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MORE THAN A FRAMEWORK: ADOPTING AN EQUITY MINDSET ACTION STEPS
FOR SCHOOL LEADERS TO ENACT CHANGE

MICHELLE Y. HASSAN

158 Pages

To secure the economic well-being of our country in the current global society, we must be concerned with all students, and all means all. This qualitative research study asserts the need to stop focusing on the achievement gap and work to close opportunity gaps through equitable school practices. This narrative inquiry study critically analyzed equity frameworks and sought to understand how equity directors translate theory into praxis. Their counternarratives shared their approach to praxis during their journey. This study used Critical Race Theory (CRT) and CRT in Education theoretical frameworks to examine the equity directors' experiences. Their stories provided wisdom and guidance along with concrete, actionable steps for new equity directors and school leaders to enact change.

KEYWORDS: achievement gap; opportunity gap; equity director; equity framework; action steps.

MORE THAN A FRAMEWORK: ADOPTING AN EQUITY MINDSET ACTION STEPS
FOR SCHOOL LEADERS TO ENACT CHANGE

MICHELLE Y. HASSAN

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
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MORE THAN A FRAMEWORK: ADOPTING AN EQUITY MINDSET ACTION STEPS
FOR SCHOOL LEADERS TO ENACT CHANGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Men talk of the Negro Problem. There is no Negro Problem. The problem is whether the American people have loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough to live up to their own constitution. - Frederick Douglass.

Table 1 illuminates fundamental changes in demographics occurring between 2014 and 2060. Whites will no longer be the majority (Frey, 2019). Whites are 62% of the population now, but they will only be 44% in 2060 (Chappell, 2015). The Black population will only increase by 1% despite an increase in people. The American Indian population will remain steady at only 1% overall. People of two or more races will increase from 3% to 6% of the population. Asian people will increase from 5% to 9%. The most significant shift will be for Latinos, rising from 17% to 29% (Chappell, 2015). There will be an overall increase in people of color, from 39% to 59%. People of color will be the new majority (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015).

Table 1

Population by Race Projections

	2014	%	2060	%
White	198,103	62%	187,930	44%
Black	42,039	13%	59,693	14%
Latino	55,140	17%	119,044	29%
Asian	17,083	5%	38,965	9%
American Indian	3,957	1%	5,607	1%
Two or more	7,995	3%	26,022	6%

Note. Adapted from *For U.S. Children Minorities will be the majority by 2020, Census Says* by B. Chappell, 2015 (<https://npr.org>). In the public domain.

The United States is becoming more diverse, with more than 51% of children under 5 being children of color (Chappell, 2015; Radd et al., 2021; Salazar & Lerner, 2019). Schools have traditionally provided high-quality education for middle and high-income whites while failing to provide equitable learning opportunities for children of color and poverty (Muhammad, 2015; Scanlan & Theoharis, 2015). Instead of improving their practices, schools blamed Black families for the schools' performance inadequacies (Radd et al., 2021; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999).

Background of the Study

An educated and well-rounded citizenry is vital to local, national, and global economies (Baker, 2018). Our society hurts itself when it intentionally withholds equitable resources from Black students (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015; Muhammad, 2015). We are all interconnected, so inequity affects our entire society (Radd et al., 2021; Trucios-Haynes, 2001; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2014).

Every industry depends on education. Economists have long realized the inextricability of education and the economy (Brimley et al., 2016). While economists Marx, Keynes, Galbraith, and Friedman had different perspectives on administering education, they all realized its critical value (Brimley et al., 2016). The Coleman Report was misleading with its research results because funding does matter; funding and achievement correlate (Baker, 2018; Bloch et al., 2016).

Education is a crucial factor in breaking the cycle of generational poverty. Most public-school students qualify for free or reduced lunch (Brimley et al., 2016). Schools with a high percentage of low-income students are inadequately funded, thereby minimizing their students' educational opportunities (Moore, 2005; Muhammad, 2015). This state-sanctioned atrocity of

centuries of insufficient education will impact our entire country for generations (Brimley et al., 2016).

Brimley et al. (2016) discussed a funding formula that includes differentiation for at-risk students; however, Brimley, Verstegen, and Garfield misspoke. The students themselves are not at risk, they attend inequitable schools (Deo, 2012). Some school districts cannot adequately or equitably fund education based on state funding (Muhammad, 2015). Property taxes are still widely used to fund schools; therefore, the zip code where children live still determines the quality of their education (Baker, 2018). Although states control education locally, they have essentially signed off on this inequitable way of funding, leading back to oppression being interlocked by multiple institutions at one time (Delgado, 2011; Holme & Finnigan, 2018; Rothstein, 2017).

Illinois historically distributed the least funding to children who needed it (Baker, 2018). Students in the lowest poverty quintile received \$9,446, while students in the highest poverty quintile only received \$8,220 per year (Baker, 2018). This annual difference of \$1,226 minimally totals \$18,390 for a pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade education. Imagine the difference in student achievement if under-resourced communities received an equitable share of funding (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Equality is not synonymous with equity (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015).

There is much conversation about national, state, and local equity. Equity ensures that each student has what they need to succeed academically (Rice, 2019). In an equitable funding formula, the schools in the highest poverty quintile would get what they need, glaringly more than the lowest poverty quintile schools (Baker, 2018). Money is about power. Students in the high poverty quintile are hegemonized (Bloch et al., 2016; DiMuzio & Robbins, 2017).

Increased resources have been positively correlated with increased student achievement (Baker, 2018; Bloch et al., 2016). Without equitable resources, student achievement is a pipe dream. Regardless of their zip code, every child can contribute to solving our economic, scientific, and political issues because only a diverse society can solve extremely complex problems (like climate change and cancer) with creative, critical thinkers (Woodson, 1933/1990).

In 1954, the Supreme Court handed down the legendary and landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education*. It ruled that separate was not equal, and education should be administered equally (Brimley et al., 2016). Sixty years later, we have not realized the promise of Brown because schools are more segregated now than they were then, and education is not being provided on equal terms (Deo, 2012; Ee et al.; Saddler, 2005). Instead of integrating schools, whites moved away from Blacks (Holme & Finnigan, 2018; Rothstein, 2017). Real estate developers and politicians interlocked arms to create specific parts of a town and the suburbs, which became a haven to maintain white schools (Baker, 2018; Holme & Finnigan, 2018; Rothstein, 2017).

Does our American society want Black and Brown children to prosper (Saddler, 2005)? Baker (2018) posits that middle-class white Americans know a quality education will give their children a competitive edge. This knowledge has been known for hundreds of years and is at the root of why education for Black children has been intentionally underfunded (Muhammad, 2015).

Problem Statement and Significance of the Study

Issues in education are falsely framed as an achievement gap (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Moore, 2005). The achievement gap is the symptom of a bigger problem – underfunding (Muhammad, 2015). America has been a global leader and a

powerhouse. To secure the economic well-being of our country in the current global society, we must be concerned with all students, and all means all (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015; Brimley et al., 2016; J. Rodriguez personal communication, July 1, 2021). Allen Greenspan, Former Federal Reserve Chairman, understood that to maintain our global positioning, we must fix our education system (Ladson-Billings, 2006). All students' academic outcomes will affect every one of every ethnicity (Muhammad, 2015).

Several years ago, the State of Illinois released a new version of the state report card for schools. Under the category of academic progress, one of the subtitles is the achievement gap. The report card defines the achievement gap as “the persistent difference in academic performance between different ethnic and racial groups, income levels, gender, and special student groups” (ISBE, 2018). The spring 2018 results of The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) indicate that in English Literacy Arts (ELA), whites outscored Blacks by 29% and Hispanics by 22%. In mathematics, whites outscored Blacks by 30% and Hispanics by 22% (ISBE, 2018).

Ladson-Billings (2006) posits that the achievement gap is “in fact” an "educational debt" owed to Black students based on the systematic, structural denial of resources since our nation was founded (p. 3). The educational debt is calculated based on centuries of free labor, the Black troops in the civil war, and hundreds of years of non-education (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2013). Ladson-Billings (2006) asserts that the education debt owed to African Americans can only be chipped away by taking on historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral issues that have not been addressed. Ladson-Billings (2006) contends we cannot have the discourse about an achievement gap when schools have never truly been desegregated or equally funded. Lipman

(2011) agrees that we need to address the education debt owed to everyone who has historically been denied a quality education.

Schools work to eliminate what they call an achievement gap, which Ladson-Billings (2012) revealed as an opportunity gap at the intersections of race and class (Chapman, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006). There would be no gaps if schools were funded equitably (Muhammad, 2015). Like race, the achievement gap is a social construction that oppresses Black people and gives them the illusion of being less than (Moore, 2005; Delgado Bernal, 2002). How much funding would it take to make up for 400 years of no education followed by perpetual underfunding (Muhammad, 2015)?

Morsy and Rothstein (2019) assert that low achievement can be predicted due to social conditions. Schools with students of color are less likely to offer advanced science and math courses (Radd et al., 2021). Additionally, students of color, especially Black boys, with identical test scores and grades are less likely to be recommended for advanced placement (AP) courses (Morris, 2002; Radd et al., 2021; T. Conrad, personal communication, December 4, 2019). Placement is also an issue as students of color are more than three to four times more likely to be placed in special education (Morris, 2002). School segregation, which is inextricably tied to educational inequalities, is a significant factor in achievement data (Holme & Finnigan, 2018; Reardon, n.d.). These studies are steeped in a deficit mindset (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Valencia, 2010). Essentially, the real problem is an analysis of the nation's one hundred largest school districts indicated there are no districts where Blacks are performing at the same level as whites due to a lack of resources (Reardon, n.d.). This qualitative research study asserts the need to stop focusing on the fabricated achievement gap and work to close opportunity gaps through

equitable school practices (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Linton, 2011; Moore, 2005; Salazar & Lerner, 2019; Stenbridge, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Built on critical legal studies and radical feminism, “Critical race theory (CRT) is a body of legal scholarship...a majority of whose members are both existentially people of color and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law” (Bell, 1995, p. 898). Critical race theory posits “racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society” (Bell, 1992, p. vix). This theory emerged when scholars and activists acted on stalled civil rights progress to understand and to change the trilogy of "race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017, p.3). Bell's interest convergence theory posits that there is little hope for change unless it somehow benefits white folks (Bell, 1980; Muhammad, 2015).

There are three tenets of CRT. One tenet is that race is a man-made social construct (Bell, 1992; Muhammad, 2015). Race is a social and political construct used to possess and maintain power (Lawrence, 2012). Another tenet is that racism is so normal that it is nearly invisible. Racism is so embedded in our society that it almost goes unnoticed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Saddler, 2005). The third tenet is the domination of white European culture which is viewed as the norm. Racism is at the roots of American culture (Deo, 2012; Lynn & Parker, 2006). Critical Race Theory asserts that racism is a part of how America was formed; therefore, a permanent part of our being.

Since the beginning of American time, institutions have maintained social order by subjugating Black and Brown people (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical Race Theory honors the epistemologies and ontologies of Black and Brown communities (Delgado Bernal, 2002;

Saddler, 2005). Based on the belief in collective wisdom, CRT seeks to center and communicate the views, perspectives, and stories of those who have been historically marginalized (Masko, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Analyzing education through a CRT lens, we know racism is the cornerstone of the American schoolhouse (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Through the misapplication of educational theories, white norms, beliefs, customs, and traditions compare, stratify, hegemonize, and marginalize Black and Brown children (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Eurocentrism is an American norm, so education appears to be meritocratic (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Using CRT as a framework, scholars and practitioners fight fervently against racism in society and education (Salazar & Lerner, 2019).

Bell's Critical Race Theory is the foundational framework for Critical Race Theory in Education (Leonardo, 2012). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) developed a Critical Race Theory in Education framework to examine school inequities. The three propositions of Critical Race Theory in Education are inequities are based on race, rights are based on property holdings, and the intersectionality of race and property "creates an analytic tool through which we can understand...school inequity" (p. 48). There are five tenets of Critical Race Theory in Education. One tenet is that race is deeply rooted and inextricable to gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Another tenet is committed to dismantling sexism, poverty, and racism (Lynn & Parker, 2006). The third tenet challenges the dominance of white privilege (Patton, 2016). The last two tenets are strongly connected in that they value experiential knowledge of families and multiple perspectives.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explain that although race is a social construct, it is continuously used to define and disadvantage Black people. Opportunities to learn are

intentionally and unconsciously withheld from Black students who are not deemed worthy of occupying academic space (Harris, 1993; Morris, 2002). CRT in Education is a theoretical and analytical framework to challenge the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Saddler, 2005; Salazar & Lerner, 2019). CRT is used to understand policies, practices, and procedures that affect school discipline, tracking, testing, bilingual & multicultural education, alternative & charter schools, and funding (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Moore, 2005; Saddler, 2005; Villenas & Hyde, 1999).

CRT challenges the Eurocentric curriculum and denounces the deficit-theory approach to schooling for Black and Brown students (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Gillborn, 2006). CRT seeks to refute and dismantle objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity (Brayboy, 2005). This research study uses Critical Race Theory and CRT in Education as theoretical frameworks to examine the praxis of district equity directors (Lynn & Parker, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

Districts focus on increasing test scores (Moore, 2005). Planting the seed for college and building character are essential, too; however, at the end of the year, schools are judged based on test scores. Performance reviews for superintendents, school leaders, and teachers are partially based on test scores. Dantley and Tillman (2006) suggested that leaders make recommendations for changes in practice. The purpose of a qualitative study is to do more than make recommendations. School leaders need tried and true practices that have been proven successful (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). This study analyzed equity frameworks and provided actionable steps for school leaders and new equity directors (Lynn & Parker, 2006).

Rationale

In 2018, Chicago Public Schools opened the Office of Equity, and some principals wondered what the office would do. In March of 2020, the world shut down during the coronavirus pandemic. Many people attended school and worked remotely from home. Minneapolis police officers murdered George Floyd, and the world was at home to witness this horrific atrocity. Some companies released statements that Black Lives Matter, while others raced to promote and hire Black people.

As a result of this event, some school districts established diversity, equity, and inclusion positions. Directors of Equity lead the equity work in their district. School leaders want to start equity work within their districts; however, they need professional support to begin their work. This study is primarily for equity directors who need a roadmap to start.

The Illinois State Board of Education recently released the equity continuum. Student learning, learning conditions, and elevating educators are the three categories that schools are rated on. There are four steps of measurement, step 1 (large gaps), step 2 (moderate gaps), step 3 (small gaps) and step 4 (minimal gaps). Leaders will be compelled to work to improve their ratings, which were made public via the most recent Illinois School Report Card. While leaders are willing to do the work, they need support. This study provided actionable steps for leaders.

Methodology

Narrative research studies the lived experiences of individuals as shared with and interpreted by a researcher (Frankel et al., 2015). This qualitative study used narrative inquiry as a methodology. Narrative inquiry supports the natural form of communication through stories and narratives (Frankel et al., 2015). This research study sought to understand the lived experiences of directors of equity (Hansen, 2019). Their testimonials centered their voices as

they share their truth. Narrative inquiry aligns with Critical Race Theory which seeks collective wisdom through stories of those who have been historically marginalized (Masko, 2005).

An email was sent to the thirty equity directors who attended the first meeting of the National Equity Directors Consortium held in the fall of 2021. This study sought to engage at least eight equity directors based on their interest in participating in the study. One-on-one interviews were conducted in a private space for 25 to 75 minutes to document their experiences. The interview questions were adapted from Hansen (2019) a narrative inquiry study about Black female superintendents and Learned-Miller (2018) & Maier (2018) interviews with equity leaders which examined their experiences.

This study sought to analyze the lived experiences of equity directors based on their interview responses. After interviews, member checking was performed to ensure the accuracy with which their experiences are collected and portrayed. The themes that emerged from the interviews were documented.

Research Questions

This qualitative, narrative inquiry study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How are equity directors translating theory into praxis?
2. How are equity directors approaching praxis during their first year?
3. How do equity directors address barriers to implementation?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are critical to this study.

Equality – students receive the same resources and opportunities (Rice, 2019).

Equity – opportunities and resources for every student to reach their self-desired outcomes (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Rice, 2019).

Assumptions

The researcher assumes that the American education system was not designed for Black children (Anderson, 2016; Brimley et al., 2016; Memmi, 1965; Muhammad, 2020; Stenbridge, 2020). Some educators have been surrounded by achievement gap ideology and perceive the gap to be real (Moore, 2005). School leaders have been requesting support to enact equity work, so they will act once they have concrete action steps.

The equity directors are the main drivers of equity work within their school district. Equity directors have formal education or training in diversity, equity, and inclusion. The districts where the equity directors work are committed to equity action beyond mere words on paper.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is the misunderstandings about Critical Race Theory (CRT) and how it shows up or not in K-12 schools. Practitioners may be apprehensive of the action steps based on the use of this theoretical framework. Another limitation of this study is that the role of equity directors is relatively new. A third limitation of this study is that the equity directors interviewed were all from the State of Illinois.

No data is collected or analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the participants' praxis. For several years, Illinois enacted laws regarding cultural competence and education and workforce equity. These laws may support the work of equity directors; whereas, the new focus in other states to ban CRT may impede the work of equity directors in those states.

The level of skill and support from the Board of Education, superintendent, and other district-level and school-based administrators may strengthen or impede equity directors' work. I was an equity director and may have biases based on my work.

Positionality Statement

My life experiences are at the center of this research. I taught for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in the late 1990's. Our school's probationary status, the need to improve academically, and what a horrible status name as it indicates some denotation to prison, was managed by the late Dr. Barbara Sizemore. Dr. Sizemore was the first Black female superintendent of the Washington D.C. Public Schools. I did not know who she was at the time. She established School Achievement Structure (SAS), a network to help schools to continuously improve. Dr. Sizemore and her colleagues taught me how to improve my practice as a teacher.

Later, I worked at CPS's central office. Concurrently, I began looking for a quality school for my two daughters. It was during that time that my career and my personal life collided. I realized that there were few quality schools for Black children to attend. I left central office administration to become a New Leader for New Schools (NLNS) resident principal to increase the number of quality schools for Black and Brown children. Once I became a principal, I worked diligently to implement the Urban Excellence Framework (UEF) to dramatically improve my school. Being a mother drove my passion to lead a high-quality neighborhood school like the school that I would like for my daughters to attend.

These professional and personal experiences motivated me to constantly research schools that were overcoming barriers and being successful. This search led me to study equity which resulted in my becoming an equity director. As an equity director, I continued to thirst for knowledge about how to improve my practice. At the same time, I was supporting school leaders

in understanding and implementing equitable practices. This research is about improving myself and continuing to share my work with others.

As an executive director of academic excellence, I am uniquely positioned to implement the findings of this research and share actionable steps with school leaders. With the knowledge of Black history that people died so I could have a quality education, I am driven by my experiences as a Black woman with Black children to research and put theory into practice. I have personally witnessed race, racism, and the system of white-over-color ascendancy in schools so my interviews with equity directors were personal.

It was important to pair the knowledge from the equity frameworks with the lived experiences of the equity directors. The recognition of my biases was ever present during this research. The interviews with the equity directors allowed me to peer into their practice while being reflective of my own. It confirmed some of what I knew while making me aware of what I had not learned yet.

This narrative inquiry study led me through my experiences. The choice to use this research methodology was the result of my being a participant in a research study. My experiences helped me to understand the work and concerns of the equity directors. These narratives were recorded with an open mind. To ensure accuracy, member checking was performed. Member checking allows for participants to review their narratives to ensure for accuracy and reliability of the data.

Delimitations

This study did not involve equity directors who serve in an assistant superintendent's capacity. This position inherently has greater authority possibly influencing the ability to garner support from others to achieve outcomes.

Organization of the Study

The literature review in chapter 2 provides a critique of equity frameworks. These frameworks were analyzed, compared, and contrasted. Chapter 2 also includes sections on leadership, culture, and pedagogy. Chapter 3 provides the rationale for a narrative inquiry study and the research methodology. Chapter 3 includes the research design, data sources, collection, analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 is an analysis of the data. Chapter 5 presents the findings, the implications and provides actionable steps for practice and future studies.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A thinking man, however, learns to deal wisely with conditions as he finds them rather than to take orders from someone who knows nothing about his status and cares less.

Carter G. Woodson

Background of the Problem

Schools were not designed with all children in mind (Anderson, 2016; Brimley et al., 2016; Memmi, 1965; Muhammad, 2020; Stenbridge, 2020). There is a substantial difference in resources for children of color (Baker, 2018). For our country to flourish economically, each and every child must receive a high-quality education (Muhammad, 2015). For schools to function differently, they need guidance on how to recreate the system (Muhammad, 2020). Some schools have hired equity directors. Equity directors may need direction on where and how to start (L. Varn, personal communication, June 25, 2022). Equity frameworks provide an entry point for support for equity directors and their school districts.

There have been studies about equity from the superintendent and principal perspectives. Maier (2008) suggested that additional research about equity leaders be conducted along with an educational framework that could be used for critical analysis. The definition of equity is resources and opportunities to reach a desired outcome (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015; Holme & Finnigan, 2018; Linton, 2011; Mascareñaz, 2022; Muhammad, 2020; Radd et al., 2021; Salazar & Lerner, 2019; Stenbridge, 2020). Equity is more than just access to resources and opportunities. Implementing equity requires adopting a new mindset regarding leadership, culture, instruction, and operations (Linton, 2011; Muhammad, 2015; Muhammad, 2020). Implementing equity leads to actions, insights, and reflection (Stenbridge, 2020).

Beginning equity work is extremely difficult because it requires deep self-examination and self-reflection (Kendi, 2019). DiAngelo (2019) posits that we were all born into an institutional system of racism. The system is bigger than the institutional level; in reality, it is actually at the structural level (Scheurich & Young, 1997; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999).

Radd et al. (2021) posit that historical inequity is at the root of systemic issues. Our entire American society has been built on a lie. Lies are complicated to deal with and extremely hard to face. Although racism is real, race is not (Bell, 1980; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Muhammad, 2015). Race is a social construct, not a biological truth (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It is the acknowledgment that race is not real that many people find troubling. If race is not real, then the perception of a reality based on race to justify being better than Blacks is shattered (Brown & Brown, 2010).

Historical Context

To fully understand why race plays a role in education, educators must face some historical facts (Saddler, 2005). Race was used to justify slavery (Harris, 1993). In 1840, Samuel Morton conducted a scientific study that violated the scientific method. His study concluded that Black craniums are smaller; therefore, Blacks possess less intelligence (Poskett, 2015). These lies and misconceptions were published and sent around the world for consumption. If Blacks were viewed as being less than human, whites could rationalize owning Blacks as property (Harris, 1993). Blacks were considered 3/5 human (Harris, 1993). Although the constitution said all men are created equal, that did not apply to Black men because they were not considered human and therefore not men (Declaration of Independence, 1776).

There are no words to truly capture the horrific atrocities of chattel slavery. While some historians report slavery began when Africans arrived in Jamestown in 1619, some historians

have chronicled its beginnings as early as 1526 (Gates & Yacovone, 2013). Africans were stolen from their land and transported for months, during which as many as 50 million died (Gates & Yacovone, 2013). They were forcibly brought to America and sold at auctions like cattle, having their bodies examined. They were beaten and forced to work in the scorching sun all day and all night.

The enslaved were sold away from their families. Babies were ripped from their parents' arms. Men and women were forced to have sex (while being portrayed as oversexualized) to produce babies who would be born into slavery. White men raped Black men. White men also raped Black women while their Black husbands and Black sons had to stand by, knowing, listening, and sometimes even watching. Black women gave birth to children fathered by their enslavers (Harris, 1993).

Furthermore, this all went on for hundreds of years. Willie Lynch spoke at a conference and wrote a letter teaching enslavers how to terrorize their enslaved for hundreds of years and pit Black people against one another (Gates & Yacovone, 2013). Although history claimed Abraham Lincoln freed the enslaved people, he did so to save the union. (Lincoln, 1862).

Enslavers forbade the enslaved from learning how to read (Ladson-Billings, 2012). It was against the law to teach a Black person how to read. Once slavery was legally over in 1865, America established schools for whites while Blacks had to build their own schools (Anderson, 2016; Brimley et al., 2016). Some segregated schools were very successful (Siddle-Walker, 2003).

Siddle-Walker (2003) concluded that teachers taught students skills they needed to be successful because the teachers knew the racism their students would face. Principals collaborated with the community to ensure students had everything they needed. Parents were

engaged, and they supported schools by helping to build them and work on their ongoing efforts (Anderson, 2016; Siddle-Walker, 2003). When taxes were collected, whites kept extra money for themselves (theft) and did not give Black schools their fair share of financing, so Black school facilities were not as well maintained (Anderson, 2016). School instructional materials were second-hand, meaning they were old and outdated (Siddle-Walker, 2003). When Black segregated schools outperformed white schools, Black schools were no longer allowed to add additional rigorous courses (Siddle-Walker, 2003). Once Blacks decided they wanted to attend elementary and high school closer to home, they sought to integrate white schools.

Despite *Brown v. Board of Education*, whites were vehemently opposed to their children attending school with Black children. Ruby Bridges had to be escorted to school by the U.S. Marshalls. The Little Rock Nine were physically and verbally assaulted. In Virginia, schools were closed for five years rather than allow integration (Anderson, 2016). Once schools were integrated nationally, more than 50,000 Black teachers and administrators were fired for no valid reason (Anderson, 2016). Today, schools are more segregated than they were in 1968 (Ee et al., 2014; Saddler, 2005). When schools began to integrate, whites moved away to the suburbs (Holme & Finnigan, 2018; Rothstein, 2017).

Blacks were denied housing and charged more for housing, impacting Black wealth (Rothstein, 2017). Blacks were denied jobs and relegated to lower-paying jobs (Rothstein, 2017). Blacks were forced to create their own resources, and when they did, it was burned down to the ground like in Tulsa (Brockell, 2021; Gates & Yacovone, 2013). Incidents similar to Tulsa happened in nineteen other cities including Atlanta, New Orleans, New York, East St. Louis, Springfield, and Chicago (Brockell, 2021).

Blacks have been incarcerated at a rate four–five times higher than whites and given harsher sentences for the exact same crimes. Through the media, Black men have been portrayed as criminals. Through various systems that interlock, Black people have been viewed as less than and oppressed for centuries (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

Current Context

These misperceptions have framed our schools. Because Black students are thought to be less intelligent, they are not given grade-level material, not recommended for advanced placement classes, separated in special education classes, and suspended at a rate four to five times higher for the same behaviors (Salazar & Lerner, 2019; Simson, 2014).

Schools have not changed much in the last 100 years. Schools have not recovered from losing Black educators, and now, 85% of teachers are white (Radd et al., 2021). The curriculum reflects only the European perspective (Saddler, 2005). Schools are reflective of society. While students may technically enroll at any school, ideals have not substantially changed.

Some white people do not want to discuss race and racism because the conversation is uncomfortable (Diangelo, 2019). We have been conditioned not to talk about race, but we have to talk about race because 51% of children under 5 are of color (Chappell, 2015). Schools must get prepared to receive and well-educate all children. Not doing so is detrimental to our entire society and survival (Muhammad, 2020). To advance as a global society, we must give every child a high-quality education. Giving every child a high-quality education means examining unconscious biases in schools.

Review of Literature

Race is a man-made construct (Bell, 1995; Muhammad, 2015). Studies have shown that we are more alike than different (Muhammad, 2015). We have features like skin color and hair,

which distinguish us from each other. These features allow people to associate these features with being different biologically, which is invalid. Due to the messages, we have seen in the news and media and perhaps even heard in our own homes, everyone has unconscious biases. Benson and Fiarman (2020) state that unconscious racial bias is “learned beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes about a particular race that results in harmful or preferential treatment of members of that race” (p. 16). These biases manifest in schools' policies, culture, curriculum, instruction, staffing, rules, procedures, student and family engagement, practices, discipline, and student outcomes (Chapman, 2007; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Saddler, 2005).

In order to provide each and every child with a high-quality education, we have to be conscious of our unconscious biases. Being conscious requires working on oneself. In being conscious, we must reflect on ourselves first and ask what we are thinking, saying, and doing. Our thoughts become our actions.

Educators are focused on closing the achievement gap (Muhammad, 2015). When doing so, educators blame children, families, and teachers (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). It is an opportunity gap, not an achievement gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The opportunities not shared include adequate funding, qualified teachers, experienced teachers and leaders, up-to-date textbooks, materials and labs, libraries, technology, adequate facilities, teachers of color, rigorous curriculum, and rigorous coursework (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Holme & Finnigan, 2018). Darling-Hammond (2010) posits that we must provide an equal education for all students. Equal and equitable are not synonymous. Equal means the same, and equitable means according to individual needs. Children of color deserve an equitable education.

Equity builds on diversity, belonging, and inclusion. Diversity refers to representation. Schools can look at the demographics of their students and staff and then compare the two.

Belonging refers to students, families, and staff feeling welcome, respected, and affirmed.

Inclusion refers to who is involved in decision-making.

To have conversations about equity, we have to talk about race. Whether we agree or not, race is always at play. We were taught not to have conversations about race and rarely engaged in such (Tatum, 2017). Singleton and Linton (2006) suggest we use four agreements, six conditions, and a compass to have a courageous conversation. The four agreements are “stay engaged, speak your truth, experience discomfort, and expect and accept non-disclosure” (p. 27). The six conditions guide us to speak personally, isolate race, understand race, monitor the conversation, define race, and examine whiteness. The compass guides individuals through the conversation to identify where they are – intellectually, relationally, emotionally, or morally. Courageous conversations help us navigate these conversations to get to the heart of the matter and have an authentic conversation.

While Singleton can lead educators to have courageous conversations, he uses deficit language; therefore, his audiences may too. He refers to "racial subgroups" (p.46). According to Merriam-Webster, sub means under, beneath, below, and lower or inferior (merriam-webster.com). Whom are we referring to as the sub and the group?

After defining “race”, “racism”, and “racist”, Singleton defines institutionalized racism as "when organizations remain unconscious of issues related to race or more actively perpetuate and enforce a dominant racial perspective or belief" (p. 52). “Unconsciousness” is synonymous with implicit bias. Both show up to school through policies, practices, procedures, curriculum, instruction, rules, tracking, staffing, and, most importantly, belief (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Saddler, 2005; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Beliefs influence the aforementioned (Delgado Bernal, 2002). School leaders have to be self-reflective. The question is not how to close the

achievement gap (Moore, 2005). The question is how to stop upholding racism (Muhammad, 2015).

Trust and capacity are critical levers to dismantle existing structures and build new systems (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Trust means believing in someone's competence and character (Covey, 2018). Competence is the skill and track record of results. Character is integrity and motives. Trust is key to all relationships, even at work. Superintendents, principals, and equity directors change every few years, so it is challenging for the staff to get to know them and trust them. Administrators must be candid and transparent about their intentions. Trust is often overlooked and taken for granted. It is critical because schools with a high degree of trust have an increased chance of improving culture and test scores (Bieler, 2012; Blankstein, 2013; Blankstein & Noguera, 2015; Covey, 2018).

New systems are necessary to improve school achievement. Leaders and teachers can work for and against equity at the same time (Benson & Fiarman, 2020). Although everyone may be well-intentioned, the impact of policies, procedures, and practices does not always have the intended impact on all students (Benson & Fiarman, 2020). Benson and Fiarman (2020) recommend that leaders look at school-wide climate first. Culture and climate begin in classrooms because every day, students face a barrage of messages regarding their worth (Benson & Fiarman, 2020; Woodson, 1933/1990). Because Black children and staff are being harmed daily by unconscious biases, we must have a high sense of urgency (Benson & Fiarman, 2020). Although this work is a marathon and not a sprint, we must find balance considering the urgency (Benson & Fiarman, 2020; J. Schnur, personal communication, June 14, 2008).

Interrogating Equity Models

CRT calls for interrogating educational models and frameworks (Lynn & Parker, 2006). The goal of New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) was for 90-100% of students to achieve college readiness. In 2001, NLNS, the national premiere principal preparation program, began partnering with several major cities to develop a program to transform schools through the recruitment, training, and support of principals (Desravines, Aquino & Fenton, 2016). Research from Rand Corporation indicated that New Leaders principals' schools made faster gains in academic achievement than non-New Leader-led schools (NLNS, 2008). Additionally, several NLNS schools made substantial improvements surpassing all others within their respective city and state. New Leaders for New Schools conducted site visits, case studies, and research to learn more about how these results were accomplished. The results of this learning were compiled in the Urban Excellence Framework (UEF). If the journey to achieving equity entails the pursuit of excellence, then the UEF is an equity framework by design (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015).

Principals use the UEF to diagnose their school and determine a timeline for specific action to achieve academic growth. The UEF delineates “yet aligns” principal actions and school actions. The two main drivers of achievement are achievement-based learning and teaching and a belief-based culture. Principals put these two levers in place by setting a clear vision for learning, building a high-quality staff, and establishing systems (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

The first major lever of the UEF, achievement-based learning and teaching, is broken down into five smaller levels. Rigorous and goal-driven curriculum and instruction ensure all teachers use a scope and sequence of learning standards to spell out what students will know and be able to do. School-wide consistency in how students are taught should bring together differentiated instructional practices, classroom environment, routines, and culture. Instruction

must be modified regularly based on data from frequent formative assessments, which support the creation of continuous plans for improvement. Classroom instruction must be supplemented by interventions, acceleration, and enrichment for individual students by providing additional intensive small group and individualized instructional support (J. Rodriguez, personal communication, August 2021). Lastly, frequent instructional feedback and professional learning drive instructional improvement when coupled with professional learning communities.

The second major lever of the framework, achievement and belief-based culture, also consists of five categories. The first category, inspiring a vision and belief-based culture of high expectations, incorporates care for students and joy in the classroom. In this category, leaders develop cultural competence so their schools will view children's background, language, and knowledge as assets (Yosso, 2005). Secondly, adult-student and adult-adult relationships support students' knowledge that they can achieve, and the staff will do everything they can to make goals achievable. Then, students embrace academic success, working hard, and school-wide beliefs to stay on track to be prepared for college and careers by tracking their own data and having a voice in the school. Next, due to school-wide expectations and consequences, a focus on learning is possible because of good student behavior. Lastly, parents understand what they can do to support student achievement by ensuring students do their homework, having discussions about learning, and reading with students. During ongoing support, NLNS leadership coaches also provide training for school staff to help principals shift the school's culture.

The UEF calls for principals to be the drivers of change by communicating a clear vision. The principal is an instructional leader versus the traditional building manager. The principal is reflective and takes personal responsibility for high student achievement. The principal builds relationships and trust while communicating effectively during difficult conversations. A

principal alone cannot move a school. Teachers have the most significant impact on learning (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Principals are trained to share expectations and provide explicit feedback. Low-performing staff is coached up or out. Recruitment of new staff strives for diversity while staying mission focused. An instructional leadership team is developed to support the vision of data-driven, high-quality teaching and learning.

This framework makes only one deficit-based reference to at-risk students; however, it also references viewing students as assets (Buendía, 2011). While the UEF references teachers developing cultural competence, being aware of cultural competence is not the same as having knowledge of racism and its historical, institutional, and systematic strongholds. While the UEF delves deeply into specific categories, more emphasis should be placed on how to maneuver a school through the implementation of cultural competence and trust. Conversations related to race have long been avoided, so this aspect of the training must be more explicit and happen on an ongoing basis. It is easier to shift practice than beliefs, so strategic support is needed in this area as it is tied to the historical racist roots of our country. Trust cannot be glossed over as it is foundational to cultural competence (Covey, 2018).

While some frameworks focus on pedagogy and leadership, the UEF fills the gaps with an operations and systems lever. The school schedule and calendar are central to organization and structure. Principals create a strategic plan with milestones and timelines aligned to budgetary resources. Principles juggle legal and district mandates to ensure a focus on high student achievement. The facility is well manicured to reflect an environment of learning, a culture of care, and community expectations. Systems and tools are used to operationalize school practices. Pedagogical practice cannot flourish without operations and systems (NLNS, 2008).

NLNS used the UEF to train principals to transform the quality of education within their schools. The intensive training consisted of five weeks during the summer and three weeks during the second, third, and fourth quarters of the school year. Additionally, there was a year-long residency with a successful principal mentor and weekly all-day training supplemented with individual coaching sessions. Each New Leader also received three years of coaching and a lifelong network of associates. Overall, the Urban Excellence Framework is comprehensive because it is accompanied by a roadmap guiding principals throughout the year from beginning to end. Knowing what to do is vital, when to do it is essential, and how to do it is critical.

Learned-Miller (2018) worked with The New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA), a non-profit located in the state of New York in Long Island City, which was founded in 2003. Like New Leaders for New Schools, New York City Leadership Academy started with the intention to train aspiring principals to be very effective. The organization expanded nationally to coach principals and train and develop central office administrators and superintendents. NYCLA uses an equity focus to coach leaders who aspire to excellence. NYCLA defines equity as "children and adults receive what they each need to achieve their potential and that their race, culture, and other characteristics of their identity do not prevent access to opportunities and resources" (Learned-Miller, 2018, p. 11). NYCLA developed a school-level diagnostic tool consisting of a guidebook, playbook, initial training, ongoing training, equity-related simulations, and an equity logic model. These tools were developed to serve as a road map to help leaders address the challenges of implementing equity work to close opportunity gaps. This manual serves as an off-the-shelf resource by also providing a guidebook with a timeline and process overview to help leaders implement equity using the exemplars.

The playbook has ten exemplars for leaders to model their practice after. The ten exemplars are cultural competency, pedagogy, collective action, parent engagement, discipline, enrollment, personnel, scheduling, special education, and transportation. The first exemplar of adult growth focuses on developing cultural competence for leaders and teachers. This exemplar is broken down into several components: prioritize equity, measure what matters, follow the money, start early, engage more deeply, improve conditions in learning, and empower student options. Other exemplars are categorized similarly.

The Pedagogy exemplar concludes that learning should be rigorous for all learners. Communicating a commitment to rigor is not enough. Schools must communicate explicitly horizontally and vertically regarding what students will learn and be able to do. The Community Engagement exemplar incorporates collective decision-making. When developing the definition of community problems, the definition should come from the community. Regarding the Parent Engagement Exemplar, communication to parents does not have specific expectations for reasons to contact parents other than for behavior.

The Enrollment Exemplar does not consider districts with multiple schools. Not only must students be enrolled in schools with exceptional teachers, but students must also be enrolled in a school that offers academic options. Every school should offer rigorous academic programs. Districts should communicate the options at different schools and the application process.

Exemplars are interconnected. The exemplars must be connected because they cannot be implemented in isolation. At the same time, the Academy might suggest that superintendents focus on one exemplar and do it well. For example, the Cultural Competency Exemplar is critical to implementing all other exemplars. Pedagogy affects discipline. If learning is not engaging, disciplinary issues may arise related to the quality of instruction. Transportation affects

enrollment. Students may want to enroll in a program offered at a school outside of their neighborhood and may need transportation to take advantage of the opportunity.

This framework is missing an exemplar for buildings and grounds. School buildings do have an impact on student achievement. Buildings must be maintained according to life safety requirements. Upgrades must be made to facilities, especially bathrooms. Schools must be thoroughly cleaned inside and out. The symbols, such as pictures, words, signs, and trophies, must communicate the importance of learning and academic achievement while conveying a sense of belonging.

The Academy mentions the achievement gap. Ladson-Billings (2006) corrected that flawed concept with her work regarding the educational debt. The lever to prioritize equity is steeped in deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). This framework mentions subgroups throughout it. Who is sub to whom? The Special Education Exemplar also references the “regular” program (Learned-Miller, 2018, p. 21). Words have power, and language is important. The antonym of “regular” is “irregular.” The term general may be more appropriate.

A strong point of this framework is that it recommends removing teachers from the classroom who cannot improve. It also references interdisciplinary studies and critical thinking. The framework recommends school-based instructional coaches. Since teachers have the most significant impact on achievement, coaches who can help improve instruction are a solid recommendation. This framework is off to a great start; however, it is not complete.

Singleton and Linton (2006) assert that educational equity should narrow gaps and eliminate racial predictability. Linton (2011) defines equity as "educators provide all students with individual supports they need to reach a common standard" while empowering students to self-actualize (p. 22). In *The Equity Framework*, Linton posits that an equity framework is

needed to bring strategies together. Linton's equity framework's big rocks are leadership, culture, and practice. Personal, institutional, and professional strategies are embedded within each rock. Educators are encouraged to think about the strategies they have used and the strategies they could use. Linton suggests strategies should be characterized by rigor, expectations, relationships, and relevancy which are essential for student success.

Linton calls for a personal commitment to equity. Linton indicates that the biggest obstacle to equity is getting people to understand how they unconsciously contribute to inequities. Educators must see students as worthy. This is a shift from the historical mindset that people of color were not worthy of occupying academic space, the same space as whites.

Linton chronicles schools that have enacted equity. These schools began by building unity, trust, and communication and were committed to their students. This commitment was made clear through implementing professional learning communities (PLCs) and data-driven instruction. Leaders in these schools believed in the staff's potential to teach, while both the leaders and staff believed in the students' ability to learn. Leaders held themselves and teachers accountable to equitable practices. Pedagogically, teachers built their classroom community, focused on standards, collaborated across all content areas (including specials/electives), and incorporated community and family engagement (Reeves, 2003; Reeves, 2007).

Linton posits a formula for leaders to equitize practices: "building equity = understanding difference + access & opportunity + social justice" (p. 58). Access and opportunity are synonymous. Students need resources instead of access. While acknowledging schools have been inherently unequal and inequitable, Linton still refers to an achievement gap versus the opportunity gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This language continues to support a false narrative (Ladson-Billings, 2012).

Linton offers a diagnostic poll for leaders to assess their institutional practices. While instructional practice is undoubtedly most essential, Linton misses focusing on operational practice. Instruction and operations must be aligned for a school to run well (NLNS, 2008).

Linton states equity matters now. Although it has not been a focal point, equity has always mattered. Linton applies an equity lens in his framework; however, an equity mindset – a shift in thinking- is needed. He asserts that *Brown v. Board of Education* guaranteed access to a school; however, schools are more segregated now than before Brown (Deo, 2012; Ee et al., 2014; Saddler, 2005). Schools created tracks designed to separate students within the school, and the tracks offering lower-level classes have been mainly filled by Black students (Saddler, 2005).

Linton calls for action because students deserve the best in their lives. The truth is that equity does more than just provide better for our students' future. Enacting equity means we all do better because more of us do better. The understanding that we are all interconnected aligns with the African philosophy, I am because you are.

In *Excellence through Equity: Five Principles of Courageous Leadership to Guide Achievement for Every Student*, Blankstein and Noguera (2015) posit a framework for equity rooted in courageous leadership and steeped in excellence. The relentless pursuit of excellence will produce equity which Blankstein and Noguera define as "a commitment to ensure that every student receives what he or she needs to succeed" (p. 3). The five principles needed to carry out this work are getting to your core, making organizational meaning, ensuring constancy and consistency of purpose, facing the facts and your fears, and building sustainable relationships.

Getting to your core is when leaders know their “why” and remain laser-focused on their mission and values. Making organizational meaning is a way to ground, center, and focus the work on the vision. Ensuring constancy and consistency of purpose refers to a commitment to

work regardless of roadblocks. Facing the facts and your fears requires disaggregating data and committing to obliterate predictable results found at the intersection of race and socioeconomic status. Building sustainable relationships means building trust and gaining buy-in to springboard and achieve short & long-term goals.

Blankstein & Noguera (2015) engaged multiple contributing authors to pen a call to action. School leaders from elementary, high school, and unit districts shared their experiences implementing substantial changes and accomplishing significant outcomes. These experiences generated a long list of practices that worked. The themes that emerged from the various leaders: know your why, communicate a clear vision, mission, and set (three to four) goals. Motivating a team to embrace the sense of urgency as an opportunity is essential. Leaders must build the capacity of their team and set the stage for a strong culture that values reflection, learning, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

Leaders are responsible for creating a schedule that permits cooperation. High-quality instruction is the crux of the work (Stembridge, 2020). Professional learning communities (PLCs) allow teachers to analyze data, plan quality instruction, create common assessments, look at student work, and plan interventions and enrichments (DuFour et al., 2016).

Many contributors mentioned they faced challenges; however, there was not much focus on how to overcome barriers. Some contributing authors used deficit language like “subgroup”, “disadvantaged”, “at-risk”, “have nots”, and “achievement gap”, although Blankstein and Noguera do not use this language (Muhammad, 2020; Valencia, 2010; Valencia & Suzuki, 2001). The narratives offer very practical solutions to end the predictability of how "race, socioeconomic status, and zip code" correlate with student success and school quality (p. 13). Although there is a sense of urgency, the stories alone are not enough for leaders to know where

to start. These five principles focus on what specific strategies leaders should know; however, leaders also need to know how to implement these strategies, and when to take action. These practices would take better roots if framed in a concise framework.

In *Striving in Common, A Regional Equity Framework for Urban Schools*, Holme & Finnigan (2018) give a historical account of geography, politics, school reform, and segregation from 1900 to the present day. Holme and Finnigan describe how integration programs worked in several major cities. Schools sent children to the suburbs to attend school. Suburban schools only agreed to the program so a judge would not order their schools to become fully integrated. Suburban schools never sent their children to integrate schools in the city.

Holme & Finnigan (2018) describe how white and affluent families sieve financial, geographical, and political resources (housing, transportation, and economic development). Holme & Finnigan (2018) incorrectly posit that urban school failure is caused by school segregation. Some segregated schools were successful (Siddle Walker, 2003). It is not segregation that causes failure; it is the lack of resources provided, which is rooted in systemic racism (Deo, 2012; Saddler, 2005). Holme & Finnigan (2019) discuss how a regional framework could be used; however, the city they refer to has not used the framework successfully.

Many districts use the Framework for Teaching as an evaluation tool. However, Charlotte Danielson did not intend for it to be used for this purpose (group personal communication, C. Danielson, October 2012). In *Teacher Evaluation as Cultural Practice: A Framework for Equity and Excellence*, Salazar & Lerner (2019) assert that teacher quality and effectiveness have the most substantial impact on student outcomes and achievement. Teacher evaluation has the most influence on improving teacher effectiveness. Although most students of color are not proficient according to the state test, 99% of teachers (85% of whom are white) are proficient according to

the teacher evaluation system (ISBE, 2021). How can students not be proficient; however, teachers of those students are proficient?

Salazar & Lerner (2019) propose a Framework for Equitable and Excellent Teaching (FEET), “a new framework for teacher evaluation that merges culture, pedagogy, assessment, and evaluation” (p. 6). Salazar and Lerner advocate using culturally responsive pedagogy to engage students in critical thinking to create change. Salazar and Lerner stress the importance of culturally responsive assessment, so students demonstrate their learning through an authentic assessment that validates their strengths while preparing them for test-taking (because tests are valued by society). Salazar & Lerner posit that no framework comprehensively evaluates teachers' practice of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Lived experiences are important to determine what is taught, how it is taught, and how that teaching is evaluated. What is taught should affirm and incorporate students' cultural capital (Salazar & Lerner, 2019; Yosso, 2005). Salazar and Lerner (2019) posit that widely used national frameworks marginalize Black and Brown learners. These frameworks are generic (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). They exclude cultural relevance by not acknowledging cultural differences and providing detailed examples of how teachers should demonstrate evidence. Without examples, teachers and leaders have no direction for improving teaching and learning for culturally and linguistically diverse students, thus maintaining the status quo (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999).

Culturally responsive teacher evaluation (CRTE) centers historically marginalized communities through five critical race theory-based tenets: “develop equitable and excellent teachers; facilitate the collaboration of diverse communities in co-construction of evaluation tools; incorporate targeted teacher competencies that promote student growth and development,

particularly culturally linguistically diverse learners; establish and monitor reliability and validity within a cultural context; and advance equity and social justice in student outcomes” (p.13).

Salazar and Lerner (2019) propose a culturally responsive teacher evaluation model that assesses teacher performance based on 60 indicators within 15 competencies in 4 dimensions. FEET is well designed to lead teachers by supporting students to navigate the world, maintain their culture, and develop critical consciousness. The limitation of FEET is that it did not incorporate feedback from students and parents. The model is contradictory in that it calls for the input of students and parents when creating a teacher evaluation model.

In *Evident Equity: A Guide for Creating Systemwide Change in Schools*, Mascareñaz defines equity as "eliminating the predictability of success and failure that currently correlates with any number of social and cultural factors, such as race, language, and geographic location" (p. 4). Mascareñaz (2022) posits that equity requires shifting systems and processes. Mascareñaz offers an equity heat map as a framework for tackling the inequities that plague us. The four quadrants of the map are organizational equity, shared equity, structured equity, and evident equity. Mascareñaz suggests a backward map approach to equity. She poses some reflective questions which springboard into goal creation and implementation.

Organizational equity suggests we analyze and solve issues by working closely with students, parents, and the community to make effective school-level, district-level, and top-down systems changes. Shared equity entails building a coalition because one person alone cannot recreate the system. Mascareñaz recommends that leaders be intentional about mapping their own identity and building a coalition to carry out equity work. Structured equity requires thinking of equity differently - it is not a part of the work; it is the work (Saddler, 2005). Evident

equity relates to the culture of the school - how it looks, sounds, and feels as it relates to the mission, vision, and core beliefs.

Unfortunately, Mascareñaz uses deficit language when referring to students in a subgroup. One aspect this framework addresses that other frameworks miss is building and grounds related to artwork, student pictures, and disability access. Most importantly, Mascareñaz (2022) provides actionable steps and resources to address and solve inequities immediately.

In *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom: A Framework for Pedagogy*, Stenbridge (2020) believes equity invokes action, insight, and reflection, and he defines equity as “the implementation of an equity mindset into thoughtful pedagogical design” (p. 1). He asserts that culturally responsive education (CRE) is the framework for achieving excellence in pedagogy. He posits responsiveness is providing access to rigorous learning with intentional support. He indicates responsiveness has six themes – “rigor, engagement, cultural identity, relationships, vulnerability, and assets” (p. 68).

Stenbridge provides thoughtful, guiding questions about equity, pedagogy, and opportunities. Stenbridge believes students deserve access to engaging learning opportunities considering their needs and assets. He provides specific examples of engaging learning strategies, including philosophical chairs, Socratic seminar, and the Question Formulation Technique.

Although Stenbridge recognizes Blacks were treated as sub-human, a deficit mindset rears its ugly little head through his use of the term sub-groups (Bartolomé, 1994). Most importantly, he understands that schooling nurtures the talent of all students for society's common good, and high-quality education is our best strategy to maintain our global positioning.

Stembridge's call to action asserts the responsibility of educators to eradicate racism.

Furthermore, he understands that educators are working to close an equity gap.

In *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, Muhammad (2020) seamlessly weaves culturally relevant and responsive theories together, positing that we need frameworks written by people of color to uplift Black students who have been marginalized (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Muhammad's Historically Responsive Literacy Framework (HRL) can be used across the curriculum in every content area. The pillars of HRL are "identity development, skill development, intellectual development, and criticality" (p. 12). Students must know themselves, build skills, and connect their knowledge to the world to ultimately transform our society.

Muhammad provides a detailed account of Black Literary Societies, which began in the early 1800s to advance society, specifically the social conditions of Blacks. These societies entailed an interdisciplinary, diverse approach to "reading, writing, debates...and lectures" for a deeper understanding of oneself and social justice (p. 33). Muhammad uses this historical foundation of Black brilliance to create a framework so Black children can succeed academically and personally (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The foundation of HRL is grounded in achieving equity and excellence by implementing culturally responsive pedagogy along with policies, practices, and procedures aligned to students' identities.

While most equity frameworks focus on practices, this framework takes us back through history and challenges the very foundation upon which the entire educational system is built. The system was not built to include Black students (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This explains why some Black students have not flourished within it. Not only was the system not built for Black children, but it was also not built well for white children either because it does not speak to

engaging students thinking through multiple perspectives about power and oppression (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Our society will begin to transform when all students understand this concept: when we all do well, we are all better. While Muhammad does explain this theory, she does not explore it from an economic standpoint as other frameworks do.

Due to a history that positioned Blacks as less than, a deficit mindset frames beliefs, systems, actions, and words (Chapman, 2007; Poskett, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Muhammad calls out this deficit mindset and language, indicating that our misaligned, age-old system rooted in racism is a problem. Educators may think Black youth are not motivated to learn, while the truth is they are motivated when the learning pertains to them, their community, and the world (Brown, 2011; Woodson, 1933/1990). Resistance to the curriculum has been interpreted as non-engagement (Chapman, 2007; Lawrence, 2012). Cultural responsiveness is not an add-on – it must be implemented (Backer, 1998).

For decades educators have been flummoxed about the achievement gap, and Muhammad provides clarity regarding the persistence of this myth (Ladson-Billings, 2012). Muhammad shuts down the current perspective positing that the system, testing, frameworks, curriculum, textbooks, literacy models, and practices not designed by people of color will not increase achievement for children of color (Moore, 2005). Muhammad's theory impels rethinking everything (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Muhammad, 2020). With the HRL framework, leaders plummet into cognitive dissonance, causing unlearning, rethinking, shifting, and creation (Bell, 1995; Saddler, 2005). There is a call to action to create instruction that begins with the identity of Black learners (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Understanding by Design (UBD) requires backward mapping of the curriculum into a unit plan before the planning of daily lessons. As a basis for instructional planning, teachers

widely use the four PLC questions – what do we want students to know and be able to do, how will we know they learned it, what will do if some students did not learn it, and what will we do if some students already know it (DuFour et al., 2016). HRL suggests four questions that should be used – “How will my instruction help students to learn something about themselves and others? How will my instruction build students' skills for the content area? How will my instruction build students' knowledge and mental powers? How will my instruction engage students' thinking about power and equity and the disruption of oppression” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 58)? The HRL questions require us to unlearn and rethink what we focus on in professional learning communities (Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017). These questions are essential for all students (Freire, 1983).

The HRL framework also requires leaders to rethink the roles of stakeholders in the learning community. Who are educators alone to make decisions about what students should know and be able to do? These communities should include students, parents, and the community. Muhammad advocates for students' voices to be heard and responded to. Students are the center of the system, and their perspectives are critical to building a new system. Students have long voiced their concerns; however, they have been silenced (Muhammad, 2020). Students must participate in policy, curriculum, texts, and hiring decision-making.

Visions for schools usually include seeing students as successful in the future. This future includes academic and personal success. To accomplish our visions, students must learn about their identity and celebrate their culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995). True transformation in education and our country will come with the transformation of instruction through the basis of students learning about their identity (Thomas & Columbus, 2009). Identity includes who

students are and who they want to become. Equitable curriculum and instruction support students' aspirations.

Teachers have the most significant impact on learning, and while HRL presents a solid pedagogical model, an equity framework that entails operations and more information regarding leadership is needed. Leaders work to fulfill the district's mission and goals, including empowerment. The best way to empower a student is, to begin with, identity. Excellence is already within each student. Leaders must do more to bring out the genius in students.

By providing a historical perspective and detailed account of how Blacks sought out literacy, skills, intellect, and criticality, the HRL generates a sense of urgency to create a new system while providing the framework and strategies for teachers and leaders to do so. This framework not only calls for developing students' criticality but also compels leaders to engage in criticality by interrogating the current educational system and working toward social transformation. Saddler (2005) posits that educators are either oppressors or revolutionaries. HRL calls for a revolution of pedagogical systems.

The definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing and expecting a different result. HRL makes cultural responsiveness what we do, which is different from what we have done. Muhammad (2020) asks, "what do humanizing practices look like in and outside of the classroom," aligning with social justice (p. 118; Bartolomé, 1994). It is the only framework that acknowledges and explains the lineage of Black brilliance and that educators must tap into the greatness that already exists within students. This basis is what makes this framework one that should be widely used.

In *Five Practices for Equity-focused School Leadership*, Radd et al. (2021) suggest a transformative approach - thinking and acting differently because one leader cannot do this work

alone. Radd et al. (2021) posit a team approach to prioritizing equity leadership. Teams must be trained together and work through systems and structures together to create change. Teams cannot just learn about equity and immediately try to implement it. They also must understand and have a strategy for change within the context of their school. The change process does not begin with data (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). Disrupting and reframing the leaders' perspective through reflection is the first step. While the framework guides leaders to learn about multiple histories and perspectives, leaders could benefit from resources. The history learned in school has been grossly inaccurate, so leaders need support in finding historical resources that shed light on what has not been discussed (Brockell, 2021; Loewen, 2007; Muhammad, 2015). This framework does provide media resources and additional articles to understand concepts associated with equity.

Radd et al. (2021) suggest we "create and ensure engaging learning activities, environments, and relationships for all students; they will learn and achieve" (p. 30). Some leaders may need more details about how to implement these suggestions. While this framework presents some sample team discussions, it considers that no one on the team may be able to lead the discussion and suggests using consultants. Some reflective questions are posed; however, leaders do not know what they do not know, so answering these questions may be difficult. This framework is designed to support leaders to take a long look in the mirror before looking out the window. A reckoning with oneself must take place, and this framework begins there.

If the problem lies within the system, can the system transform itself? A deficit orientation is defined and explained through common examples (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This framework speaks power to the truth that schools blame students, communities, and staff for failure when the system was not designed for children of color. This framework provides

vignettes that include what educators have actually said. The language of educators reveals deficit thinking in contrast to what educators believe about their own values/viewpoints/performance. One example of a deficit perspective is within one of the suggested protocols – the six thinking hats, in which the black hat is used to be pessimistic and consider the negative side of an issue.

Radd et al. (2021) suggest five practices for equity-focused school leadership. In Practice I, prioritizing equity leadership, a statistical overview provides a sense of urgency for educators in America. Unlike other frameworks, in the beginning, Practice II - preparing for equity, defines various aspects of sociocultural identity, including race, disability, socioeconomics, language, religion, sex, gender identity, and sexual identity. This practice provides leaders with a foundation regarding what is being discussed and needed. Practice III is developing equity leadership teams. The equity-focused Leadership Team Model has four routines – expand and strengthen relationships, transform the use of power, integrate personal experience with systems/trend data, and assess data credibility.

Routine one of the four routines is to expand and strengthen relationships. People are most comfortable with people and communities similar to their own. Leaders must be intentional about building and maintaining relationships with people and a team across all areas of diversity. Relationships are crucial; therefore, although time is rarely dedicated to continuously building relationships, this focus is foundational to equity-focused leadership. Relationships can be built by assuming the best intentions, allowing time to share personal stories, committing to engaging in conflict constructively and creating hope-filled meetings.

Routine two calls for transforming the use of power by being more intentional about who is on the team, the work the team does, and how the team goes about accomplishing the work.

Routine three requires the integration of personal experiences with systems and honoring the truth of trend data. Routine four encourages the pursuit of accurate data to make meaning without blaming marginalized students and communities.

The framework delves into four roles: an educator, leadership practitioner, equity champion, and decision-maker. Then, the framework suggests strategies for carrying out the aspect of each role. The educator role reminds leaders that they come to the table as teachers and should be engaged in learning from one another. Leadership practitioners should continuously engage in critically reflecting on their practice. As equity champions, leaders work as a team to engage in critical consciousness to create an environment where everyone can attain their self-determined goals. As decision-makers, leaders must utilize inclusive processes so stakeholders' input is authentically incorporated.

Practice IV builds equity-focused systems by conducting a needs assessment and interpreting data. A needs assessment is conducted via an equity audit, which has two aspects. The quantitative aspect takes place by gathering disaggregated data to assess disproportionality. The qualitative aspect involves listening to the voices of students, families, and staff via surveys and focus groups. The strategic plan is created or improved utilizing the information from the audit.

Practice V, sustaining equity, provides a guideline for continuous transformation, including building a coalition and networks. Theories of action and change are proposed to guide leaders through an intentional, well-planned thought process. To maintain for the long haul, leaders must stay grounded, practice self-care, and remember that we are all human. An equity-focused framework is presented in a graphic format that shows how to pursue equity by altering

elements of the situation, implementing change, or reconsidering the change. Although the graphic is explained, it is unclear and difficult to understand.

This framework builds up leaders to do this work. Then, it calls for a team effort to “go beyond technical and adaptive approaches” to dismantle historical, structural, and institutional inequities (p. 198).

Critical Analysis

Muhammad (2020) calls for educators to rethink the entire system because curricula were not created for children of color (Woodson, 1933/1990). Using a historical and cultural approach to her framework, she suggests that only educators of color can design a better system (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006). Stenbridge (2020) and Radd et al. (2021) discussed the premise of mental models and changing educators’ paradigms of thinking.

While every framework provided a working definition of equity, Linton (2011) presented a formula for equity along with personal, institutional, and professional strategies. Mascareñaz (2022) presented district and school action steps, while NLNS (2008) presented leader and school actions. Radd et al. (2021) and Learned-Miller (2018) stressed the importance of a leadership team approach by creating and implementing an action plan. Blankstein & Noguera (2015) posited that courage is the essential trait leaders need as everything emanates from there.

While some frameworks focused on pedagogical strategies that can be put in place, Salazar & Lerner (2019) kicked it up a notch, positing that leaders need to be trained to evaluate teachers who use culturally responsive techniques.

Radd et al. (2021) was the only framework explaining the purpose and process for completing an equity audit. They, along with Mascareñaz (2022), provided tools and protocols as resources.

Muhammad (2020), Radd et al. (2021), & Mascareñaz (2022) started with an honest acknowledgment that the current system was not built for children of color. A strong belief that all students can learn and excel was the basis for all the frameworks, as evidenced through short stories and vignettes from real-life school leaders (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These frameworks all acknowledged that leaders are the drivers of the work and should start with themselves by engaging in deep reflection. After educators reflect, another commonly recommended action step is to conduct a diagnostic analysis to contextualize the organization (Learned-Miller, 2018; NLNS, 2008; Radd et al., 2021).

One of the strategies overwhelmingly recommended was PLCs which help with developing trust and communication, which were also highlighted. PLCs work exceptionally well for teams to implement rigorous, data-driven instruction, which was highly recommended by the NLNS (2008) framework (DuFour et al., 2016). The frameworks recognized the positive impact of families as an essential, yet often overlooked, part of the learning community.

Most of the frameworks contained deficit language; however, Muhammad (2020) and Stenbridge (2021) did not because they focused on Black brilliance (Valencia, 2010). They, along with Salazar & Lerner (2019), posited that pedagogy steeped in cultural relevancy and responsiveness is critical for student success. With cultural relevancy driving student empowerment, it is not surprising that the frameworks focused on the importance of social justice leadership (Beauchum, 2008; Dantley & Tillman, 2006).

Social Justice

Educators frequently use the term social justice; however, some are not actually aware of the context of the word (North, 2006). Bond & Chernoff (2015) simply refer to what social justice is versus providing a solid definition. The definition of social justice is elusive (Dover,

2009; Hardy, 2019). Other adjectives that describe social justice include complex, ambiguous, and unclear (Hardy, 2019). These terms may be used because social justice meets at the intersections of poverty, gender, "race, ethnicity, language, religion, and sexual orientation" (Chapman, 2007; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015, p.1).

In 1840, an Italian priest birthed the term social justice (Beauchum, 2008). He sought to contextualize the economic, social, and political shifts in the Catholic Church. Beachum's (2008) definition of social justice, "social justice can be defined as an optimal belief system that emphasizes equal recognition of all groups and individuals along with redistribution to address social inequity while emphasizing virtues such as liberation, empowerment, and uplift" (p. 60). Young (1990) posits "social justice means the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression" (p. 15).

Young's definition is too limited. By mentioning institutionalized, it stops short when societal and civilizational racism exists and is also in effect (Scheurich & Young, 1997). The definition of social justice has to be straightforward for people in our society who do not realize their unconscious assumptions (Scheurich & Young, 1997). We must dig deeper into how racism is endemic in our society (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Costa (2014), too, had difficulty finding a universal definition for social justice. She boiled it down to "social justice is used to refer to bias and prejudice based specifically on race and language" (p. 10). Costa's definition falls short of addressing ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. Her definition also lacks depth because social justice is so much more than a reference to bias and prejudice.

The Pachamama Alliance expanded on Costa's definition by positing, "social justice is the equal access to wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society"

(<http://www.pachamama.org>). Pachamama's definition is concise and addresses three major areas where equality is needed. Their definition is not thorough enough because equality without equity does not offer marginalized people who have been oppressed for hundreds of years a level playing field (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

Marrying Merriam-Webster's definitions of social (relating to society or its organization) and justice (the quality of being impartial; based on rank or status in a particular society) may yield a definition of being impartial regardless of someone's rank or status in society (merriam-webster.com). The questions remain: who has the right to do the ranking and what is the status based on?

Being a scholar, practitioner, and activist is inextricably linked (Saddler, 2005). Based on all these contributing definitions, social justice can be defined as the privilege of equal and equitable resources, opportunities, and human rights (Moore, 2005). This definition expands on Pachamama's. Resources are inclusive of wealth but not limited to finances. Resources include health, human capital, knowledge, land, and economics. "Equitable" adds another layer to equality because we need positioning, which builds up people who have been oppressed for so long (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Educational and employment opportunities lead to resources.

During the summer of 2020, a Black man, George Floyd, was killed in the street. A video detailing the murder was released. Surely, he deserved the human right to life. Because of his death, many companies and schools began creating director of equity positions to lead companies toward social justice.

Social Justice Leadership

Theoharis (2007) believes that social justice leadership should focus on student achievement, school structures, culture, and community involvement. A social justice leader

must also disrupt inequities; however, being a social justice leader is not an easy road to travel (Saddler, 2005; Woodson, 1933/1990). School programs teaching social justice have been shut down. Social justice activists have been killed. Social justice principals have been fired.

A social justice leader's responsibility is to ensure all students receive the best possible educational opportunities (Moore, 2005; Dudley-Marling & Dudley-Marling, 2015; Woodson, 1933/1990). Being a social justice leader entails working with students, staff, parents, and the community (Kearney et al., 2012; Saddler, 2005). A leader cannot be too far removed from their community to actually help (Woodson, 1933/1990).

It is urgent and critically important to remember that this work is a marathon, not a sprint (J. Schnur, personal communication, June 14, 2008). Reflecting on their practice, leaders must search and rid themselves of the deficit way of thinking that has surrounded them for their entire life (Valencia, 2010; Woodson, 1933/1990). Believing students can and will excel once a school community comes together is paramount to being responsible for academic success (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Leaders must have expectations for all, including themselves (Anderson, 2012). They must model what they expect (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Shields, 2013).

A social justice leader must design professional development that stresses the importance of high expectations and beliefs, break the news that race is a social construct, call out the ugliness of inequities, destroy the walls of deficit thinking, shine a light on social justice, allow us to reflect on ourselves, and empower us to fix ourselves and our school (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Woodson, 1933/1990). Professional development for the staff has to be carefully crafted. Most people are still blind to civilized, institutionalized, and systemized racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Racism has become so

normalized that teachers and administrators do not even realize how we promulgate these ideals through our words, actions, policies, and practices (Bell, 1992; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Rigor relates to an opportunity to learn grade-level material (TNTP, 2018). A social justice leader must ensure the school has a highly engaging and rigorous curriculum (Anderson, 2012; Chenoweth, 2007; Chenoweth, 2009; Chenoweth & Theokas, 2012; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). If their school does not have a culturally relevant curriculum, their job is to develop one because cultural relevance is inseparable from engagement (Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Teachers have the most significant impact on student learning (Podolsky, Kini & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Social justice leaders hire teachers who believe Black and Latino children can learn (Brayboy, 2005). A social justice instructional leader has to ensure the delivery of a high-expectations curriculum (Lawrence, 2012; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Classroom observations with explicit feedback will ensure rigorous, high-quality instruction. Instructional strategies must be facilitated to promote reading, writing, and critical thinking while building on students' cultural wealth and funds of knowledge (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015; Woodson, 1933/1990; Yosso, 2005;). The leader pushes the school to recognize students' aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005). Leaders work to develop and implement a culturally relevant curriculum so students learn more about their history, their ancestors, and their power (Muhammad, 2020). Teachers must be empowered to study students' culture, representing it in daily lessons (Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Schools must promote communalism, so students work together to support each other versus individualism, where everything is a competition (Beachum, 2008). Leaders must situate

the school community in a broader neighborhood community where everyone works together for the common good (Capper et al., 2006).

Hong (2012) posits that schools move to an ecological parent engagement model where parents participate in the planning and problem-solving. In this model, parents and communities share in power and leadership. The school collaborates with partners to make decisions.

Enveloping themselves in social justice, school leaders must be embedded in the community with parents and organizations to be viewed and received as allies (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Warren & Mapp, 2011).

Summary

Whether leaders believe in social justice, the path to equity is paved with excellence. America's roots in individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism run deep (Delgado, 2011; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Racism is endemic (Bell, 1980; Brayboy, 2005; Lynn & Parker, 2006). This history makes it very difficult to move forward (Saddler, 2005; Woodson, 1933/1990). While theories provide a thorough knowledge of what happened, leaders need praxis to move forward and enact change (Saddler, 2005). These equity frameworks provide direction for equity directors regarding the why, what, when, and how to do the work that desperately needs to be done (Lawrence, 2012). This country will only be great when it lives up to the beauty of its ideals (Sandefur, 2020).

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

It is time to “get real” about race and the persistence of racism in America.

Derrick Bell

Research Design

Narrative research is the study of an individual’s first-hand experiences shared with a researcher (Fraenkel et al., 2015). The researcher documented equity directors’ experiences by listening, writing, and recording. The researcher interpreted these experiences, which usually include epiphanies, and shares them so others can learn from them. Narrative research may be difficult because the researcher collects a great deal of information and must be insightful enough to listen to the story in consideration of the context of the individual’s journey. The researcher must understand the historical period during which the story takes place (Fraenkel et al., 2015).

Qualitative research allows for an in-depth study of the lived experiences of equity directors (Glesne, 2011). This research dug deeper than their perceptions and examined their actual experiences. Although listening to these experiences in the individual’s school setting may have provided more context, all the interviews were held off-site. The directors may not have been able to fully open up if the building was occupied with other workers during the time of the interview. The school setting is important though to understand the culture of the school district. While qualitative researchers often spend a great deal of time observing before determining the questions, this researcher built upon personal experiences and previous equity studies’ questionnaires (Glesne, 2011; Hansen, 2019; Learned-Miller, 2018; Maier, 2018).

The purpose of this research study was to understand how equity directors utilize equity frameworks to guide their work. Narrative analysis allowed the researcher to interpret the equity

directors' journey and their praxis. By listening, the researcher used inquiry to bear witness to these stories to determine if the voices of equity directors have been heard. The researcher hoped to develop working close-knit relationships through a network of thought partners.

The researcher wanted to share these stories with future equity directors so the entry path can be clearer. Personal narratives allowed for participants to share their voice. As people of color, their voices may have been silenced or marginalized in the past. These narratives allow for a counter narrative which honored their voices, their stories, their experiences, and their brilliance (Muhammad, 2020; Stenbridge 2020). CRT and CRT in Education call for counternarratives to dismantle racist structures and practices in our schools so students of color can experience success (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Muhammad, 2020).

Racism is interwoven in the fabric of American society. Based on her ontological belief, the researcher assumed race is socially constructed (Bell, 1992). This qualitative research study has an interpretivist approach which melds well with the CRT and CRT in Education frameworks (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This study sought to understand how the experiences of equity directors allow them to change theory into practice (Glesne, 2011). This study examined trends and patterns in praxis. The narratives of the equity directors were interpreted by the researcher who also worked as an equity director.

Description of sample

The National Equity Directors' Consortium consists of thirty directors. They participated in a virtual consortium meeting which indicated a desire to network with other equity directors. Most of the directors work in Illinois, although directors hail from California, Nebraska, New York, Michigan, and Virginia. The goal was for eight directors to agree to participate in this study.

The directors selected as research participants work in traditional (non-charter) public school districts. Charter and private schools were not included because they may have more flexibility due to not having to abide by union contracts. Additionally, there may be more flexibility to change policies, practices, and procedures.

Instrumentation

The open-ended interview questions were mainly adopted from two studies. Learned-Miller (2018) conducted a study focused on superintendents and Maier (2018) focused on equity directors. One question was adopted from Hansen (2019) which was a study that also used narrative inquiry to focus on lived experiences. The questions adopted from these studies aided in the validity of the interview questions as they were vetted and used. The survey for this study consisted of fifteen questions to learn more about the equity directors' background in education, their journey, and their praxis. While taking notes, the researcher used a recorder to collect every detail of the narratives to ensure reliability during transcription.

The interviews lasted between 25 minutes to 75 minutes which was approximately two to five minutes per question. The semi-structured interview followed; however, a few unstructured follow up questions were asked.

Explanation of procedures

The National Equity Directors' Consortium formed a couple of years ago with the first wave of equity directors hired in the Chicagoland area. In the fall of 2021, they opened the network up to the second wave of equity directors. Purposeful sampling was used to engage specific equity directors in this research study because their experiences are comparable. This study did not involve equity directors who serve in an assistant superintendent's capacity because this position inherently has greater authority possibly influencing the ability to garner support

from others to achieve outcomes. Additionally, equity directors who double as teachers were not selected because of their informal authority. The researcher emailed thirteen of the thirty equity directors who participated in the National Equity Directors' Consortium first network meeting of the 2021 school year. These thirteen directors work for traditional public schools in Illinois. Their experiences provided information-rich narratives to draw from (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

After participants indicated a willingness to participate, they were contacted by email and phone to arrange a time and place to meet for a face-to-face, 1:1 meeting. The researcher met in person with participants to capture their body language, including gestures and mannerisms, as well as oral communication. The stories were documented through notetaking and recording. The locations were a place of their choosing so they would feel comfortable to share their experiences and perspectives. The researcher offered participants in this study the opportunity to learn more about the experiences of other equity directors through a copy of the dissertation.

Data analysis techniques

Through narrative analysis, this research study examined the lived experiences of equity directors by listening to their stories. This research sought to understand the complexities of this role as it emerged during the interview process. The social context of the school district was taken into consideration. The researcher was passionate about the role of equity director, while understanding the role through the narratives, she empathized with their personal experiences. The researcher was neutral and nonjudgmental in the analysis of the data.

A recording was made during the interviews to aid in the transcription of the notes. The researcher personally transcribed the notes to accurately capture the full essence of the interviews. The transcripts were read and reread multiple times to become fully immersed in the

data to learn from it. Utilizing inductive coding, the researcher poured over the data line-by-line to identify similarities and differences. Quasi-statistical and template approaches were used based on the three research questions to determine the importance of words and phrases (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The data was reduced and organized in chunks to thoroughly analyze and synthesize these stories.

Deductively, the researcher generated categories based on the interview data and the equity frameworks in the review of literature. Then, category codes were assigned. By capturing nuances, agreements, repetitive and unique segments, processes, actions, and concerns, themes emerged during analysis (Yin, 2016). During interpretation, themes based on patterns that connected cut across responses also emerged. This study explored the experiences of equity directors to determine how they approach their practice and what role equity frameworks play.

Trustworthiness

The interviews in this study were conducted face-to-face to capture facial expressions, gestures, and body language to ensure the interpretation of the narratives were accurate. To ensure accuracy, member checking was conducted. With member checking, the research participants received a copy of their interview to review to ensure that their story was being told with authenticity. The researcher recognized biases exist based on her previous work as an equity director.

Limitations

Due to the sample size, this study may have been limited. All research participants work in the state of Illinois. The interviews were a one-time observation, so the content of the interview is limited to one encounter and the recording. The researcher has a limited working relationship with the participants which may have led to fewer details being disclosed.

Summary

The role of equity director is fairly new. Despite a job description, a new role requires creating processes, procedures, and practices. With little on-the-job training and direction, an equity director charts their own path to implementing a plan of action. The stories of current equity directors will help incoming equity directors chart a path. Providing an equitable education for all children is urgent; therefore, equity directors could benefit from support and information.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually. – James Baldwin.

Introduction

Eight equity directors shared their journeys, counternarratives, and goals during this narrative inquiry study. Their journeys spanned from two to six years. Each year has been unique and different. Although each director is in a slightly different place, their stories mirror one another. They shared a common bond of attending a National Equity Directors' Consortium meeting. While their positions do not allow them to meet very often, they communicate when needed to ask for support, and show up for one another. This research sought to understand how these directors translated theory into practice to implement equitable practices.

The National Equity Directors' Consortium email distribution list was used to reach the equity directors. Two directors responded immediately. A follow-up email yielded responses from the additional six directors. Face-to-face interviews were scheduled. One of the meetings was held at a local coffee shop. One meeting was held during lunch at a local Mexican restaurant. One meeting was held over dinner. Two meetings were held in private locations. Three meetings were conducted on Zoom due to time constraints.

The members were very willing to participate. Five directors hold doctorate degrees, remember their process, and genuinely appreciate those who helped them by being involved in their study. Two directors are currently earning their doctorates and are in the dissertation stage. Another director has been contemplating pursuing a doctorate in curriculum and instruction. Each participant openly shared their passion for the work and their journey to becoming an

equity director. Each was the first-ever director to serve in their district, so they had the autonomy to blaze their trail.

Each participant received and signed a consent form. While sharing the consent form, I reiterated that the interview might be triggering, I did not seek to exploit trauma, and that the interview could be stopped at any time. Two participants expressed their enthusiasm for this type of research. One participant revealed that she was conducting a similar research study, and the interview motivated her.

The interviews were recorded. I transcribed the recordings. I read through the transcripts several times. The transcripts were coded to find similarities and differences. The findings were compiled by each question enabling me to perform inductive data analysis to generate themes. Deductive data analysis was performed to focus on the research questions and analyze the data through a theoretical lens.

Unisex first name pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their identity. Some of the finer details of their stories are changed to preserve anonymity. A few details have been generalized to maintain confidentiality. These changes do not take away from the visionary work of these directors.

Table 3 lists the equity directors along with the type of school district. The number of students and demographics are not indicated to maintain anonymity.

Data

Table 2

Equity Directors

Pseudonym	Years in position	Previous position
Harper	3	Director of Curriculum
Payton	4	Dean
Kennedy	3	Principal
Sidney	2	Principal
Blake	4	Literacy Coordinator
Riley	5	District-level position
Jordan	6	Director of Curriculum
Christian	4	Counselor

Table 3

School Districts

Type of District	Equity Director Pseudonym
Suburban	Harper
Suburban	Payton
Suburban	Kennedy
Urban	Sidney
Urban	Blake
Suburban	Riley
Suburban	Jordan
Suburban	Christian

1) How did you come to the position you currently have, what was your career path leading up to this position? & 2) How long have you held this position? (Maier, 2018)

Harper: I needed to leave my previous experience as director of curriculum of ten years because my superintendent was not equity minded. I was working in curriculum, and I wanted to bring in our first equity unit, he asked, “do you really want those questions and to take those phone calls because I do not think you can do that.” I asked him, “Don’t you think it is time?” and he said, “no.” That was the beginning of the end for me. I cannot stay someplace where you do not see the facts before you. Black parents were contacting saying, “we need your help.”

I empathized with them because the thing that got me seriously down this path was the experiences of my three sons. Kids made monkey noises when my oldest son walked down the hallway. Some children told my younger sons they could not be their friend because they had brown skin. I started being a champion of equity part-time for free by working as a parent representative with their district on the equity task force. I have been in this position for three years.

Payton: I was a classroom teacher for ten years, then a dean for ten years, and this is my fourth year in this role.

Kennedy: I was a teacher for seven years, an assistant principal, a principal for fifteen years, and this is my third year in this role. When the George Floyd tragedy happened, directors of equity and inclusion became the talk of the town. This popped open. You always take something like this in the hopes that people are really ready to do real work.

Sidney: I was a teacher for several years, then dean for four years, an assistant principal for a few years, and then a principal for ten years. The practicum for my superintendent’s

endorsement focused on equity but this is just who I am before this. This is my second year in this position.

Blake: My journey was a little different. I was a teacher, an instructional technology coordinator, and then a literacy coordinator. Our country was in a very strenuous racial climate. I have been in this position for four years.

Riley: I started as a classroom teacher, I worked for public and charter schools. I did some educational policy work before working in human resources and in multiple district-level capacities. I wanted to be in this position where I could support all the other departments because equity and inclusion is all intertwined, it is not its own separate thing. The district needed a point person to ensure it is happening, to hold people accountable, and to provide support, guidance, and resources. I am now in my fifth year in this role.

Jordan: I started was as a teacher for several years before becoming a coach and then director of curriculum and instruction. I am in my sixth year as an equity director.

Christian: I was a school counselor for several years and then became an equity director which I have been for four years.

3) What does equity mean to you and in the context of the communities that you serve?

(Learned-Miller, 2018)

Harper: I don't like the picture of the three kids at the baseball game because to me that's only a small portion. It doesn't get into disrupting or interrupting practices that have impacted our marginalized students and it doesn't talk about systemic change or nurturing and fostering the unique gifts of every student. It only talks about access, which access, and opportunity are a part of it but there are also those other pieces. Equity is

about disrupting, you know, stop doing the same thing, if it doesn't work, you are going to get the same results. We have got to think about what is going to be best for our students of color. What systemic changes need to be made so they will exceed and excel at the same rate for all students all the time.

Equity is about all students, always, all the time, and that means policies, practices, behavior changes, professional learning, parents, teachers, and administrators. I always talk about being equity minded so it is no longer this thing that we roll out in a binder. It is a part of the fabric of who we are, how we walk, how we breathe, and what we do. We no longer think about the fact that, we are doing equity or need to call me because this is an equity issue. We move from getting ready to plan an event to thinking about is this that we need to have at our school considering our demographics.

Payton: I hope that equity, especially educational equity means kind of the same thing. To me, it is how are we really as an education system looking to support the needs of all of the children that we are serving and that we are giving them the things that they need to be successful. To me, it is so important for us to have the resources and curriculum, curriculum, curriculum – that is the hard one. I think in being able to talk about those different types of equity, of educational equity, and not just looking at it from one particular piece. We have talked a lot about understanding how we look at things and how we are developing things from that equity lens. It is everything we do in education, and it should be how we are teaching and leading in schools today.

Kennedy: I actually think that it is part of the problem, we just view equity through this racialized lens, and to me, it is so much more. At the core, equity really is about making sure that everybody feels that sense of belonging and can maximize whatever their

potential is. Most schools are not set up for that because it requires us to create spaces where kids can explore what they want to be. Most schools are already trying to pigeonhole people. We always say college and career, we never say career and college. Because some kids do not want to go to college, and we are finding more and more kids who don't want to go to college. So, to me, equity is really about belonging and creating that sense where kids can explore who the hell they want to be.

My own child went from wanting to be a scientist to an artist to an architect. They took all this math, now they don't like math, but now they are stuck taking math, and now they hate school. I recommended changing tracks, and she said, "there is nowhere for me to go. I have to."

In order to be equitable, you have to have a good career and technical education program that really allows kids to explore. We got to realize kids are different than they used to be. If we are not helping to cultivate and create engineers and things like that, we are failing kids. Because those are jobs that we know transfer, and right now, we don't know what jobs are going to exist in ten years. Video games are huge, and it is a billion-dollar industry; however, I haven't seen too many schools with a quality video game design program. You inherently create motivation by pushing those kinds of things.

We are still archaic in terms of high schools beating kids up about reading. Most high school students know how to read, and we are not teaching them how to read anymore. We are teaching them how to utilize what they read but we are giving them shit they do not care about.

Sidney: In an ideal world, it would mean that all our citizens have the supports they need to be successful but that is not our current reality. No matter how you define success,

there are gaps. The biggest gaps are along racial and income lines. Low-income families get the worst of everything, and then you have Black families, immigrant families, students with individualized education plans (IEPs), and biracial students. Things are racially charged and polarized, economically charged and polarized, and politically charged and polarized.

Blake: Equity means everyone getting exactly what they need. In the community that I serve, you are considering race. I think race is first and foremost because it guides everything that we do, even though people do not want to admit it. It is a big part of it. It is a big part of the reason that our community is set up the way it is, the reason that disparities exist the way they do. You cannot truly honor the work if you do not consider that aspect. It really is understanding their needs, socioeconomic background, and cultural as much as you can. A lot of times, we do not consider documentation status. It is often unspoken but that is huge, especially in our community. It can be a big barrier because a lot of families are afraid to attend or share information because they do not know how that will impact their status. Then, it comes to just knowing about where to go and how to properly advocate for yourself.

From an educational standpoint, really considering the input, right? What we are putting in to really getting that outcome that we want, that outcome being student achievement, that is the ultimate goal. What does that look like? That is the magic question that everyone is trying to answer because there are so many aspects to it. Culturally, are students being seen and do they feel like they belong? Do our practices align, what resources are we using, what are our discipline practices, and what is the curriculum we are putting in from of them? All these things.

Riley: Equity for me means that as a school community the end goal would be that we are no longer able to predict outcomes for any individual identity group based on their sheer identity. Right now, we can very almost accurately predict outcomes. Equity requires a lot of systemic change and requires some full disruption – a total redo of systems and practices. They were never designed to be equitable in the first place. Equity means people feel good about the school community. They have positive experiences in all aspects of the learning environment, and those experiences are not necessarily a result of their identity. It is about the experiences of our students, and the quality of the academic education that our students receive.

Beyond our students, thinking about all of our stakeholders, our families, our staff, and our students...elevating the voices and perspectives of those who have historically been left out of the conversation and most adversely impacted by a lot of existing structures. New decisions need to be made. Equity for me would mean that they are included, they are considered, and they are valued. Their voices, perspectives, and experiences are sought out, not in a superficial way but in a very meaningful way so they can meaningfully engage and benefit from what the schools have to offer.

Jordan: Equity for us really means eliminating the impact of race, socioeconomic status, and any kind of factor, neurodivergence or ability and building on all strengths and assets of our students and removing the predictability we see reflected in so many different schools and systems. We look at some of those outcomes and they are the lagging measures that we pay attention to. Eliminating inequities is very complex. These are systems that are layered and nested within each other and require revolutionary transformative ways of thinking.

Christian: Equity is about providing students what they need to find success by disrupting systems that have disproportionately impacted Black, Brown, poor, and underserved people negatively ever since education has been around. This is ancestral work in the fact that today we are naming it equity, in the sixties it was civil rights, and in the 1860's it was being an abolitionist.

Schools are not currently structured so all students can be successful. There needs to be a disruption of current practices and a systemic change/overhaul, so all students get what they need to achieve and excel. The core of how we are thinking, teaching, and leading.

4) What equity work are you engaging in? Please explain specifically the changes you made at the system-level, in policies, in your personnel, and in your curriculum. Other areas?

(Learned-Miller, 2018)

Harper: Thankfully, our district had the foresight to create the position before the whole George Floyd murder. They really wanted to see if our money is where our mouth is, and that is how they created my position.

We have not gotten to policies and systems just yet, but it is coming. They created my position, and then they decided they wanted to do an equity audit, but they did not know all the details of that, so my first task was setting that up and seeing that through. Talking with our equity auditor gave me my marching orders and a little bit of guidance in terms of where to start. The report and the findings revealed areas of strength and areas of improvement as it relates to equity. Based on those recommendations, I created our district equity leadership team, our student equity advisory council, and our community equity advisory council.

Our district equity leadership team is drafting our equity action plan. We took one recommendation, and we are looking at it from five different angles. The equity audit report made recommendations for systems of teaching and learning, professional learning, family, community agency, student voice, and climate and culture. We have five different subgroups within our equity action team.

We are working on hiring and diversifying our staff to represent our student demographic. We are also providing professional learning opportunities for staff so we have a common language. These are areas that I already started working so I am just continuing to work on these.

Another thing that we are focused on is looking at the disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic students who are being disciplined compared to their white counterparts. We are looking at what that means from a system's lens. What does that mean from each of those five lenses so I guess the systems and the policies level? From a curriculum stance, we were already taking a look at our curriculum to see how we incorporate not only culturally responsive practices but the social justice standards. Those are very important. How do we take a look at the CASEL standards and make sure those are incorporated into what we are doing? I have been added into some of those meetings and discussions looking at making sure that our curriculum is not just diverse, but it is equity-minded information.

For personnel, I formed a partnership with a national organization to recruit some candidates We are carefully reviewing resumes of all candidates. We are not going down the path of HBCUs because that seems to be a flooded market, and there are only so

many candidates out there. People do not know we are a diverse community. We are working on growing our own with a couple of education classes for high school students.

Payton: We are looking at our hiring practices, and that has been really important to me. We are looking at how it is structured from the beginning of the process all the way through including the questions, the team, how we are defining things. We have an equity training for every individual hiring team so that we are talking about those things. We moved away from the concept of fit to what are our needs.

We have been talking a lot about supporting our BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) educators and how are they not just surviving and doing their time but how are they able to feel that they belong and are supported in our spaces. We have done quite a bit of work with creating an affinity space for them and growing that community within a community because people feel so disconnected and often, they do not see each other. In my role, that is a big part of what I have been trying to foster. Another big part of my work is really building those connections for our students. How are they having certain affinity spaces and connection to resources and interest versus just supports.

We are doing a lot with our strategic plan, so to me, that is the system's piece. It is really important that we said we do not want a separate equity plan but that we have our strategic plan and equity is really imprinted on everything that we do because it is when it is separate that people can just disregard the work (because a lot of districts would have done that in the past). They'll be like, where is your equity plan? I'm like, hiring practices should be an equity plan, that should be your strategic plan. It is just the plan so that has been really important.

Kennedy: Systems, we have not done enough there. In that vein of teaching and learning, we are working on that avenue. But just to give you an idea of how slow the work is right now, our goal is, I will give you a simple example. We are struggling to get have one diverse unit in high school English. Not all, just one unit where they provide students an opportunity to be in small book groups with diverse texts.

The pushback is nobody knows how to teach diverse texts. And I'm like, it is just like teaching any other. I'm confused, and I am lost. You know how to teach text, right. They say, yeah, and I say, well, wait, why don't you know how to then? And they say, because there might be some ideas that come up that we don't know how to teach. I say, you teach *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and that is a very racist book. How do you deal with the racism that exists in that book when you provide that to a Black student, and you got the N word being dropped multiple times? How do you work through that? Nothing you come across in *The Hate you Give* is going to be worse than that. But there is that fear, and so systems, our goal right now is to do things like that.

We have from a systemic standpoint, and we are working on people understanding that diversity, equity, and inclusion is so huge, it permeates all areas. We are trying to get our staff to be better at data disaggregation, and data disaggregation through a cultural lens, breaking kids in groups and looking at progression. How are Latinx students progressing? That is probably the population that has the greatest struggle in our community. One of the things we are finding out is if you are a Latinx male, your chance of success in our district literally does not exist. And especially if you are bilingual, the odds of you making it through our system and graduating is like none. So

how we address that because that is not a kid problem, that's an us problem. How do we fix that? From a systemic standpoint, those are the pieces that we are looking at.

Teaching has so many layers to unpack, that is the hard part. So, we are focusing on professional development and just building some general structures. We created an equity reporting tool because we got a lot of instances where kids are being called derogatory terms by other students in front of staff and nothing happens. Oh yeah, the n word is out of control, just out of control. One of the things we realized early on is kids weren't, either feeling comfortable telling people that these things were happening and if they told people, nothing was happening.

Our goal became to just create a baseline of general safety. And now, in this current political climate, I'm sorry the LGBTQ community, it is taking a beating. So, creating general safety and educating people around microinterventions, Derald Wing Sue's work around how do you intervene because people didn't know how to intervene when stuff like that happened (or at least that was their excuse). Embedding this microintervention protocol, which is just a base protocol on how you put a halt to it.

Sidney: We are working to ensure our staffing mirrors the racial percentages in the student population. We are nowhere close to where we want to be for certified staff but we are for non-certified staff. We are working on getting future teachers of color certified. We have some partnerships with universities. We have a chance with working with people who already work here and are committed to the community.

We are creating a district-wide equity plan. We have an equity team that represents the whole district with every race and income level with paraprofessionals, retirees, grandparents, parents, cabinet-level administrators, and teachers. We are having

some really serious conversations about the reality of being othered in our school district. We have parents who can't come into schools without feeling minimized, kids who come into school and feel minimized in some way, and staff who cannot come into the school without feeling minimized...just really addressing that stuff directly.

Our goal is for our board to enact a policy after we present this to them. We are looking at sample policies. We are going to give them everything they need to be successful along with our recommendations along with ideas for how to monitor it. The same team will be responsible for monitoring, like where we are this time next year.

At the end of last year, pretty much on any standardized test, formative assessment, or state assessment, less than 1% of Black students were proficient in reading and math. We have a lot of work to do. A lot of it boils down to one thing, our curriculum. We do not have a viable curriculum in any content area. I looked at Black males, and they do not have a chance if we are not even teaching the right things. They don't have a chance, and it is not that they cannot do it. We just are not equipping them to be successful, and then we will blame it on everything else. Oh, they come from a single parent home and the daddy ain't at home. I taught at a school where the majority of my kids fit those risk factors, and they are killing it in the world because we taught them what they needed to know to be successful.

Blake: The jury is still out on change. It is hard to measure that. Equity work is so vast, right? It is like the iceberg. You are just chipping away at it, and it is a big iceberg. It takes time to really knock that thing down, if it ever comes down, you know, you may just get it as small as possible.

We started off with an equity audit. That was the first thing that I did when I took office. I think it was important for us to do that in order to give a voice to the community, give a voice to our staff, give a voice to everyone, and all stakeholders in this work. I thought it was important for it to come from the community or should I say stakeholders. I did not want it to be me saying this is what we do. I may know what it looks like, but I needed to lift that, and it was important for me to do that. From there, we received recommendations to move the workforce. I am really trying to embed equity work and empower those who are leading the work to understand how you can do this in a more equitable fashion. How are you keeping this in mind?

We are working on a math curriculum. A one-stop shop for all courses, and a viable curriculum that works for all dual language learners, bilingual students, general education students, and diverse learners. I support the work by providing professional development on culturally responsive practices. I may share a tool for auditing books. I coach and provide feedback. We are working on plans for high school and middle school, and just reimagining school. I support principals with writing their school improvement plans. We look at our equity audit and the results of the things that we know to be true. We are being intentional around lifting those inequities and addressing them.

At our board meetings, we have community members who show up, and they explicitly focus on Black students. They ask, what are you doing for Black students. We are no longer just writing smart goals; we are writing SMARTIE goals. That simple change in practice is now requiring our staff to really take a moment to consider who is benefitting from this change, this goal or whatever it is that I'm doing and who is not benefitting from it, and how am I actually aiding disparities unknowingly.

Another initiative that I worked on that is pretty big is reviewing our policies. We created a process for me and the legal department to review pretty much all of our policies. We have a lot of policies so we cannot do those in one sitting. We prioritize them by year. I created a rubric that we use to evaluate those policies. It is important we have the right people leading that work. The members of the committee may vary depending on the policy.

We look at the policy language and evaluate the words that we are using in the policy. Are we criminalizing people? We look at access – is this policy presenting itself as a barrier? Is there a group disadvantaged by this? Maybe the policy is okay but there is an issue of practice that we need to address. We provide a recommendation based on the information gathered. We can say we have every celebration, we can lift our fists, and we can do all of the things, but it means nothing if you have policies that blocking the work and the advancement. Some policies are controversial, and we bring them to the board. Policy work is the work of the board.

It is hard to measure impact when you are doing things at such a large scale. Human resources practices, I have not been able to successfully tap into that. I'll just be honest. The barrier there is the leadership. It is the way that I'm positioned within the organization. There are other individuals sitting at the executive table, and I have to depend on them to speak from this lens, and that does not happen.

I move around and build alliances. It is not because I have to but at the same time, I have to. In doing that, I'm able to collaborate and do different things. I'm like, hey, I need to be a part of that so that is how I'm making change.

Riley: Policy wise, of course the school board sets policy. I have been able to work with the committees to make recommendations to the board for changes. We have made some positive changes to policies where we have examined them with an equity lens. We looked at who benefits from this policy and who doesn't. Who is this policy designed for and who was it not? How can we make it better and how can we include the voices of those stakeholders in that process? The dress code policies have been updated since my tenure. This other policy remained pretty similar except we got more explicit with some examples that were in it like bullying, harassment, and things like that. We talked about a racial slur, like we called it out, like we named it. It was implied before, but we made sure to name it and call it out so that folks can't just sweep it under the rug.

At the time I started, the district had a strategic plan in place so I worked to establish a comprehensible equity plan that would complement the existing strategic plan. The district is in the process of developing a new strategic plan and the equity components will be in the new one, and it won't be a separate document. Some folks liked the fact that it was a separate document because it was a lot more meat to it when it was just its own separate thing. It is important for people to see that this is how we should be operating. So, when it is a part of the larger plan, to me, that sends a stronger message.

I'm so glad of the direction we are going in the future. Right now, we do have a comprehensive equity plan. It is very thorough with a lot of stakeholder input. I do think that it has provided a roadmap for those who are unsure about what they should be doing, what next steps were in place, or what their role of responsibility is in ensuring that those are our end goals. Being a school district that exudes the values and commitments we have made around equity, and so now they can see themselves in it very

clearly. And there are measures that identifies how they will be held accountable and what is expected of them. It has all the pieces of the purpose, the why, and what. We did all of the work making sure people had a good understanding of what it is before we rolled it out.

By the time the summer of 2020 happened, where a lot of folks were starting to find out about George Floyd and his brutal murder and the subsequent reactions of the larger community as a result of it, our board put forth its own equity resolution without my input. That is not a bad thing. I say that in the sense that they took that initiative on their own. I did not ask for it, and I didn't have to push for it. It was good to know that they did not need me to hold their hand anymore. To me, that was a win, a huge win – the fact that they took such a firm stance on where they stood. I was proud. There is still a lot of work to do but it is good to know that I do not always have to be the one, making the suggestion.

We recently established affinity groups within our district. The first one we had came as a result of a lot of civil and social unrest, racial unrest due to the hand of brutal murders of Black people at the hands of law enforcement. We had Black staff, and there's just a few of them, who walked into buildings feeling isolated, lonely, like no one understood. We actually had a person call human resources, and say, I can't be here. We needed a space, a space for people who have experienced certain traumatic experiences as a collective to come together to have community and be able to unpack things when they happen.

Our first new group was established as a result of that and now it has a custodian and an assistant superintendent because we are often dealing with a lot of the same

struggles, traumas, and challenges in this space. It really came from the group up from our educators. It then expanded to the LGBTQ+ community of four employees. I am talking about taking care of our people. We need our people to be in a good space so they can be there for our kids. They can put their best selves forward for our students. And if you notice, I did not say teachers. It is for all our employees.

We now have a very formal process for establishing affinity groups in our district, and that includes how the district will support the group. It makes it very clear so that folks won't try to get district supported groups that are not aligned to our vision and our mission. We connected everything right back to our equity plan and the larger values and goals of the district. We were very thoughtful about all of those things.

We have a gender equity statement that made it clear to our staff what the district expects of them in regards to accepting and affirming people's identities. That was unfortunately a problem here. Not everyone wanted to respect and affirm people's identities. We made it clear what we expected of them in the context of the school community. People have their own opinions outside of work but in this space...we made sure to do the necessary research around laws and recent litigation. I really have been wanting to work with kids. We need to get the adults in together first because they set the tone, the context for the school culture that students will experience. They also set the curriculum and the policies that will directly impact kids.

We are starting to make strides in providing direct support to our kids to build their capacity to be more inclusive, to be more welcoming for others to understand why it is important to understand context historically how things, the conditions that certain groups are collectively generally experiencing and why that is. It is not by happenstance.

It is not because that is a condition they want to be in. It was oftentimes due to oppression or, and lack of access to other opportunities that created conditions that we are in now.

We want to help our young people to understand that. Getting young people to be a part of the conversation is so important. We are starting with our high school kids...but it is not school-wide or district-wide just yet.

Jordan: A number of years ago, our board passed a district equity policy that is thorough and quite expansive. It identifies core areas that we need to address. We rewrote our student handbook, and our dress code changed dramatically. We developed a progressive discipline approach with levels of behavior. There was a lot of language in there referring to positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS), and an approach to restorative practices and restorative discipline. A big part of my work was developing strategies to build capacity for MTSS which included mental health supports and social-emotional learning.

A lot of my work for the last few years has been centered around doing monthly reports looking at office discipline referrals. We have tier 1 and tier 2 teams in place that are upholding the standard for what should be happening in those team spaces. I work cross departmentally on different projects that have connections to our equity policy.

Christian: There is some capacity building that had to happen, and we are driving that work now. A lot of my work to this point has really been about building an infrastructure. The first thing I wanted to do was create a district equity leadership team. There was already an affinity group of people of color that was formulated after George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. We have equity leaders in each building to support the work. I meet with the principals and assistant principals every month. We have also built capacity of

instructional coaches and interventionists. I have been strategic in building an infrastructure.

I got with data and assessment, and we laid out a ton of data that was no surprise to anyone around the different disparities and inequities that exist. Our district equity team decided to focus on discipline disparities, hiring practices, and more access to advanced placement classes. We also looked at the portrait of a learner. We developed competencies and we are rolling those out. We developed our strategic plan.

5) With whom do you work closely? Describe those relationships? Do you supervise anyone?

(Maier, 2018)

Harper: I am a department of one so sometimes that's good. Most of the time that is good because I do not supervise anyone. There is one colleague who I wish they could be like an assistant equity director because she is doing a lot of English Learner work and plugging in a lot of equity pieces. I report to a cabinet member. They pretty much get out of my way, and they actually pull me into a lot of things that I need to have a say in or be aware of. I think we could work side-by-side.

Payton: I am on our cabinet, and that is really important, I think in these equity roles. I think it is important that you are in the position of being in that room where those decisions are being made. I think it is also important who you report to, and I report directly to the superintendent. We meet regularly to discuss what I am working on, what our needs are, and any problems.

I work side-by-side with directors of curriculum and student services. We are doing this work from our strategic plan. It doesn't just pivot to me and equity. I think that's been really key is that we really try to design things that we all speak about

together, and it is not my job. I am a resource for everyone and assist in that. I work with our building-level people. I also have multiple networks of equity people I work with.

Kennedy: I report directly to the superintendent. I met with them once a week to run down big things that I am working on. I work closely with the executive cabinet, principals, and my team. I would love to work with the assistant superintendents more.

One of my primary goals this year has been to try and provide coaching for principals on some basic things they can do to change their environment. I do a lot of coaching for one building, and I work closely with the high schools probably a little bit closer because our high schools are our hotbed for problems. I also mentor kids, and that is just personal.

Sidney: I work closely with the cabinet thinking about how we can make the district better. I work with teaching and learning every day in some way, even if it is just a conversation about what is going on but mostly to align the equity work. Most of my work is with the assistant superintendent. I am really pushing for curricular alignment. We are teaching x, and we are being tested on y, and for some reason we keep teaching x, like no matter what the test scores say, we just keep teaching x. We see year after year, it is not working but we still keep teaching x. I also work with the cabinet member for secondary schools. I also work with the community engagement director, and I work with one person on recruiting. We all do equity work. Basically, if you work in education, you are doing every work.

We do monthly professional development with principals, and we are working on coaching teachers with equity in mind. We all work with advanced placement teachers and department chairs. They need to understand that the culture of the students impacts the way they learn. In many instances, there is not congruence between the two. They are

teaching in ways they are familiar with, but they don't really have an awareness of the ways students learn to enable them to be successful. What we are doing is good for all. If you are teaching a special education class, you still need awareness.

We are working with parents and our community because it is no longer acceptable for our kids to not demonstrate proficiency on these exams or for any percentage of our students to come to elementary school and not know their letters and count to one hundred. They have been watching cartoons for five years. It is okay to watch cartoons but put them on cartoons that teach them something. We got You Tube channels.

Blake: I report to a cabinet-level member, and I supervise and work closely with our community engagement specialist. I do think that it is beneficial because the work that we are putting out to our families, it is important. We started a group for Black parents. That is another access point, gathering data to understand what people's needs are and for them to have input around what goes out, what are some of the things we are doing, and some of the celebrations we are having. I think that is important. Are we being inclusive in our celebrations? Are we including all cultures? Are we considering the LGBTQ+ community? Are we being conscious of language that we are putting out? The family and community engagement department is so helpful. I do manage that.

Riley: I report directly to the superintendent, and I am a part of the district's cabinet leadership, which I think is important for anyone in a similar role. You have to have the ear of the person who really can drive change and who is the liaison with the school board (the folks who drive change).

I also work collaboratively with a lot of leaders of various departments within the school district, especially the superintendent of curriculum and instruction. I cannot talk about equity without talking about curriculum and instruction. That is the core of what we do. We also think about what professional learning is made available to our staff in terms of what is required and what is not. We have to weave those threads of equity lens and mindset throughout everything. I also work closely with the assistant superintendent of student services who supervises special education, counseling, and social work. It is important to work closely with that department because a lot of our students with special needs are grossly underserved. We see a lot of disproportionalities in who is identified for those types of services and in other ways who is not getting the support they need when it comes to social work services and counseling services in a culturally appropriate way.

I work closely with human resources in diversifying our workforce. We look at which recruitment fairs we are going to go to. We honestly do not have to recruit because so many people want to work for us. We will get the same applicants we have always gotten if we sit on our hands and do nothing. We cannot just rest on our laurels. We have to do the work. You have to establish relationships with historically Black colleges. We are small, and Black people need to know that they can trust you, and that requires relationship building. You cannot expect results overnight because it takes patience.

I have worked with our technology department because we had to update our systems. This is helpful when we want to affirm students' gender identity or name changes. It really requires interdepartmental collaboration. It is not just my office. My office is really a support system to every other office.

Jordan: I work closely with directors at the district level, our assistant superintendent of instruction and instructional coaches, and I supervise a few coaches who work directly with our schools.

Christian: The directors at the district level of student services, schools, curriculum and instruction, multilingualism, and I stay connected with one another in the work and work across our roles and responsibility. There is a level of trust. We all want these equitable opportunities and experiences for our students to ultimately result in equitable outcomes.

6) What is your official job description? How would you describe your position? (Maier, 2018)

Harper: My position looks different today than when I started, and I think it is going to continue to evolve because I have conversations every day and every week that are coming under my umbrella in some shape, form, or fashion. I do not even know what it will look like by the end of the year. I am okay with that because I need to be someplace where it is evolving, and I am being challenged.

Payton: The piece is how am I supporting, I do work with professional learning, community outreach and engagement, and work directly with students. In a smaller district, I am more able to speak with kids and do things directly with them, and that has been really important. This role, that is the great part and the challenging part, you really touch on all things and just depending on your system, how you are used, how people let you in, how people are willing to use you and things you have been allowed to take on and address.

Kennedy: I would love to just coach principals on creating more equitable environments. At the end of the day, I'm mindful that principals move needles, district staff does not. To

me, that should really be the role because I have a wealth of knowledge but if I'm not imparting that to the principal so they can implement it. We are predominately Latinx, but you go in our building, and we have got no Latinx signage, and we have no Latinx staff. We are not very hospitable to the Latinx community. So, it is helping principals understand, how do we pivot. How do we change our environment so that we are more welcoming to who ultimately, we serve? That is what my role should be. How is it? I troubleshoot problems.

We have got a couple of schools that are on fire when it comes to their Black and Brown community. I have spent a lot of time there. We have got some of our Title schools that are predominately students of color that have fallen apart from an academic standpoint, so I am going into those to provide support. That is not to me what it should be if it was running well.

Sidney: School improvement, school equity, and recruiting. I mean, school improvement, it is easy to like align those because if you look at who is struggling, it is the poor students, students of color, and students with IEPs. I work with the human resources department.

Jordan: I report directly to the superintendent, and I sit on the executive leadership team. All of my colleagues have equity goals tied to their role because we have this robust equity policy. It is important that every department leader and every principal is rooted in a concept for all students. So, I think everyone being unified and everyone having a role. It is not just the equity director's role to address equity.

Christian: In my position, I am tasked with intentionally designing systems or even redesigning systems. We have a system in place that marginalizes students and has

created racial gaps in achievement and outcomes. My job is to look at systems in partnership with all the other leadership and ask some critical questions. I used this book, *Equity: How to Design Organizations* where everyone thrives by Minal Bopaiah as kind of a framework because there is this theory of change. In that theory of change, we are talking about, number one, you have to engage leadership. That is part of my job because it starts with leadership.

Those who report to us and are under our leadership are going to take on who we are as leaders. Asking, what are those observable behaviors we want to see out of folks and continuing to nudge and shape that path of equity all the while along that continuum of being able to communicate and even over communicate about equity, diversity, and inclusion. My job is about designing systems for equitable outcomes.

7) Describe a typical day/week? (Maier, 2018)

Harper: A typical week involve some type of meetings either with principals, a professional learning opportunity in a building with the leadership team, a conversation with the deans or the assistant principals about something going on in their building. I am working and prepping for a professional learning session that is coming up. Attending senior leadership and district leadership meetings, going on building visits, and having lunch with some students who are struggling - so coaching and mentoring them, and making parent phone calls.

I do not really have an official week other than some meetings that happen. I have our district equity leadership team meetings that happen monthly, the student equity advisory meets bimonthly, and community equity advisory is once a month. I also meet

monthly with a team to look at how we acknowledge and recognize all of the different cultures within our district.

Payton: A typical week is going to be mostly a lot of doing and a lot of meetings. We meet as a leadership team once a week. Mondays for me are sacred. I have a girls' affinity space, and I believe in doing things during the school day for kids, so we have a lunch study hall. I have a student equity committee, so I am planning those. I try to create resources for teachers. I have a book club that I run. We do professional learning during the day, and right now we are doing a lot of work with culturally responsive pedagogy using Dr. Gholdy Muhammad's framework. I do a lot of community events so planning for those. Meetings with teachers so it is a lot. It is about how are you meeting the needs of students, staff, and families.

Kennedy: A typical day, it really depends on the day. I spend all Fridays in schools. I do my mentoring on Fridays. Monday through Thursday, I do a lot of meetings. When I am not in meetings, I am working with my team because they are dealing with hotbed issues, and they need support. They call me so we have a consistent system. I get out about three of four days a week. I coach some principals and teachers. A lot of our schools have student affinity spaces. We are working on creating a district equity committee that will meet with the superintendent.

Sidney: I have multiple meetings with the cabinet and teaching and learning. I am working on this Grow Your Own program, and I'm always meeting with potential candidates. I am working on getting them enrolled in school and talking to the university representatives. I meet with community members and community organizations, like the NAACP (national association for the advancement of colored people) once a month. I

meet with faith organizations to address what does equity work look like in the community. I try to educate families about how to help their students with literacy and math. A regular week is a lot of meetings. I am working on getting these initiatives not just off the ground but to the point where they are policies.

Blake: A typical week would include many emails. It would include a lot of collaboration time. I meet regularly with our academic office, which consists of other directors and assistant superintendents. We talk about progress on big initiatives. We have meetings with schools, and we do walkthroughs. I host an equity council, which is a group of stakeholders. I may be engaging in community meetings or meeting with faith partners. I may be sitting in on a policy meeting or doing one-on-one meetings with some of my staff around their progress on some of the things they are working on. I may be networking with some organizations discussing professional development.

I would be remiss if I did not mention problem solving when issues happen and come across my desk. Sometimes, things come to me second hand, and I have to ask, how can I support. I have to define my role, otherwise other people will define it, and I do not want to get bogged down or prioritize things that I should not own. I may be able to support colleagues on how they can address and move through. I'm empowering those who do own that work.

Riley: I am like every other district office person. I have a lot of meetings on my calendar. I try to make those meetings meaningful. I want to be in meetings with stakeholders I want to meet with the community, students, and staff so I constantly have my ear to the ground because I am not in every school. I can think we are doing a lot of

great things, and then I will call up a teacher, and they are like, that is not happening. I do a lot of collaboration with other equity directors in my county.

I was getting a lot of cold calls from community members because there is a lot of misinformation that was out there. I am trying to engage those folks and help them understand what is real, what is not, what we are actually doing and what we are not doing and the why behind it. There has been less of that lately. Surprisingly, honestly, there were times my phone would be ringing and there were emails popping up, and I did not shy away from it. I engaged because they are stakeholders.

There is a lot of planning for things because we have a lot of events, doing reports, and I try to get out to schools a couple of times a week.

Jordan: A typical day is just different meeting spaces that I am involved in. It could be one-on-ones with coaches. It could be out in schools going to tier one and tier two team meetings. Doing principal evaluations are a big chunk of work. Meetings with principals, doing walkthroughs with principals, doing data reports for schools, working with community partners, and working with partners who are facilitating professional learning for us and working through those plans.

Christian: A week is fast and furious. Curriculum work, MTSS work, leadership development is a huge piece, professional learning, and debriefs with administrators. My schedule is full of different touch points weekly, biweekly, and monthly that are happening to keep all of those plates spinning.

8) What are the district's goal for this position? What are your goals? (Maier, 2018)

Payton: I think the goals are answering the question, how are you driving that change. I feel like in a system when we are talking about the equity journey continuum, when you

are looking at how are you having an impact and how are all of our kids receiving the education that they need. A lot of work is with the teachers and our leadership so that we can move them in that direction, and that takes a lot of small things. It can be responding to the needs of a teacher, spending time with them to create our professional learning community sessions (PLC) where you are leading them, modeling, and doing the work. A lot of which also takes place because people want to know how does this deal with me and what do I do.

Kennedy: Our equity action plan has five areas. The first one is system. It was a lot of basics, like defining diversity, equity, and inclusion as a district, developing a board policy, creating measurable, accountable, and transparent diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, increasing practice to attract and retain highly qualified diverse teachers, which is a big problem for us. Teaching and learning, we are really attacking instructional approaches and materials for instance, we are adopting new curricular materials frameworks, making sure that they are culturally sensitive, which they were not. The funny thing is there is none that really exists.

We just adopted a new series, and we are going to have to supplement the hell out of it. The third area is student voice and climate and culture. How do we create that sense of belonging among students, how do we elevate student voice and being able to dictate what their environment should look like? We want to do that within a framework with some degree of accountability.

The fourth area is professional development, so how do we give people a base-level professional development around what equity is. The fifth area is community, family, and community engagement, how do we make sure that our families feel that

sense of belonging. To that end, we have created a number of adult affinity spaces for African Americans, Latinx, and LGBTQ+, since that community was under attack.

My goals, if I do my job well, it is really more educating more principals and assistant superintendents on this work. The more I sit with it, the more I realize that as an outlier position, that is the best way for me to influence long-term change. If I can work directly with principals and educate them on the need to create inclusive environments.

If I can work with assistant superintendents, that is okay – what does that look like. How do we know when we are there and what do we do when we are not there yet, then I create sustainability? Without that, once I'm gone, whoever comes in, they are starting from scratch, if the position even continues. I want there to be some long-term impact to this role. That is my goal without all of the technical minutia.

Sidney: One goal is an equity plan. It is a big one and a big deal. We look at how we improve equitable outcomes for families, staff, and students, and the conditions because the conditions are not the same based on what you look like. And that is just the reality. It is unfortunate. That is our truth.

I think on some level, there are those in our organization who want to run from that reality. There are those of us who embrace it fully because that is all we have ever known as part of the system. Even though we are doing this work, we have been impacted in the same ways that we are getting these legal redresses for. When you take the leadership position, sometimes, it is like, do you want to be in the media for anything related to this because if somebody googles your name, and you are looking for another job having been ousted not because you did something wrong but because you will be

perceived as a troublemaker or not a team player, whatever the little phrase to try to oppress you.

My goal is for every child in our school district to receive the level of education necessary for them to be successful in our futures. In my mind, it means that we would have to either reduce tracking or eliminate it. Neither is on the table as of this moment, and I have voiced it and voiced it. At some point, you have to understand where you are, and what you will be able to successfully implement. You have got to put your energy into those things, and not everything I want is just not going to be our reality.

Blake: I think the district's goals would be to have equity visible or infused as a part of everyday practices. Everything that we do, like I mentioned, our big priorities, they would like to see equity present throughout all of that. One of the big things we are working on is our new strategic plan for the next five years and making sure equity is visible throughout that plan. I would support what the district is doing. I would like to really have an impact.

One of the things we are developing is our district equity framework and really making sure that everyone in the district understands it for the work they do. How it translates to the roles of teachers, principals, directors, human resources, and even board members and being mindful in everything they do in their day-to-day. There are a few areas, culturally responsive buildings and schools, equitable policies, practices, and resources, and family and community engagement.

Riley: The district did not have real clear goals for me. They do not really know, and they look at me like, you tell us. I think the district's goal really are the goals of the equity plan. My position is to help the district get there. My personal goals are infused with the

district's goals with the plan because I really want to see it realized with really meaningful steps in progress. I do not expect change to happen overnight, I am not naive enough to think that, but I want to see that incremental change really, really happening.

Jordan: One of my key goals has been around reducing racial disproportionality and exclusionary discipline and disproportionality in our office discipline referrals. We have two kind of different ways we manage data around those. My goals are also around building capacity and bringing restorative practices to scale in our districts. We only have four institute days a year, not a lot of time.

My vision would be to bring the work to scale, like principals doing circles with their staff and circles for kids on a regular basis in their classes. For the work to be more ubiquitous in everything we do like when we meet families. It would become a part of the fabric. There is some mindset shifting that needs to happen, especially if that was not a way you were raised.

Christian: My goals are building capacity. When we think about our strategic plan, there are equitable systems goals that exist in there. All our goals have undertones of equity in them so it is something that is embedded in our system. We are always combating the technical versus the adaptive. People say give me a list of some things that I can do, some strategies, right now to make me more of an equitable educator but people do not necessarily consider those adaptive challenges.

There is some non-closure. We are not going to fix all of the ills of our system in a school year, two years, three years, or four years. It has to be a part of the fabric of who we are as an organization, our ethos, to really begin to make some gains.

9) What are your biggest successes personal and professional you have experienced in this work thus far? (Maier, 2018)

Harper: I would say personally, just doing this type of work is a major personal success for me because by nature, I'm an introvert and so it requires me to step outside of who I am. I find that is, I won't say easy, but I have learned how to do it because it is something that I am very passionate about. Professionally, I am just proud of the fact that our district is taking on, and I am leading the change in terms of how all our staff is thinking about students of color, thinking about discipline issues, and thinking about the way our staff is responding to Black boys.

I'm having some of the conversations that I wish I could have had in my boys' school. There is a certain level of personal satisfaction that comes with knowing that I cannot change what happened for my boys. By golly, I am fighting tooth and nail to change it for these kids. Sometimes it just makes me sad that I could not change it for my oldest, but I feel like, vengeance is mine saith the Lord so all in due time.

Payton: The biggest successes is when you see teachers who are able to say, I have done something, and my kids really responded. The other piece has been when you are connecting with students and they are feeling empowered, and they are feeling seen and heard. When you are creating or doing things with them, it is really powerful. I think of a couple of our systems' pieces, and people being able to say yes, I understand why we need to make some of those changes. Just being able to see people speak the language that you are talking about. Those things are really important, I think.

Kennedy: The completion of the audit and the creation of the board policy because once again that gives it an opportunity to outlast me.

Sidney: I want my biggest success to be academic improvement for all. The conversations are happening now on a very consistent level with every group that we speak with. Another success is we had a data review at the end of the school year with building-level academic, behavioral, social-emotional learning (SEL), attendance, and 5Essentials. We look at district data and building-level data, and we disaggregate the data by race, income, and IEP status so you cannot say anything. There is a discrepancy.

There is research that shows there is a correlation between the number of hours or days that you are not in school and the likelihood that you will or will not graduate. Every minute you are not in class like increases the likelihood that you won't graduate. We have this exclusionary discipline of being sent out of the room for extended periods of days and times.

We have about thirty people taking classes to become teachers.

Blake: The biggest success would be just the things that I have been able to see to fruition, the equity advisory council (establishing that) and bring people's voices to the table. I am really excited about the policy work, and the equity advisory council plays a vital role in that whole equitable policy review. The SMARTIE goals, it is a success that the principals know about it and that it is the standard for the goals they are writing in their school improvement plans and our strategic plan. Another success is building my team.

Riley: Success is when I talk to a young person, and they tell me they can feel the difference. A family asked me to advocate for them at an IEP meeting. I listened to their concerns, and they felt like my presence would make a difference and what people would see as possible, and they were right. I try to push our thinking and ensure we are thinking

outside of the box with an equity lens while conveying that I am fully here to support. When the family said thank you for being there, that is a success.

There was a gay white man who did not feel safe to put a picture of him and his fiancé on his desk. I visited his office the other day and saw a picture. That is a win, when you get to a point and a place where people feel safe enough. Those are wins for me.

Jordan: Reducing racial disproportionality. I feel proud about bringing some frameworks into the district like Skiba and Gregory, *The Framework for Increasing Equity in School Discipline*. I am championing so hard because it is a framework about prevention and intervention. It is about the blend of academics not just behavior, it is about instruction. It is about instructional design when it comes down to it. It is the extent to which students are cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally engaged in instruction that is a teacher planning.

We can do all these system changes, but it also has to be about how is instruction such that students want to be there and want to be a part of it. There is clarity around expectations and success criteria, and it is not gray for kids. It is embodying that warm demander ethos. This is a tool, framework you can use with your building leadership teams and your PBIS teams.

I think too often, we are not like always good about pulling research. Actually, folks have spent a lot of time looking at data sets and reading a lot of research and knowing what works and what doesn't. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. We need to engage folks with it. We have worked with the National Equity Project for a number of years and started to build out what we called equity systems teams.

Christian: A big win is coming into this district and having the support of a district leadership team who gets it. The number one success is building the equity leadership structure and rolling out *Courageous Conversations* for the capacity building pieces. Another big success is the development of our MTSS infrastructure.

10) What are the biggest challenges (personal and professional) you have experienced in this work? (Maier, 2018)

Harper: Ignorance. People who are ignorant do not know that they are resistant and don't realize that they are being resistant because of ignorance. People who avoid me and don't realize that I know they are avoiding me.

Payton: I think some of the biggest challenges are some little passive aggressive pushbacks with things. People not wanting to attend things or not finding value or complaining. It can really bring your spirit down when you are doing things and a lot of people will say it is just so many things, just too much. You cannot let that shut you down because it can.

Kennedy: We have to be mindful that everybody's research within this work is not one of the same. Our foundational text is one of the few texts that really gets at the essence of equity without making it just about race. Most books in this day and age, and they are all racially focused because it sells. Inclusion and equity are so much more than that. One of the things we are realizing right now is that we probably need to create is some white affinity spaces. Why? Because our white people are feeling like they don't matter anymore.

I almost quit after my first year. I spent literally the whole year in an office (during the COVID-19 shut down). I spent the whole first year in there solo. Pretty much

my every day was coming to work and walking around my office and reading. I go from being a principal responsible for everything that happened in a building where you are constantly ping-ponging to literally sitting in an office fucking lonely and shit. I will say I hated it, but I loved it because out of that I learned two things my job and what I wanted my job to look like.

I learned how to cultivate relationships within this community. I also built an equity parent committee and a school equity committee and from that came some of my best ideas. I learned very quickly what I already knew but I needed to learn it here, relationships move the needle. The more people you have working on a problem that come from different perspectives, the better you have an idea of how that will play out and if it can and will work.

It is really helping people understand the need for this work. We did a couple of book studies. Then, we dove into data and saw how inequitable our system really is depending on where you come from. The greatest population of students is our Latinx population. We know our trajectory, and we are going to pretty soon become a Latinx district. How is it that this collection of people who make up the majority of our students do not have a shot at success in our district. It doesn't make sense. Every metric we were looking at, we are failing this population.

If you are bilingual and you have an IEP, you literally have no shot of even graduating. Now, how do you get people who need to really understand how to dig through this data to dig through and then make changes to their systems based off this data. A lot of old school people have been in their positions for a long time and teaching

them new ways of doing things is hard, especially when there is not a really firm top-down expectation.

Sidney: The biggest challenge is racism. That we try to clean it up instead of just calling it racism, we will call it everything else - you know, well that is new, they haven't been trained, and they haven't been trained ain't got nothing to do with me treating you like you are a human. It is awfully peculiar that I'm writing referrals, and 85% of my referrals are for children of color in my classroom. We call it everything else, but we have to get to a place where we just call it out. One out of every two Black children has a referral. It is a really clear and apparent indicator that we need training.

I am working with high schools on AP classes. You have students who are smart enough to pass these classes, but they get into the classroom, the teacher says to them directly, you might want to just drop this class. The teacher knows nothing about him, especially that his standardized test scores have been in the 90th percentile since elementary school and looks this child in his face and says, I do not think you are going to be successful in this class.

Blake: The challenges are the lack of knowledge. Everybody and their mother has a definition of equity and it does not align with what equity actually is. The biggest challenge is the lack of opportunity to norm that. Just to add to that as challenges go, the misconceptions, the limited knowledge around what equity work is and that limited knowledge of lack of understanding and the scope of the work that happens. Consider how my position was created in the position of the place that it is, and I feel like that comes from not a strong understanding of equity work. When I am facing people, yes, this is wonderful work but when I am not there, what is really happening.

Riley: How far is the district really willing to go. You know they have been very supportive thus far, and I am very lucky. Sometimes, we do a lot of background work and then a crisis comes up, so we have to put some work on the backburner. When the crisis is finally over, when I come back to the issue, then people ask, is this really necessary. We really do not want to stir the pot. Can we be proactive? It was a reminder that sometimes, they are willing to be reactive. It doesn't require a public situation to respond to everything. This is aligned to the things that we claim that we are committed to and what and who we aspire to be. If I had not pushed back, if I did not feel comfortable enough to challenge that, it would not have happened. Do they really want this?

Other challenges, of course, they are community members and even some staff who are not supportive of the work, and they try their best to disrupt as much as possible to prevent this work from happening. Keeping you busy by distracting you from the work with a lot of mistruths, misinformation, and sometimes flat out lies to confuse people in the community who might not really know what is going on at all.

I have had personal attacks on me where people direct message me on my Twitter account and threaten me or say really derogatory things. I got a really crazy email. I contacted our IT department to see if they could find out where it came from. I went to human resources and expressed that I am doing my job, and I do not feel safe doing my job, and that is a problem. You all need to protect me because I work here, and I am doing my job. They sent it to the police, and I had to file a police report. Then, I ended up having a police detail because they were basically trying to intimidate me to stop me from doing the work.

Jordan: I think a big challenge is how to have organizational instructional coherence and alignment. There are like only so many hours in a day so how do we stay committed to our priorities and the work. One of our biggest challenges can just be that organizational discipline around saying we are doing too much, or we are doing a lot of things, but we are not doing the right things. Our schools systems are complex organisms.

Christian: The biggest challenge is that there are only 168 hours in a week. The work is expansive, we touch everything from curriculum to budgets. I am anticipating some challenges with mindset shifting, teachers' beliefs and mindsets around students' ability to achieve at grade level and not lower the expectations for them is a challenge for us because our scores are not where they need to be.

11) What is one thing that you wish people understood about your work? (Maier, 2018)

Harper: That it is serious, it is not optional. That it is required, and it is not about you haven't had a chance to get to it yet, or you can't figure out how this is going to fit in. This is here to stay. We have been talking about this forever, and we are still asking the same questions. Maybe we need to take a break and look at what is really important. I am a department of one. I have a lot of random conversations that I'm pulled into that may or not be equity related. It is more of a Black-white fear thing.

Payton: Last year people were really talking at the board meetings about my salary and what do I do, just crazy stuff. I think people need to recognize my expertise in so many areas because I know a lot about curriculum, I know a lot about educational pedagogy, and I am a sound practitioner. People sometimes put you over here as equity is something different. Recognizing that no, we are looking at all these pieces, and it can be really vital

to the success of your institution and not to think of it is some add on or something that we just have extra money for, or we are wasting money on this extra little position.

Kennedy: I wish people understood the necessity of it. We always view it as an add-on, as an addition. This is the work. To me, real equity because once again, it is not racialized, it is about giving kids what they need to be successful at the end of the day. And when you strip it down, that is our job.

The second part is understanding that in order to do this work you have to understand a lot. I know what a good principal looks like, and I also know a wealth of things about equity work, and it is those two elements coming together. I fucking know a ton about PLCs. I think about restorative practices, and these are old skills I have accumulated over time. People don't realize that so when I tell them, no I do not need help on restorative practices, but I can help you in that area. I have been doing that for ten years. Why are you questioning whether that knowledge exists? It is like I got to prove that knowledge exists, and that shit is irritating. Just trust that I know what I am talking about and that does not always exist.

Sidney: That it is everybody's work even though I have become like the face of you know to treat people right in our school district and how treat students right. And provide a high-quality education for everybody, do not give the good education to the people who live on one side of town, and everybody else gets something else, a reduced version of what that is. This is all of our work for all children not for some of them.

Blake: That I got this. I wish people would trust my knowledge and my abilities. I wish they would give me the luxury of an opportunity to explain if they have questions, and that doesn't always happen. I wish people understood you cannot do equity work without

understanding race work, and that is a big part of it and not either or, but it is also more than that.

Riley: I think some people do understand this but it can be heavy. I had a heavy day yesterday. It can be very emotionally draining and taxing but I am in it. I am very thoughtful about my self-care. I will take a day and disconnect if I need to. I am Black so I am directly impacted by many of these things that we are having conversations about, and I have a Black child. It can just be really, really heavy. I think others might not realize that.

Jordan: When we think about equity, equity is about getting every student what they need every single day. Equity is about who has access to resources, who has access to accelerated programming, how do we embed opportunities during the day or how do we eliminate barriers so students who do not have access to it have the same opportunity. When we look at our system asking, what barriers have we put in place and interrogating those unapologetically and then doing what we need to do to remove those.

Christian: It is all encompassing, and it is not a sidebar, conversation, or extra thing that we are doing. It is a mindset shift in understanding that this work is woven into everything that we do. It is not a separate thing.

**13) What advice do you have for other equity directors looking to engage in equity work?
(Learned-Miller, 2018)**

Harper: You need to know what you are getting into because it is easy to burn out. I have had some colleagues say that they are not sure how long they are going to last. If you do not have experience at the district level, it is going to be harder coming from the building into this position because you have to have a global lens and when you come in

from the building, you still view it through a very narrow lens. Everything you are seeing is true, and the names have not been changed but let's focus. There is no right or wrong way to do this job, but you have to know the players and what the expectations are and do the work. My colleagues, we have a group, everything that we are doing there are some similarities, but it looks different in every single place. At first, I was like should I be doing this or that won't fly here so you just have to be confident and know that you know.

Payton: I want to say have a strong network of reaching out to other people who are in your same space. I have really tried to network with more educators who are more similar to my experience and background. I think it is really important to have that network. I think as educators of color there are just so few of us in so many spaces. Sometimes you just hear things that can bring you down, so I have really tried to surround myself with other like-minded identifying folks who are excellent, and I call on them and bring them in, and we do that for each other, so we know how to show up in places for each other. That has been really important.

Kennedy: In order to do this work and do this work well, you have to have a diverse skillset. I am not saying that you have to have been a principal but you have to understand the principalship. I am not saying you have to be restoratively trained but you have to understand restorative practices. To me, equity work is a meld of all of these pieces. You have to know PLCs because to me it is the best structure to move schools because it gives buy-in with what equity work is all about. If you are not willing to cultivate and craft all of this other knowledge National Equity Directors' Consortium then this is not for you. If you really want to dive into it, then be prepared to go to school

and pick up some of the pieces that you do not have at your disposal. To me, a good equity coach has to be a jack of all trades and might be a master of none but has to at least be a jack of all trades.

Sidney: Know the limitations that are going to be placed on you because when you walk in, you think that you can do everything and everybody agrees and wants to do everything that you want to do. The best advice that I could give is to be really clear about what your superintendent and board support you on and what they do not. Some of that you have to do by learning. You do not even know everything you probably want or should do when you walk in the door. There will be opportunities that arise, and you need to really have a clear grasp if those initiatives are going to be supported or not. You have to have a good line of communications with your superintendent. This is some of the best learning as it relates to the politics of education that you are ever going to acquire in your life.

Blake: My advice would be to understand your community and the needs of your district. Stay in the know, whether it is to maintain collaboration, networking opportunities, or reading. What is happening at a national level, local level, practice level, and research level. I understand how this work has evolved over the years. You need a good understanding of equity work and the social justice piece.

Riley: Self-care is important. We have talked about the kind of trauma and how emotional taxing this role is. Find your people, find networks, support systems for resources to lean on and partner with. Advocate for your role to have some sort of direct report like a team. You are collaborating across departments. If your position doesn't already report to the superintendent advocate for that path.

Jordan: What is your situatedness to the superintendent because if you are situated away from them that may be a challenge if sort of all the equity goals are tied to you. Ask questions about how are goals related to equity. If it is a part of every department. I think also understanding the political landscape of your community and what the community's expectations are. Also knowing the history of the community. Asking what are the metrics for success, if that is not clear, I think it can be a frustrating job.

Christian: I would advise new equity directors to build and make sure the infrastructure is there. These positions are relatively new in the realm of the preK-12 space. You are not always afforded the luxury of trust. Get your district leadership team to be able to engage and be prepared to lean into some strategic planning. Try to connect as many pieces of the system as you can.

14) Were there any tools or resources helpful in this work? What tools or resources would have been more helpful? (Learned-Miller, 2018)

Harper: *Coaching for Equity* by Elena Aguilar, *Stamped* by Ibram Kendi, *So You Want to Talk about Race*, *Courageous Conversations about Race*, *Culturally Responsive Teaching* and *the Brain* by Zaretta Hammond, and *Cultivating Genius* by Dr. Gholdy Muhammad.

Payton: The New York Times, ASCD books, and Learning for Justice

Kennedy: *Belonging through a Culture of Dignity*, Gloria Ladson-Billings' work, Geneva Gay's work, Brene Brown, *The Introduction to Transgender Studies*, Zaretta Hammond's work, bell hooks, *Power of Pedagogy*, *Demystifying Disability*, Elena Aguilar and some of her work around coaching. It is the coaching role because moving people is about partnership. *The Art of Coaching Teams*, *Cultivating Genius* by Dr.

Gholdy Muhammad, *We Want to Do More than Just Survive* by Bettina Love, ICEEL network, and an equity audit every five years.

Sidney: Conferences on equity and The AASA Howard University aspiring superintendents cohort academy.

Blake: Blogs and podcasts, you would be surprised what you find on all of those social avenues.

Riley: ICEEL, equity leaders across the state are so supportive of each other, and TED Talks.

Jordan: The National Equity Project has been nothing short of lifechanging. They have a lot of professional learning. Affinity spaces. Nonprofit organizations that are key players in certain work. You have to understand that work around equity is adaptive work and not technical. There can be technical aspects to it. You have to understand all the nuances and complexities of facilitating adaptive work. You have to know how to build relational trust with people, I mean it is critical. It is not just what you say, it is how you are, how you show up in spaces with people, being willing to call a thing a thing and embrace the concept of radical candor.

Christian: Glen Singleton's *Courageous Conversations* is a framework to hold space for authentic conversations about equity. We will start with race just because that is a predictor of success. It is not the only predictor of success or failure but as it stands now in our system, we can predict outcomes based on race when we look at discipline, academic achievement, and access to various opportunities. We use SAM, which is a system for MTSS, and it has been extremely helpful in building our MTSS infrastructure. The National Equity Directors Consortium has been a big help for me.

15) Is there anything else you would like to share? (Hansen, 2019)

Harper: I wish there was a better network. There are a couple of different networks that I belong to, but we are all so busy that nobody really has time to make it grow and flourish the way it needs to. Our jobs are so new and squeezed so tight that we do not have much time left to devote to these secondary professional equity groups that we are trying to form.

Payton: I hope people continue to support these positions because they are worthy. I hope they can see educators of color in other spaces besides just in the equity role because they do tend to be dominated by Black women. We are passionate about these roles but also, we can do many other roles.

Kennedy: You have got me thinking about my work in depth.

Sidney: It is hard. Hard work is hard work. It is painful to look at these scores every year and its kids that mirror us or look like our children. It would be just as painful if it was somebody else's kids. But when you are looking at your kids at the bottom of everything on the most negative end of every statistic we have in a school district, the number of IEPs and suspensions. It is painful. We need more Black folks doing this work. This work has to come from a place of passion of everybody in a school district because we are serving everybody. There is nobody who we are not responsible for.

We need to exist. We should exist. It should be a priority. Everywhere people teach children, there are disparities in outcomes for kids that you can see based on any number of factors.

Make sure that the school board that you are working with is educated about the work that you are doing but that is really not your job unless you are the superintendent.

You talk about the politics piece of it, you do not want people thinking that you are trying to step on their toes or embarrass them. I think that is how it is perceived or could be perceived. You have to know what you are dealing with. Communication is crucial so have consistent meetings with your superintendent.

Somebody has to do this work, and the people who do this work need to be supported. They are going through stress. You are being lied on. We have to take time to take care of ourselves.

Blake: This was fun.

Jordan: I commend you for doing this research. There needs to be more research I think done on this role. I'll be so curious in ten years to see if it like continues to exist or if boards just lose their interest. I hope they don't. I also think though they will if its seen as like one person's job and it is not embedded into like throughout an entire district, that is just like my hope for the profession. I would hate for this important work to get downplayed.

Christian: I am thankful that there is scholarship and research dedicated to better understanding and learning of these positions. They can be rolled out, even though you may have the same title, in a number of different ways. Whether we are managing equity, diversity, and inclusion or if we are really changing systems. One thing I would hope is that these positions are more aligned to ensuring system change.

You can celebrate a diversity calendar and be inclusive, all these things are very important but if we don't change the system, we will just have a bunch of students and folks who are happy with being acknowledged and recognized and included from a

celebratory standpoint rather than flipping a system to make sure it supports every one of our students, every one of our learners, in particular marginalized populations.

Data Analysis and Findings

How we got here. The heinous murder of George Floyd was a turning point in our country. Millions of Americans witnessed the crime on television because it was captured on video, and then millions of people took to the streets in protest. Companies began releasing statements denouncing the vicious act. Very soon thereafter, school districts were looking to hire equity directors, and then, positions were created. Kennedy stated, “When the George Floyd tragedy happened, directors of equity and inclusion became the talk of the town. This popped open. You always take something like this in the hopes that people are really ready to do real work.” Blake acknowledged, “Our country was in a very strenuous racial climate.”

Several districts were focusing on equity beforehand. Equity work is not new. Harper said, “We have been talking about this forever” and “thankfully our district had the foresight to create the position before George Floyd was murdered.” Christian identified that equity has always been around “in the sixties it was the civil rights movement, and in the 1860’s it was being an abolitionist.” Some districts were doing work beforehand; however, when COVID-19 hit, it slowed their work.

Definition of equity. Equity directors’ definition of equity was almost the same word for word. This is a mashup of their definitions, “Equity ensures a sense of belonging so all children, especially those who have been historically marginalized, have what they need to be successful. Students are nurtured, and we build on their strengths and assets. Each learner receives what they need to achieve and excel at high levels. This can only be accomplished by fully disrupting and redesigning our entire system. It affects policies, practices, behaviors, teaching, and leading. We

will no longer be able to predict outcomes based on race, socioeconomic status, documentation status, languages spoken, or any identifying factors. The voices and perspectives of underserved students, families, and communities would be welcomed, heard, and valued.” Harper believes it is a part of a mindset, “It is a part of the fabric of who we are, how we walk, how we breathe, and what we do.” Payton concurred that it is, “everything we do in education, and it should be how we are teaching and leading in schools today.”

There are aspects of this mashup from the equity directors that align with the New York Leadership Academy’s (NYCLA) definition. The NYCLA framework defines equity as "children and adults receive what they each need to achieve their potential and that their race, culture, and other characteristics of their identity do not prevent access to opportunities and resources" (Learned-Miller, 2018, p. 11). The Equity Framework defines equity as "educators provide all students with individual supports they need to reach a common standard" (Linton, 2011, p. 22). Blankstein and Noguera (2015) define equity as "a commitment to ensure that every student receives what he or she needs to succeed" (p. 3). In *Evident Equity: A Guide for Creating Systemwide Change in Schools*, Mascareñaz (2022) defines equity as "eliminating the predictability of success and failure that currently correlates with any number of social and cultural factors, such as race, language, and geographic location" (p. 4).

Experiences of own children. A couple of the equity directors connected with parents because of their own personal experiences. Harper shared, “Black parents were contacting me saying, we need your help.” I empathized with them because the thing that got me seriously down this path was the experiences of my three sons. Kids made monkey noises when my oldest son walked down the hallway. Some children told my younger sons they could not be their friend because they had brown skin.” Riley shared, “I am Black, and I have a Black child.”

These real-life experiences made equity directors even more passionate about doing the work. They were not just doing their work because it is their job. They were fully invested so no one else would have to encounter the racial trauma that their children experienced.

Perspective on the role. Most equity directors share the belief that it is everyone’s responsibility to ensure that schools are equitable. Harper asserted equity work is “not optional.” Kennedy said, “it is a necessity”, “it is the work”, and “it is our job.” Riley captured the essence of the work, “equity and inclusion is all intertwined, it is not its own separate thing.” Sidney asserted, “This is everybody’s work.” These perspectives align with the NYCLA’s framework to train a team of administrators to carry out the work (Learned-Miller, 2018). *Evident Equity’s* framework outlines the need to build a coalition because no one can do this work alone (Mascareñaz, 2022) .

As Christian stated, “This work has always existed, and it is not an extra thing that we are doing.” Riley shared, “the district needed a point person to ensure it is happening, to hold people accountable and to provide support, guidance, and resources.” Equity directors ultimately ensure that everyone is held to higher standards. They work with every department and every school.

Equity is a mindset. Equity is the work, the goal, and the ultimate success. Riley said, “We have to weave those threads of an equity lens and mindset throughout everything.” Harper says, “I always talk about being equity-minded...it is a part of the fabric of who we are, how we walk, how we breathe, and what we do.” Payton believes, “It is everything we do in education.” Kennedy says, “When you strip it down, equity is our job” and “this is the work.” Sidney said, “We are coaching teachers with equity in mind.”

Blake stated there is a need for “Equity to be visible or infused as a part of everyday practices.” Jordan concurred that “It would become a part of the fabric. There is some mindset

shifting that needs to happen.” Christian too believes, “It is a mindset shift in understanding that this work is woven in everything that we do. It is not a separate thing.” Every equity director viewed equity as a mindset and not as an initiative.

Two of the frameworks aligned with these beliefs. Mascareñaz (2022) explicitly states in her framework that one of the four pillars, structured equity, requires leaders to think of equity as the crux of their work. *Five Practices for Equity-focused School Leadership*'s framework posits that one leader cannot do this work alone and advocates for developing equity-focused leadership teams (Radd et al., 2021). Conversely, Linton (2011) only refers to equity as a lens which does reflect the same viewpoint as the equity directors.

Equity in the strategic plan. When equity is embedded in the strategic plan, it focuses the work that needs to be done and illuminates the criticality. Strategic plans drive goals which drive action steps. Harper asserted, “It is no longer this thing that we roll out in a binder.” Payton said, “We are doing this work from our strategic plan. It doesn't just pivot to me and equity. I think that's been really key is that we really to design things that we all speak about together, and it is not just my job. I am a resource for everyone and assist in that.” Jordan said, “All of my colleagues have equity goals tied to their role” and “it is not just the equity director's role to address equity.” Blake is, “Working on a new strategic plan to make sure equity is visible throughout that plan.”

Christian said, “When we think about our strategic plan, there are equitable systems goals that exist in there and all of our goals have undertones of equity in them so it is something that is embedded in our system. It has to be a part of the fabric of who we are as an organization, our ethos.” Riley said, “At the time I started, the district had a strategic plan in place so I worked to establish a comprehensible equity plan that would complement the existing strategic plan. The

district is in the process of developing a new strategic and the equity components will be in the new one, and it won't be a separate document. Some folks liked the fact that it was a separate document because it was a lot more meat to it when it was just its own separate thing. It is important for people to see that this is how we should be operating. So, when it is a part of the larger plan, to me, that sends a stronger message.”

Some equity directors created equity plans. Equity directors who did not have equity written into their current strategic plan were working towards embedding it in the next version of the plan. The strategic plan outlines goals and action steps. The strategic plan is monitored closely for progress.

Positioning is important. Harper and Blake report to a cabinet member and find that troublesome. Harper initially reported to the superintendent; however, was repositioned because he was busy. Harper was disappointed by this shift in staffing and reported the dismay to human resources to ensure it was on the record. Blake said, “It is the way that I’m positioned within the organization. There are other individuals sitting at the executive table, and I have to depend on them to speak from this lens, and that does not happen.”

Payton, Kennedy, Sidney, Riley, Jordan, and Christian report directly to the superintendent. Payton shared, “I am on our cabinet, and that is really important, I think in these equity roles. I think it is important that you are in the position of being in that room where those decisions are being made.” Sidney believes the role on cabinet allows for them to think, “How can we make the district better.” Christian believes, “It starts with leadership”, and collaboration with the cabinet helps “stay connected and work across roles.” Riley believes, “It is important to have the ear of the person who really can drive change, and who is the liaison with the school

board, the folks who drive change.” The equity directors were all in agreement that new equity directors should advocate for their position to report to the superintendent.

Curriculum and instruction are core. Every equity director believes it is important to work closely with the curriculum and instruction team. Sidney said, “I work with teaching and learning every day in some way mostly to align the equity work.” Sidney is, “really pushing for curricular alignment. We are teaching x, and we are being tested on y, and for some reason we keep teaching x, like no matter what the test scores say, we just keep teaching x. We see year after year, it is not working, but we still keep teaching x.” Payton concurred, “This is how we are teaching.” Riley said, “I cannot talk about equity without talking about curriculum and instruction. That is the core of what we do.” Jordan stated, “It is about instructional design when it comes down to it. We can do all these system changes but it also has to be about how is instruction such that students want to be there and a part of it.”

Kennedy is working on, “Adopting new curricular materials frameworks, making sure that they are culturally sensitive.” Harper said, “We are already taking a look at our curriculum to see how we incorporate not only culturally responsive practices but the social justice standards and CASEL standards. Sidney knows, “We have a lot of work to do. A lot of it boils down to one thing, our curriculum. We do not have a viable curriculum in any content area.” Blake said, “We are working on a curriculum. A one-stop shop for all courses, and a viable curriculum that works for all dual language learners, bilingual students, general education students, and diverse learners.”

While the curriculum and instruction work looked slightly different for each equity director, most directors were in the process of implementing culturally responsive units. They were experiencing pushback from teachers. The equity directors were using adaptive versus

technical solutions to address this resistance. They used Singleton and Linton's (2006) *Courageous Conversations* as a framework to engage in racially charged conversations. *Courageous Conversations* is a precursor to Linton's (2011) *The Equity Framework*. This framework posits the importance of culturally relevant materials and aligns with the equity director's desire to implement rigorous and relevant units.

Salazar & Lerner (2019) designed the *Framework for Equitable and Excellent Teaching* to advocate for the use of culturally responsive pedagogy to engage students in critical thinking to create change. If teachers were evaluated using this model, Kennedy and Christian would not have such a hard time pivoting to the use of a culturally responsive unit because teachers would be striving for integration to be successful on their evaluation. *The Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom* framework also posits that cultural responsiveness is critical to achieving excellence in pedagogy (Stembridge, 2020). *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* can be used across the curriculum because literacy pertains to all subject areas (Muhammad, 2020). This is the reason why this framework is most widely used by the equity directors.

Principals are key. Kennedy and Sidney both served as building principals for several years. Their perspective on implementing equity practices are similar. Kennedy would, "love to just coach principals on creating more equitable environments. At the end of the day, I'm mindful that principals move needles, district staff does not." Sidney said, "We do monthly professional development with principals."

Kennedy and Sidney were not New Leaders for New Schools-trained principals. They are not familiar with the Urban Excellence Framework (UEF); however, their perspectives that principals lead the transformation of their building aligns with this framework. The UEF calls for

principals to drive change. The UEF guides principals to implement the instructional changes necessary to increase student achievement. Based on the principal's instructional leadership, schools should dramatically improve (NLNS, 2008).

The New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA) was instituted to train principals to be effective. This framework aligns with Kennedy and Sidney's desire to coach principals. The NYCLA framework also stresses the importance of central office school leaders' role to help close opportunity gaps (Learned-Miller, 2018).

Trust is foundational. Trust is important in all relationships. This aligns with the *Excellence through Equity's* framework aspect of building sustainable relationships (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015). Within Christian's cabinet, "there is a level of trust." All equity directors don't have that. Christian's experience is different than most other equity directors. Payton wishes, "people would recognize my expertise in so many areas because I know a lot about curriculum, educational pedagogy, and I am a sound practitioner. Blake wishes, "people would trust my knowledge and my abilities" and know, "I got this." Kennedy said, "It is like I've got to prove that knowledge exists, and that shit is irritating. Just trust that I know what I am talking about and that does not always exist."

The equity work. Equity directors' work is usually guided by the results of an equity audit. Blake has been in the position for six years, and said, "we started off with an equity audit. That was the first thing that I did when I took office. I think it was important for us to do that in order to give a voice to the community, give a voice to our staff, give a voice to everyone all stakeholders in this work" and "from there, we received recommendations to move the workforce." Harper said, "they created my position, and then they decided they wanted to do an equity audit, but they did not know all of the details of that, so my first task was setting that up

and seeing it through” and “talking with our equity auditor gave me my marching orders and a little bit of guidance in terms of where to start.”

Although the work of the equity directors is similar, it does not fit into a box. Harper is working on “prepping for a professional learning session.” Kennedy said, “I spend all Fridays in schools” while Riley, “gets out to schools a few times a week.” Blake spends time, “meeting with schools and walk-throughs.” Blake also realized that means principals need to have goals for equity “written in their school improvement plans” and supports them with that work. Jordan was the only person who mentioned “evaluating principals.”

Riley states, “I work closely with human resources in diversifying our workforce. We look at which recruitment fairs we are going to go to. We honestly do not have to recruit because so many people want to work for us. We will get the same applicants we have always gotten if we sit on our hands and do nothing. We cannot just rest on our laurels. We have to do the work. You have to establish relationships with Historically Black Colleges. We are a small district, and Black people need to know that they can trust you, and that requires relationship building. You cannot expect results overnight because it takes patience. Harper is, “working on hiring and diversifying our staff to represent our student demographic” with the help of an outside professional organization and has a Grow Your Own program for students.

Payton says, “we are looking at our hiring practices and how it is structured from the beginning of the process all the way through including the questions” and “we have an individual hiring equity training for every individual hiring team.” Sidney too spends a great portion of time, “working to ensure our staffing mirrors the racial percentages in the student population. We are working on getting future teachers of color certified. We have some partnerships with

universities. We have a chance with working with people who already work here and committed to the community.”

Kennedy is “working on creating a district equity committee that will meet with the superintendent.” Harper has been in place for three years and has a district leadership equity team up and running. Sidney has, “an equity that represents the whole district with every race and income level with paraprofessionals, retirees, grandparents, parents, cabinet-level administrators, and teachers. Blake also has an equity council.

Blake hosts a community advisory team and meets with faith partners. Sidney works with “the NAACP and faith organizations.” Payton, “does a lot of community events” (which requires a lot of planning).

Harper and Payton have student equity advisory team to elevate students’ voice. Kennedy said, “A lot of our schools have student affinity spaces.” Kennedy believes it is essential to “create a sense of belonging among students.” Payton also has student “girls’ affinity spaces.”

Policies are critical because they define what can and cannot be done. Blake honed in on modifying policies, “we created a process for me and the legal department to review pretty much all of our policies. We have a lot of policies so we cannot do those in one sitting. We prioritize them by year. I created a rubric that we use to evaluate those policies.” Although only in the second year, Sidney is, “looking at sample policies.” Riley said, “I have been able to work with the committees to make recommendations to the board for changes. We have made some positive changes to policies where we have examined them with an equity lens. We looked at who benefits from this policy and who doesn’t.”

According to Jordan, “A number of years ago, our board passed a district equity policy that is thorough and quite expansive. It identifies core areas that we need to address. We rewrote

our student handbook, and our dress code changed dramatically. Problem solving is the essence of the work that Blake does, “empowering those who do own the work” by “supporting colleagues on how they can address and move through.”

In their frameworks, Linton (2011) and Blankstein & Noguera (2015) both share real-life examples of the equity work that school leaders were doing which align to the equity directors’ accounts of their work. In the *Five Practices for Equity-focused School Leadership* framework, an equity audit works twofold. The quantitative aspect takes place by gathering disaggregated data to assess disproportionalities. The qualitative aspect involves listening to the voices of students, families, and staff via surveys and focus groups. The strategic plan is created or improved utilizing the information from the audit (Radd et al., 2021).

Professional learning is a building block. Every equity director facilitates professional learning for teachers and administrators. This learning is key to shifting practices. Jordan and Christian both said verbatim, “Building capacity” is important. Kennedy said, “We are focusing on professional development and just building some general structures.” Jordan is “working with partners who are facilitating professional learning for us and working through those plans.” Blake said, “I support the work by providing professional development on culturally responsive practices.” Although they know shifting mindsets may take years, the equity directors strive to do so every day.

Data, data, data. Data is critical to reflective practice. Data presents indisputable facts that no one can deny. When Christian started, “I got with data and assessment, and we laid out a ton of data that was no surprise to anyone around the different disparities and inequities that exist.” Kennedy is, “trying to get our staff to be better at data disaggregation, and data disaggregation through a cultural lens, breaking kids in groups and looking at progression.”

Harper, “is looking at the disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic students who are discipline compared to their white counterparts...we are looking at what that means from a system’s lens.”

The successful schools chronicled in Linton (2011) also focused on data-driven instruction. One aspect of the *Excellence through Equity* framework is facing the facts and your fears which requires data-disaggregation (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015). The *Five Practices for Equity-focused School Leadership* framework suggest the pursuit and use of accurate data (Radd et al., 2021).

Affinity spaces are sacred. An affinity space is a place where people who share similar identities can connect and share experiences and feelings. Kennedy has “adult affinity spaces for African Americans, Latinx, and LGBTQ+.” Payton too has, “done quite a bit of work with creating an affinity space and growing that community within a community because people feel so disconnected, often they do not see each other.” Christian said, “There was already an affinity group of people of color that was formulated after George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Riley explained, “We recently established affinity groups within our district. The first one we had came as a result of a lot of civil and social unrest, racial unrest due to the hand of brutal murders of Black people at the hands of law enforcement. We had Black staff, and there’s just a few of them, who walked into buildings feeling isolated, lonely, like no one understood. We actually had a person call human resources, and say, ‘I can’t be here’. We needed a space, a space for people who have experienced certain traumatic experiences as a collective to come together to have community and be able to unpack things when they happen.

It then expanded to the LGBTQ+ community of four employees. I am talking about taking care of our people. We need our people to be in a good space so they can be there for our

kids. They can put their best selves forward for our students. And if you notice, I did not say teachers. It is for all our employees.”

Payton has affinity spaces for students, and said, “a big part of my work is really building those connections for our students...connections to resources and interest versus just supports.” While some affinity spaces were initiated by an equity director, some emerged from grassroots efforts of staff members. *Cultivating Genius* details how affinity spaces existed in the early 1800’s to advance the social conditions of Blacks.

Where do we go from here? For district leaders and new equity directors who want to engage in equitable practices and need guidance about what to do next, Riley said it will require, “A full disruption – a total redo of systems and practices” while “elevating the voices and perspectives of those who have been historically left out of the conversation and most adversely impacted by a lot of existing structures.” Jordan said that it will “Require revolutionary transformative ways of thinking” to eliminate inequities. Radd et al. (2021) discuss the adaptive and the technical stages of work. Based on the equity interviews with the equity directors, they are mostly in the adaptive stage of implementation and moving into the technical stage.

Interviews through CRT and CRT in Education Theoretical Frameworks

Critical race theory has been misinterpreted and vilified in the news (Fortin, 2021). Reporters and critics may be able to summarize CRT’s historical beginnings; however, they fail to understand CRT’s basic tenets. The three tenets of CRT are race is a social construct, racism is so normalized that it is nearly invisible and intangible, and the “system of white-over-color ascendancy” (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017, p. 8). The failure to understand these tenets has led to widespread opinion that CRT is being taught and should not be taught in elementary and secondary schools.

CRT is not a part of the traditional K-12 curriculum. The perspectives of people of color are not a part of the traditional K-12 curriculum either (Loewen, 2007). CRT was a hot button topic in 2021; however, it resurfaced in 2023. Most recently, the governor of Florida rejected the College Board's Advanced Placement course for African American History (Hartocollis & Fawcett, 2023). It is impossible to have an authentic conversation about history without the topic of race emerging so just because teachers talk about race does not mean that they are teaching CRT. Higher-order thinking should naturally lead students to examine how history juxtaposes with their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Opponents do not know that the CRT theoretical framework is used to understand what has happened and is happening in America. Primarily, graduate and doctoral students engage this framework to make meaning of their research. This meaning provides context for their findings, conclusions, and recommendations. This study uses CRT and CRT in Education as theoretical frameworks to examine the praxis of equity directors (Lynn & Parker, 2006).

The first tenet of CRT is that race is a social and political construct used to possess and maintain power. Race provides a visual cover for children to be categorized. Despite skin color and attributes, there is no biological evidence of differences of humans (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017). Race is used as a demographic descriptor for children in schools.

All the equity directors referenced race. Harper said, "we have to think about what is going to be best for our students of color." Sidney courageously asserted, "things are racially charged and polarized." Blake agreed, "race is first and foremost because it guides everything that we do, even though people do not want to admit it." Jordan posited we need to "eliminate the impact of race." Christian said, "we need to disrupt systems that have disproportionately

impacted Black and Brown students ever since education has been around.” These findings align with this CRT tenet.

Race is a social construct that impacts our work in schools. Race is visibly seen and drives the differences in the treatment of students. Equity directors confirmed what hundreds of years of data already told us. Black and Brown children are suspended at a rate of four to five times that of white students (Salazar & Lerner, 2019; Simson, 2014). Black students are less likely to be recommended for A.P. classes (Morris, 2002; Radd et al., 2021; T. Conrad, personal communication, December 4, 2019). Education, as it currently exists, is oppressive and promulgates students as deficient when our system is the real problem (Valencia, 2010).

The second tenet of CRT is that racism is normal (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017). Racism occurs when students are treated differently. Harper said staff members practice avoidance, and “people are resistant because of ignorance.” Payton noted experiencing, “passive aggressive pushbacks.” Sidney courageously called it out, “the biggest challenge is racism.” Harper, Kennedy, and Christian used *Courageous Conversations about Race* as a framework to discuss race and set the stage for discussions about racism with their staff.

Every equity director focused on creating a culture where students feel like they belong. *A Sense of Belonging* was being used to create a climate where students feel welcome. Sidney reported that a teacher told a Black A.P. student that he may want to drop the class because he may not be successful despite the student having academically proven himself. Harper shared the personal experience of their children being bullied by students making monkey noises. Sidney and Blake expressed that the district may not act until challenged by members of the Black community. Riley shared that they received personal threats of bodily harm. While none of these experiences should be seen as normal, these experiences are a horrific part of the equity

directors' journey. CRT asserts racism is a part of how America was formed; therefore, a permanent part of our being (Bell, 1995). Equity directors fight fervently against racism in education. Their work indicates a disbelief regarding the permanence of racism and the hope for a brighter future.

The third tenet of CRT is the system of white-over-color ascendancy. Aspects of the directors' definition of equity prove that this ascendancy is in place. Their definitions include, "Equity ensures a sense of belonging so all children, especially those who have been historically marginalized, have what they need to be successful. Students are nurtured, and we build on their strengths and assets. Each learner receives what they need to achieve and excel at high levels. This can only be accomplished by fully disrupting and redesigning our entire system. It affects policies, practices, behaviors, teaching, and leading. We will no longer be able to predict outcomes based on race, socioeconomic status, documentation status, languages spoken, or any identifying factors. The voices and perspectives of underserved students, families, and communities would be welcomed, heard, and valued." Dismantling this system will be beneficial for all people, including white people.

The white-over-color ascendancy also showed up in the curriculum. Kennedy and Christian discussed resistance while trying to implement one single unit with authors of color in the English language arts curriculum. Kennedy shared that a teacher said he would not know how to teach a text with an author of color. Kennedy wondered how the teacher taught *To Kill a Mockingbird* which mentions the "n" word ad nauseam. Christian shared teachers were vehemently opposed to changing the curriculum by adding authors of color. Black children deserve to learn about authors who look like them (Woodson, 1933/1990). Whites use their

norms, beliefs, customs, and traditions to compare, stratify, hegemonize, and marginalize Black and Brown children.

None of the equity directors openly mentioned CRT during the interviews. Data and outcomes show that racism permeates our schools yet it is not always candidly and openly discussed in terms of this theoretical framework. By examining their work, this research found the social construct of race emerges because of the physical attributes of children, students experience racism, and Black and Brown students are compared to white students. Student achievement remains a focal point with the achievement gap versus the opportunity gap being a constant topic of conversation. While CRT is not being taught in K-12 education, the tenets show up every day, are present, and accounted for.

Critical Race Theory in Education is built on CRT (Leonardo, 2012). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) created the Critical Race Theory in Education framework to examine school inequities. The three propositions of Critical Race Theory in Education are inequities are based on race, rights are based on property holdings, and the intersectionality of race and property. The aforementioned equity directors' experiences indicate inequities based on race. Schools are funded based on taxes, taxes are determined based on property ownership, and schools with a high percentage of children of color rate receive less funding (Baker, 2008 & Brimley, et al., 2016).

There are five tenets of Critical Race Theory in Education. One tenet is that race is deeply rooted and inextricable to gender and socioeconomic status. Sidney shared, "The biggest gaps are along racial and income lines. Low-income families get the worst of everything, and then you have Black families, immigrant families, students with individualized education plans

(IEPs), and biracial students. Things are racially charged and polarized and economically charged and polarized.”

Another tenet is committed to dismantling sexism, poverty, and racism (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Equity in schools today attacks these premises. Christian shared, “equity is about providing students what they need to find success by disrupting systems that have disproportionately impacted Black, Brown, poor, and underserved people negatively ever since education has been around. Today we are naming it equity, in the sixties it was civil rights, and in the 1860’s it was being an abolitionist.”

The third tenet challenges the dominance of white privilege (Patton, 2016). Kennedy shared, “we are predominately Latinx, but you go in our building, and we have got no Latinx signage, and we have no Latinx staff. We are not very hospitable to the Latinx community.” Kennedy also expressed, “one of the things we are realizing right now is that we probably need to create is some white affinity spaces. Why? Because our white people are feeling like they don’t matter anymore.” Some whites in this school community are more concerned about themselves than they are for Latinx families.

The fourth tenet compels us to value the experiential knowledge of families, and the fifth tenet honors multiple perspectives (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Riley shared the need to, “elevate the voices and perspectives of those who have historically been left out of the conversation and most adversely impacted by a lot of existing structures and have their voices, perspectives, and experiences sought out, not in a superficial way but in a very meaningful way so they can meaningfully engage and benefit from what the schools have to offer.” Blake agreed, “I think it was important for us to do that in order to give a voice to the community, give a voice

to our staff, give a voice to everyone, and all stakeholders in this work.” The knowledge and perspectives of Black and Brown families are affirmed by equity directors.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explain that although race is a social construct, it disadvantages Black people. Opportunities to learn are intentionally and unconsciously withheld from Black students through school disciplinary procedures that keep them from attending class (Harris, 1993; Morris, 2002). Sidney detailed accounts of students being sent out of class for weeks at a time. Jordan has been focused on reducing suspensions for students of color. CRT in Education challenges the ways race and racism impact school practices (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Saddler, 2005; Salazar & Lerner, 2019).

The equity directors in this study work vehemently to disrupt racism and instill equitable practices. Harper noted, “equity is about disrupting, you know, stop doing the same thing, if it doesn’t work, you are going to get the same results. We have got to think about what is going to be best for our students of color. What systemic changes need to be made so they will exceed and excel at the same rate for all students all the time.” Sidney posited, “the biggest gaps are along racial and income lines. Low-income families get the worst of everything, and then you have Black families, immigrant families, students with individualized education plans (IEPs), and biracial students. Things are racially charged and polarized, economically charged and polarized, and politically charged and polarized.” Riley stated, “equity requires a lot of systemic change and requires some full disruption – a total redo of systems and practices.” Christian agreed and stated, “equity is about providing students what they need to find success by disrupting systems that have disproportionately impacted Black, Brown, poor, and underserved people negatively ever since education has been around.”

CRT in Education is used to understand policies (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Moore, 2005; Saddler, 2005; Villenas & Hyde, 1999). Harper said, “equity is about all students, always, all the time, and that means policies, practices, behavior changes, professional learning, parents, teachers, and administrators. Christian shared, “schools are not currently structured so all students can be successful. There needs to be a disruption of current practices and a systemic change/overhaul, so all students get what they need to achieve and excel.” Blake has been, “working with the district to rewrite policies through the development of a policy rubric.” Riley works to, “examine policies through an equity lens looking at who the policies benefit and are designed for.”

Equity Frameworks through the Theoretical Frameworks

The equity frameworks all align with CRT and CRT in Education in that they all acknowledge that inequities exist in our school system and vehemently work to provide educators with information and resources to overcome barriers (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015; Holme & Finnigan, 2018; Learned-Miller, 2018; Linton, 2011; Mascareñaz, 2022; NLNS, 2008; Radd et al., 2021; Salazar & Lerner, 2019; Stembridge, 2020).

In its definition of equity, NYCLA identifies race as a barrier (Learned-Miller, 2018). *Excellence through Equity's* frameworks shares narratives that offer very practical solutions to end the predictability of how "race, socioeconomic status, and zip code" correlate with student success and school quality (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015, p. 13). *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom's* framework calls on educators to eradicate racism. Stembridge (2020) advocates for a high-quality education for all students, including Black and Brown, as our best strategy to maintain our positioning as a global economic leader.

Mascareñaz (2022) offers an equity heat map as a framework for tackling the inequities that plagues our schools. *The Evident Equity Framework* also calls for the voices of students, parents, and the community to make decisions resulting in system changes.

NLNS's (2008) belief that school leaders should develop cultural competence to affirm students' background and language aligns with the commitment to value the knowledge of families (Yosso, 2005). Salazar & Lerner (2019) built the *Framework for Equitable and Excellent Teaching* (FEET) on the CRT framework . FEET seeks to use culturally responsive pedagogy to engage students in critical thinking to create change. Feet also encourages the voice of the Black and Brown community in the formation of an evaluation system.

Holme & Finnigan (2018) describe how white and affluent families siege financial, geographical, and political resources. This aligns with CRT's tenet of white-over-color ascendancy and CRT in Education's tenet which challenges the dominance of white privilege (Patton, 2016).

Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy aligns perfectly with all of CRT and CRT in Education's tenets. It calls for students to develop criticality which causes them to raise critical questions and implement societal changes. This framework calls for uplifting Black students which includes magnifying their voices. Muhammad (2020) candidly states that the educational system was not built for Black students, and curriculum, textbooks, and standardized testing were not developed with them in mind. This framework's candor also cites that our system is steeped in racism.

The *Five Practices for Equity-focused School Leadership* framework guides leaders to learn about multiple perspectives. After reflecting on one's practice, an urgent call to action

invokes leaders to embark toward transformative change. This framework provides tools and resources to disrupt the inequities in schools and make change happen.

Learned-Miller (2018) and Linton (2011) discuss an achievement gap which does not align with CRT in Education. Ladson-Billings (2006) posits the achievement gap is an opportunity gap. The work of the equity directors evidenced that Black and Brown students do not have the same opportunities to learn because they are excluded from A.P. classes at a higher rate than white students, and they do not always have access to culturally relevant curriculum.

Using CRT and CRT in Education as frameworks, we acknowledge racism is a part of America's DNA. It is not always obvious because it is so deeply rooted that it has become a way of life. Analyzing education through these lenses, we know racism is the cornerstone of the American schoolhouse. Ignorance denies children a quality education because of the color of their skin and the income of their family. We are all connected, so this disservice affects everyone.

Summary

The narratives shine a light on the practice of equity directors. Their stories allow us to peer into their world and their work. All eight equity directors were willing to share their journey to advance the collective work. Their experiences span from two to six years, and their work paves a path for all school leaders – teachers, principals, district-level administrators, and especially for new equity directors.

From the directors' stories, themes emerged. They shared how their work began and how it evolved. They also shared their hopes for a brighter, more equitable future. Hope is not a strategy, so from their experiences, we must draw knowledge, wisdom, and courage to blaze our paths.

Throughout Illinois, equity directors are doing similar work to improve outcomes for all students, especially students who have been historically marginalized. These directors uplift voices, change trajectories, and, most importantly, empower a future generation.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.

– Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to provide school leaders with actionable steps to implement equity within their school community. The researcher critically analyzed several equity frameworks. This study found that three of the equity directors interviewed used one of the frameworks, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* by Dr. Gholdy Muhammad to translate theory into practice. Directors indicated the curriculum is the cornerstone of their school so shifting their practice in this area is crucial to student success. Muhammad (2020) provided guidance on how to redesign our system.

During this study, all eight equity directors shared their stories about their journey to establish and implement equitable practices. From their experiences, wisdom, and guidance emerged that yield direction. This study sought to do more than provide recommendations. By sharing the narratives of equity directors, this study presents concrete, actionable steps that can be used by school leaders, especially new equity directors.

This chapter discusses the findings of the three research questions that prompted this study. The implications of the study will also be discussed. The action steps provide a call to action. Equity is the civil rights movement of our time. School leaders must act bravely, courageously, and swiftly to provide all children with what they need to be successful (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015).

Discussion and Implication of Findings

R1: How are equity directors translating theory into praxis?

Equity directors spent time doing research. They used that research to develop and implement policies, practices, and procedures. The research often took the form of reading books. Kennedy spent much of the first year reading as much as possible. At other times, it was engaging in professional learning. Jordan spent a lot of time engaging in professional development offered virtually by the National Equity Project. According to Jordan, “we do not need to reinvent the wheel.”

Sidney and Jordan spent a great deal of time implementing programs to eliminate or minimize school exclusion. According to Sidney, “research shows a correlation between the number of hours or days that you are not in school and the likelihood that you will or will not graduate.” Jordan and Christian used their research to develop their MTSS infrastructure. Equity directors suggested everything be research-based. Equity directors translated theory into praxis by developing policies, practices, procedures, and professional learning.

Policies. Blake, Jordan, and Riley relied on policies to guide and sustain change. Blake developed a tool to analyze policies. Jordan was fortunate to walk into a policy that had already been developed. Riley worked with the legal team to ensure a culture of belonging through policies for affinity spaces.

Practices. Jordan used a framework for increasing equity in school discipline to analyze data dramatically reduce school exclusion. Sidney, too, used data to reduce school exclusion. Payton developed a practice of conducting professional learning for every hiring team and having teams consider the position's needs. Blake worked with principals to develop SMARTIE

goals for school improvement plans. Payton, Kennedy, and Riley developed affinity spaces for staff and students.

Procedures. Kennedy used the text *Microaggressions in Everyday Life* to establish a system and a microinterventions protocol for reporting microaggressions. This was especially important for students who were being called the “n” word. Students need to be emotionally safe at school.

Professional learning. Kennedy did a book study using the text, *Belonging through a Culture of Dignity*. Christian laid a foundation, “rolling out *Courageous Conversations* for the capacity-building pieces.” *Courageous Conversations* was also declared to be a framework and was also widely utilized by the equity directors in the adaptive stages of their work. Payton facilitated a book club using, *Cultivating Genius*, which is the most widely used equity framework that was highlighted in this study.

R2: How are equity directors approaching praxis during their first year?

Capacity building. Some directors spent a lot of time reading during their first year. To build capacity, book studies were then held with teachers, school-based administrators, and district-level administrators. Directors also spent time engaging in professional development opportunities. Jordan and Christian both spoke about the need to build capacity and infrastructure. People need time to explore their mental models and understand the why.

Equity Audit. During the inaugural year, equity directors start after an equity audit has been conducted or lead their districts through an equity audit. After the audit, Harper said, “Talking with our equity auditor gave me my marching orders and a little bit of guidance in terms of where to start. The report and the findings revealed areas of strength and areas of improvement as it relates to equity. Based on those recommendations, I created our district

equity leadership team, our student equity advisory council, and our community equity advisory council.” Blake, too, started with an equity audit and said, “that was the first thing that I did when I took office. I think it was important for us to do that in order to give a voice to the community, give a voice to our staff, give a voice to everyone, all stakeholders in this work.” Some equity audits are qualitative, and some are quantitative. The quantitative aspect takes place by gathering disaggregated data to assess disproportionality. The qualitative aspect involves listening to the voices of students, families, and staff via surveys and focus groups.

Data disaggregation. Many districts focused on data during the first year. Data disaggregation is essential to illuminate disparities that may not otherwise be apparent. Kennedy said, "We are trying to get our staff to be better at data disaggregation, and data disaggregation through a cultural lens, breaking kids into groups and looking at progression." Sidney says, "we had a data review at the end of the school year with building-level academic, behavioral, social-emotional learning (SEL), attendance, and the 5Essentials data. We looked at district and building-level data, and we disaggregated the data by race, income, and IEP status. There is a discrepancy.”

Culture of belonging. Sidney said, "we are having some really serious conversations about the reality of being othered." Kennedy started with a book study about *The Sense of Belonging* to address this. Belonging is the third level of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Kennedy said, “we have from a systemic standpoint, and we are working on people understanding that diversity, equity, and inclusion is so huge, it permeates all areas. The focus was not just about race; it was also for LGBTQ+ students who did not feel welcome.” Payton focused on students believing, "Another big part of my work is building those connections for our students. How are they having certain affinity spaces and connection to resources and interest versus just supports.”

Christian says, “there was already an affinity group of people of color that was formulated after George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.” Riley started with, “a gender equity statement that made it clear to our staff what the district expects of them in regard to accepting and affirming people's identities. That was, unfortunately, a problem here. Not everyone wanted to respect and affirm people's identities. We made it clear what we expected of them in the context of the school community. People have their own opinions outside of work, but in this space, we made sure to do the necessary research around laws and recent litigation.”

Harper suggests, "know the players and what the expectations are and do the work." expectations of the role. Jordan emphasized, “understanding the political landscape of your community and what the community’s expectations are. Also knowing the history of the community. Asking what are the metrics for success.” If students, staff, and families do not have a sense of belonging, everything will be hard to accomplish.

Planning. Directors either started working to have equity embedded in the strategic plan or developing an equity plan. Most believed that if it were in the strategic plan, it would carry more weight, and people would not consider it separate and optional. Payton started by "building equity into the strategic plan." Sidney started by creating a district-wide equity plan. Sidney said, “we have an equity team that represents the whole district with every race and income level with paraprofessionals, retirees, grandparents, parents, cabinet-level administrators, and teachers. Kennedy is planning on building “systems; our goal right now is to do things like that.”

Policy. The policy sets the vision and provides guidance. Jordan started with a "district equity policy that is thorough and quite expansive. It identifies core areas we need to address. We rewrote our student handbook.” Blake developed a process for reviewing policies. Blake worked with the legal team to suggest to the board that some policies be rewritten.

R3: How do equity directors address barriers to implementation?

Be encouraged. Harper felt encouraged by what could be accomplished and was continuously motivated by that.

Policies rule. Kennedy, Riley, and Jordan were able to get an equity policy in place. Policy drove what staff were able to do and not do.

Communication is key. Sidney said, "you have to have a good line of communication with your superintendent because communication is crucial." Sidney set up more consistent meetings with the superintendent. Blake used the equity advisory team to "bring people's voices to the table."

Networking. Payton said, "You cannot let anything shut you down because it can. I have really tried to surround myself with other like-minded identifying folks who are excellent, and I call on them and bring them in, and we do that for each other, so we know how to show up in places for each other. That has been really important." Riley agreed that you "find your people, find networks, support systems for resources to lean on and partner with." Christian encouraged networking with other equity directors and using them as a resource.

Wellness. Most equity directors deal with "racially-charged and politically-charged conversations," according to Sidney. Riley conveyed the importance of practicing self-care to deal with the racial trauma that they take in.

According to equity directors from this research study, they identified the following actions steps for leaders to enact equity:

- Read to examine your own beliefs and build your background knowledge (see resources in Chapter 4)
- Understand the history of your community and know the key players

- Understand the superintendent’s stance and expectations
- Develop relationships with key players and stakeholders
- Facilitate a qualitative and quantitative equity audit and use the results to drive change
- Develop and facilitate professional learning for teachers, building-level administrators, and district-level administrators to build capacity
- Conduct school walkthroughs
- Implement MTSS
- Reduce office referrals, suspensions, and exclusion by adopting restorative practices
- Embed equity goals into the strategic plan and school improvement plans
- Provide professional development for hiring teams to build capacity
- Work with human resources to intentionally diversify the workforce, focusing on Grow Your Own programs with current staff members
- Create and facilitate a district equity leadership team consisting of all stakeholders
- Create and facilitate a student equity leadership team
- Create and facilitate a community equity leadership team
- Work closely with departments across the districts
- Build a culture of belonging
- Enroll and support students in advanced placement programs
- Support and form affinity groups for students and staff of color and LGQBT+ students and staff
- Develop and implement a culturally responsive, rigorous, viable curriculum
- Examine and revise school policies
- Examine and redesign practices and procedures

- Practice self-care
- Seek the support of leaders engaging in equity work
- Seek out consultants, if needed
- Understand that equity work is a delicate, continuous balance of adaptive and technical leadership

These action steps do not serve and should not be viewed as a checklist. These steps cannot be blanketly applied to every school and district. Equity is not a cookie-cutter approach to excellence. Each district must forge its path based on its community and its needs. School leaders should work closely with stakeholders to determine which action steps are needed and which would work best.

Recommendations for Future Research

Christian said, "I am thankful that there is scholarship and research dedicated to better understanding and learning these positions. They can be rolled out in a number of different ways, even though you may have the same title." Jordan concurred, "I commend you for doing this research. There needs to be more research, I think, done on this role." The role of the equity director began rolling out explicitly about six years ago. With CRT being a controversial topic in many states and so many states banning CRT, research should be conducted about equity positions in those states.

Multiple case studies should be done on school districts with equity directors to examine the equity practices of the district compared to student outcomes. The expected outcomes include increased graduation and attendance rates, decreased discipline reports and suspensions, and completion of advanced placement courses. A case study should also be conducted on school

districts that abandoned their equity work to determine how they performed in terms of outcomes.

Training usually begins with learning centered around implicit and explicit bias and microaggressions. Research should be conducted on faculty and staff perceptions in districts with equity directors. This research could examine the degree to which professional learning has shifted mental models, beliefs, and practices. A study should also be conducted to determine if the staff, students, and families' sense of belonging has improved.

Conclusion

As a global leader, a well-rounded citizenry is vital to our country's progress and future (Brimley et al., 2016; Baker, 2018). The population of the United States of America is shifting (Frey, 2019). Over 51% of children are of color (Chappell, 2015). Schools have traditionally underserved children of color and economically marginalized children (Muhammad, 2015; Scanlan & Theoharis, 2015). To secure the financial and economic well-being of our country, schools must implement equitable practices (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016; Holme & Finnigan, 2018; Linton, 2011; Mascareñaz, 2022; Muhammad, 2020; Radd et al., 2021; Salazar & Lerner, 2019; & Stemberge, 2020). "If we fail at this work, not only will we have failed morally, but our economy will suffer, our democracy will be at risk, and millions of families and children will suffer the consequences" (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016, p. 200).

Discourse about the achievement gap is a false narrative (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Moore, 2005). Like race, the achievement gap is a social construction to hegemonize children of color (Chapman, 2007; Muhammad, 2015). Ladson-Billings (2006) set the record straight by positing the achievement gap is really a "educational debt" due to a systemic denial of resources like education, school funding, housing, and employment for Black

people since the inception of our country (p.3). The on-going conversation about the achievement gap is steeped in a white-over-color ascendancy which frames a one-sided perspective (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lipman, 2011). How long will it take to make up for 400 years of no education followed by perpetual miseducation and inequity (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Muhammad, 2015; Woodson, 1933/1990)?

Equity provisions for all children, including Black and Brown children, to receive the resources and opportunities they need to achieve and excel. Equity frameworks provide detailed insight to close the opportunity gap. Blankstein and Noguera (2015) posited a framework for equity rooted in courageous leadership and excellence. Stenbridge (2020) asserted the necessity of culturally responsive education to provide rigorous learning with intentional support. Muhammad (2020) created a culturally and historically responsive framework which challenges us to develop identity, skills, intellectualism, and criticality. While all the frameworks analyzed in this study provide guidance for school leaders and new equity directors, Muhammad's (2020) framework was found to be most widely used by equity directors. Equity directors do not view their work through the lens of a framework; they have adopted an equity mindset. Equity is who they are, not what they do.

Districts want to implement equitable practices; however, they may need help figuring out where to start. Some districts started their work by hiring an equity director. The role of equity directors is relatively new to school districts. These directors may have to work with their district to create a plan. This study sought to understand how equity directors translate theory into praxis, approach praxis during their first year, and address barriers to implementation (Freire, 1970/2018). Their passion for the work was evident in their account of their journey to

and in this role. Equity directors' collective knowledge provides wisdom for school leaders ready to take action and enact change.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT LETTER

Dear Participant:

You are cordially invited to participate in a study, *More than a Framework: Adopting an Equity Mindset Action Steps for School Leaders to Enact Change* conducted by Michelle Y. Hassan, a doctoral candidate at Illinois State University. The goal of this study is to understand the lived experiences of equity directors. This study will examine how equity directors translate theory into practice. This study will guide incoming equity directors as they begin their work. The results from this study will provide practical resources for school leaders looking to guide their school to excellence through equity.

This study will take place at a location of your choice. One interview lasting 45 – 60 minutes will be conducted. A semi-structured approach will allow for follow up questions based on responses. The interviews will be both digitally recorded and transcribed. The researcher will take notes and compare to the digital versions for accuracy. You will receive a copy of the transcription to ensure your story has been accurately told.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You have the right to stop participation in this study at any time. There are no reasonably foreseen risks as your identity and digital recordings will be kept safe in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's home. A pseudonym will be used when communicating your narrative.

The Institutional Review Board at Illinois State University has approved this study. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher: Michelle Y. Hassan at myhassa@ilstu.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact, Lenford C. Sutton at lcsutto@ilstu.edu.

Participant's Printed Name

Date

Researcher's Name

Date

APPENDIX B: DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Name of Participant _____

Date: _____

Thank you for participating in this study. I am Michelle Hassan, a doctoral student at Illinois State University. During this interview, you will be asked to share your lived experiences as an equity director. This interview will last 45-60 minutes during which time I will take notes and digitally record. Although you have consented to this interview, please remember we can stop at any time, if you no longer want to participate. Do you have any questions or concerns? Thank you again, and please share your story while answering the following questions:

1. How did you come to the position you currently have? What was your career path/background leading up to this position? (Maier, 2018)
2. How long have you held this position? (Maier, 2018)
3. What does equity mean to you and in the context of the communities that you serve? (Learned-Miller, 2018)
4. What equity work did you engage in? Please explain specifically the changes you made at the system-level, in policies, in your personnel and in your curriculum? Other areas? (Learned-Miller, 2018)
5. With whom do you work closely with? Describe those relationships? Do you supervise anyone? (Maier, 2018)
6. What is your official job description? How would you describe your position? (Maier, 2018)
7. Describe a typical day/week? (Maier, 2018)

8. What are the district goals for this position? What are your goals for your work? (Maier, 2018)
9. What are the biggest successes (personal and professional) you have experienced in this work thus far? (Maier, 2018)
10. What are the biggest challenges (personal and professional) you have experienced in this work? (Maier, 2018)
11. What is one thing that you wish people understood about your work? (Maier, 2018)
12. How much influence do power and politics have in what you are able to accomplish or not accomplish within your role? (Maier, 2018)
13. What advice do you have for other equity directors looking to engage in equity work? (Learned-Miller, 2018))
14. Were any tools or resources helpful in this work? What tools or resources would have been more helpful? (Learned-Miller, 2018)
15. Is there anything else you would like to share? (Hansen, 2019)

Thank you again for sharing your experiences.