Traditionally, faculty are expected to fulfill teaching, research, committee and advising responsibilities. However, expanding opportunities for ongoing mentoring by faculty throughout the college experience could strengthen feelings of connection and social integration. Research indicates how faculty can act as institutional agents in promoting the education success for first-generation college students (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). The support of faculty is pivotal in the retention and graduation of first-generation college students. Faculty have greater capacity to support their persistence through college with mentoring, teaching multiple courses in an academic major and providing extended office hours. Participants in the study also described how faculty made themselves available for office hours, extra review sessions and being available before and after class. These practices by faculty supported the participants' persistence during campus closure. In addition, ensuring that college campuses establish first-generation programs for continual support of first-generation college students. The participants described how the program and leaders were instrumental in their emotional and social care. These specific interactions and supports beyond the classroom setting would cater to the social-emotional needs of first-generation college students, which could lead to higher retention rates and persistence through 4-year institutions.

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About The Author

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Ruby Lin is currently an assistant professor and the director of CalTPA in the School of Education at Biola University. She holds an Ed.D. in K-12 Educational Leadership from the University of Southern California, a Masters in Teaching and Bachelors of Arts in elementary education from Biola University. She started off as an elementary teacher for seven years and is now in her 12th year teaching in higher education. She is deeply passionate about supporting first-generation college students and developing future educators to be culturally responsive and equity-minded in their community schools.

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Tribute to Dr. R. Brett Nelson

Written by Shane R. Jimerson, Ph.D., NCSP.

It is with great sadness that I share that our colleague and dear friend - Dr. R. Brett Nelson - unexpectedly died this week. I know there are many colleagues who will be saddened by this news, as Dr. Nelson has long been an active member of many professional associations, including NASP, CASP, CSSP, APA-D16, and ISPA. I send sincere condolences to his family members, students, colleagues, and friends. In the spirit of celebrating his life and some of his many contributions to the field of school psychology, below is a bit of information about Dr. Nelson.

Dr. Nelson earned a BA at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. He then pursued a Masters degree in the graduate school psychology program at the University of Georgia in 1978 and became a practicing school psychologist in 1980, in Greeley, Colorado. Then, while working as a school psychologist, he completed a PhD (1992) in School and Educational Psychology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado. He worked as a school psychologist and taught at the University of Northern Colorado for a decade, and then in 2008 he joined the faculty full-time at the California State University – San Bernardino, which he continued as a full-professor until his passing this week. Throughout his active engagement as a full-time school psychologist, then part-time in both practice and teaching, and then most recently in his full-time capacity as a professor Dr. Nelson has engaged in contributing innovations in practice that are exceptional contributions to the field of school psychology. Most recently, Dr. Nelson was the recipient of the 2022 APA-Division 16 School Psychology Contributions to Practice Award [apadivision16.org].

Emphasis on Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services

Throughout his career, Dr. Nelson helped to conceptualize, implement, supervise and research an integrated comprehensive service model of school psychological services. An exemplar of this was his work in schools in Greeley Colorado. His efforts have consistently emphasized the importance of collaboration among school psychologists, administration, teachers, and university personnel. A description of his early work in this area is described in a paper at NASP in 1992 (Nelson and Blank, 1992). The model placed a full-time school psychologist in each school to be the primary mental-health provider in the system. Nelson and Blank (1993) presented evaluative data on the implementation and effectiveness at the next NASP convention. During the next decade, Dr. Nelson and colleagues presented their findings on the Integrated School Services Model at APA, and NASP, as well as Colorado and regional meetings. The findings featured in their numerous papers and publications indicated many positive outcomes, including;

a) positive perceptions as measured over time by all constituents; b) time-on-task surveys indicated significant increases (more than double) of time spent on interventions; c) reductions in the number of ED students over 12 years with a 34% enrollment increase; d) increased psychological report recommendations in IEP goals; e) improved school discipline in measured schools; and f) a variety of SEL supports with whole-school prevention programs, and mentoring programs.

It is particularly notable that in the early 1990's, an APA/NASP joint committee identified seven locations for outstanding psychological services, which included Dr. Nelson's work in Greeley Public Schools, CO. Dr. Nelson also provided extensive consultation regarding the Integrated School Services Model in school districts, in an APA accredited doctoral consortium, and demonstrated positive support for appropriate inclusion practices; and more consistent use of and improved functioning of school problem solving teams.

Notably, Dr. Nelson's early pioneering work in these areas continued across the years and is reflected in some of his most recent publications focused on further advancing school psychology practice. For instance, one of his recent publications focused on topics such as: The effects of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports on student academic achievement and The association between student wellness and student engagement at school. His most recent scholarship addresses the particularly important and contemporary topic of Wellness paths to life satisfaction among multicultural youth.

Mentoring of School Psychologists

Throughout Dr. Nelson's career, as a practicing school psychologist, as an adjunct faculty member, and as a full-time faculty member, his top priority was always the mentoring and supervision of future school psychologists. His mentoring efforts over four decades focused on emphasizing evidence-based practices to support the development of children at school. Dr. Nelson consistently remained abreast of contemporary scholarship and features this research in his work to supervise, mentor, and prepare the next generation of school psychologists. Both in the school settings and teaching courses at the university, Dr. Nelson consistently highlighted the importance of contemporary research informing the activities of school psychologists. His many successes and contributions over the years are reflected in the many school psychologists whom he provided mentoring and supervision to prepare for their careers.

Scholarship Advancing School Psychology Practice

Dr. Nelson was also actively engaged in scholarship that advances school psychology practice. Throughout his career, as a practicing school psychologist, adjunct faculty, and as a full-time faculty member, Dr. Nelson continuously engaged in research and scholarly activities focused squarely on advancing school psychology practice. Throughout his collaborative scholarship with EdS students at CSU-SB, he continued to stress the critical value of data collection and research. An example of his success in research mentoring and collaboration is that in 2014 two of the students working with him won the California Association of School Psychologists Michael Goodman Memorial Research Award. This project employed a full behavior analysis and multimodal intervention approach to successfully address student academic and behavioral challenges. Dr. Nelson had over 40 publications across his career, and

more than 100 presentations. I had an opportunity to attend many of his presentations over the years and also had many opportunities to collaborate with Dr. Nelson on multiple projects. Across all activities, Dr. Nelson was actively engaged with students, practitioners, and colleagues to contribute his vast experiences, knowledge, and insights. Notably, Dr. Nelson frequently presented his scholarship at State, National, and also international conferences. Among our international colleagues, Dr. Nelson was a highly esteemed and frequent contributor to the proceedings of the International School Psychology Association annual conference. The combination of practical experience, methodological rigor, and practical application that Dr. Nelson brought to his scholarship, presentations, and publications is consistently well-received across many diverse audiences of school psychologists and allied professionals throughout the country and around the world. As many colleagues can appreciate, maintaining active and ongoing scholarly endeavors is not simple within the context of an institution wherein the teaching loads are high, the mentoring loads are high, and there is minimal support for scholarly endeavors, thus, it is to Dr. Nelson's credit that he maintained such a high level of scholarly engagement, amidst his many other faculty responsibilities.

Robust Practice, Mentoring, Teaching, and Scholarly Contributions

Some colleagues excel in their work with children, families, and administrators in the schools each day. Some colleagues excel in mentoring other school psychologists to be successful in their future work to support children, families, and schools. Some colleagues excel in their scholarship and make important contributions to practice through these efforts. Dr. Nelson is among the exceptionally few colleagues who excelled in each of these contexts throughout his career, truly making exceptional contributions to the field of school psychology through innovations in practice. With more than 40 years of practice, supervision, mentoring, research, and teaching, Dr. Nelson exemplified the characteristics and contributions that are celebrated in the APA Division 16 Contributions to Practice Award. On a personal note, Dr. Nelson enjoyed time and travels with his family and friends, including numerous camping trips in California, international trips, and many wonderful adventures at his cabin in Sugarloaf / Big Bear, California (skiing, cross country, snowshoeing, and boating on Big Bear Lake in the summer). Dr. Nelson's numerous contributions and the impact of his work on the lives of children and families, as well as the careers of so many professionals, the influence on so many school systems, and the contributions of his scholarship to advancing the field of school psychology were recognized with special recognition. His many contributions will continue to inform and positively impact children, families, professionals, and schools across the state, country, and around the world, ... as a colleague, leader, collaborator, and friend, Dr. Nelson will be missed.

Sincerely,

Shane