

**Strategies Elementary School Principals Implement to Cultivate a Positive and Inclusive
School Culture: A Qualitative Exploratory Case Study**

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Abstract

The problem addressed in this study was some elementary school principals do not cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to identify strategies elementary school principals believe cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture that supports a sense of belonging in rural public elementary schools in Northern California. The research was grounded in transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes connection, empowerment, and well-being. Data were gathered through individual interviews with eight elementary school principals and a follow-up mini-focus group. Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis process guided the coding and theme development. Three primary themes emerged in response to the first research question: communication and transparency, building relationships and inclusion, and supportive leadership. Two additional themes arose for the second research question: staff and student well-being and empowerment. Findings revealed that principals' relational practices, especially those that model empathy, clear communication, and shared leadership, play a crucial role in shaping school culture. When leaders prioritize inclusion, emotional safety, and student voice, they foster environments where staff and students feel valued and connected. This study underscores the importance of leadership practices rooted in transparency, empathy, and a commitment to holistic well-being. The findings contribute to the field by offering practical insights into how principals influence school culture. The findings also support the design of leadership preparation programs that prioritize emotional intelligence and inclusive practice. This study confirms that principals play a crucial role in creating schools where all individuals, including students, staff, and families, experience a strong sense of belonging.

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Section 1: Foundation

The role of the school principal has undergone a significant transformation in the last five years, reflecting a shift in leadership paradigms. Principals are now responsible for uniting schools and communities within a system that supports students, parents, and health and wellness professionals in addressing poverty, promoting equity, and enhancing learning, while fostering student development as changemakers (Fullan, 2023). Despite these heavy responsibilities, the school principal can invigorate the campus through leadership that establishes and promotes a positive culture.

School culture is an intangible and prevailing influence that can be felt when you step onto a school campus. A school's culture is reflected in everything from the behavior of staff and students to the overall environment, including the physical appearance of the campus. Those closest to the school, such as parents, teachers, and students, feel their school's culture is unique and powerful, although it is often hard to define (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Researchers have developed several varying definitions of culture, from "the way we do things around here" (Bower, 1966, p. 22) to "a pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with problems" (Schein, 1985, p. 11). In the 1970s, when Edmonds's movement for effective schools began, he identified that effective schools "are as eager to avoid things that do not work as they are committed to implementing things that do" (Edmonds, 1979, p. 21). Lijun and Te (2024) defined modern-day school culture as extending beyond academic achievement to reflect the institution's identity, shaped by the values, attitudes, and social interactions influenced by principals and administrators. By any definition, culture profoundly affects every aspect of a school, including faculty conversations, instructional styles, and the perspective on professional learning (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Every element on campus

contributes to the collective experience, helping to establish a unique school culture. The school principal is at the helm of that experience. The principal's leadership style plays a critical role in shaping the well-being of students from diverse backgrounds and with varied perspectives (Cooray, 2023; Hodge et al., 2023).

Every day, school principals take on tasks beyond their responsibilities, including substituting for absent teachers, supervising recess and lunch breaks, and administering student medications. However, one of the principal's most essential, yet less recognized, roles is that of architect. Principals are the architects of their school's culture. The principal shapes shared beliefs, values, and behaviors that define a school (Deal & Peterson, 2016). The principal's leadership will set the tone for how students and staff interact, approach challenges, and celebrate successes (Heenan et al., 2023). A robust and positive school culture fosters inclusivity and community engagement. This environment supports student achievement and fosters a sense of belonging among all collaborators, including students, teachers, parents, and the wider community. School principals play a pivotal role in creating and sustaining culture by utilizing transformational leadership qualities, such as prioritizing relationships, collaboration, and a shared vision (Heenan et al., 2023). A significant relationship exists between transformational leadership and site performance (Waham et al., 2020).

When cultivating a positive school culture, the principal must consider promoting inclusion regardless of factors such as race, disability, family background, language, and immigration status (DeMatthews et al., 2021). According to Salisbury (2006), "Schools that function inclusively do so for a reason ... [and] the principals in these schools were the reason" (p. 79). In promoting inclusion, educators must also address implicit bias and its negative influence on academic achievement (van den Bergh et al., 2010). The school's culture influences

how differences between teachers and students contribute to misunderstandings and miscommunications, leading to disproportionate rates of marginalization for certain groups (Simmons et al., 2018). Principals face numerous challenges in developing an inclusive culture, including a lack of resources, excessive paperwork and bureaucracy, and unprepared teachers (DeMatthews et al., 2021). The principal's job is overwhelming, and addressing culture and inclusivity requires a vigilant focus. Simply restructuring old policies rather than “reculturing” policies will not create schools that inspire change from the inside (Kaplan & Owings, 2013, p. 2).

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was some elementary school principals do not cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture (Arroyo-Rojas et al., 2024; Fullan, 2023). Schools are undergoing rapid and ongoing transformations, which undeniably affect school leaders (Heenan et al., 2023). With the shift in expectations, principals need practical strategies to support and develop a positive and inclusive school culture. The challenges and changes in the principal’s job expectations have left 85% of K-12 principals experiencing job-related stress, 48% struggling with burnout, and 28% reporting symptoms of distress (Doan et al., 2022). Regardless of the job's stresses, the principal drives a positive school culture by mentoring staff and creating a flexible, stimulating, participatory, and supportive environment (Engels et al., 2008).

While there has been research focused on the role of the principal in fostering inclusive school cultures, challenges, including inadequate professional development, resistance from staff, and conflicting policy demands, limit principals’ effectiveness in creating long-term inclusive practices (Heenan et al., 2023; Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields & Hesbol, 2020), many

principals grapple with balancing leadership tasks and promoting inclusivity, particularly when district-level goals conflict with the principals' efforts to build a positive school culture (Heenan et al., 2023; Shields & Hesbol, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to identify strategies elementary school principals believe cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture that supports a sense of belonging in rural public elementary schools in Northern California. Positive school culture is determined by a set of assumptions, beliefs, values, and attitudes cultivated by the principal (Tamir & Ganon-Shilon, 2021). As such, the principal is responsible for incorporating inclusiveness into those beliefs and values. To understand the context in which school leaders operate, it is important to identify whether their sites offer programs and services that support diverse learners. The presence or absence of such resources may influence principals' approaches to fostering an inclusive school culture. I collected experiences and strategies from elementary school principals in rural public schools in Northern California. Eight elementary school principals were interviewed using open-ended questions via Zoom and in a focus group. Codes were created after the interviews were completed to determine themes. To participate in this study, individuals were required to meet several inclusion criteria: (a) principal of a rural elementary school in Northern California, (b) at least three years of experience as a school administrator, (c) believe they have a positive and inclusive culture (as evidenced by diverse teaching staff, low teacher turnover), and (d) the school site should offer programs and services to support diverse learners.

Research Questions

RQ1

What are elementary school principals' perceptions of the leadership strategies that effectively contribute to a positive and inclusive school culture?

RQ2

What are elementary school principals' perceptions of how a positive and inclusive school culture fosters a sense of belonging on an elementary school campus, and what benefits do they associate with such a culture?

Conceptual Framework

The transformational leadership theory provided the framework for this study. Transformational leadership was first defined by James Downton (1973) and developed by James MacGregor Burns in 1978, who studied political leaders (Burns, 1978). Burns' theory suggests that political leaders should be transformational leaders, focused on a better future, rather than transactional leaders engaged in pork-barrel politics and campaign promises (Northouse, 2021). In 1985, Bernard Bass adopted Burns' theory into management strategies outside of politics. There were four key factors, the four I's, that Bass (1985) developed to characterize transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Each element of transformational leadership is essential to effective school leadership, as the focus of transformational leadership is to develop a vision and shared commitment to bring positive change to an organization's culture (Pineda, 2024).

Inspirational Motivation. Inspirational motivation refers to leaders clarifying and relaying their visions to inspire and motivate their followers to achieve the established goals (Judson et al., 2024). A transformational leader can foster a positive culture by engaging the community, setting high expectations, committing to shared goals, inspiring others, and overcoming obstacles (Alzoraiki et al., 2024). These actions broaden the environment and contribute to the organization's and its people's overall success and well-being (Alzoraiki et al., 2024).

Intellectual Stimulation. Intellectual stimulation plays a key role in organizational learning, requiring leaders to inspire and challenge their followers to grow and succeed in meaningful and engaging ways (Jung et al., 2003). Furthermore, intellectual motivation contributes to creating an environment that enhances performance. In this context, challenging situations encourage employees to think creatively and propose innovative solutions for problem-solving and growth (Afsar & Umrani, 2020).

Individualized Consideration. Individualized consideration is a leadership approach that encourages followers to reach their full potential. Leaders provide coaching, guidance, and opportunities that foster professional growth and development (Wanza, 2024). Additionally, individualized consideration recognizes and addresses employees' needs about their work tasks. By understanding these needs, leaders provide direction and guidance to facilitate task completion (Zhang et al., 2024).

Idealized influence. According to Ngaihe et al. (2016), idealized influence refers to a transformational leader's ability to communicate their vision, inspire direction, and guide followers toward its achievement. This leadership trait enhances employee performance by

promoting shared goals and values, demonstrating confidence and determination, and serving as a role model for subordinates (Olajiga et al., 2024).

Transformational leadership theory remains a key focus in educational studies. Heenan et al. (2023) highlighted the significant positive effects of school culture, indicating that transformational leadership is essential for cultivating a supportive and collaborative atmosphere. Kareem et al. (2023) demonstrated that transformational leaders can drive positive change by establishing a clear vision, fostering teamwork, and empowering individuals to take on leadership roles. However, critics cite ethical concerns, arguing that a charismatic leader may pursue their agenda (Alzoriaki et al., 2024) or that idealized influence and inspirational motivation might manipulate followers (Chunhui et al., 2023). Kamilah et al. (2023) contended that the theory overlooks social and cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, Alzoriaki et al. (2024) asserted that transformational leadership theory remains a robust framework despite these criticisms.

Alzoriaki et al. (2024) employed Bass's four I's of transformational leadership theory to illustrate the significance of fostering a positive school culture in enhancing students' academic performance. "...transformational leadership assists in school and community development through a culture that promotes a moral commitment to students' success, ongoing performance, and innovative capacity to develop the school community" (Alzoraiki et al., 2024, p. 2). The four principles of the transformational leadership theory are closely aligned with my study's research problem, purpose, and research questions. By aligning these leadership practices with the components of transformational leadership, this framework examines how principals' leadership behaviors contribute to a positive and inclusive school culture.

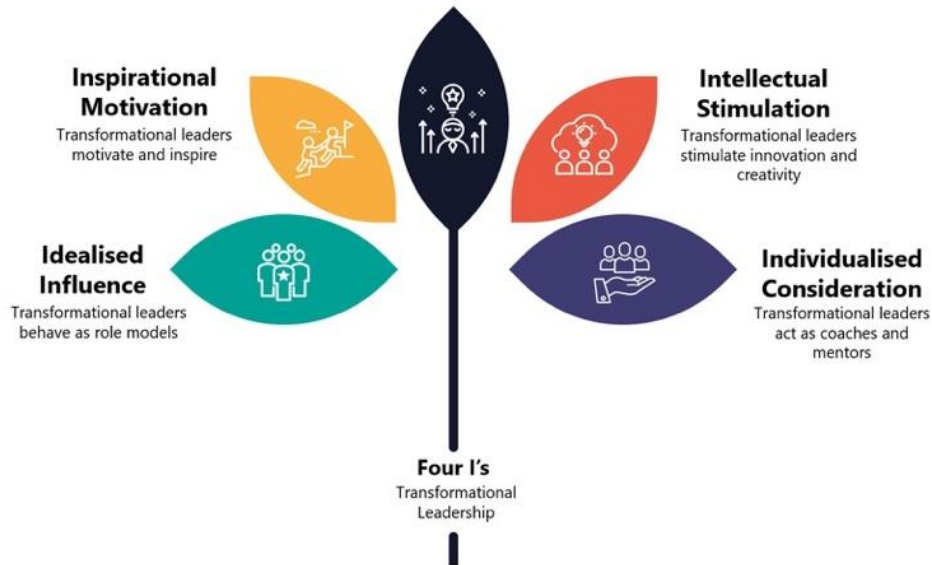


Figure 1. The four I's of transformational leadership.

Definitions of Key Terms

Inclusion

Regarding education, inclusion is a principle that education systems strive to ensure, aiming to eliminate obstacles to learning and social engagement for students. Rather than being a fixed goal, inclusion is an ongoing process that demands consistent effort and dedication. This process involves integrating inclusive policies, cultural values, and institutional, social, and pedagogical approaches (Honkasilta & Koutsoklenis, 2024).

Northern California

This study defines Northern California as the state's 48 counties north of San Francisco (Hull, 2024).

Positive School Culture

A positive school culture acknowledges and celebrates the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of students and staff. Educational leaders can foster inclusivity by adopting culturally responsive teaching practices, incorporating diverse materials, and celebrating cultural

events, which promote a sense of belonging and mutual respect within the school community (Notman & Henry, 2011).

Principal

The school principal is an educational leader responsible for guiding and supporting the school community, including students, teachers, and parents. The principal is essential to fostering a positive school culture, improving teaching and learning, and ensuring the safety and well-being of all students (NAESP, 2024).

School Culture

School culture is defined as the collective principles, practices, and mindsets embraced by everyone within a school community (Bayar & Karaduman, 2021).

Review of the Literature

Identifying strategies to foster a positive and inclusive school culture is crucial for improved student learning and well-being. School leaders must create environments that promote safety, respect, and value among students, resulting in enhanced academic performance and emotional well-being. These strategies impact teacher satisfaction and retention, providing a stable and effective teaching staff (Kraft & Papay, 2019). Moreover, an inclusive culture promotes equity and access, ensuring that all students benefit from educational opportunities. Effective community engagement, on the other hand, enhances family involvement and support for student success (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). The research surrounding school culture can inform professional development for current and future school leaders, influence educational policy, and provide best practices for crisis management, contributing to long-term positive outcomes such as higher graduation rates and increased civic engagement (Khaleel, 2021).

Understanding these strategies is essential for duplicating successful practices across schools and promoting a supportive environment for students and staff.

The literature review draws on historical and modern research to identify various aspects of positive and inclusive school culture and the role of the principal. Investigating the origins of school culture and the progress made in identifying relevant aspects of supporting a school campus enables more targeted work by school leaders. The National University (NU) online library was utilized to find peer-reviewed research articles. The library was accessed to read dissertations, journal articles, and peer-reviewed work from the last five years. Additionally, the following databases were utilized: ProQuest Central, SAGE Journals, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar. In the searches, keywords such as *school culture*, *elementary school principal*, *positive school culture*, *toxic school culture*, *student voice*, *social-emotional learning*, *rural education*, *Northern California*, and *inclusive education* were used to research this topic. The publication time frames were narrowed from 2019 to 2024 with a focus on school culture and elementary school principals. Seminal articles from prominent authors are provided as background.

Characteristics of Positive School Culture

The Coleman Report (1966) identified that a student's academic achievement was more impacted by family background and socioeconomic status than a school's quality or resources (Coleman et al., 1966; Jenecks et al., 1971). Murnane (1981) concluded that schools did impact student achievement based on the relationships with teachers and other students. More recently, Fullan (2007) found that school culture is critical to promoting student achievement, teacher satisfaction, and overall effectiveness. A positive school culture enhances teacher collaboration, strengthens campus relationships, and encourages students' sense of belonging (Dawkins et al., 2021; Deal & Peterson, 2016). In comparison, a negative school culture leads to staff burnout,

student disconnect, and low academic performance (Sasan et al., 2023). School culture has a powerful effect on student attitudes and academic achievement (Heenan et al., 2023).

Heenan et al. (2023) identified four essential practices that significantly contribute to shaping a school's culture, emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach to educational leadership. Liu et al. (2020) found that teachers should not work in isolation and that shared leadership among teachers and principals fostered a sense of ownership and accountability among the school community. Teacher leadership nurtures ownership and responsibility among staff, leading to a more collaborative and positive school climate (Liu et al., 2020). Kara (2022) revealed that teachers who take on leadership roles at school impact school culture. These efforts are tied to a collaborative culture and Khasawneh et al. (2023) demonstrated that teacher collaboration in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) enhances school culture. Kraft and Papay (2019) found that collaborative campuses foster development and improve school effectiveness. Teachers engaging in cooperative planning, sharing best practices, and mutual support contribute to a positive and cohesive school environment. Teledahl et al. (2024) discussed the importance of collective habits among teachers in fostering professional development and school improvement. The study further states that collaborative efforts among teachers are far more impactful than individual work in creating change.

The Role of the Principal in Shaping School Culture

Given principals' many responsibilities and expectations, their role is pivotal in shaping school culture. Given the increasing demands on principals, there is a pressing need for tools and strategies to cultivate a positive and inclusive culture. Leithwood et al. (2004) found that school leadership is second only to classroom instruction among factors contributing to students' learning. The school leader sets the tone for expectations and relationships.

Principal preparation programs frequently emphasize managerial and administrative responsibilities while providing limited coursework addressing the sociocultural dynamics present within schools (Arroyo-Rojas et al., 2024). At the heart of any organization is its culture, which can be found in its personality, actions, symbols, beliefs, rituals, and rules (Wallace, 2021). School leaders influence a school's culture in a way that exceeds test scores and student achievement (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Grissom et al. (2021) identified that improving principal leadership significantly impacts student outcomes. Principals must cultivate a trusting culture rather than focus on test scores and data points (Fullan, 2014).

The relationships among the adults at a school influence a school's character more than anything; trusting and cooperative relationships create a robust collegial culture (Barth, 2006). Changes made to adult behaviors influence the student culture, leading to increased student achievement and higher staff satisfaction (Liggett, 2024). The idea that a school principal leads top-down is no longer the norm. School leadership functions more efficiently with a shared model (Fullan, 2013; Peterson & Deal, 2009). The school will improve when an elementary school principal cultivates a culture built on trust and cooperation (Heenan, 2023). The principal is essential in establishing that school culture. Data from Karabag et al. (2017) demonstrated that the stronger a principal's transformational leadership competency, the more significant the impact on a school's learning culture.

Changing or improving a culture extends well beyond the title of *principal*. School leaders who encourage "achievement-oriented behavior, transformational leadership, task- and relation-orientation and effective time-management encourage professionalism and learning" (Nehez & Blossing, 2022, p. 313) are capable of driving change. Principals who do not promote a professional culture do not make the same shifts on campus (2022). Leithwood et al. (2020)

revisited claims from a Leithwood et al. (2008) paper to highlight that while principals may enact specific strategies to build culture on campus, the implementation context has a more significant impact than the strategy itself. Leithwood et al. (2020) cited a shared vision as a common strategy for building culture. However, depending on the school site, the cultural, economic, and contextual factors, a principal cannot use a cookie-cutter plan to create that shared vision. A low-income school may require greater communication with parents and community members than an upper- and middle-class school with high levels of parent engagement (Leithwood et al., 2020). These “situated contexts” (p. 9) require intentional work from a school leader to implement effectively. Leithwood et al. (2020) revealed that the *old-school* top-down model of school leadership is less influential than distributive leadership. In addition, specific patterns of distributive leadership are more effective than others (Leithwood et al., 2020). The context of each school site will drive the leadership model. Hulpia and Devos (2010) discovered that teachers showed strong dedication to frameworks where tasks were assigned based on areas of expertise.

Heenan et al. (2023) conducted a systematic literature review studying transformational leadership and school culture. They concluded that increased staff motivation and positive school culture were among the leading impacts of transformational leadership. Sawar (2022) determined that principals should utilize a leadership style that involves teachers in the decision-making processes and fosters open communication, which can lead to significant improvements in teacher performance and, by extension, school culture. Kiziloglu (2021) established that the principal’s leadership style and a supportive school culture play a critical role in fostering learning on campus.

School Partner Engagement

Students. Students play a pivotal role in shaping a positive school culture by participating in activities, open communication, and contributing to a collaborative and supportive environment (Rani et al., 2023). Bayar and Karaduman (2021) found that 31% of high school students defined school culture as the behaviors at school, 24% thought culture was the history and achievements of the school, 15% thought friends formed a school culture, 15% saw the school uniforms as defining culture, and 15% thought social activities created culture. While students had a variety of definitions for culture, 42% understood that school culture affects their achievement.

Kahne et al. (2022) found that giving students opportunities to express their views establishes a sense of belonging and community, which is crucial for creating an inclusive environment. The sense of belonging fostered through students' voices promotes a positive and supportive atmosphere (2022). Holquist et al. (2023) established that student voice should be a part of distributed leadership on a school campus and "go beyond asking students for feedback on surveys" (p. 732). Holquist et al. (2023) also found that every student in the study reported feeling frustrated by a lack of responsiveness from the teachers and administrators on campus. Wang et al. (2019) stated that schools that integrate student voice into the campus culture see declines in behavior issues because students feel heard and respected and are more likely to demonstrate positive behaviors. By hearing and responding to the voices of all students, schools can foster practices that demonstrate the community's diversity (Chen et al., 2021).

Parents. Active participation from parents cultivates a welcoming setting that fosters open dialogue and mutual respect between families and educational staff (Harris & Jones, 2020). Including parents in decision-making aligns the school's values and objectives with the broader

community, fostering a shared vision that instills a sense of ownership among parents, leading to a more unified and supportive school culture (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). Caridade et al. (2020) identified a positive correlation between parental involvement and school culture. This connection underscores the idea that when parents are actively engaged in their child's education, it fosters an environment that is supportive, collaborative, and conducive to learning (Caridade et al., 2020). A robust partnership between families and schools establishes consistent expectations for both behavior and academic achievements, thereby contributing to an improved school climate (Wang & Degol, 2019). From a parent's point of view, family engagement can contribute to a positive school culture. (Kelty et al., 2020). Engagement can be anything from parents volunteering in classrooms to school-home communication like newsletters or events on campus (Kelty et al., 2020). Kelty et al. (2020) also distinguished that school events like parent-teacher conferences or back-to-school nights at primary grade levels are positive connections between school and family. However, school and family connections often occur at the secondary level due to poor behavior or academic performance. These distinctions can alter a family's interpretation of engagement (Kelty et al., 2020).

Teachers. As a key partner to the success of a school, teachers must be engaged in developing the culture. Several researchers suggest that a positive school culture is a collective effort of school personnel (Dewitt, 2017; Jones, 2018; Korhonen et al., 2014; Papay & Kraft, 2017; Senge et al., 2012). In addition to that collective effort, school leadership must ensure that teachers and the school community are heard and part of the decision-making process (Jones, 2018; Senge et al., 2012). A positive culture can be reflected in celebrating individual staff and student achievements, strong interrelationships based on transparency, respect, and gratitude; errors not seen as failures; students are driven to academic achievement and equitable

access to all opportunities (Verma, 2021). On the other hand, a toxic school culture swings the emphasis away from student achievement and results from ineffective leadership, a lack of assistance with student behavior issues, hostile relationships on campus, and a lack of recognition (Verma, 2021).

Teachers who nurture interactive classroom atmospheres significantly impact student engagement and motivation (Wang, 2023; Walker-Roberts, 2025). The findings of Wang's study highlight the complex emotions, awareness, and interpersonal interactions that contribute to effective teaching and positive teacher-student interactions. Walker-Roberts (2025) upheld Renshaw and Brown (2021) emphasis regarding the critical role of teacher-student relationships in developing an inclusive culture that honors student voice and agency. Furthermore, teachers' involvement in shaping school policies and practices has improved school culture. Walker (2020) conducted a study to determine if implementing an innovative hybrid schedule would improve student learning outcomes at Stella Elementary School. Walker's study identified no causal link, but Walker stated that there was improved teacher collaboration, improved work in the professional learning communities, and improved student learning. "...implementing a positive change in school culture improved student-learning outcomes" (p. 161). Teacher participation in decision-making fosters a sense of empowerment and dedication to the school's objectives, thereby nurturing a climate of trust and respect among all stakeholders (Davis & Wubbena, 2021). When teachers establish clear expectations and nurture positive relationships, they create a more orderly learning environment, enhancing the school's overall culture (Zhang & Liu, 2019).

Inclusive School Culture

Research into culturally responsive pedagogies (Gay, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995) encouraged teachers to address the unique learning needs of marginalized students by using cultural references in instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and classroom management (Weinstein et al., 2004). Gay (2010) revealed that while culturally relevant teaching was important, it was not enough. All aspects of education, funding, policy, and administration need to incorporate culturally relevant perspectives. Gay (2010) further stated that if teachers were asked to change their craft, school leaders must have the same mandate towards the entire school's culture.

An inclusive education setting ensures all students are involved and feel accepted and valued (Tanzi & Hermanto, 2024; Walker-Roberts, 2025). Testing data reflect that Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students underperform on nearly all assessments in the United States education system (Khalifa et al., 2016). Further, there are significant disparities in discipline numbers, which can reflect unfriendly school environments toward minority students (Khalifa et al., 2016). "...for years, the exclusion of diverse student groups and disadvantaged communities has been a problem in educational institutions" (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024, p. 57). For educators, creating an inclusive culture requires intentional work. It is only meaningful when "embedded in understandings about community" (Schuelka et al., 2019, p. xxxii) and reflects social inclusion. Diversity plays a crucial role today and has become more apparent in schools across the globe (Kilag et al., 2024). Research indicates that fostering an inclusive school environment is vital for supporting positive academic and social outcomes among students from various backgrounds (Graham, 2020). According to Arroyo-Rojas et al. (2024), culturally responsive education is critical for fostering inclusivity; however, it remains insufficiently developed in many programs. Furthermore, although school leaders acknowledge the significance of recognizing and valuing

the unique identities of individuals within the school community, their understanding is often limited. This highlights the need for continuous professional development to equip leaders with the skills necessary to engage students and educators from diverse backgrounds effectively (Arroyo-Rojas et al., 2024).

Culturally responsive school leadership utilizes key strategies, including critical consciousness and engagement for marginalized families. School leaders must recognize and address inequities in the school community and nurture this awareness by encouraging staff and students to examine biases, privileges, and structural barriers. Culturally responsive teaching and learning (CRTL) is at the heart of a positive school culture. When CRTL is part of a school's culture, students "develop a positive sense of racial and ethnic identity [and are] more interested in befriending people of different backgrounds" (Genao, 2021, p. 162). Teachers may struggle to establish an inclusive environment if they have a limited fundamental understanding and capacity to accommodate the diverse needs of students (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). Therefore, more robust and targeted professional development plans can effectively equip educators to reflect on their practices and support diverse student populations.

Whole-School Approaches to Positive School Culture

Social-emotional learning (SEL) tools in schools have grown exponentially since 1997 (Elias et al., 1997). Devaney and Berg (2023) stated that school culture and social-emotional learning are connected. Providing opportunities for students and staff to develop SEL also enables staff to create more substantial social competence, translating to a more favorable climate. The meta-analysis by Taylor et al. (2017) showed that students who participated in SEL programs experienced significant improvements in their academic performance. This relationship suggests that a positive school culture, supported by SEL, can enhance students' engagement and

motivation to learn. In addition, SEL promotes inclusivity as students are encouraged to understand and respect other perspectives. Brackett et al. (2019) highlighted that SEL curricula support an equitable school culture by nurturing student empathy and social awareness, which is essential for addressing diversity and inclusion issues. A longitudinal study by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) found that elementary school students who received SEL instruction demonstrated stronger social skills, fewer behavioral problems, and improved mental health in later years (CASEL, 2020).

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) focuses on creating safe, equitable, and inclusive school environments and has been linked to both positive behavioral and academic outcomes for students, as well as improved perceptions of efficacy and job satisfaction for school personnel (Walker et al., 2023). Kubiszewski and Carrizales (2024) found that SWPBIS positively influenced students' perceptions of supportive practices and encouraged their participation in school life but had little impact on behavior management. This highlights the multifaceted nature of educational interventions. The positive perceptions of supportive practices suggest that when teachers engage in nurturing relationships with students, it can foster a more inclusive and motivating school environment (Kubiszewski & Carrizales, 2024).

Nitz et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of literature from 2004-2020 regarding multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and the impact of the interventions on school culture. The review confirmed that MTSS was effective in elementary schools; however, the interventions have a political dimension that could impact implementation and sustainability (Nitz et al., 2023). Gonzalez et al. (2022) stated that MTSS does provide opportunities for educational practices to shift, but also said that MTSS implementation requires a clear

understanding of students and their specific learning needs, especially culturally and linguistically diverse students. Basaraba et al. (2022) revealed that many challenges stand in the way of effective MTSS interventions for Spanish-speaking students due to a lack of appropriate screening assessments. Fallon et al. (2021) revealed that MTSS behavior interventions must start with school personnel promoting racial equity and called on school psychologists to create strong family and community partnerships and transformative professional development for staff to better support students.

Challenges for Rural Schools

Principals leading schools in rural areas face unique and significant challenges that their urban counterparts do not. State funding formulas, budget cuts, population shifts, and school consolidations significantly impact a school campus (Lieberman, 2024). Rural schools often face teacher recruitment and retention issues and geographic isolation that can create equity issues (Burton et al., 2016). Across the country, 10 million students in grades K-12 attend schools in rural communities (Lieberman, 2024). In California, 37% of school districts are considered rural and account for 5% of students in the state, and half of the students in rural districts are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged (Budhiraja et al., 2024). The impact of technology, social media, and evolving student demographics cannot be overlooked in any district. Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) identified how global shifts (like the COVID-19 pandemic) impacted students with a study that concluded that when family, teachers, and parents learn together in a “spirit of open professionalism” without the restraints of bureaucratic micromanagement, learning can be transformed.

Nguyen et al. (2021) contextualized the relationship between school culture and student well-being with a study that examined the differences between rural and suburban students. The

study demonstrated that a safe and engaging climate is linked to rural students' well-being. However, rural students view their schools as less safe and less engaging than their suburban counterparts. Nguyen et al. (2021) stated that while rural contexts can vary immensely regarding geography and resources, the study concludes that work to improve a school's culture and climate could be profoundly effective for rural students. The study concluded with four key practices for rural schools, including whole-school approaches, community resources to support student health, more robust support for teachers, and contextualized support based on each school site (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Frahm and Cianca (2021) studied the challenges of retaining teachers in rural schools. The study revealed that applicants often passed over rural job offers due to low salaries and less lucrative benefits. The study also identified that high turnover rates for rural districts require investment in recruiting and onboarding, which also means allocating resources away from supplies and technology (Frahm & Cianca, 2021). The study concluded that retaining teachers in rural districts requires school and district leadership to focus on job satisfaction. Seelig and McCabe (2021) studied why teachers remain in rural schools and concluded that the relationships between students, teachers, colleagues, and administrators are essential to teacher retention. In addition, fostering strong social ties between teachers and the community is necessary in rural districts (Seelig & McCabe, 2021).

Challenges and Barriers

Harris and Jones (2020) stated that lacking resources like modern learning materials, technology, and extracurricular activities can impede cultivating a nurturing and engaging educational environment. High teacher turnover rates can disrupt the continuity of education and adversely affect the school's culture. Frequent staff changes contribute to instability,

complicating the establishment of strong relationships among educators and between teachers and students (Ingersoll et al., 2019; Sutchter et al., 2019). Such instability can weaken initiatives to foster a cohesive and positive school culture.

When schools introduce new strategies to enhance their culture, they may encounter resistance from faculty, parents, or the broader community. Deeply rooted beliefs and established practices often hinder innovative approaches like social-emotional learning or inclusive education (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). Robust professional development is essential for teachers to implement practices that nurture a positive school atmosphere effectively; however, numerous schools lack access to high-quality training programs that focus on social-emotional learning, cultural competence, and collaborative methodologies (Gagnier et al., 2021). Gay (2018) established that schools might find it challenging to foster an inclusive culture that honors and appreciates without culturally responsive practices in place. This gap can lead to feelings of exclusion among students whose identities are not represented within the school setting.

The mental health needs of students are vital for promoting a positive school environment. However, many institutions lack sufficient mental health resources and support systems. Ringeisen et al. (2017) revealed that without adequate mental health support mechanisms, schools may find it challenging to establish a safe and nurturing atmosphere for all students. Obstacles such as language barriers, low levels of engagement, and inconsistent messaging can impede collaboration and generate misunderstandings within the educational community (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Excessive focus on test performance may lead to an overly narrow emphasis on academic success at the cost of social-emotional learning and overall student well-being (Au, 2016; Ravitch & Riggan, 2016).

Ethical Assurances

This study followed the research standards outlined by the National University's (NU) Institutional Review Board (IRB). NU's IRB approved the study on April 17, 2025, indicating minimal risk to participants. Additionally, all Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training modules were completed before the study. The study included eight elementary school principals with at least three years of experience, a diverse teaching staff, and clear policies that promote inclusivity. The participants were recruited and informed of the study's purpose to decide whether they wanted to participate. The personal information of the participants was kept confidential. Gender-neutral pseudonyms were used to ensure inclusivity. Participants could leave the study at any time.

The data and interviews are saved on my computer, and I am the only user of the device. In accordance with NU IRB requirements, the collected data will be stored for three years. Interviews were transcribed, and participants were given a copy to review.

Summary

School culture is a powerful influence that defines a school's identity and shapes the experiences of those on campus. It manifests in the behavior of students and staff, the physical environment, and the values and practices of the school community. Principals play a pivotal role in shaping this culture, guiding their schools' shared beliefs, values, and behaviors. Their leadership determines how challenges are addressed and successes are celebrated, fostering inclusivity and creating a sense of belonging for all school community members.

However, cultivating a positive and inclusive school culture is no small task. Principals face daily demands that are compounded by systemic issues. Despite these obstacles, principals must foster environments where inclusion transcends race, disability, language, and other factors,

ensuring student equity. The pressures on school leaders are immense, with many principals reporting elevated stress levels and burnout. Yet their role remains crucial in building schools that inspire collaboration, growth, and community engagement.

Section 2: Methodology and Design

The problem that was addressed in this study was some elementary school principals do not cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture (Arroyo-Rojas et al., 2024; Fullan, 2023). In recent years, principals have faced changes and challenges related to turbulent technologies, social, economic, and political events, and increased teacher turnover (Heenan et al., 2023). Principals must consider multiple variables to cultivate inclusive schools and employ strategies to overcome resistance and challenges to meaningful change (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to identify strategies elementary school principals believe cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture that supports a sense of belonging in rural public elementary schools in Northern California. This section outlines the research design and methodology, including the population and sample, materials and instruments, and the variables involved. It concludes by discussing the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

Design and Method

A qualitative method with an exploratory case study was selected to identify strategies that elementary school principals believe effectively contribute to a positive and inclusive school culture. This methodology was chosen because it allows for the study of subjective experiences that cannot be captured through quantitative research, as quantitative methods use statistical analysis to assess data (Abuhamda et al., 2021). Researchers use non-numerical data in qualitative research to explore and understand the human experience, including behaviors and social phenomena (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). The quantitative method would not be appropriate for this study, as it emphasizes numerical data and aims to gather contextual information to offer fresh perspectives on the topic.

An exploratory case study design was appropriate because it provides rich and detailed data about the phenomenon being studied (Priya, 2021). A case study offers researchers the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of an issue by focusing on the *how, why, and what* questions (Coombs, 2022). A case study is a bounded system, meaning the phenomena under study can be described within specific parameters (Coombs, 2022). I examined schools in rural Northern California rather than the entire state. Elementary schools in rural Northern California have distinct cultural, economic, and political characteristics that set them apart from other state regions. In this study, it was essential to understand the strategies that elementary school principals in rural Northern California believe effectively contribute to a positive and inclusive school culture. Gathering a better understanding of principals' strategies and implementing them within a school context allows a real-life examination of these strategies.

A phenomenological design was considered for this study, but was dismissed. Since this study aimed to explore strategies and practices rather than just experiences and perceptions, an exploratory case study is a better methodological choice. A case study design enables a detailed analysis of real-world leadership actions, rather than relying on personal interpretations. In addition, a phenomenological design is often used to examine a small group of participants, emphasizing individual perspectives rather than identifying themes across a population (Annisa, 2024). This study focuses on strategies that principals can use to foster a positive and inclusive culture, rather than the deep, subjective experience of being a principal.

While collecting data, I took steps to prevent unconscious bias from influencing the study results. As an elementary school principal in rural Northern California, I recognized the potential for bias toward the phenomenon being studied and implemented strategies to mitigate the possibility of bias impacting data analysis. Personal bias was addressed through reflective

journaling. I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis. These steps identified recurring themes in response to the research questions. These were essential steps in organizing and interpreting the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being investigated.

Population and Sample

The population of this study was all elementary school principals in rural Northern California. Due to the study's limitations and time constraints, it was impossible to interview everyone in the population pool. Therefore, the data from a representative sample was used to add meaningful findings to address the research problem. The representative sample was eight participants. Inclusion in this study required participants to meet several criteria: (a) principal of a rural elementary school in Northern California, (b) at least three years of experience as a principal, (c) belief they have a positive and inclusive culture (as evidenced by diverse teaching staff, low teacher turnover), and (d) the school site should offer programs and services to support diverse learners (i.e., Special Education, English language learning, socio-emotional support).

I created a recruitment flyer and posted it on my social media accounts, including Facebook and LinkedIn. I used snowball sampling to recruit participants. According to Leighton et al. (2021), snowball sampling via social media enables researchers to connect with participants who might not otherwise be aware of this study. This solicitation by the participants helped cast a wider net to find qualified participants. Using the snowball sampling technique resulted in at least one participant self-identifying and joining the study. My contact details, including my name, email address, and phone number, were included in the social media post. Participants who met the criteria were invited for a one-to-one semi-structured and open-ended interview.

Participants received a consent form via email. At the interview's conclusion, participants were asked if they knew others who met the criteria and could be interested in participating.

Materials and Instrument

In this study, the materials included an interview protocol and a focus group protocol. These protocols helped guide me in the data collection process. The one-on-one interview protocol contained semi-structured, open-ended questions. The protocol had 17 open-ended questions (Appendix E). The focus group protocol included six discussion prompts to facilitate conversation among the principals (Appendix F). The open-ended questions and guiding prompts were derived from the literature review. The interviews in the focus group were semi-structured. The semi-structured process fosters flexible interactions between the researcher and the participants (Naz et al., 2022). A key advantage of the semi-structured process is allowing follow-up questions and further exploring participants' responses for deeper insights (Ruslin et al., 2022).

The materials created for this study were: (a) a recruitment flyer (Appendix C), (b) a permission letter to post in private Facebook groups (Appendix B), and (c) a consent form (Appendix D). The recruitment flyer provided details about the study, including its purpose, eligibility criteria, and contact information for potential participants. The permission letter formally requested approval from group administrators to share the recruitment flyer within their online communities. The consent form outlined the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and participants' rights, ensuring informed consent before participation.

As the researcher, I was the instrument. I used a journal to lessen any potential bias. Meyer and Willis (2019) suggested that keeping a journal during data collection allows researchers to reflect on ethical and practical concerns, ensuring ethical integrity throughout the

research process. Additionally, I created all the materials used in the recruitment and data collection process to ensure consistency across all participant interviews. In full transparency, I am disclosing that I was an elementary school principal in Northern California during this study.

The development of interview questions for this study will follow an iterative process. The first iteration will create questions and prompts rooted in the literature. The second iteration will be to work with a subject matter expert. I sent the research prompts and questions to elicit their feedback, ensuring that these open-ended, semi-structured questions yield the most relevant information to add value to the research questions. Their feedback contributed to refining the wording, structure, and alignment of the questions with the study's objectives.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection started after the National University's (NU) Institutional Review Board approval process and permission letters had been collected from the Facebook groups. Potential qualified participants reached out after seeing the recruitment material. I had a brief conversation either by phone or email to ensure they met all the inclusion criteria. Qualified participants were sent a consent form explaining the participation requirements, what participants will be asked to do, and information regarding the risks, benefits, and confidentiality. Once I received the consent form, I worked with the participant to schedule a Zoom interview. I used the protocol to guide a 45-minute interview. A gender-neutral pseudonym was assigned to each participant to maintain high confidentiality. According to Kang (2023), confidentiality is paramount in research studies, so participants feel comfortable providing information. At the end of the interview, participants were invited to participate in a focus group and asked if they knew other principals who might qualify for this study. The second data collection process was the focus group.

According to Tümen-Akyıldız and Ahmed (2021), focus groups offer an authentic environment for participants and a more natural setting for discussion. For my study, a focus group was assembled with a small subset of the participants. The focus group lasted for 45 minutes over Zoom. Given the number of participants, the focus group was reduced to a mini-focus group with only three participants. One-to-one Zoom interviews and the focus group occurred in my private home office. I used a passcode-protected laptop to conduct the interviews. I encouraged participants to conduct the interview and focus group in a quiet setting. All participants were invited to participate in the focus group for inclusivity measures. The focus group is an important secondary data collection technique to satisfy triangulation. Triangulation allows the researcher to cross-verify data, providing a more comprehensive understanding of research phenomena (Bloomberg, 2023). Data collection ceased once saturation was achieved, indicating that the sample was no longer generating new codes or themes (Bloomberg, 2023).

Data collection and analysis are integral to the success of any study. By gathering accurate and reliable data, researchers can ensure their findings reflect the complexities and realities of the phenomenon. Data collection helps identify patterns, trends, and areas of need, providing a solid foundation for meaningful insights. The quality of data collection and analysis directly influences the relevance and impact of the research. Once all data collection was completed, it was analyzed step-by-step.

The transcripts were manually reviewed according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The six phases of the framework include (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generative initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These steps identified recurring themes in response to the research questions. Before applying Braun and Clarke's analysis

process, I utilized the transcription tools in Zoom. These are essential steps for organizing and interpreting the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being investigated.

Table 1

Braun and Clarke's 6-step Thematic Analysis

Steps	Methodological Procedures
1 st Step	Familiarization with the data: multiple readings of the data (interview transcripts)
2 nd Step	Generate initial codes: organize data systematically and meaningfully (low-level categorization)
3 rd Step	Searching for themes: Identify significant elements of the analysis, which should answer the research question (higher-level categorization)
4 th Step	Review themes: Does the data support the theme? any overlapping themes
5 th Step	Define and name themes: Identify the essence of each theme
6 th Step	Interpretation and reporting:
7 th Step	Composite Description: Construction of a structural-textural Description of a descriptive transcript that will pull in and include the themes

In qualitative research, coding categorizes and organizes data to reveal themes, patterns, and relationships. Various coding techniques contribute to structured data analysis, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. According to Vollstedt (2019), open coding involves initial data categorization, axial coding identifies relationships among these categories, and selective coding refines and integrates key categories, thereby enabling an insightful interpretation of the data. Throughout the coding process, common themes became clear. To enhance accuracy and credibility, member checking allows participants to review their transcribed narratives, ensuring that their perspectives are accurately represented and not

misinterpreted (McKim, 2023). These measures will guarantee that the data analysis remains systematic and adheres to rigorous qualitative research standards. Researchers can enhance the study's trustworthiness by incorporating member checking, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect participants' experiences and viewpoints (McKim, 2023). I member checked with my participants at two different points in the analysis process.

Assumptions

The first assumption in this study was that all participants would respond to questions honestly and openly, as participation is voluntary and confidential. The honesty of the participants was crucial, as their answers could not be verified. The second assumption was that all principals involved in the study understand what constitutes a positive and inclusive school culture. The third assumption was that elementary school principals possess valuable insights and practical experience regarding the strategies that contribute to fostering a positive and inclusive school culture. This assumption includes the belief that these principals have implemented, or have the capacity to implement, these strategies effectively in their schools. The fourth assumption was that principals will engage in reflective practice, considering their experiences and the effectiveness of specific strategies. The data's accuracy and depth depend on the participants' willingness and ability to reflect on their leadership practices.

Limitations

The issue of researcher bias was a potential limitation of this study. Researcher bias must be discussed, as errors in judgment can impact the quality of data and the research results (Johnson et al., 2020). To mitigate this limitation, researchers can use reflexivity to reflect on their role in the research process (Finlay, 2002). A second limitation was a limited sample size. Qualitative research typically involves a limited number of participants, which may restrict the

ability to generalize the findings to other contexts. To mitigate this limitation, researchers can employ purposive sampling to select participants most appropriate to the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A third limitation was the recruitment of participants. Participants could have limited access to digital tools that could impact the Zoom interviews, or limited social media access, and could miss the recruitment flyer altogether.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the specific parameters set by the researcher to define a study's scope. These parameters establish the focus and limitations of the research (Coker, 2022). In this study, four delimitations were applied to participant selection. Eligible participants were required to be elementary school principals serving in rural Northern California with a minimum of three years of experience in school administration. Additionally, participants needed to perceive their school culture as positive and inclusive and have programs in place that support diverse learners.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to identify strategies elementary school principals believe cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture that supports a sense of belonging in rural public elementary schools in Northern California. The representative sample included eight elementary school principals. This study included inclusion criteria that participants needed to meet to participate. This section included materials and instrumentation, data collection, and analysis. Interview questions were open-ended. Interested participants contacted me via phone, email, or social media and were reminded of the inclusion criteria. Participants participated in semi-structured interviews and a focus group via Zoom. Following the interviews and the focus group, Zoom's transcription tools were used to transcribe the interviews, and then the coding process began. Braun and Clarke's (2006) data analysis

process was used to analyze the data. Section two ends with the study's assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to identify strategies elementary school principals believe cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture that supports a sense of belonging in rural public elementary schools in Northern California. The problem addressed in this study is some elementary school principals do not cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture (Arroyo-Rojas et al., 2024; Fullan, 2023). Eight elementary school principals via social media postings and snowball sampling. Interested participants either texted or emailed me to express their interest in being involved. Once it was determined that participants met the inclusion criteria, they were emailed a consent form (Appendix D).

After obtaining written consent, participants were invited to a semi-structured interview. They chose their preferred date and time for a virtual interview via Zoom, enabling them to engage in an environment that fostered focus and minimized distractions. This approach enhanced participant comfort and encouraged deeper engagement during the in-depth interviews. A mini-focus group was held on Zoom with three out of the eight participants.

This section presents the study's findings, drawing on thematic patterns that emerged from the coding and analysis of participant responses. Each research question is explored in depth, with results presented individually to ensure clarity and alignment with the study's core aims. Interpretations are grounded in the data, offering insights into how leadership practices share positive and inclusive school cultures. To ensure credibility, the strategies used to establish trustworthiness are also discussed. The section concludes with practical recommendations for elementary school principals and identifies meaningful direction for future research.

Findings

Eight principals contributed to the study. Each participant was an elementary school principal with at least three years of experience. Table 2 details the gender-neutral pseudonym for each principal, the years of experience, and the current school site size.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Gender Neutral Pseudonym	Years as Principal	Grades Served	School Size
Sam	3.5	TK-4th	357
Alex	3	K-8th	422
Riley	4	TK-3rd	270
Reese	4	TK-8th	75
Kennedy	8	K-8th	160
Avery	5	K-8th	52
Terry	18	K-5th	335
Logan	8	TK-8th	521

Sam. Sam has been a principal for three and a half years and oversees a TK-4th grade school with 357 students. Sam believes that a positive school culture is one where the students treat each other respectfully and are comfortable making mistakes in the classroom. A positive school culture for staff is one where adults treat each other with respect.

Alex. Now, in their third year as principal, Alex leads a K-8 school that serves 422 students. Alex believes that a positive school culture is one where everyone on campus contributes to a positive atmosphere. They think all groups, students, parents, teachers, and administrators, work together to achieve a common goal. Alex stated that building relationships across stakeholder groups is the key to creating a positive environment.

Riley. With four years of experience as a principal, Riley currently leads a TK-3rd grade site serving 270 students. Riley believes that a positive, inclusive school culture means that everyone, both staff and students, feels valued and heard, and that each group is represented and validated in some way.

Reese. Reese is in their fourth year of principalship and leads a small TK-8 school with 75 students. Reese said their passion is setting up a welcome wagon for new students and ensuring people feel seen, celebrated, and supported on campus. Reese emphasized that principals set the tone for the school culture by modeling expectations.

Kennedy. In their eighth year as a principal, Kennedy leads a K-8 school serving 160 students. Kennedy stated that a positive and inclusive culture is evident if kids love attending school. Kennedy noted that when kids complain about going to school, there is something wrong with how the campus operates.

Avery. Avery has been a principal for five years and currently leads a K-8 school with 52 students. Avery said that creating a positive culture comes from the fun activities on campus, such as assemblies and events.

Terry. Now in their eighteenth year as a principal, Terry leads a K-5 school serving 335 students. Terry said that school culture is something embedded into everything on campus. It is about character, student behavior, and student skills. They stated that the principal is the role model for the community in what the school culture should look like and reflect.

Logan. Logan has been a principal for eight years and oversees a TK-8 school site with 521 students. Logan defines school culture as a community where people feel they belong and have the agency to be involved in that community.

Focus Group. After the one-on-one interviews, I invited participants to join a 45-60-minute focus group. The focus group evolved into a mini-focus group due to the number of participants who attended. The participants in the focus group were Sam, Kennedy, and Logan. The focus group confirmed the themes from the one-on-one interviews. The discussions from the focus group are included, along with the themes listed below, in Table 3.

Table 3

Emergent Themes

Research Questions	Themes	Participant Contribution Frequency	Participants
RQ1: What are elementary school principals' perceptions of the leadership strategies that effectively contribute to a positive and inclusive school culture?	Theme 1a. Communication and Transparency	5/8	Sam, Alex, Riley, Kennedy, Logan
	Theme 1b. Building Relationships and Inclusion	5/8	Alex, Riley, Terry, Reese, Logan
	Theme 1c. Supportive Leadership	5/8	Sam, Kennedy, Avery, Reese, Logan
RQ2: What are elementary school principals' perceptions of how a positive and inclusive school culture fosters a sense of belonging on an elementary school campus, and what benefits do they associate with such a culture?	Theme 1a. Staff and Student Wellbeing	6/8	Sam, Alex, Reese, Kennedy, Avery, Logan
	Theme 1b. Student Empowerment	5/8	Riley, Reese, Logan, Kennedy, Terry

Trustworthiness of the Data

Qualitative research focuses on establishing the trustworthiness of its findings (Stahl & King, 2020). Ensuring trustworthiness is essential for fostering reader confidence in the interpretations of the data. Researchers implement a variety of strategies to address validity and reliability, including transferability, confirmability, credibility, and dependability. The following section provides an in-depth examination of each of these dimensions of trustworthiness, as outlined by Stahl and King (2020).

Credibility. Creswell and Creswell (2018) define credibility as the degree to which research findings accurately reflect participants' perspectives and provide a trustworthy representation of the studied phenomenon. To enhance the credibility of this study, I conducted extended interactions with participants, which enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives. This interaction built trust and rapport, enriching the depth of the data collected. Additionally, I used triangulation by incorporating multiple data sources, including individual interviews, a focus group, and member checking. This method allowed for cross-verification of the data, thereby enhancing the study's validity and reliability.

Dependability. Dependability refers to the reliability and consistency of the research process, emphasizing the need for a thoroughly documented, transparent, and logically organized approach that can be followed over time. It involves evaluating whether the methods and procedures can be reliably applied and assessed (Ahmed, 2024). To ensure dependability in this study, I outlined the research design and procedures in Section 2, providing a framework to guide the study. Additionally, I kept a research journal throughout the project. This journal recorded the research process, capturing reflections, analytical insights, and responses to

unforeseen developments. By documenting the research journey this way, I aimed to enhance transparency, clarity, and the integrity and accountability of the study.

Confirmability and Reflexivity. Confirmability and reflexivity are crucial to qualitative research, ensuring that findings are based on the data rather than researcher bias (McLeod, 2024). These principles encourage transparency in the analysis process and maintain the research's integrity by requiring conclusions to be backed by evidence and carefully considered interpretations. To support confirmability, I reviewed existing literature and prior studies during the analysis to contextualize findings and mitigate personal biases. I also kept a detailed audit trail, including research journals, interview transcripts, and documentation of theme development. This audit trail served as a transparent record of the research process, showing a clear connection between the data and the interpretations. In practicing reflexivity, I consistently reflected on my biases, assumptions, and values, considering how they might have influenced the research process and results. This ongoing self-assessment helped make the study more objective and credible, aligning with the strategies outlined by Ahmed (2023).

Transferability. Transferability refers to the extent to which research findings can be applied or extended to contexts outside the original study setting. It helps readers evaluate the relevance of the interpretations and adapt them meaningfully to other situations (Stalmeijer et al., 2024). To support transferability in this study, I focused on clarity and coherence in my writing to provide a complete and transparent account of the research process, including the methods used and the implications of the results. Each part of the methodology was described in detail to ensure that readers could easily understand and evaluate the procedures and reasoning. The findings were presented objectively, highlighting their broader significance and potential applications.

Research Question 1: What are elementary school principals' perceptions of the leadership strategies that effectively contribute to a positive and inclusive school culture?

The first research question identified the strategies used by elementary school principals to contribute to a positive and inclusive school culture effectively. For research question one, the following themes emerged from the analysis: communication and transparency, building relationships, and supportive leadership.

Table 4

Research Question 1: Themes, Categories, and Codes

Codes	Categories	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Transparency • Listening • Inclusive decision-making • Building trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparent leadership • Inclusive communication practices • Trust-building through communication • Feedback and responsiveness 	Theme 1a: Communication and transparency with all campus groups contribute to a positive and inclusive school culture.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational leadership • Voice and belonging • Classroom inclusivity • Welcoming environments • Responsive classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentional culture building • Inclusive practices • Shared leadership • Relational visibility • Modeling inclusivity 	Theme 1b: Building relationships and inclusion create a welcome space for students and staff.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modeling expectations • Hands-on leadership • Supportive structures • Staff empowerment • Teacher voice in PD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowerment through trust • Collaborative visioning • Modeling and visibility • Inclusive routines • PD as support 	Theme 1c: Supportive leadership guides the work in fostering a positive school culture.

Theme 1a: Communication and transparency build culture. Five of eight participants indicated that frequent communication and transparency with all campus groups contribute to a positive and inclusive school culture. Each participant shared strategies for communication and

transparency in their one-on-one interviews. This theme was substantiated during the focus group, and the participants shared their strategies.

Kennedy stated that transparency is the key to building a strong campus.

(Transparency) is where you really build trust and culture. It affects culture just to be as transparent as possible to your families, faculty, and students, like budget stuff. I tell my staff, and they know what is happening budget-wise. The parents even know what is happening budget-wise. We were just looking at funding, and I was transparent with my parents and my staff, saying, 'Hey, we lost out on \$100,000 last year because of attendance.' I just put it out there and really talking it up to people. And now our attendance rate is way better, and the ADA (Average Daily Attendance) we've gotten back is night and day. That's our kids' money, and that should go to the kids. So, (we looked at independent studies, and my staff is like, 'Let's figure out what to do.' ... there was not any pushback with that because they saw the need. ...they're going to go that extra mile because they know where it's going.

Logan replied:

I second that and just add listening. Making sure that I'm hearing all voices and publicly soliciting for that and making sure that I'm hearing people and echoing back what I hear. That helps build trust with people knowing that I'm going to listen. And also, when I make decisions to be clear. (I don't just say no) but these are the things I weighed in the scenarios, particularly for budget decisions and programmatic decisions that are impactful.

Sam added:

...soliciting opinions from the quiet people in the room. Make sure that they feel valued and heard because you always have those who share their thoughts and feelings in meetings and presentations and just make sure you check in with the quiet ones.

During the one-on-one interviews, Alex noted the importance of transparency:

Being open and honest with (campus groups). I think that has helped a lot because, you know, they know we're not just blowing smoke. We're not just coming up with a story, but giving them a reason why something is happening, where we're going, and being honest about it has really helped. And then encouraging them as well. If I'm going to be honest with them (staff), I'm honest with my students, and I'm honest with my parents. Just demonstrating that has been huge.

In the one-on-one interview, Riley said:

Communication helps build trust. Getting feedback from people also builds trust, and then just having follow through. I'm not perfect by any means, but when there's something going on with a student, I'm following through with it. I'm not ignoring anyone. It's really hard to do. I'm often burning the candle at both ends, but (communication) helps people to feel safe and secure in their environment.

Theme 1b: Relationships Foster Inclusion. Five of the eight participants emphasized the importance of building relationships to foster inclusivity. Each participant shared strategies for inclusion and relationship building in their one-on-one interviews. This theme was substantiated during the focus group, and the participants shared their strategies.

During the focus group, Sam explained that building positive relationships allowed for more inclusivity among staff:

When I arrived (as principal), I learned that it wasn't the most positive culture due to some of the previous leadership. I understand the reasoning behind (the decisions that were made); it just was executed really wrong and created some divisiveness, and then COVID hit, and that was divisive on its own. So, it took some time, three years of asking questions and being humble, and knowing that I don't have all the answers...

Kennedy followed with her strategies for building inclusiveness:

I like to take staff members to go to other schools. And so, one thing we got from looking at their school was that we noticed that just belonging was missing. So, we created a responsive classroom school. We sent all the staff to responsive classroom training and actually really changed our approach to how we talk to kids and how we do discipline at our school; everything was completely overhauled with it. It really changed the culture. The kids really feel welcome. They know each other better. It's more of a family versus just a classroom. ...I see more kids playing with each other and more understanding. I don't have as much picking on. Referrals completely dropped. I see kids rallying for each other, cheering each other on, and our discipline is more community service driven.

Logan followed up with their own experiences in building relationships and inclusivity:

A lot of inclusivity is built into our model, and it's not necessarily a move I've done, just supporting and sustaining. But, for the staff, when I got here, there were five teachers who basically ran the school. They made the decisions. They made decisions before me, and they were deciding who was hired and fired and how things were run. After my first year, I said, 'We're not doing this anymore. We're going to have multiple leadership groups, not just one, and everybody's going to be on a leadership group.' Each has its own territory, and that's what they deal with. That upset those five, but the other 15 were

appreciative and supportive of it. And now we have people who are in a place of leadership and have that sense of belonging to be able to speak up for things they would have been afraid to do otherwise. Just to dovetail into that part of it is just being steadfast in the decision. There were teachers who really fought that hard, and they complained. They complained to the superintendent, and they wanted to upend that. They tried. In some ways. I've tried to make my life difficult. And I said, 'Well, we're sticking with this. This is what we're gonna do. We're going to do this because this builds a more connected, inclusive school,' and I think once other voices started speaking up and being part of the conversation, then those louder voices got quieter and allowed that, so part of a big part of it was just sticking with it.

In the one-on-one interviews, Riley shared an activity the staff did to discuss inclusiveness on campus:

They did this great thing where they walked around other people's classrooms and took notes on things they noticed that were inclusive and then areas that they could improve on. It was really uncomfortable for some people. I wish I could say everyone made a drastic change, but a lot of people did. For example, one of our teachers said they always talk about these composers and then realized there was nothing but white male composers on the wall. It was good for her to reflect and change that. There was a reflection on auditing literature that you have available to kids and making sure that it's reflective of the group.

During their one-on-one interview, Reese shared that their experience as a high school activity director inspired them to foster a positive school culture when they became a principal.

My passion is being the welcome wagon and making people feel seen and celebrated and supported. That's what I'm about wherever I go. I think that it's very important that the leader represents that. I am really passionate that this is who we're going to be. This is who we are when we're at school. ... I welcome every person. I stand in front of the school every morning for about 45 minutes and welcome everybody, and say hi to their pets, and say hi to their moms. I think it's incredibly important. I say, 'Oh, I'm so glad you're here.' 'I missed you yesterday.' 'Yay! I'm glad you're back.' I do think that just sets the tone. It sets the stage.

In the one-on-one interview, Terry shared their experience as a principal, saying:

The thing about being a principal is that you can't delegate relationships, and so you can delegate everything else, but not relationships. So, as a principal, you have to be in everybody's face all day long. You have to be in their periphery. ... You have to love people. If you don't have that overarching level, you really shouldn't be a site leader or even a district leader. You have to have that, and within that is that everybody is included, and that means everybody.

Theme 1c: Leadership Shapes School Culture. Five of eight participants emphasized the importance of supportive leadership in fostering a positive and inclusive school environment. Each shared strategies for supportive leadership in their one-on-one interviews. This theme was confirmed during the focus group, where participants again shared their strategies.

In the focus group, Logan stated, "We design our own professional development with the teachers based upon the needs that we see based on our focus groups. That is a huge part of what we do for teachers and creating that environment."

Sam added that support to their staff includes a lot of 'yes':

I say yes to crazy ideas. What if we did this? Oh, my gosh, that's a great idea. Let's do it. Let's try it. What if it fails? What if? Let's go! Do it! Whether it's something fun for the staff, or some new learning strategy, or a teaching strategy. You don't know until you try, so let's go do it.

Kennedy said that leadership support shows up in the context of common goals:

Our biggest thing is common goals, just as staff, like brainstorming; what are our common goals? What do we want? What do we want our school to be like? If you walk on the campus, what do you want people to instantly say about the campus? Those conversations with staff.

During the one-on-one interviews, Kennedy discussed their leadership style more: "So when my teachers get hired, I do a full-day training on what I expect. I'm pretty honest with them. I'm a pretty high-maintenance administrator. I expect a lot, but I show them a lot. They always see me working. I don't mind getting my hands dirty. I don't mind subbing for them."

Avery stated in the one-on-one interviews that treating teachers like professionals with their time and professional development is a way to support them.

We do weekly staff meetings that are casual but still allows us to touch base on the things that need to be covered. Then in addition to that, we do an early release on Mondays. Sometimes, they're just about to, if we don't have anything critical going on, do prep time. In addition to that, we went through the MTSS cycle here recently, and that was a super beneficial experience. I think people really enjoyed and we got a lot out of it and were able to grow and set some goals and achieve them.

Reese referred to the little things that support positive leadership in the one-on-one interview:

There's little things. When I introduce myself, I say, you know, my name is --- and my pronouns are --- . I'm going to wear this name tag, so it's okay if you forget my name, and I model wearing the nametag. The first thing I do for every new staff member is give them a nametag, and I put some things in the nametag for them, like our emergency procedures, and a whistle and all these things, because I want it to be like we're all one team. I think that's inclusive in the way that it makes all the staff look like they have unity. ... We are universally on the same page. I think that that makes it inclusive in the sense that the staff feels like they have each other's backs. They're not standing here alone fighting this fight alone or, you know, being the bad guy while the others are not.

Research Question 2: What are elementary school principals' perceptions of how a positive and inclusive school culture fosters a sense of belonging on an elementary school campus, and what benefits do they associate with such a culture?

Research question two examined how a positive and inclusive school culture fosters a sense of belonging on an elementary school campus and the benefits for the school community. Participants reflected on strategies they have implemented relating to belonging and the advantages for the campus. This study used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis method to interpret and code the data. The approach offers structured support for qualitative researchers, addressing common issues such as establishing credibility, maintaining consistency, and grounding conclusions in strong evidence.

The analysis process began with thoroughly acquiring knowledge of the data through repeated readings. This was followed by generating initial codes and systematically organizing the information. The subsequent steps involved pinpointing key elements, refining and confirming themes, labeling them appropriately, and interpreting the findings (Braun & Clarke,

2006). In response to the second research question, the analysis revealed the following themes: staff and student wellbeing and student empowerment.

Table 5

Research Question 2: Themes, Categories, and Codes

Codes	Categories	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer mentorship • Student recognition • Staff responsiveness • SEL routines • Student belonging • Joyful school experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer-based support systems • Joyful expression • SEL as a foundational practice • Mental health and wellness support 	Theme 2a: Staff and student well-being is a key aspect of positive school culture.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student voice • Leadership opportunities • Student presentations • Hands-on learning • Peer inclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joyful engagement • Leadership through participation • Student voice and choice • Relational trust-building 	Theme 2b: Student empowerment offers students a voice in their school.

Theme 2a: Well-being fosters belonging. Six out of eight participants emphasized the importance of staff and student well-being in creating a positive and inclusive school culture. Each participant shared strategies for promoting well-being among staff and students during their one-on-one interviews. This theme was confirmed in the focus group, where participants discussed their approaches.

Kennedy said:

We actually had a reset. There was just some unkindness happening. So we had a kindness week that we launched. We did a whole thing. I got the parents involved. They all had homework assignments as well as the kids. Actually, parents came in and hugged me and said, this is the best thing they've ever done. It was like the cutest thing ever. I

actually was shocked. I really push the upper-grade students to be role models. We do buddies.

Sam agreed with Kennedy's ideas regarding student well-being and expanded on how their monthly sing-alongs at the school have turned into a cafeteria lunch performance for some students:

We have a 4th grader who is a huge Weird Al Yankovic fan, and he has started performing for the 3rd and 4th graders. During lunch, it started in the lunchroom, where he got up on the stage and was singing a Weird Al song, 'My Baloney' instead of 'My Sharona,' and then he stood on one of the picnic tables outside and had a mob of fans. While he was playing his accordion. It was hilarious. And now other kids are like, 'I want to sing a song!' 'I want to get on stage?' It's crazy. So at lunchtime, with 3rd and 4th grade, we're having some in-house entertainment.

In the one-on-one interview, Alex shared the importance of student well-being, stating:

This one's always my priority. This is my baby. Their social-emotional needs are first. I mean, you're not going to learn until you're safe here. We prioritize, and if there's a kid having a hard time and we know it, we reach out to teachers right away. I have an amazing staff, and they'll be the ones to reach out to us and say, this student just went through this. This is what's going on. We prioritize their social and emotional needs.

Reese also shared the importance of resources on campus to support student well-being:

Social-emotional needs have to come first because they're not going to learn anything otherwise. So, I spend most of my time on that. The Wellness Center is staffed by a social worker five hours a day, five days a week, and they do lunchtime groups like a pride lunch, a friendship group, and a young men's council.

In their one-on-one, Kennedy shared a specific example of how the kindness week improved student belonging by stating:

I had a fifth grader that was kind of struggling. He transferred from another school And has some really like a rough background with treatment, and so I knew that. I actually assigned an eighth grader that also had some struggles to watch for him, help him out, and be his mentor. It really helped that eighth grade student. I praise him on how much he's grown and matured. He's amazing now. Absolutely amazing. And so he now has, you know, has the other kids back, and now the other kids get along great with all of his classmates. He absolutely loves the school. So just making sure that they have that, and then they're just like, you really want to show they support each other.

Avery shared in their one-to-one the importance of social-emotional work for student well-being:

“The classrooms are all doing SEL at the beginning of the day, and then the wellness liaison is working with them a lot of times on different activities and helping with that, and also doing activities outside of just the morning routine.”

Theme 2b: Empowering student voice. Five of eight participants highlighted the importance of student empowerment in fostering a positive and inclusive school culture. Each participant shared strategies for empowering students during their one-on-one interviews. This theme was supported during the focus group, where participants also shared their strategies.

Logan shared in the focus group how students are empowered to present to their peers the character traits of the month:

We have nine character traits for the nine months (of the school year), and we celebrate kids with those character traits. We have kids give presentations on what next month's character trait is, and it's super cute. And then there's always class presentations that a

class will do that is somehow tied into the character trait, and they will sing a song or share photos of some service work they did with their group.

Kennedy added:

I actually gave a tour to a new student that just moved into the area. And we walked into the classroom, and these kids grabbed him and said, 'Are you joining our school?' And then he's like, 'I'm thinking about it.' And the parents like, 'Yeah, we're thinking about it.' And they're like, 'Can you come and do this?' And they grabbed his hand and pulled him into the project, and it was a stem project, and he started doing it with them. And that's what I want at the school I want kids to be like, come, join us and grab them and bring them in. I also kind of gauge on the noise level of the campus. I don't know. Like during Covid, I think the hardest part was the quietness. Really eerie. You should have noise in a school.

In their one-on-one interview, Riley stated:

I want every child here to experience joy when they're at school. Maybe not every minute of every day, but as often as possible. We want to give them opportunities to show leadership. So, our third graders get to be, it's very exclusive, in student council by invitation. You have to show leadership qualities, and then they get to twice a week during lunch, have lunch with one of our teachers who runs the leadership program.

For Reese, student empowerment comes in the form of students selecting what they are working for, "I think it's a lot of listening and talking specifically with each person. All of our PBIS closet, a vault of prizes, are all things they've asked for. When they ask, we get them. It's building trust."

Evaluation of the Outcomes

This qualitative exploratory case study investigated the strategies used by eight elementary school principals to foster a positive and inclusive school culture in rural public schools in Northern California. Significant research emphasizes the strong connection between a healthy school culture and the well-being of both students and staff (Cann et al., 2021; Jessiman et al., 2022; Thien & Lee, 2022). However, there remains a need for practical strategies that school leaders can implement to cultivate such an environment, especially given the increasing demands on principals.

The findings of this study align with existing research on the elements and effects of a positive school culture (Andriadi & Sulistiyo, 2024; Wilson Heenan et al., 2023). Principals in the study valued the opportunity to reflect on and discuss their practices during the interviews, viewing it as a rare chance for professional collaboration. Many noted that time constraints and geographic isolation pose significant challenges to consistent peer engagement, reinforcing the idea that rural school leaders often work alone.

Rooted in transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes vision-setting and collective commitment to cultural change (Pineda, 2024), the study's findings acknowledged the theory's significance to effective school leadership. Each element of transformational leadership was relevant in promoting inclusive practices and building a sense of belonging. No unexpected or conflicting results emerged, and the following discussion explores the findings using the study's guiding research questions.

Research Question 1: What are elementary school principals' perceptions of the leadership strategies that effectively contribute to a positive and inclusive school culture?

The findings address the study's core problem, which is that some elementary school principals do not promote a positive and inclusive school culture (Arroyo-Rojas et al., 2024; Fullan, 2023). By identifying specific leadership strategies used by rural elementary school principals, this study highlights practices that foster inclusivity and a sense of belonging within school communities in Northern California.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis offered a structured method that enhanced the study's trustworthiness and interpretive clarity. The three emerging themes, communication and transparency, building relationships and inclusion, and supportive leadership, demonstrate that cultivating school culture is both relational and strategic. These findings provide practical insight into how principals apply leadership values aligned with transformational leadership theory, which served as the study's conceptual framework.

The theme of communication and transparency reflects the core principles of transformational leadership, especially idealized influence, and inspirational motivation. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of open dialogue, honest feedback, and transparent decision-making processes, which foster trust and mutual respect. These strategies align with research that connects transparent leadership to higher staff engagement and collective efficacy (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Building relationships and promoting inclusivity align with transformational leadership's emphasis on individualized consideration and developing strong interpersonal connections. Principals described implementing peer classroom walk-throughs, equity audits, and restructuring leadership opportunities to amplify the voices of traditionally marginalized students. These practices reflect what Leithwood et al. (2021) identified as equity-driven leadership strategies that foster inclusive environments by strengthening the voices of

underrepresented individuals and cultivating collaborative school cultures. These efforts directly support the study's purpose by illustrating how principals embed inclusion into daily practices, even within challenging, resource-constrained rural environments.

The third theme, supportive leadership, aligns with the distributed and empowering elements of transformational leadership. The principals' dedication to amplifying teacher voices, encouraging innovation, and fostering shared responsibility for school culture reflects the literature, which highlights collaboration and distributed leadership as key factors in school improvement (Harris et al., 2019).

The findings reinforce the existing literature without any divergent results. There were no unexpected or conflicting themes, which supports the research. The way participants discussed job-related stress, and the personal impact of relational leadership may be worth exploring further. Although not unique, this theme was highlighted more than expected and could illustrate the challenge of rural school principals working without consistent peer collaboration. This study provides insights into how rural elementary school principals employ leadership strategies that foster inclusive school cultures. The findings support the effectiveness of transformational leadership in rural areas and emphasize the need for ongoing support that helps principals maintain inclusive practices over time.

Research Question 2: What are elementary school principals' perceptions of how a positive and inclusive school culture fosters a sense of belonging on an elementary school campus, and what benefits do they associate with such a culture?

The findings of research question 2 address the study's central issue, which is that some elementary school principals do not develop a positive and inclusive school culture (Arroyo-Rojas et al., 2024; Fullan, 2023). This research examines how such a culture fosters a sense of

belonging and the benefits it offers to school communities. This analysis offers insight into the experiences of rural elementary school principals. It highlights the results of their efforts to build inclusive and supportive school environments.

The study identified two main themes: staff and student well-being and student empowerment. These themes show how a strong school culture, reflected in relationships and daily practices, influences campus dynamics. They highlight the importance of a sense of belonging within healthy school systems. The focus on staff and student well-being emphasizes that inclusivity is more than just an idea; it must be actively demonstrated through intentional care and emotional support. Participants shared strategies, including wellness centers, campus-wide social-emotional learning (SEL) routines, kindness initiatives, and mentoring programs, that foster a safe and respectful environment. These practices align with the goal of transformational leadership to address individual needs, reminding us that supporting students emotionally is essential for their academic success. As supported by existing research, school leaders who prioritize well-being experience better relationships, fewer discipline problems, and higher student engagement (Bryk et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Student empowerment, the second emerging theme, aligns with the transformational leadership constructs of intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation. Principals shared how they worked to increase student voice and leadership through student-led assemblies, inclusive councils, and behavior systems that respond to student needs. These approaches gave students meaningful ways to shape their school's culture and foster a stronger sense of ownership and belonging. The accounts shared suggest that empowered students are more likely to engage meaningfully with their peers, participate in schoolwide activities, and develop prosocial

behavior, outcomes consistent with recent findings in school climate research (Osher et al., 2018).

The results align with the study's conceptual framework and support existing research on transformational leadership. There were no significant deviations from the anticipated findings; instead, the study enhances the understanding of how theory is put into practice, particularly in rural settings where school leaders often drive systemic change. The data indicates that principals lead with more than just operational concerns; they actively demonstrate values centered on relationships, equity, and emotional well-being. A prominent theme was the focus on joy. Principals shared stories about student performances and inclusive school rituals that brought playfulness and celebration into the school day. These moments help students feel connected. The emergence of joy and a sense of belonging in this study suggests a link worth exploring further in future research. Overall, the findings make a valuable contribution to the field by demonstrating how positive and inclusive school cultures are created and experienced, and how such cultures, in turn, foster a sense of belonging and enhance the overall well-being of the school community.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

This study emphasizes the vital role elementary principals play in creating a positive and inclusive school culture. Themes such as open communication, transparency, strong relationships, supportive leadership, staff and student well-being, and student voice have clear implications for practice.

Table 6*Implications and Recommendations*

Research Question	Implication/Conclusion	Recommendations for Practice
RQ1: What are elementary school principals' perceptions of the leadership strategies that effectively contribute to a positive and inclusive school culture?	A. Transparent communication builds trust and credibility among staff and families, fostering a shared sense of ownership.	1. Leaders should share decisions, data, and rationales consistently. Districts can provide PD on communication and change leadership.
	B. Relational leadership by engaging staff and students with humility and visibility promotes a sense of belonging and inclusion.	2. Leadership preparation programs should focus on active listening, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution skills.
	C. Empowering staff through shared leadership fosters innovation and collaboration across school teams.	3. Schools should adopt collaborative leadership models and provide structures that support teacher-led initiatives and decision-making.
RQ2: What are elementary school principals' perceptions of how a positive and inclusive school culture fosters a sense of belonging on an elementary school campus, and what benefits do they associate with such a culture?	D. Students feel more connected when given leadership roles and opportunities to share their voices.	4. Implement student-led projects, peer mentoring, and leadership opportunities to promote engagement and connection.
	E. Staff and student well-being is foundational for a safe, supportive learning environment.	5. Embed SEL in routines, provide wellness centers, and safeguard time for collaboration and emotional safety.
	F. Sustained equity-driven leadership creates long-term conditions for inclusion and community engagement.	6. Support leaders with coaching, mentorship, and systems to share best practices like inclusive onboarding and kindness campaigns.

RQ1 Implication A: Transparent communication builds trust and credibility. The first implication for RQ1 is Implication A. It suggests that transparent communication promotes trust and credibility among staff and families, fostering a shared sense of leadership. Transparency is a key leadership strategy for creating a positive school culture. Principals who communicate openly about decisions, priorities, and resources establish environments where trust can develop. Participants described how regular updates, honest conversations, and explaining the reasons behind decisions increased buy-in from both staff and families. This trust enhances collaboration and strengthens relationships within the school community. Transparent communication also reduces uncertainty during times of change, helping campus groups feel informed and included. These leadership behaviors support daily operations and align the broader community with the school's mission and goals.

Recommendation 1: The finding led to a suggestion for guiding future practice. The suggestion is that educational leaders establish systems that support ongoing communication with staff and families. This involves regularly sharing key decisions, relevant data, and the reasoning behind school-wide initiatives. Transparency clarifies priorities and encourages a shared sense of purpose. Districts can support this effort by offering targeted professional development in communication strategies and leadership for change. Leaders who build skills in rapport, transparency, and trust are better prepared to lead effective and sustainable school improvements.

RQ1 Implication B: Relational leadership promotes a sense of belonging and inclusion. The second implication for RQ1 is Implication B. It indicates that relational leadership, through humility and transparency when engaging staff and students, nurtures a feeling of belonging and

inclusion. Principals who lead with humility, vulnerability, empathy, and openness foster genuine relationships with staff and students. Visibility on campus and active listening were frequently mentioned by participants as practices that enhance safety and connection. These leaders do not just manage schools; they build communities. Belonging begins with feeling seen and heard, and relational leadership establishes those conditions.

Recommendation 2: This finding informed a recommendation for future practice. To prepare principals for the demands of inclusive leadership, administrative credential programs must go beyond managerial skills and invest in relational abilities. Active listening, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution are crucial for fostering trust and navigating the complexities of school dynamics. Incorporating relational leadership skills into coursework helps ensure that aspiring principals are ready to foster a sense of belonging from day one. These practices should also be reinforced throughout a leader's career through coaching and mentorship opportunities.

RQ1 Implication C: Shared leadership promotes innovation and teamwork. The third implication for RQ1 is Implication C. It suggests that empowering staff through shared leadership encourages innovation and collaboration among school teams. When principals trust and empower their teachers, the school culture becomes more collaborative. Participants explained how shared leadership, such as involving staff in creating solutions or leading initiatives, increased engagement and fostered creative problem-solving. Teachers felt valued as professionals and were more willing to take risks to support student success. This shared leadership approach promoted collaboration and aligned teaching processes to improve student outcomes. As one participant said, "When teachers lead, students thrive." The message is clear: innovation occurs when principals loosen control and include others in decision-making.

Recommendation 3: Based on this finding, a future practice recommendation has been proposed. Schools should create leadership structures that intentionally include teachers in decision-making and improvement planning. This may involve instructional leadership teams, teacher-led professional development, and shared goal setting. Empowering teachers through these roles demonstrates trust and enhances capacity across the system. Schools should also recognize and highlight teacher-led successes, which further foster a culture of collaboration, ownership, and shared achievement.

RQ2 Implication D: Students feel more connected to leadership roles that allow them to share their voice. The first implication for RQ2 is Implication D. It indicates that students feel a stronger connection when given leadership roles and opportunities to express their voices. When students are invited to lead, participate, and contribute meaningfully, their sense of belonging improves. Participants shared examples of student-led projects, peer mentoring, and inclusive leadership opportunities that empowered students to be recognized and heard. These practices helped students feel valued and capable, enhancing their connection to the school's culture. The opportunity to lead and be recognized as contributors created a joyful and inclusive environment that supported both academic and social-emotional growth. This finding aligns with research on inclusive leadership and culturally responsive practices, which highlight the importance of student voice in building community and promoting equity.

Recommendation 4. This finding led to a recommendation for future practice to support student voice. Schools should create authentic leadership roles for students. Initiatives such as student councils, peer mentorship programs, classroom ambassadors, and student-led assemblies offer multiple ways for students to express themselves and take ownership of the school culture. These practices should be integrated into the school's structure and supported by staff who

recognize and promote student agency. Providing opportunities for student leadership not only increases engagement but also strengthens a sense of community and inclusion throughout the school.

RQ2 Implication E: Staff and student well-being are essential. The second implication for RQ 2 is Implication E. It suggests that staff and student well-being are foundational for a safe and supportive learning environment. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of well-being in creating the conditions necessary for effective teaching and learning. Schools that prioritize emotional safety, wellness resources, and collaborative time often see higher staff morale and greater student engagement. Leaders who demonstrate a commitment to well-being, such as checking in with staff, integrating SEL into routines, or protecting planning time, help foster a culture of care and community. These practices create environments that enable both staff and students to thrive.

Recommendation 5: Considering this finding, a recommendation for future application includes district and site leaders promoting well-being by aligning policies and schedules with this priority. This includes integrating SEL practices into classroom instruction, providing access to on-campus wellness centers, and establishing spaces for staff to collaborate and reflect. Leaders who actively structure the school day around emotional safety and shared purpose help decrease burnout, support mental health, and foster a strong community culture of care on campus.

RQ2 Implication F: Sustained, equity-driven leadership encourages long-term inclusion and engagement. Implication F is the final implication from RQ 2. It suggests that ongoing, equity-focused leadership creates lasting conditions for inclusion and community involvement. One-time efforts are not enough. Building an inclusive, positive school culture requires leadership

that is consistent, reflective, and committed to equity. Participants highlighted how equity-centered decisions, inclusive policies, and deliberate practices (such as diverse book audits or inclusive hiring) gradually transformed school communities. These leaders fostered cultures where differences were valued, and everyone felt a sense of belonging. They also noted that this work is neither quick nor easy: it requires intentionality, reflection, and a willingness to grow.

Recommendation 6: The final suggestion for RQ 2 is that schools and districts must invest in ongoing support systems to keep inclusive leadership alive. This includes mentoring new leaders, leadership coaching that focuses on equity and inclusion, and district-wide structures for sharing effective practices. Highlighting and copying successful programs, such as kindness campaigns, teacher-led professional development, and inclusive onboarding, can help foster a culture of continuous learning. Creating opportunities for leaders to learn from one another also helps build collective capacity. When principals are supported in their growth and have chances to reflect, collaborate, and lead with equity at the center, inclusive school cultures are more likely to thrive.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on this study's findings and its methodological limitations, several directions for future research are recommended to enhance the understanding of leadership strategies that foster a positive and inclusive school culture. I suggest two qualitative and one quantitative study for further exploration. The recommended methods include comparative case study, phenomenological research, and quasi-experimental designs.

First, since this study focused exclusively on elementary school principals, future research should investigate how inclusive leadership strategies are applied in secondary school settings. Conducting a qualitative comparative case study across middle and high schools could

help determine whether themes such as communication, relationship-building, and supportive leadership are equally effective or vary depending on the age group and school level. Exploring these differences can provide valuable recommendations for leaders at all grade levels.

Second, the perspectives in this study were limited to principals. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership practices influence school culture, future research should include the viewpoints of other campus groups. A qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design could focus on the experiences of teachers, support staff, students, and families to identify areas of agreement or disconnect between leadership intentions and the community's actual experiences. Including these viewpoints could reveal insights into how inclusive leadership is interpreted and experienced across different roles in the school community.

Finally, while this study examined leadership practices at a single point in time using a qualitative approach, future research should investigate the long-term, measurable outcomes of inclusive leadership strategies. A quasi-experimental design could track school climate, staff retention, student belonging, and academic achievement across multiple school years. Employing pre- and post-surveys along with leadership interventions would help evaluate the sustainability and effectiveness of these strategies. This mixed-methods approach would allow researchers to combine the depth of qualitative insights with the breadth of quantitative data.

Together, these studies will expand on this research by providing broader, more inclusive, and long-term perspectives on how school leadership can foster welcoming, equitable, and high-achieving school environments.

Table 7*Recommendations for Future Research*

Methodology	Design	Purpose of the Study
Qualitative	Comparative Case Study	The purpose of this study is to explore whether themes such as communication, relationship-building, and supportive leadership observed in elementary schools manifest similarly or differently in secondary school settings.
Qualitative	Phenomenological	The purpose of this study is to examine how inclusive leadership strategies are experienced by teachers, students, families, and support staff, and to identify points of alignment or disconnect across campus groups.
Quantitative	Quasi-experimental	The purpose of this study is to measure the long-term effects of inclusive leadership practices on school climate, staff retention, student belonging, and academic outcomes over multiple school years.

Conclusions

This qualitative study examined the leadership strategies that elementary school principals believe contribute to creating a positive and inclusive school culture, and how such a culture fosters a sense of belonging and benefits the school community. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, the study analyzed insights from eight elementary school principals through individual interviews and a mini-focus group discussion. Three main themes emerged in response to the first research question: communication and transparency, relationship building and inclusion, and supportive leadership. Two additional themes were identified in response to the second research question: staff and student well-being, and student empowerment.

The findings show that school culture is strongly influenced by principals' behaviors, values, and relational leadership practices. When communication is open and transparent, it builds trust and a shared sense of ownership. Strong relationships foster connection and inclusion, while supportive leadership empowers staff and students to take initiative and feel valued. Schools that focus on wellness and create space for student voice and leadership are more likely to develop environments where everyone feels they belong.

This study adds to the ongoing discussion about the importance of relational, inclusive leadership in schools. Highlighting the real-world experiences of current elementary principals offers practical insights into how leaders can create a school culture that is both positive and equitable. These findings impact site-level leadership, district policies, leadership development programs, and school improvement strategies.

Although the study is limited by its sample size and focuses on elementary schools, it lays a foundation for future research that can expand to other educational levels and include a broader range of perspectives. The recommendations for practice and further research provide ways to build on this work, helping school leaders become better equipped to meet the diverse and changing needs of students and communities. The findings clearly demonstrate that principals play a vital role in creating and maintaining school environments that are inclusive and supportive. When leadership is grounded in transparency, empathy, and a commitment to well-being, schools become places where everyone can thrive.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval



9388 Lightwave Ave.
San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

Notice of Exemption

April 17, 2025

To: Megan Dickson

Project Title: Strategies Elementary School Principals Implement to Cultivate a Positive and Inclusive School Culture: A Qualitative Exploratory Case Study

NU IRB Number: IRB-FY24-25-812

Determination: Exempt from further review 45 CFR 46.101 Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

Status: Active - Research activities may begin as of April 17, 2025

Dear Megan Dickson:

The study referenced above has been reviewed by the National University IRB. The IRB has determined your research is exempt from further review under 45 CFR 46.104, which means you will not need to renew your study and may begin your study effective immediately. However, if you find the need to change your study in any way, you will need to submit a modification to the IRB prior to implementing the changes. This will allow the IRB to determine whether or not the study still meets exemption criteria.

Please review your Post Approval Responsibilities here: [Approved Documents Guidelines](#)

For any questions regarding your protocol, please reach out to the IRB at irb@nu.edu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Joseph M. Marron'.

Dr. Joseph Marron, IRB Chair

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Brianne Mongeon'.

Dr. Brianne Mongeon, Director, HRPP & IRB

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Jenessa Eberhardt'.

Jenessa Eberhardt, Associate Director, HRPP & IRB

**Appendix B:
Recruitment Letter**



National University IRB
9338 Lightwave Ave., San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

Month 2025

Hello, Admin of [Redacted] Facebook Group,

My name is Megan Dickson, and I am a Doctoral Candidate at National University. I am conducting interviews to identify strategies elementary school principals use to create a positive and inclusive school culture in rural Northern California. I am seeking permission to post my recruitment flyer in your group.

I am recruiting participants who meet all the following criteria:

- Currently serving as an elementary school principal in rural Northern California
- A minimum of three years of experience in the principalship
- Self-identifies as leading a school with a positive and inclusive culture
- Leads a school that provides programs and services designed to support diverse learners

If you have questions or want to reach me, please do so at 530.205.7786 or
M.Dickson4178@o365.ncu.edu.

Thank you for your time,
Megan Dickson
Doctoral Candidate
530.205.7786
M.Dickson4175@o365.ncu.edu

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

SEEKING RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

A request for participants in dissertation research to explore strategies elementary school principals use to cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture.



DO YOU MEET THE CRITERIA?

- Are you an elementary school principal in rural Northern California?
- Have you been a principal for a minimum of three years?
- Do you believe you have a positive and Inclusive school culture on your campus?
- Does your school site offer programs and services to support diverse learners?

**IF YOU ANSWERED YES TO
ALL FOUR QUESTIONS,
LET'S CHAT!**

Participants will engage in a Zoom interview for 60 minutes and may be asked to participate in a focus group via Zoom.

How to get started:



Email Megan Dickson
m.dickson4178@o365.ncu.edu



Call or Text Megan Dickson
530.205.7786



Appendix D: Informed Consent



National University IRB
9338 Lightwave Ave., San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

My name is Megan Dickson. I am a doctoral candidate at National University (NU) and an elementary school principal in rural Northern California.

I'm asking you to participate in a research study about the strategies elementary school principals use to cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture.

You may participate in this research if you meet all the following criteria:

- Currently serving as an elementary school principal in rural Northern California
- A minimum of three years of experience in the principalship
- The belief that your school has a positive and inclusive culture
- Leads a school that provides programs and services designed to support diverse learners

I hope to include 4-15 people in this research. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1:1 online interview over Zoom for 45-60 minutes.
2. Review a summary of the interview via email for 10-15 minutes.
3. Participate in a focus group online via Zoom or for 60-90 minutes.
4. Review a focus group summary via email for 10-15 minutes.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your role as an elementary school principal
- Your experience in creating a positive and inclusive school culture
- Your experience navigating challenges as a principal

Risks: There are minimal foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. You can skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

Benefits: If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this research.

Recording: I would like to audio and video record your responses with Zoom during the interview and focus group. You can disable the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

Mandated Reporting: My professional role outside of NU requires me to report suspicion of child or elderly abuse, suspicion of possible harm to self or others, and committed crimes to the appropriate authorities.

Confidentiality: I will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Gender-neutral pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant during the interview. The interviews will be conducted from a private home office. The recorded data will be stored on a passcode-locked computer accessible only to me. All recordings will be destroyed once analyzed. The completed transcriptions will remain available for seven years after publication.

Taking part is voluntary: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

If you have questions: Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at m.dickson4178@o365.ncu.edu or at 530.205.7786.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at irb@nu.edu

Appendix E: Interview Protocol



National University IRB
9338 Lightwave Ave., San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

Introduction: Hello, and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview today. My name is Megan Dickson, and I am a doctoral candidate at National University conducting my dissertation research.

This interview is expected to last 60 minutes. I will record our discussion and take notes to ensure I have complete information.

Consent: I would like to review the consent letter with you before we begin the interview.

Do you agree to participate in the study?

Participant: Yes _____ or No _____

Thank you. I am conducting a study on the strategies rural elementary school principals use to create a positive and inclusive school culture. This information will be confidential. Your perspectives and experiences are important to understanding how principals can do this.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Interview Questions

1. How do you define a positive and inclusive school culture, and what role do you play in shaping it?
2. What leadership practices have you found most effective in fostering an inclusive environment for students and staff?
3. How do you build and maintain trust among staff, students, and families to support a strong school culture?
4. What strategies do you use to ensure all stakeholders—teachers, parents, students, and community members—feel valued and heard?
5. How do you support and empower teachers to create a classroom culture that aligns with the school’s vision for inclusivity?
6. How do you ensure school policies and practices promote equity and inclusivity for all students, especially those from diverse backgrounds?

7. What programs or initiatives have you implemented to celebrate diversity and foster a sense of belonging for all students?
8. How do you address and prevent biases or inequities in disciplinary policies, instructional practices, or student support systems?
9. How do you support teachers in developing culturally responsive teaching practices?
10. What professional development opportunities do you provide to help staff cultivate an inclusive and supportive learning environment?
11. How do you handle resistance or challenges from staff when implementing changes that promote inclusivity?
12. What role do students play in shaping the school's culture, and how do you encourage their voice and participation?
13. How do you address student social-emotional needs while maintaining high academic expectations?
14. What systems or structures have you implemented to ensure the sustainability of a positive and inclusive culture?
15. Looking back, what are your most impactful strategies to influence school culture, and what advice would you give other principals?

Conclusion: Thank you for meeting with me today and sharing your strategies for creating a positive and inclusive school culture.

Debriefing questions:

1. Ask if they would like to participate in a focus group.
2. Ask if they know other elementary school principals in rural Northern California interested in participating in this study.

Appendix F: Focus Group Protocol



National University IRB
9338 Lightwave Ave., San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

Hello! Thank you for joining me today to discuss strategies for cultivating a positive and inclusive school culture. My name is Megan Dickson, and I will be the facilitator for the group. You have been invited to this focus group because you are an elementary school principal in Northern California and believe your campus has a positive and inclusive school culture. This focus group aims to listen to your experiences implementing strategies that cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture.

This focus group will last for approximately 90 minutes. The information you share throughout our time together will be valuable in understanding the strategies principals can implement to cultivate a positive and inclusive school culture. As I explained in the informed consent form, the discussion will be recorded to ensure that all information is captured accurately. The Zoom file will be password-protected; all transcriptions will utilize pseudonyms to protect your privacy. I ask that each participant close other windows on your computer to avoid distractions.

Do I have your permission to record both audio and video? Does anyone have any concerns about the recording? [Wait for responses.]

Your participation today and throughout the focus group is voluntary. You may skip any question or leave the Zoom anytime for any reason.

Does anyone have any questions before we begin? [Wait for participant questions.]

If there are no questions, I will begin our recording now. [Start the recording.]

Focus Group Discussion

1. To begin, please introduce yourself to the group and describe your experience as a principal.
2. What leadership practices have you found most effective in creating a culture where all students and staff feel valued and included?

3. Can you share a specific initiative or strategy that has significantly improved inclusivity and belonging in your school? What made it successful?
4. How do you navigate challenges when implementing changes that promote a more positive and inclusive school culture?
5. In what ways do you involve teachers, students, and families in shaping and sustaining a strong school culture?
6. How do you measure whether your efforts to build an inclusive school culture are making a meaningful impact?

Closing

Now that we are reaching the end of our time, are there any other comments, concerns, or questions? [Wait for responses.]

Thank you for your participation! You have provided much great information. If you have any questions about your participation today, please reach out to me at any time. The following steps include transcribing the audio recording. After the transcription is complete, I will email you a copy of the transcription for your review. Once reviewed, I will make any edits that arise and are deemed inaccurate. [Stop the recording.]