THE ROLE OF DISTRICT LEADERS IN IMPROVING ACHIEVEMENT AND EQUITY: HOW DISTRICT LEADERS MAINTAIN A FOCUS ON EQUITY

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EQUITY: HOW DISTRICT LEADERS MAINTAIN A FOCUS ON EQUITY

Dissertation in Practice by

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Abstract

The Role of District Leaders in Improving Achievement and Equity:

How District Leaders Maintain a Focus on Equity

by

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District leaders are under tremendous pressure to narrow disparities in achievement in an effort to close the achievement gap without tremendous guidance from policy makers, researchers or literature. Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008) proposed a theory that district leaders enact four essential roles when engaging in systemic reform that improves achievement and equity: (1) providing instructional leadership which consists of building capacity and generating will, (2) reorienting the organization, (3) establishing policy coherence, and (4) maintaining an equity focus. This research examined the essential role of maintaining a focus on equity as a complex multiple construct. This qualitative case study explored how leaders in a Massachusetts public school district that made gains in improving achievement, attempted to maintain a focus on equity when enacting the role of instructional leadership.

Drawing upon semi-structured interviews and a review of documents, this study concluded that leaders enacted the role to varying degrees in some ways that were consistent with Rorrer, et al. (2008). Data revealed that leaders attempted to address inequities through responsive leadership practices that connected with their notion of equity as it related to language, special needs, emotional wellness and poverty. Recommendations include how leaders can enact the role in a more informed, intentional, and deliberate manner through the development of Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem and Purpose

District leaders are charged with the formidable yet important task of improving achievement for all students. On one hand, federal and state high stakes accountability policies provide a sense of urgency to improve schools systemically. On the other hand, district leaders feel internal and societal pressures to reform in an effort to realize higher and more equitable educational outcomes.

Progress along these fronts has been uneven. Although nationwide achievement has increased across the board, the achievement gap remains pervasive (Chudowsky, Chudowsky & Kober, 2009). Low-income, Black and Latino students and students with disabilities (SWD) continue to experience inequitable learning opportunities, higher discipline rates, lower standardized test scores and higher dropout rates as compared to Asian and White students (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Underachievement not only affects one's ability to be a productive member of a democratic society, but also threatens the overall ability of the United States to maintain a well-informed citizenry and compete in the global marketplace (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Koski & Reich, 2006).

In response to such issues, districts are often considered critical to sustainable, systemic change in achievement among all students (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010; Leithwood, 2010; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). In these efforts to

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[1] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Peter J. Botelho, Peter J. Cushing, Catherine L. Lawson, Lindsa C. McIntyre, and Zachary J. McLaughlin

increase achievement and advance equity systemically, the functions of superintendents and their district leadership teams have evolved significantly (Rorrer, et al., 2008). District leaders have shifted from managerial and monitoring functions to taking on complex new roles as leaders of learning (Honig et al, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003).

However, there is limited support from policy and research for district leaders regarding how to enact these important new roles (Leithwood, 2010; Weinbaum, Weiss, & Beaver, 2012). First, accountability policies call for districts to close the achievement gap, yet provide little practical guidance for district leaders. Instead of useful guidance, these policies rely on testing, sanctions and public shaming as the main instruments for improvement (Goertz, 2001; Mintrop, & Sunderman, 2009; Weinbaum, et al., 2012). Secondly, educational research on district efforts to improve achievement and equity fails to address the complexity of district reform and, as a result, is limited in its usefulness (Leithwood, 2010; Trujillo, 2013). For example, research primarily offers lists of characteristics of effective reform districts without being able to determine which particular characteristics actually result in achievement gains. Consequently, it is difficult to apply these general findings to very different contexts with a high likelihood of success (Leithwood, 2010). Additionally, although some of the research has strived to provide more specific and practical guidance for district leaders, these studies tend to be overly simplified and decontextualized (Trujillo, 2013). For example, they tend to concentrate simply on raising standardized test scores as an indicator of success. Furthermore, these studies largely ignore the social and political context within the district as well as the historical, social and political realities surrounding the district, all which impact the

district leaders' reform efforts. Consequently, district leaders risk responding to policy pressures and interpreting and applying research guidance in a manner that fails to meet the current complex needs of the particular districts in which they serve.

Thus lies the problem: district leaders are responsible for designing and implementing complex systemic change aimed at improving achievement for all and advancing equity, but with a dearth of useful guidance from policymakers and researchers. Accordingly, the main purpose of this project was to explore the work of district leaders in improving achievement and advancing equity system-wide. In doing so, we explored to what degree the actions of a district leadership team reflect an enactment of the four essential roles for district leaders in educational reform as conceived by Rorrer et al. (2008).

Rorrer et al. (2008) highlight four key dimensions of district leadership: providing instructional leadership; reorienting the organization; establishing policy coherence; and maintaining an equity focus. In order to address this purpose, the individual studies of this research team were organized according to this framework (See Table 1).

Table 1.1

Individual Studies According to Dimensions of District Leadership

Dimensions	
Focus Area	Investigator
Instructional Leadership	
Generating will	Lawson
Building capacity	Cushing
Reorienting the Organization	
District Culture	McLaughlin
Establishing Policy Coherence	
Policy Coherence	Botelho
Maintaining an Equity Focus	

In the final dissertation in practice, each of these individual studies posed unique research questions, reviewed literature and methodologies unique to the individual study and reported findings and discussion related to the individual study.

Literature Review

The goal of narrowing achievement disparities across the nation has been a central focus of educational reform for decades. This review will briefly discuss issues relating to district leaders' work in narrowing achievement disparities and advancing equity. First, we describe student achievement and its importance. Second, we discuss the importance of equity, the relationship between inequity and achievement disparities, and how public school districts can inadvertently promote inequitable practices. Third, we discuss why district leaders are important actors in improving achievement and equity and how they are currently working to narrow disparities. Lastly, we will review the theoretical framework that informed this study.

The Importance of Student Achievement

Often measured by test scores, student achievement is viewed as a predictor of other educational attainments, including: grades, graduation rates, and college acceptance rates (Cassidy & Lynn, 1991; Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia & Nolly, 2004). Achievement can serve as a gateway or a barrier to social and occupational mobility (Brown, 2003; Cassidy & Lynn, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Skrla, et al., 2004). Some researchers have illustrated the importance of achievement by examining the outcomes of students from disadvantaged demographic groups who have experienced persistently low achievement

levels (Ewert, Sykes, & Petit, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Holmes, & Zajakova, 2014; Xia & Glennie, 2005). Many of these studies found that low achieving students are more likely than higher achieving students to drop out of high school, and are in turn more likely to attain unskilled, low-wage jobs, be unemployed, on welfare, and/or incarcerated (Brown, 2003; Ewert et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Penfield, 2010; Xia & Glennie, 2005).

Darling-Hammond (2010) extends the importance of achievement to a broader level. She claims that persistently low achievement jeopardizes our nation's position as a competitor in a globalized economy that is increasingly dependent on a professionally skilled workforce. Policy makers and scholars who share Darling-Hammond's concern have engaged in long-standing debates about why some student groups are consistently outperforming others and what can be done to remedy this problem (Brown, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2010; NRC, 1997). At the forefront of these debates is the concept of equity (Noguera, 2007; Ready & Hawley, 2003).

The Importance of Equity

Equity is believed by some scholars to play an important role in supporting student achievement (Noguera, 2007). While educational equity is defined in many different ways (Espinosa, 2008), it generally involves the fair and just (Green, 1983; Gottfried & Johnson, 2014) distribution of educational resources in order to ensure learning opportunities that support *optimal* achievement outcomes for all students (Kahle, 1998; Kelly, 2012; Noguera, 2007; Springer, Houck, & Guthrie, 2007). To best understand the role of equity in supporting achievement, it is first important to understand

the relationship between inequity and disparities in achievement, commonly referred to as the achievement gap.

   Achievement disparities as a reflection of inequity. A substantial amount of research on the achievement gap suggests that existing disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged students is a reflection of educational inequity (Dentith, Frattura, & Kaylor, 2013; Dunn, 1968; Oakes, Rogers, Lipton & Morrell, 2002; Steinberg & Quinn, 2015). The achievement gap first became apparent in the 1960s when public schools began to publish the results of achievement tests (Harris & Herrington, 2006; Ipka, 2003). Access to test scores provided scholars with a mechanism for discerning discrepancies in student achievement patterns among different demographic groups. Findings revealed a gap in performance between White, advantaged students and students from disadvantaged and different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Brown, 2003).

   At the same time, the release of the *Equality of Equal Opportunity Study* (Coleman, et al., 1966), known as the *Coleman Report*, highlighted the relationship between equity and achievement by exposing the existence of racial inequities regarding the educational opportunities afforded to students in public schools (Kober, 2001; Wong & Nicotera, 2004). Despite significant efforts to eliminate educational inequities (*Brown v. The Board of Education,* 1954; The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), 1965), the achievement gap not only continues to persist but has also grown to include students with disabilities (SWD) and English Language Learners (ELL) (Brown, 2003, Chudowsky, et al., 2009).

For example, recent NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) scores (NCES, 2013) indicate that students who performed at proficient or above on the eighth-grade mathematics test vary significantly by race (45% of white students; 21% of Hispanic students; 14% of Black students; 5% of ELL students), eligibility for free and reduced lunch (19% of eligible students; 48% of non-eligible students) and disability status (8% of disabled students; 49% non-disabled students).

The eighth-grade NAEP Reading test revealed similar trends in performances at or above proficient by race (46% of White students, 22% of Hispanic students, and 17% of Black students), eligibility for free and reduced lunch (19% eligible; 48% non-eligible) and disability status (9% of students with disabilities; 40% of students non-disabled students). Furthermore, Ingels and Dalton (2013) found that between 2009-2011 dropout rates for Black students (4.3%) were four times higher than Asian students (0.3%) and almost twice as high as White students (2.1%).

District practices that create inequity. There is some disagreement among scholars about whether achievement disparities are more strongly affected by educational inequity or inequities that exist outside of school (Carter & Welner, 2013; Coleman et al., 1966; Holmes & Zajakova, 2014). Nevertheless, there is common agreement that public school districts can perpetuate, sometimes unknowingly, disparities in student achievement by supporting inequitable practices (Kahle, 1998; Gregory, et al., 2010). The ways districts promote inequitable practices can be determined by the prevalence of opportunity gaps (Dentith et al., 2013; Hehir, Grindal & Eidelman, 2012) and outcome gaps (Ewert, et al, 2014; NCES, 2014) between different groups of students.

According to Noguera (2007), learning inequities create opportunity gaps that lead to low levels of achievement for certain students. Opportunity gaps span educational resources, school conditions, school curriculum and the level and intensity of instruction (Dentith et al., 2013; Dunn, 1968; Oakes et al., 2002; Steinberg & Quinn, 2015; Wang, 1998). Opportunity gaps can be seen by examining who has access to quality teachers, enrollment in honors, advanced placement and "gifted" classes and who does not (Albano & Rodriquez, 2013; Burris & Welner, 2005; Hehir et al., 2012; Jaafar, 2006; Lee, 2012; Welner, Burris, Wiley & Murphy, 2008). Isenberg et al. (2013) in the study, *Access to Effective Teaching for Disadvantaged Students,* found that free lunch students do not have the same level of access to effective teachers compared to non-free lunch students. Findings further suggested that inequitable access to quality teachers contributed two percentile points to the difference in student achievement scores between the two groups.

One way to determine the presence of opportunity gaps is to look at whether or not various educational data is proportionately or disproportionately represented by different groups of students (Gregory et al., 2010; Noguera, 2007). Disproportionality occurs when data is underrepresented, or overrepresented by a certain student demographic relative to the overall student population (Gregory et al., 2010; Lee & Ransom 2011; Noguera, Hurtado & Fergus, 2012; Penfield, 2010). For example, minority children and children from economically challenged homes are disproportionately overrepresented in special education programs compared to other groups of students (Dunn, 1968; Holtzman & Messick, 1982; Kunjufu, 2007; Moreno & Gaytán, 2013; Piechura-Couture, 2013). Students with disabilities and minority students receive discipline at disproportionately higher rates when compared to White students (Noguera,

et al., 2012). Minority and Special Education students also have disproportionately higher dropout rates than White and Asian students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; NCES, 2014). On the other hand, rates of admission to undergraduate, graduate and professional programs are disproportionately underrepresented by Black, Hispanic and Special Education students compared to White and Asian students (Holme, Richards, Jimerson, & Cohen, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006, NCES, 2013).

Some scholars have illustrated the relationship between inequity and achievement disparities by examining outcome gaps, or group differences in measurable school outcomes such as graduation rates and test scores (Carter & Welner, 2013; Ladson-Billing, 2006). Ewert et al. (2014) examined demographic and educational attainment data of incarcerated populations across the country and found that the majority of inmates between the ages of twenty and thirty-four were high school dropouts, male and Black. By adjusting data to include incarcerated populations, Ewert et al. further concluded that conventional educational attainment data, which typically omits incarcerated individuals, creates an illusion of progress that "not only underestimate[s] the high school dropout rate but also underestimate[s] racial inequality in educational outcomes" (p.36). Despite the ways school districts reinforce achievement disparities, many district leaders are attempting to remedy the problem by instituting practices that will promote achievement and equity for all students.

The Importance of District Leaders in Improving Achievement and Equity

The belief that district leaders are important actors in promoting student achievement and narrowing disparities is a viewpoint that emerged in literature during the same time period as the standards-based reform (SBR) movement (McLaughlin &

Talbert, 2003). Prior to SBR, educational reform scholars viewed district leaders as either inconsequential or an impediment to student learning and school improvement (Firestone, 1989; Heller & Firestone, 1995; McLaughlin, 1990). District leaders functioned primarily as regulators and monitors of compliance (Firestone, 1989; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Additionally, widespread views that principals and school-level factors had the greatest impact on student achievement caused many scholars to focus their energy on school-based reform (Leithwood, 1994; Ogawa, 1994), leaving a gap in educational research on district leadership (Honig, 2007).

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk* (NAR), which claimed, "the educational foundations of our society are being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (p.9). The release of NAR led to the enactment of standards-based reform legislation known as The Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994 and the publication of Goals 2000. IASA focused on high standards for disadvantaged children and Goals 2000 aimed at becoming "first in the world in science and math performance by 2000" (IASA, 1994, §102 (5) (a)). Standards-based reform legislation sought to improve student achievement by requiring districts to implement rigorous academic standards for *all* students tied to performance assessments, monitoring student achievement and holding schools accountable for student progress (IASA, 1994; Linn, 2008; NRC, 1997).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), reauthorized in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act, brought standards-based reform and the role of district leaders in school improvement efforts, to a new level. Districts were required to report

student test scores by subgroup and were accountable for meeting student achievement targets through the use of sanctions and rewards. Standards-based legislation extended responsibility from the school to the school district, shifting the research lens from school-based reform to systemic reform, and from the role of principals to the role of district leaders in improving student achievement (Leithwood, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). As a result, research began to acknowledge district leaders as important actors in improving achievement and narrowing disparities across the system (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Spillane & Thompson, 1997; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

For example, McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) sought to determine what successful reform districts do to achieve systemic change across fifteen urban school districts in the San Francisco Bay area. Their findings suggested that districts leaders play an important role in creating systemic change and that a weak district leadership team limits schools' reform progress. Current research continues to echo the importance of district leadership in large-scale reform (Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, & Wang, 2013; Honig et al., 2010; Honig, Lorton, & Copland, 2009; Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010).

Current leadership actions to improve achievement and narrow disparities. There are many ways district leaders are currently working to improve student achievement and narrow disparities. Some district leaders are focusing solely on increasing high stakes test scores (Srikantaiah, 2009), while others are engaging in complex large-scale efforts to improve teaching and learning (O'Dougherty & Ovando, 2010; Rorrer, et al., 2008) and advance equity (Wright & Harris, 2010). This work is described below.

Improving standardized test scores. Pressure from federal and state accountability policies have caused some district leaders to concentrate on improving student test scores without necessarily improving student learning opportunities (Booher-Jennings, 2005). Many district leaders are attempting to raise test scores by supporting the use of educational triage practices, narrowing the curriculum and teaching to the test (Berliner, 2011; Elmore, 2004; Jacob, 2005; McLaughlin, Artiles, & Pullin, 2001; Weinbaum, et al., 2012). Districts are also using gaming tactics such as retention, minimizing subgroups, and disproportionately identifying disadvantaged learners.

Jacob (2005) studied the impact of high stakes tests on the Chicago Public School System. Findings suggested that the district raised test scores by supporting increases in special education placements and preemptively retaining students. The district furthermore narrowed the curriculum by steering away from low stake subjects like science and social studies. Improvement strategies that narrowly focus on quickly increasing standardized test scores without also improving instruction in substantive ways can have unintended consequences. Districts can inadvertently reinforce educational inequity, further marginalize underperforming students by restricting opportunities to learn and lead to increases in student dropout rates (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Penfield, 2010). The next section will review how district leaders are working to increase achievement scores and improve educational outcomes for all students by focusing on more substantive improvements in teaching and learning.

Improving teaching and learning. A promising way to improve both student achievement and educational outcomes is to improve teaching and learning (Leithwood, et al., 2004; Louis, 2008). This section will discuss three common leadership moves the

literature suggests district leaders in underperforming districts are making to improve teaching and learning. These moves include: evidenced-based decision making; practicing and promoting instructional leadership; and advancing equity throughout the school system.

Evidenced-based decision making. The literature on large-scale reform suggests there are many ways district leaders are using evidence to improve achievement. Some are using evidence to set strategic goals and motivate change (O'Dougherty & Ovando, 2010; Wright & Harris, 2010), while others are using it to inform instructional practice (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschoreck, 2001; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). For example, O'Dougherty and Ovando (2010) found that district leaders in an urban California school district making progress towards narrowing achievement disparities used data to expose the problem of underachievement. As a result, the leadership team was able to create a sense of urgency and gain stakeholders' support for reform.

While it is widely understood that the use of data can lead to improved practice, most scholars agree that data provides only the opportunity to inform leadership decisions (Coburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009; Farley-Ripple & Cho, 2014; Wayman, Jimerson, & Cho, 2012). District leaders must know how to make deep and meaningful contextual connections with data if they are to effectively inform educational practice in a way that leads to improvement. This point is illustrated by Finnigan, Daly and Che (2013), who found that district leaders in a consistently underperforming school district did not appear to see the benefit of using evidence, narrowly defined evidence as student test scores and based improvement decisions on primarily affective information.

Wayman et al. (2012) provides guidance to district leaders by identifying four factors that can build, or limit, a district's capacity for effectively using data to improve student achievement: (a) how data is used, (b) attitudes toward data, (c) principal leadership for data use, and (d) the use of computer data systems. Accordingly, Wayman et al. suggests that districts can work towards becoming a data-informed district by focusing on developing common understandings throughout the system, engaging in professional learning and by investing in computer data systems.

Practicing and promoting instructional leadership. The achievement gap is considered a complex problem of learning that requires educators to make substantive changes to their instructional practice (Gallucci, 2008; Knapp et al., 2010). Many scholars of the NCLB reform era posit that district leaders are most likely to support student learning by acting as instructional leaders (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Honig, 2007; 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004).

There are many ways district leaders are attempting to transform their roles from monitors of compliance to instructional leaders. District leaders are establishing learning-focused partnerships with principals and schools (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Honig et al., 2010; Knapp et. al, 2010). Central office administrators are cultivating the exchange of information across and between multiple levels of the organization by spanning boundaries and acting as brokers of information (Burch & Spillane, 2004). They are promoting a culture of high expectations and continuous learning (Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2010), while reorganizing and re-culturing central office to support teaching and learning at all levels of the organization (Honig et al., 2010; Knapp et al., 2010). Additionally, district leaders are using evidence as a medium for leadership (Honig et al.,

2010; Knapp et al., 2010). Honig et al. (2010) subsequently found that district administrators are investing in instructional leadership by allocating resources to sustain instructional improvement efforts, supporting ongoing professional learning and responding to operational needs.

Another way effective reform district leaders are executing their role as instructional leaders is to build professional capacity by creating a coherent instructional guidance system while providing ongoing professional learning opportunities for both administrators and teachers (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010; Skrla, McKenzie, Scheurich, & Dickerson, 2011). Nevertheless, despite the wealth of research on the impact effective instructional leadership can have on improving student achievement outcomes (Leithwood, et al., 2004), the problem of inequitable access to quality instruction must be addressed if achievement disparities are to be narrowed (Isenberg et al., 2013; Kahle, 1998).

Advancing equity throughout the school system. Education is often referred to as the Great Equalizer (Scutari, 2008) and some scholars suggest that public school districts can improve achievement by attending to equity (Hewson, Butler, Kahle, Scantlebury, & Davies, 2001; Rorrer et al, 2008; Theoharis & Brooks, 2012; Turner, 2014). Datnow (2005) contends that the advancement of equity requires systems that support good learning (parent support, equitable OTL, multicultural education strategies); district level involvement; efforts to also build the community's capacity; and linkages between districts and the state.

Studies on effective reform districts illustrate a variety of strategies district leaders are using to advance equity (Leithwood, 2010; Rorrer et al., 2008). By

acknowledging past inequities explicitly, reform-focused leaders are providing opportunities and empowering administrators and teachers to apply potential solutions (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2010; Turner, 2014). Leaders are also attempting to advance equity by developing and clearly communicating a vision of all children graduating proficient and college ready (Bryk et al., 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Wright & Harris, 2010).

Wright and Harris (2010) found that eight superintendents in small, culturally diverse districts experienced a 10% reduction in the achievement gap by promoting cultural proficiency throughout the district. Strategies enacted by these superintendents included: developing a culture of high expectations and promoting individualized instruction; interpreting and communicating achievement data through a cultural lens; and implementing targeted professional development and mechanisms for evaluating progress towards goals.

District leaders are furthermore attempting to advance equity by creating socially just and culturally proficient learning communities (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2010; Scanlan, 2013; Skrla, et al., 2001; Theoharis, 2007; Wright & Harris, 2010). Leaders who maintain a lens toward social justice can provide the opportunity for all children to perform at uniformly high academic levels by creating a safe and secure school environment for children, regardless of their race and family background (Skrla et al., 2001). For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012) studied the educational experiences of 900 at-risk first grade students from diverse backgrounds who displayed multiple challenges in behavior, attention, academic and social development throughout kindergarten. Findings indicated that after

being placed in a first-grade classroom characterized by strong instructional and emotional support systems, the students' "achievement scores and student-teacher relationships [were] commensurate with their low-risk peers" (p.125). Conversely, at risk students placed in less equitable classroom environments had lower achievement and noticeably more conflict with their teachers.

A Theory of District Leaders Improving Achievement and Advancing Equity as Institutional Actors

Previous scholarly work includes a lack of developed theory and is based largely on district effectiveness, which poses oversimplified measures of effectiveness and makes weak causal claims (Leithwood, 2010; Trujillo, 2013). Rorrer et al. (2008) addresses these limitations by proposing a theory of districts as institutional actors in systemic reform. In this view, district leaders affect the organization by assuming four central roles: providing instructional leadership; reorienting the organization; establishing policy coherence; and maintaining an equity focus. The individual studies of this research team were organized according to this framework (See Table 1.2) and responded to limitations in the literature by applying Rorrer et al.'s theory to a specific district in Massachusetts that was attempting to improve achievement and advance equity.

A synthesis of these individual inquiries will not only illustrate how leaders are currently working to improve achievement and advance equity, but it will also provide a an example of how Rorrer et al's (2008) theory can be applied to the complex work of systemic reform.

Table 1.2

Framework of Individual Studies

Individual Study	Role	Research Questions
Lawson, 2016	Instructional Leadership: Generating Will	1. How do district leaders build will? 2. How do district leaders then sustain will?
Cushing, 2016	Instructional Leadership: Building Capacity	1. What actions do leaders take to build capacity in the district to improve student learning? 2. How do district leaders prioritize their efforts to build capacity toward advancing equity?
McLaughlin, 2016	Reorienting the Organization: District Culture	1. How do district leaders work to understand culture? 2. How do district leaders work to shape culture?
Botelho, 2016	Establishing Policy Coherence: Mediating Policy	1. What policies are districts likely to enact? 2. How do district leaders make sense of policy challenges that exist in light of local needs and context? 3. In what ways do district leaders work to mediate these policies in order to best serve the goals of the district?
McIntyre, 2016	Maintaining a Focus on Equity	1. What is equity to district leaders? 2. How do district leaders foreground equity for other educators?

CHAPTER TWO[2]

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In conducting this research project, team members shared common procedures for collecting and analyzing data. All team members contributed to the work of data collection, but worked independently when analyzing data for individual studies. Procedures that were unique to particular independent studies are reported in those chapters respectively. The sections below describe the overall study design, procedures for data collection, procedures for data analysis and study limitations.

Study Design

To explore the work of district leaders in improving achievement and advancing equity system wide, this study utilized a qualitative methodology. Understanding that this work is complex and multifaceted, this type of open-ended question is best answered by an approach that does not see a finite set of variables (Creswell, 2013). This study ultimately looked to answer a series of "how" questions concerning the actions of district leaders. To give a holistic answer to these questions, the study methodology needed to be open to multiple data sources and needed to be adaptable to possible new interpretations of data (Stake, 2005).

Specifically, the research team used a case study approach. Case studies have origins in the work of sociologists and anthropologists (Creswell, 2013). These researchers used case study approaches to try to understand the interactions of people within specific contexts. Merriam (2009) defines case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system." The bounded system makes up the case to be studied.

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[2] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Peter J. Botelho, Peter J. Cushing, Catherine L. Lawson, Lindsa C. McIntyre, and Zachary J. McLaughlin

Rather trying to understand "leadership" in general, a case study narrowly focuses on subjects like "leadership in XYZ High School." A single school district delineated the boundaries of our study.

Our study created a "thick description" of one school district that is improving achievement and advancing equity system-wide (Geertz, 1973). This description sifted through layers of details to come to a fuller understanding of the district in its unique context. During this investigative process, researchers paid careful attention to the details of environment as they tried to interpret the meaning of the data they collect. Successful districts, and their leadership teams, are by their nature constantly planning and adjusting their approach based on their staffs, their students and their community. Bounding our study by a single district allowed the research to explore the complex interchange of variables and actors that may be impossible to fully isolate from one another (Yin, 2013).
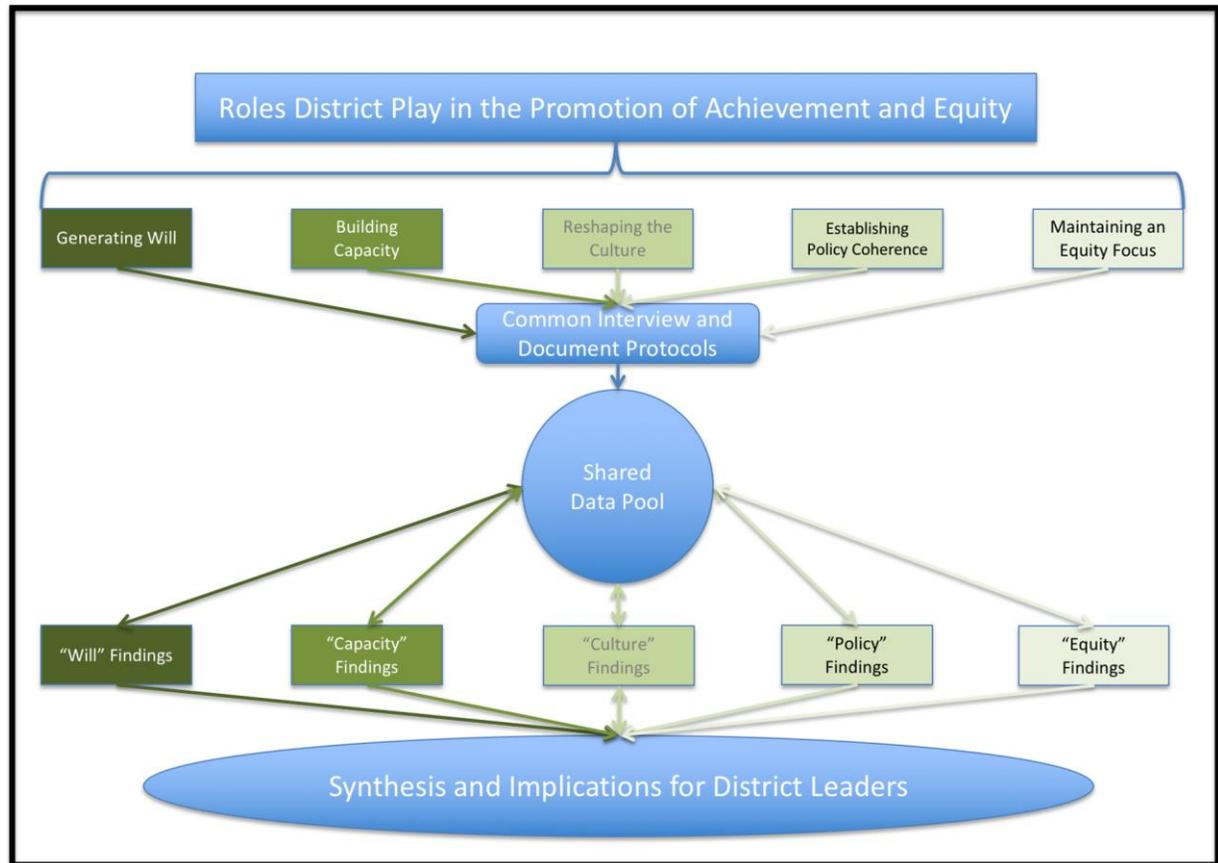
Figure 2.1 Overall study methodological map

Guided by our theoretical framework, this project examined the selected district's efforts to increase student achievement and equity. The work of the district was examined through district leaders that, for our purposes, include the superintendent, mid-level central office administrators and principals. The roles of these leaders were examined through a variety of perspectives (See Figure 2.1).

Site Selection

A study site was selected based on three criteria: a diverse student body, a visible district-wide effort to narrow the achievement gap and a mid-sized student population. To examine the work of district leaders improving achievement and equity system-wide, our district had to have a student body with a large enough population of students from

groups that have traditionally demonstrated lower levels of achievement than their peers in order to able to determine if the achievement gap has been narrowed. As such, we used a district with two or more subgroups identifiable on NCLB reporting. The district had shown positive gains in the achievement scores of these groups and a reduction in the achievement gap between these groups and their more affluent, White and/or Asian peers.

Making progress with these groups was not enough. This study sought to understand a district whose improvement appeared to be by design rather than chance. Therefore, the next step in our selection process was to further cull from the districts with a diverse student body by identifying which of those districts publicly recognized improving achievement and equity as a district-wide effort. The site needed to have a district vision, mission, and, or improvement plan that speaks to the desire to accomplish these two goals.

The final step in our selection process was to narrow our focus to mid-sized districts in our state of study (5,000-15,000 students). Due to the heavy emphasis on large urban districts in recent district-level research, the research community has missed the opportunity to obtain rich data from a more manageable site. In particular, studying a comparatively smaller district provided an opportunity to study the district more deeply and examine a higher percentage of district leaders.

Unlike the large urban districts more commonly studied, districts of this size typically have fewer bureaucratic layers separating instructional decision makers and the teachers implementing those decisions; nevertheless, these districts are large enough to have multiple member central office leadership teams. These teams allowed the study to view district leadership collectively through the eyes of several different categories of

professionals. Given the manageability of targeted participant groups, the study was able to include a high percentage of staff members who constitute key leadership groups. This strategic choice increased the possibility that the findings could inform theory and guide future research. Furthermore, together with a variety of other theoretically guided studies, this study contributes to literature that can provide district leaders with more relevant and useful guidance as they engage in complex systemic reform efforts.

Contextual background of Wyoma School District. Wyoma is a historically significant suburb of Boston with deeply rooted economic tensions. Wyoma began as a maritime community. Textile factories supplanted this economy in the late 19th century. These factories employed scores of immigrant workers who starkly contrasted the generations of American aristocrats who built estates and lavish summer homes here. These wealthy few attempted to divide the municipality along class lines, an action that was narrowly defeated. Wyoma remains a disparate community even as innovative companies fill the once dormant factories with highly skilled workers.

During the first decade of this century, Wyoma Public Schools faced severe financial constraints as voters resoundingly rejected operational tax overrides that forced school closures and staffing cuts. Teachers were reduced in force by 18% between 2004 and 2012 while the student population decreased by under 6%. Student to teacher ratios increased by over 15%. Recent enrollment increases have not been matched with teacher hires: the student to teacher ratio is currently behind the state by over 10%. Wyoma voters have supported over $200 million of school construction throughout the past decade.

Data examined from the decennial census reveals stability in demographics and population growth. While Wyoma's population has grown by approximately 3% since 2010, the school district has seen enrollments grow by 6% over the same time period. Since 2001, the White enrollments decreased by 13% while Hispanic enrollments increased by 500%. Students who are Hispanic and Limited English Proficiency are 80% more likely to drop out of high school when compared to their white peers. Thirty percent of district students receive either free or reduced meals. These students are more than twice as likely to drop out of high school than their peers. Asian and African American enrollments have remained static with insignificant annual changes of under 3%.

Data Collection

Case study data included interviews and reviews of documents collected from July to October 2015.

Interviews. In order to understand the perspectives of district leaders, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from the district. Respondents included the superintendent, assistant superintendent, director of special education and pupil personnel services, finance director, principals and instructional coaches (see Table 2). Each participant was individually interviewed for 45-90 minutes.

The interview protocol explored respondent perceptions of district leaders improving achievement and advancing equity system-wide. Flowing from each unique conceptual framework, our protocol specifically studied the ways district leaders generate will, build capacity, reshape culture, establish coherent policy and maintain a focus on equity while pursuing those goals (See Appendix A).

In order to support question validity, cognitive interviews were employed to identify problems in the interview protocol and design stronger questions (Singleton & Straits, 2012). Specifically, think-aloud interviews and probing techniques were used to understand the way a respondent may process a particular question (Beatty & Willis, 2007).

Table 2.1

Interview Subjects

District Assigned Title	Sub-Group Pseudonym	Overarching Pseudonym
Superintendent of Schools		
Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction		
Assistant Superintendent for Student Services	Central Office Leaders	
Finance Director		
Child Welfare & Community Support Director		District Leaders
3 Elementary Coaches		
5 Elementary Principals	School Level	
Middle School Principal	Leaders	
High School Principal		

Note: This table represents the leadership structure of Wyoma Public Schools.

These think-alouds were piloted with four central office leaders, principals and other school professionals from outside districts to gauge question effectiveness. This process involved asking the initial question, receiving an answer and asking a variety of follow up probes (Conrad & Blair, 2009). For example, the cognitive interview subject was asked one of our protocol questions, "In what ways has the vision for teaching and learning been used to generate buy-in from staff?" The subject answered the question, then the cognitive interview team asked the subject probing questions such as, "What did

you think I meant by 'vision'?" and "I said that I was trying to understand 'generating will. What would be indications that will had occurred?" These reflections influenced the team's process concerning possible instrument adjustments.

Table 2.2

Respondent Characteristics

Job Category	Gender		Years in the District		Years in Current Role	
District Leaders	Female	4	1-3 years	1	1-3 years	2
	Male	1	4-5 years	1	4-5 years	2
			5-10 years	1	5-10 years	1
			More than 10 years		More than 10 years	0
Building Leaders	Female	8	1-3 years	2	1-3 years	4
	Male	2	4-5 years	3	4-5 years	4
			5-10 years	2	5-10 years	1
			More than 10 years	3	More than 10 years	1

Document review. The research team member also reviewed documents to triangulate interview answers. All team members used the district's most recent strategic plan. Individual team members used additional documents, as appropriate, to their investigation. These documents were selected to help shed light additional light on efforts to improve achievement and equity in the district.

Data Analysis

Dedoose software was used to code all data. As transcripts and documents were added to Dedoose, individual researchers did an initial wave of descriptive coding. This first cycle approach summarized the topic of passages with a short phrase (Saldaña, 2013). During this process, individual team members made passes starting from an *a priori* list (Miles et al., 2014) developed from their review of literature concerning their

specific role. The goal of this first wave of coding was to chunk data into initial categories. The categories used in this initial stage of analysis consisted of the roles being examined by each researcher: generating will, building capacity, aligning structures, reshaping culture, policy coherence and equity focus.

Additional coding cycles were completed by all of the researchers; however, each team member made the choices of which coding techniques and how many cycles were needed individually (see chapter 3). Second (and further) cycles were designed to create a more narrowed thematic organization of the initial descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013). While the first round of coding identified a variety of concepts to explore, additional cycles were for the purpose of coming to some more generalizable themes.

The study built trustworthiness by completing pair checks, developing analytic memos and focusing on reflectivity (Merriam, 2014). Team members reviewed each other's coding cycles. The research team also shared a single Google document as a repository for reflection on their ongoing process of understanding the case. This journaling included commentary on "reflexivity" which is the process of reflecting on the impact of their role as a human instrument in the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

CHAPTER 3[3]

HOW DISTRICT LEADERS MAINTAIN A FOCUS ON EQUITY

Problem, Purpose and Research Questions

Educators face the task of closing the achievement gap, but doing so is hard. Classrooms are not nearly so white or homogenous as they were before. Closing achievement gaps requires rethinking what we do in schools and how we manage districts. One way in which to lead districts differently around issues of equity is to engage in culturally responsive leadership. However, research about this is focused on school level leadership, and it is not clear what district leaders need to do in order to engage a culturally-responsive leadership model.

Although some scholars would argue that reform efforts that include a focus on equity should emanate from the school level, current research suggests, given the systemic nature of inequity in our schools and the challenge of accountability, district leaders must lead the charge (Leithwood, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). District leaders must own the responsibility of creating equitable conditions to improve achievement and advance equity for all schools and students within their districts. In doing so, they must consider the implications of race, culture, socioeconomics, student status and language on our current educational institution, which are the premises of a culturally responsive community.

Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership (Johnson, 2006) provides a lens for district leaders to understand and implement educational changes for diverse students in order to advance achievement and equity in schools. Current researchers have identified Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership as an antidote to the

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[3] Chapter 3 was authored by Lindsa McIntyre

educational inequities that exist within our public schools (Gay, 2004; Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Johnson, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006). According to Johnson (2006), "there have been few attempts to apply this culturally responsive framework to the study of leadership practice in urban schools" (p. 26).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to research the ways in which district leaders maintain a focus on equity to improve achievement and advance equity system-wide through Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership. It will be guided by two research questions:

- What is equity to district leaders?

- How do district leaders foreground equity for other educators?

A Review of the Literature

This review will discuss issues relating to the role of district leaders in maintaining an equity-focus to improve achievement and advance equity system-wide. The literature review will consider (1) what is equity and why is it important?; (2) what are the things that schools might do to promote equity; and (3) how district leaders foreground equity for other leaders.

Equity and its Importance

There are many different ways to think about equity. For the purpose of this study, equity will be defined as a way in which we are able to support the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners through the framework of Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership. Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership supports an understanding of the role of equity in teaching and learning and how it interacts with instruction, policy, culture, poverty and other variables as a process for

system-wide reform. It allows district leaders the opportunity to transform the school environment to focus explicitly on meeting the needs of the diverse and most marginalized students within their school communities (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Equity in the context of American schooling is to understand what is fair and just in the pursuit of quality learning experiences and educational attainment for each and every student (Gottfried & Johnson, 2014; Jenlink & Jenlink, 2012; King, Swanson & Sweetland, 2005; Theoharis, 2007). Prewitt (2002) noted that, "American society has never been more linguistically, culturally, religiously, ethnically and racially diverse"(p. 49). In addition, growing demographic shifts in our society are occurring within a, "political and social context of high accountability, resegregation, and fiscal inequities between urban and suburban districts" (Johnson, 2011, p. 81). This change in demographics can present challenges to district leaders and heighten their need to practice equity within their school communities. Taking a Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership stance can support district leaders in transforming educational inequities, discrepancies and injustices that plague school performance.

According to Brown (2007), this change in the racial, cultural and linguistic diversity of the population is not the problem. She reports, "the problem lies in the way educators have responded to the change" (Brown, 2007, p. 57). Elmore (2000) further elaborates that efforts to solve this educational challenge must include reform around instruction and leadership. A task that public education "has been unable to do to date, but which is possible with dramatic changes in the way public schools define and practice leadership" (Elmore, 2000, p. 3). To that end, school leaders must attain "the knowledge, skills and willingness to address issues facing marginalized populations in order to

understand how cultural issues within and between various school subcultures influence leadership practice" (Boske, 2012, p. 184), and hence achievement. Fostering an equity stance in school leadership will open the doors for school leaders to develop a Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership practice in support of increased learning outcomes.

This section will review literature pertaining to: first, the importance of understanding inequities of our society; second, how leaders use vision and mindset as a first step to creating culturally-responsive learning communities; and third, how leaders must engage equitable structures and programs to challenge the status quo.

Understanding the inequities of our society. First, leaders must learn that understanding the inequities of our society is essential to creating equitable opportunities. Noguera (2012) reports, that achievement disparities represent an, "educational manifestation of social inequality" (p.3). According to Ladson-Billings (2006) social inequality can be seen in terms of funding disparities between minority and white school districts. In the Chicago Public Schools, the annual per pupil expenditure is $8,482, as opposed to Highland Park where the expenditure exceeds $17,000 per pupil (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Findings from a study conducted by the Glenn Commission (2000) reports that children in high minority schools have only a 50% chance of being taught math and science by a highly qualified teacher. Additional disparities in achievement can be seen in the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores for Black and Latina/o fourth graders and their White counterparts, where a gap in scaled academic scores of more than 26 points was revealed (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Marginalized students are typically not afforded relevant and culturally-proficient opportunities to learn. Hawley and Nieto (2010) claim, "race and ethnicity affect how

students respond to instruction and their opportunity to learn" (p. 66). In the same context, Yang (2000) finds that ethnicity is an indicator of what opportunities are made available for different groups. In our current society the effects of ethnicity on learning create challenges for ethnic groups (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994). This is of particular concern given that disadvantaged students experience high dropout rates, low college entrance rates and over-representation in special education (Harry & Klinger, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002). In addition, members of diverse student populations experience high rates of disciplinary exclusions, placement into low-level programs (Patton, 1998; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003; Singleton & Linton, 2006) and high rates of incarceration spurred by the school to prison pipeline (Levin, 2009; Xia & Glennie, 2005).

Using vision and mind set. Second, leaders must employ visioning as an important next step in transforming a traditional school community into an equity-oriented, culturally-responsive learning community. The vision must be able to guide and motivate those associated with it. According to Ancess and Ort (1997), having a "vision frames discussions on the business of school-keeping and is the foundation on which members of the school community construct common ground and the school culture" (p.3). Visioning for effective schools requires leaders to think outside of the box. There must be a commitment to abandon the status quo. Transformative leaders must be, "willing to leave the comforts and confines of professional codes and state mandates for the riskier waters of higher moral callings"(Brown, 2011, p. 349). Leaders who wish to change educational outcomes for diverse students must conceptualize an understanding that "barriers to equity in educational opportunity are multifarious and inextricably

entwined with social structures that extend beyond the school door" (Scanlan, 2012, p. 2).

Leaders must attend to, "the history, values, and cultural knowledge of students' home

communities in the school curriculum" (Johnson, 2006, p. 27). According to Johnson

(2006), leaders must become transformative intellectuals, curriculum innovators and

social activist, all in an effort to engage Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership.

Brown (2011) concurs that leaders are called upon to transform schools through inclusive

practices that engage a respect for diversity, advocacy and critical consciousness.

Engaging equitable structures and programs. Third, teaching leaders to

become agents of change is another priority for leaders engaging in equity work.

Historically, district leaders ignored the implications of race, ethnicity, culture, poverty

and language on learning (Brown. 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Theoharis, 2007).

Johnson (2007) affirms that in a high stakes, accountability-driven environment where

schools are pressured to raise test scores with little support from governance or policy

makers, leaders must begin to embrace diversity by creating structures and programs that

support equity. Further, Johnson suggests that rather than looking at underlying causes

and results of the achievement gap, schools leaders need to model how to challenge the,

"status quo of inequitable assessment practices, incorporate students' cultural knowledge

into the school curriculum and work with parents and community activists for social

change in the larger community" (Johnson, 2007, p. 33). According to Ferguson (2010),

district leaders need to support a "conspiracy to succeed" (p.22), one that weakens and

defeats the dominant social norms and pressures.

Staffing. Transformative leadership includes providing a staffing template that

offers school personnel opportunities to address the needs of the whole child. This

includes participating in activities that serve students and families more holistically, organizing community platforms, campaigning for educational reforms and assuming the role of leaders within the community (Johnson 2006).

Programs and structures. Many of the social structures that impact learning and create barriers to equal access for diverse learners include, "school routines, procedures, standards, curriculum and text book adoption, hierarchical arrangements and classroom pedagogies" (Brown, 2011, p. 351). Villegas and Lucas (2002) acknowledge the following attributes as necessary characteristics of transformative culturally-responsive teaching and learning: a) socio-political consciousness; b) affirm views of students from diverse backgrounds; c) responsible and capable of bringing about education change; d) embrace of constructivist views of teaching and learning; and e) build on students' prior knowledge and beliefs while stretching them beyond the familiar (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, Johnson, 2006). Brown (2011) captured this understanding and explained,

> Since various segments of our public school population experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis, it is the duty of our educational system to end such oppression, to increase equity, and to make bold possibilities happen for all children. (p. 4)

Things Schools Might do to Promote Equity

This review of the literature on leadership practices revealed that leaders are looking at ways to create equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students to achieve. According to Brown (2004), a focus on equity requires a commitment from educational leaders to understand student-learning needs in the realm of achievement. A major focus of a successful reform initiative includes understanding equity as access, process and outcome (Rorrer et al., 2008; Theoharis & Brooks, 2012), within a framework of Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership.

Engaging leaders to help each and every student learn and succeed is an important aspect of equity-oriented practices and is personalized learning. Tailoring pedagogy, curriculum and the actual learning environment to meet the needs of individual student learners creates a personal learning environment often used to support learning for diverse students (Johnson, 2006). Two practices that stand out as equitable instructional strategies are *student-centered learning* and *research based instruction.*

Student-centered learning. Culturally-responsive differentiated instruction is a meaningful strategy to raise achievement for diverse students. According to Gay (2000), engaging "culturally-responsive teaching is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching and learning" (p. 106). She goes on to say that culturally responsive-teaching and learning serves to embrace the, "sociocultural realities and histories of students through what is taught and how…" (Gay, 2010, p.1). On the other hand, Tomlinson (2013) introduces differentiated instruction and describes it as, "a sequence of common sense decisions made by teachers with a student-first orientation. When these two strategies are combined to become *culturally-responsive differentiated instruction*, the outcomes are greater and indicative of student-centered learning. This academic repertoire moves diverse populations of students toward greater educational opportunity.

In recognizing a student's identity, district leaders are better able to build relationships, trust, hope and efficacy in the teaching and learning experience. Incorporating student-centered learning allows leaders to create access and opportunities for diverse learners that lead to greater participation and is comprehensive. This student-centered philosophy of teaching is personalized, empowering and inclusive (Huber,

2010). It affords an understanding of the various styles of learning and allows for a practice of adapting instruction to meet student differences (Tomlinson, 2013). Learning in this environment supports performances that include front-loading language, small group instruction, learning centers and encouraging student discourse.

According to Huber (2010), a culturally-responsive and differentiated classroom that is transformative includes attention to the following five characteristics: (1) assessment, climate, instruction and curricula that uses students' strengths, interests, background, home life, and lived experiences to validate student identities; (2) recognizes culture's influence and then uses cultural resources to mediate instruction; (3) includes resources that legitimize the cultural and historical legacies of all cultural and ethnic groups by including these legacies in the materials; (4) students are active in all aspects of learning and teaching; and (5) assignments are meaningful and purposeful to students, families and teachers.

Research-based instruction. Research-based interventions are strategies and supports that have been scientifically tested and proved to be sound in raising the achievement levels of diverse students. These practices can help students improve academically, socially, emotionally and behaviorally. Research-based practices can be employed through a small group or individual student approach. Interventions are available for all contents covering grades K-12. In addition, interventions can be intensive, targeted or universal (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

District Leaders Foregrounding Equity for Others

Foregrounding equity requires district leaders to initiate equity-based practices and model them for other leaders. In light of the ever-changing demographics of public

education, district leaders, principals and other affiliates of the school community must begin to focus on equity-oriented practices as a strategy for reform to effectively engage diverse students in the learning process. As a result, district leaders are being called upon to promote equitable opportunities, prevent the disruption of access and remove barriers to protect a child's right to succeed.

In this section, I will review how *collaborations* and *partnerships* can be used to create and maintain an equity-focused school community, thus a culturally-responsive district.

Collaboration. According to Strauss (2013), "collaboration in schools is not a big topic in the national education discussion, and that's unfortunate, because it's a key to effective schools" (p. 1). This is in part due to Barth's (1991) understanding of working in isolation.

> Are teachers and administrators willing to accept the fact that they are part of the problem? ...God didn't create self-contained classrooms, 50-minute periods, and subjects taught in isolation. We did, because we find working alone safer than preferable to working together. (Barth, 1991, p. 126-127)

Recent research that considers the role of collaboration in districts and in schools has found that trust and relationship building is the hallmark of effective teamwork. In low-income districts that are challenged with struggling schools, great achievement has been actualized and demonstrated in student outcomes through deep collaboration between administrators and teachers (Anrig, 2015). Bryk, Allensworth, Sebring, Easton and Lupesco (2010) attribute high degrees of relational trust among stakeholders as a major factor of collaboration. In addition, collaboration requires a willingness to engage in collective responsibility. DuFour (2004) further conveys that, "collaborative conversations call on team members to make public what has traditionally been private"

(p.4). Finally, Bryk et al. (2010) have identified five organizational features of collaboration that are deemed to be central to advancing student achievement: (1) a coherent instructional guidance system; (2) an effective system to improve professional capacity; (3) strong parent-community-school ties; (4) a student-centered learning climate; and (5) leadership focused on cultivating a growing cadre of stakeholders. When these five features are incorporated with fidelity outcomes are ten times more likely to be great (Anrig, 2015).

> The power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things for two reasons. One is that knowledge about effective practice becomes more widely available and accessible on a daily basis. The second reason is working together generates commitment. (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010, p. 72)

One such example of the power of collaboration can been seen at a school in Livermore, CA where student achievement for economically-disadvantaged students and English Language Learners more than doubled as a result of collaborative processes (Keller & Kusko, 2015). Another example is The Burke High School in Boston which was once deemed underperforming and had a Turnaround designation. Through engaging the organizational features of collaboration, the school shed the Level 4 designation and went on to compete and win the 'School on the Move' prize in 2015.

Partnerships. According to Cox- Peterson (2011), partnerships are an important aspect of system reform and necessary to close the achievement gap for all students. District leaders must develop the ability to communicate effectively and engage in meaningful relationships with others outside of their school community in order to strengthen teaching and learning. Relationships must be developed with family, community, local and business partners to increase student outcomes. Leaders must think

outside of the box to enhance educational achievement for all children. Successful partnerships include the exchange of knowledge, ideas and resources (Cox-Peterson, 2011).

Research Design and Methodology

This qualitative, single case study of a Massachusetts school district examined and analyzed the collected data, to answer the two research questions from a Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership conceptual framework. The research drew upon interviews and documents collected as part of a larger research project. In addition, it explored questions that were unique to the individual study. All procedures that related to the individual study of *Maintaining a Focus on Equity* were my sole responsibility. The study served to answer "what" and "how" queries regarding the actions and moves of district leaders when engaging in equity-oriented reform through the lens of Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership (Johnson, 2006). This section describes the methodology used for this portion of the overall study.

Study Design

The design selected for this research was a common research method called the case study, and was used to conduct in depth analysis of a bounded system (Merriam, 2009). Conducting a single case study allowed the researcher a deep and nuanced understanding of how district leaders maintained a focus on equity to improve achievement. It also provided a lens to look at the role of culturally-responsive practices as an understanding of equity.

Site Selection

The purposefully selected sample is a K-12 district comprised of 4,500 students with approximately 303 teachers of whom 98.8% were highly qualified. It was a Title 1 district with a Level 2 status, situated in a manufacturing town with a residential community.

The site for this case study was selected based on the following criteria: a diverse student population with at least two subgroups as identified by NCLB; a visible district-wide effort to narrow the achievement gap; and a mid-sized student population. The district appeared to be engaging in improvement efforts through a design process and not by happenstance. This district had included a focus on equity in both its Strategic Plan and their Mission and Vision statement. This public declaration of equity in relation to achievement further supported the criterion used for the selection of this site. Finally, site selection included an understanding that the district will have demonstrated some level of positive gains in achievement outcomes for marginalized student groups as a gap-narrowing measure between those groups and their advantaged, White and Asian peers.

Data Collection

Case study evidence can be derived from multiple sources (Yin, 2013). In this case study, data was comprised of interviews and document reviews collected from August 2015 to November 2015. Combining the two forms of data in the collection process allowed for greater triangulation (Desimone & LeFloch, 2004).

Interviews. To gain the perspectives and understandings of district leaders, semi-structured interviews were administered to district participants. Primary participants included the superintendent, central office administrators and principals. Other

participants included those staff members who were specifically mentioned by others three or more times as being intricately involved in plans to narrow the achievement gap. All participants were interviewed for 45-60 minutes with follow-up, as necessary. In total, interviews included 15-20 participants. (See Table 1)

Table1

Interview Respondents

District Leaders → Superintendent
→ Assistant Superintendent
→ Finance Director

Upper School Leaders → High School Principal
→ Middle School Principal
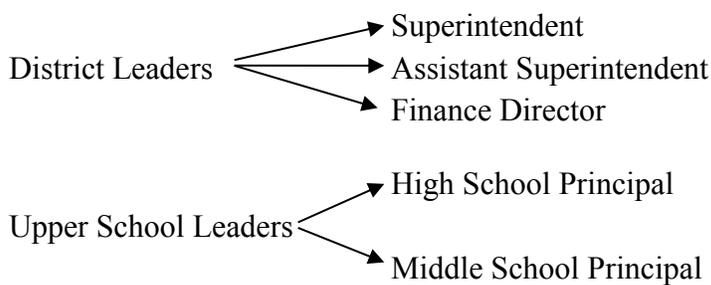
Elementary School Principals

Instructional Coaches

Participants were presumed to have a role and responsibility in improving achievement and advancing equity. In addition, participants answered questions relevant to equity, specifically, how they understood and foregrounded the process.

To make sure questions were valid, the researcher employed cognitive interviews. Desimone and LeFloch (2004) explained, "cognitive interviews provide an excellent methodology for examining the extent to which tools of inquiry validly and reliably capture respondents experience" (p. 5). The researcher specifically targeted think aloud interviews with additional probing so as to make sure the respondents were processing the questions as intended.

Documents. Collected text served to identify written understandings of the district leaders' commitment to maintaining a focus on equity through Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership. That being said, document data included artifacts such as: District Improvement Plan; School Improvement Plans; Mission and Vision Statements; Statement of Core Values; and regulations and policies that impacted the district's ability to improve student achievement by maintaining a focus on equity. These documents were presented as plans, reviews and part of the data collection processes. They were also used to support interview data and triangulation.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and documents underwent thematic analysis. An *a priori* list was generated from the literature review (Merriam, 2014). Both types of data were analyzed using several cycles of coding for pattern matching and analysis. Pair checks, analytic memos and a focus on reflections supported trustworthiness in the study (Merriam, 2014). The first research question related to district leaders' understanding of equity in the context of advancing achievement system-wide. The second research question related to how district leaders foregrounded equity for other educators in an effort to improve achievement system-wide. These questions were probed through the lens of Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership.

A series of interview questions were constructed and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore Wyoma District School leaders' understanding of equity and their practices associated with it. Coding was specific for data that addressed the two research questions and the array of concepts they explored. Several cycles of coding were employed to analyze all data. The goal of the initial coding was to develop

generalized categories for the collected data. Initial coding included the topic of equity, identification of student groups and structures and practices that comprised an equity-oriented or culturally-responsive community. Additionally, sub-coding was used with the purpose of generating common themes around efforts to define or describe the district's understandings of equity and what was being done in the district to advance it. Sub-coding was informed by the literature around Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership. Additional codes emerged and allowed for new trends that developed from the conversations and further transcriptions.

Findings

In this section, I report the findings of my study on how district leaders maintained an equity focus to improve achievement. First, I depict how leaders conceptualized their notion of equity. Second, I describe what schools do to promote equity. Third, I relate how district leaders foregrounded equity for other educators.

How Leaders Conceptualized Notions of Equity

The district had historically self-identified as a homogeneous district with very little economic diversity. However, recent demographic shifts in their community, along with a decaying economy, changed their students' demographics. As a result, they identified equity as a key measure in its 2011-2016 Strategic Plan. The district's goal was to maximize academic achievement and personal growth for every student. Ideally, each student had a Personal Plan for Progress (PPP). In addition, all district leaders expressed the belief that all students will graduate college-ready and demonstrate personal development of 21st Century skills. Leaders of the Wyoma School District understood equity in terms of responsiveness and accountability. All school principals talked

extensively around meeting the needs of ELLs, special needs and students who were experiencing the effects of poverty on learning. These students were identified in the research as the district's struggling student population, or the students most likely to fall through the cracks without appropriate interventions. All district leaders expressed an urgency to strategically increase accountability measures for their struggling population. School leaders acted on the premisse that all students can learn, all students will graduate from high school and all students will be ready to take their place in a 21st Century society. Their notion of equity was communicated strategically as goals in the district's Vision and Mission statements, and enacted on at various levels throughout the organization. Overall, equity was generalized as opportunities to raise test scores for proof in closing the achievement gap.

What Schools Did to Promote Equity

Schools in Wyoma promoted equity by focusing on creating tailored opportunities to meet the needs of individual learners. District leaders intentionally designed specific interventions within their schools to meet the needs of the diverse student body. The following two themes emerged as part of their practice: *equitable structural supports* and *equity-oriented practices*.

Equitable structural supports. In response to their challenging population of learners, district leaders had enacted a process of change to effectively inform greater outcomes for their English Language Learners, students with disabilities and poor students. Further analysis of the data demonstrated that a process was designed which included transformation of *staffing protocols* and *school structures*.

Staffing. Collectively, the staffing profile of the district allowed school leaders the opportunity to meet a wide range of needs, e.g. behavior, social-emotional needs, special education, language and poverty that considered the impact of learning in relation to instruction. Beyond teachers and leaders, the district had staffed all schools with Equity Officers, Adjustment Counselors, Behavioral Consultants, Literacy, Math and Science Coaches and paraprofessionals. These positions were evident in all schools and were recognized by all fifteen respondents in one way or another as meaningful to serving all students. Two positions that focused on the whole child and seemed essential to the wellness of all children were those of the *adjustment counselor* and the *child support specialist*.

Adjustment Counselor. The interviewees spoke at length about the role of the Adjustment Counselor above all others. The words of one respondent summarized an understanding around the depth of the work of an Adjustment Counselor, "We have a wonderful Adjustment Counselor who works really well with our students and families. Come Thanksgiving time, there will be baskets of food delivered to families". Similarly, it was related by another respondent who spoke at length and further emphasized the Adjustment Counselor's role as being significant to the leadership team when it came to unpacking data around performance of students with social emotional needs. More specifically, one principal lamented, "We have kids with a lot of baggage. We know they can't make academic gains if they're not here emotionally and feeling safe." All principal respondents agreed that Adjustment Counselors addressed student needs, both individually and in small groups, through a social curriculum and were beneficial to raising student achievement.

Child Support Specialist. Another such role that served to support the many needs of their struggling student population was that of a child support specialist. Child Support Specialists coordinated efforts around child welfare, equity and civil rights for all students and families, as evidenced by the presence of equity officers in all schools. The particular role, as described by one respondent, had been designed to protect students from being negatively impacted in schools as a result of race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, gender, history, cultural experience, residential status, behavior and/or performance. The words of one school leader illustrated the extent of the economic challenges faced by the district, "I have half of my building experiencing poverty. We have a number of kids in shelters. There are many kids living in other districts but being transported in, as a result of homelessness."

School Structures. In an effort for schools to better align instruction, curriculum and assessment methods to student needs, the district created a systemic structure to focus on particular sub-groups in specific schools. Every elementary school housed a specific program relevant to student profiles as a means to generate a greater focus on targeted intervention. For instance, one school housed the English Language Learner (ELL) population, while another housed the special needs population. However, five respondents revealed overlap in all 5 elementary schools, in varying degrees.

The structural model was described as a means to support district leaders intentionality around looking at instruction through the lens of kids that are "stuck." One school leader described their efforts around clustering students, "We do it so we are able to ask ourselves, how do we get them up and collectively commit to ways in which to

improve their performance." In one Title 1 funded school, the focus was on reforming the entire schedule to better meet the needs of ELL students.

Equity-Oriented Practices

Equity-oriented instructional practices, such as differentiated instruction, responsive classroom intervention and small group work, were employed for those that were identified as struggling students. These practices and programs, as revealed from eleven of the fifteen respondents, identified specific pedagogies and programs as comprehensive instructional models to serve the struggling population of students in their schools.

Personalized pedagogy and programs. In order to understand the factors influencing achievement on struggling students, district leaders explored student-centered learning and research-based programs as strategies to advance achievement and equity.

Student-centered learning. Student-centered learning had been identified in the data as the style of teaching that best met the needs of diverse learners. More specifically, fifteen respondents identified effective instructional practices to be student-centered. However, not all fifteen incorporated this strategy consistently into their practice. According to the data, the practice has been implemented at various levels within the district. All elementary school principals were more consistent in their demonstrations of this practice. Elementary school level leaders reported they employed small group interventions, differentiated instruction and responsive classroom techniques to ensure that each individual learner's needs was met as standard practice. This was accomplished in collaboration with teachers, administrators and coaches.

Contrary to elementary school practices, the upper school level leaders reported that they were still working to develop a greater consistency around student-centered learning. Data from two respondents showed that the two upper schools maintained a mixture of both student-centered learning and teacher-centered direct instruction, with the goal of moving in the direction of becoming more student centered in their approach.

Research-based programs. In response to the change in their community dynamics, the Strategic Plan outlined various research-based programs as a way of creating equitable opportunities for all students to learn. Fourteen out of fifteen respondents identified research-based programs as systemic interventions that are used throughout the district. They invariably named: Empowering Writers, Strategy Based Intervention Program, RTI, One-to-One Lap Top Learning and Project Based Learning as instructional initiatives that helped struggling learners achieve.

How District Leaders Foregrounded Equity for other Educators

Foregrounding equity was the way in which leaders operationalized structures, practices and processes to create meaningful opportunities to learn. It required leaders to practice an explicit focus of their attention on equity, while addressing the relevance of race, ethnicity, language and income on student learning. To address foregrounding equity for others, the second research question, the following themes were identified: Collaboration and Partnership.

Collaboration: Enhancing our ablities to lead and instruct. The interpretation of the findings suggested that collaboration was a major component of teacher development and was practiced throughout the district in meaningful ways. For example, all central office and principal leaders revealed different forms of collaboration as a

major tenet of their work. Collaboration was embedded in the learning community in various ways. Rather than practicing teaching and learning in silos, collaboration became their new normal and has been acknowledged as an essential ingredient of a professional learning community. It was described through multiple fashions that included data meetings, team meetings, grade level meetings, content meetings, district team level meetings, instructional leadership team meetings, coaching and mentoring, as well as parent meetings. The following quote from a central office leader summarized the results of the district wide buy-in around collaboration and partnering, "We are a very robust and phenomenal Level 2 school district with school programming that is incredible and inclusive." In addition, the respondent reported, "We are a district with very, very high graduation rates, pretty close to 100%," and this was in part due to a commitement to collaboration.

  All accounts of district leaders indicated that there was a true commitment to collaborative processes that utilized multifaceted approaches in an effort to fully meet the academic goals of the district. Accordingly, collaboration proved to be at the heart of their learning organization. It supported the ability of staff to engage in the development of meaningful relationships through *mentoring* and job *embedded professional development*.

  Mentoring supports. Mentoring appeared to be intentionally integrated into the teaching and learning community. The strategic plan, as well as information obtained from ten, respondents identified each school in the district as having a Mathematics, Science and Literacy coach that provided on-the-ground mentoring in the content area to teachers within the school community. One principal described the importance of

mentoring in the school community in the following statement, "I have eight standards-based instructional coaches that we utilize through training, so I can pull them into work with people when they are having problems."

Job-embedded supports. As part of maintaining a focus on equity for school success, district leaders employed the process of modeling through common planning time where teachers and coaches were afforded the opportunity to debrief lessons, plan for additional supports and discuss needed professional development. Interpretation of the findings suggested that the use of this practice helped grow teacher performance and consequently raised student achievement. Ten out of fifteen respondents spoke of coaches modeling classroom instruction as a significant form of collaboration and job-embedded professional development that directly supported teaching and learning.

Partnering: Positioning academic progress. The Strategic Plan identified partnering as one of its goals with the intent of increasing sustainable and productive community partnerships to maximize educational opportunities. The plan outlined benchmarks for increasing the growth of community partners. Data collected revealed partnerships were employed to support *instruction* and *professional development*.

Instructional support. Responsive classroom interventions were developed to provide instructional support. Bay State Reading Initiative (BSRI) proved to be a strong partner within the district's elementary schools, as evidenced by 7 principal respondents. All five elementary school respondents said they utilized the support of BSRI to gain traction, first in reading and then in math. One elementary school principal described outcomes from the support, "I think we consulted with BSRI for a number of years. I think as a district that really helped. People became more data literate, and so now we are

really focused on both literacy and math." Two other respondents credited the BSRI math coach for helping them design their own scope and sequence and redesign the math benchmark assessments. Overall, all elementary principal respondents noted that BSRI worked not only at the school level, but also with the district on professional development, and found their support most valuable.

    Professional development. The district has invested in supporting teacher growth and improvement through utilizing consultants to provide professional development. Specifically, they have supported the coaching model through a partnership with outside consultants to work with the coaches across district schools around the characteristics of proper coaching. Here is how one respondent described the partnership, "Consultants come in to work with all of our instructional coaches so that they are able to help them build their repertoire of strategies to use while working with teachers."

    Consultants also helped build capacity around teaching special needs students and students who were identified as social-emotional through professional development. Relative to special education, one central office leader had pulled in consultants to work directly with all special needs programs in the district to focus on student growth and achievement. Another respondent described the use of consultants to "shape student behaviors."

Discussion

    The questions posed by this study pertained to the school district's notion of equity and how the district and school leaders focused teaching and learning around equitable practices for their diverse student body. To address these questions, I drew

upon the knowledge of Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership. This helped create a framework to understand Wyoma's practices.

This study found clear evidence that central office and school leaders had a limited notion of equity. Both district and school leaders understood equity in terms of primarily creating conditions for struggling students to pass a state assessment through drilling down on instructional processes and provisioning for social emotional wellness.

District leaders focused with intentionallity around meeting the needs of ELL students, special needs students and poor students. However, they did not consider the effects of culture, race and ethnicity on learning, and hence did not practice Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership. While district leaders spoke readily about responsive practices, there was little talk or commitment to being culturally responsive. For example, their plans had no provisions to: 1) develop broader understanding of equity that included the impact of race, culture and ethnicity on learning; 2) transform their model of "responsiveness" to a Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership stance; 3) develop a systemic comprehensive district model of student-centered learning to engage all learners authentically, and not just focus on underperformance.

In addition, district leaders should embark on reform efforts and initiatives to: 1) deconstruct school spaces and structures that perpetuate exclusion and compromise equity and inclusion; 2) refrain from narrowing curriculum to increase proficiency on state assessments for (ELLs and SWDs); 3) create partnerships that loan themselves to acquiring knowledge of families and students' traditions, culture, history, and language; 4) explore the realms of social justice learning for a historical understanding of how race, culture and language impact learning, past and present.

Current researchers suggest Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership is a necessary reform practice to address the educational inequities that currently challenge our public schools (Gay, 2004; Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Johnson, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership specifically identifies and addresses the needs of the various learners to include an understanding of culture, language, race, ethnicity and economic status and its impact on learning (Johnson, 2006). Wyoma's leaders were able to recognize the impact of language, social emotional stability, special needs and poverty on learning, and responded in multiple ways. However, they fell short on recognizing the effects of race, culture and ethnicity on the learning process. While the district leaders attempted to be responsive to the needs of some, a true learning environment is responsive to the needs of all.

District leaders were foregrounding equity-oriented practices for other educators through collaboration and partnerships and research-based methodology. The way school leaders implemented equity-oriented practices was varied depending on the schools.

Consistent with the research, common planning time existed across all district schools and provided a space and time for teachers, leaders and coaches to work collaboratively. This opportunity allowed teachers, leaders and coaches to build relationships and share best practices. Anrig (2015) researched challenging school districts and found that this type of collaboration leads to greater student achievement.

According to Tomlinson (2013), student-centered philosophy of teaching is personalized and affords the opportunity to adapt instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners. Student-centered learning, research-based programs and reponsive instructional strategegies were implemented with fidelity at the elementary school level. In the upper

school, there was little consistency in how these same practices were used. As a result of this lack of consistency, the district's equity-oriented practices were fragmented.

District leaders created structures that addressed issues of student learning but in the process compromised equity and inclusion. They created spaces in schools for ELLs and special needs students that were separate from others. Although their intention was to focus and target supports for the students in question, in the process of their design, they created isolation and limited opportunities for those students to learn. According to Gottfried and Johnson (2014), the practice of excluding students to promote learning is limiting and unfair. Consistent with the research, this practice of narrowing down the curriculum to address the needs of sub-groups in an attempt to increase assessment scores, undermined their true opportunity to learn and to transfer that learning into generalized situations (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Brown (2011) concurs that leaders must transform schools by being inclusive and respectful of diversity.

Conclusion

At the core of equity within the framework of cultural responsiveness is the belief that all children can learn and achieve when placed in a learning environment that is nurturing, loving, student-centered and respectful of the diversity that defines the student population (Johnson, 2006). Engaging equity and culturally responsive practices requires a commitment to the belief that all children deserve the opportunity and right to learn. Cultural responsiveness in education requires leaders to have a disposition to address the role of culture, language, race, ethnicity and economic status on learning.

CHAPTER FOUR[4]

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the work of district leaders in improving achievement and advancing equity system-wide. In doing so, our research team examined the degree to which the actions of a district leadership team reflected an enactment of the four essential roles of district leaders in educational reform as conceived by Rorrer et al. (2008). Cushing (2016) and Lawson (2016) focused on how leaders attempted to build capacity and generate will when providing instructional leadership. McLaughlin (2016) focused on how leaders strived to reorient the organization's culture. Botelho (2016) focused on how leaders worked to establish policy coherence. McIntyre (2016) focused on the extent to which leaders maintained an equity focus in their efforts to improve achievement and equity system-wide.

Two central findings emerged following a synthesis of our individual lines of inquiry. First, consistent with research on standards based systemic reform (Leithwood, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003), our studies found that district leaders played an important role in efforts to improve achievement and equity system-wide. Second, we found the actions of district leaders were consistent with Rorrer et al.'s (2008) theory of districts as institutional actors. Albeit to varying degrees, in their efforts to improve student outcomes, all district leaders were attempting to enact the four reform roles conceived by Rorrer et al.

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[4] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Peter J. Botelho, Peter J. Cushing, Catherine L. Lawson, Lindsa C. McIntyre, and Zachary J. McLaughlin

The following sections will discuss these findings and their implications for both practice and research in light of current scholarship. First, we discuss the three prominent leadership moves leaders made when attempting to improve achievement and equity. Second, we discuss how leaders enacted the four leadership roles as conceived by Rorrer, et al.'s theory. Third, we provide recommendations for practice that can be used to guide the future efforts of leaders seeking to improve achievement and equity system-wide. Lastly, we discuss the limitations of this study and provide recommendations for future research.

Leaders Played an Important Role in Efforts to Improve Achievement and Equity

Consistent with current educational reform research (Bird, et al., 2013; Honig, et al., 2009; Knapp, et al., 2010), our studies suggest that Wyoma Public Schools district leaders played an important role in efforts to improve student achievement and equity across the system. Public reporting of the district's high stakes test scores, which revealed existing achievement disparities (Brown, 2003), and the Level 3 status[5] of one elementary school incentivized district leaders to implement large-scale instructional improvements. A synthesis of findings from individual lines of inquiry revealed three prominent leadership moves when attempting to improve achievement and equity: leaders (1) provided and supported instructional leadership; (2) implemented evidenced based decision making practices; and, (3) promoted equity across the system. In the next sections we discuss these leadership moves and the potential implications our findings may have on practice in light of current scholarship.

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[5] The Massachusetts accountability system uses aggregate high stakes test scores to designate districts as level 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5. A Level 1 district is the highest performing level, where Level 5, are performing at levels low enough to be placed in receivership by the state. Level 3 districts are considered in need of improvement and qualify for targeted support from the state.

Leaders attempted to provide and support instructional leadership. Similar to Galucci (2008), who considers underachievement a "problem of learning," leaders in Wyoma recognized the need for new knowledge and changes in instructional practice for improving student achievement. In order to realize these types of improvements, foremost, district leaders emphasized the importance of high expectations for learning for all students. This value of high expectations for all students was communicated using a variety of mediums and leaders sought to maintain high expectations by balancing support (professional learning and resources) with accountability (observations and evaluations). In addition to promoting high expectations, district leaders prioritized the development of instructional leadership throughout the district. Our data suggests leaders attempted to provide support by establishing "learning-focused partnerships (Honig, 2012)." These partnerships appeared to exist on and across many levels, (i.e. among central office, principals, coaches, and teachers) and were fostered through professional learning communities (PLCs), data teams, use of common goals and by allotting time for collaboration and planning.

Specifically, central office administrators attempted to partner with schools to develop and deepen the principals' instructional practice by providing job-embedded supports. This was evidenced by the leadership coaching support provided to the principal of the Level 3 elementary school and the addition of a literacy coach[6] position to her school budget. Similarly, a multi-year federal grant program was used to provide

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[6] The coaching model was first implemented at the elementary school designated as level 3, then expanded to another elementary school experiencing an increase of low SES students due to a change in student demographics. The coaching model was expanded over time to include a literacy coach and math coach at all elementary schools and the middle school. Additionally, there are 7 facilitators at the high school who provide curricular leadership without also formally evaluating staff.

resources and professional development to support the high school principal in initiating standards-based instruction and establishing PLCs.

Furthermore, the recent efforts to provide instructional coaches with their own coaching support demonstrated an awareness that investments in the learning of instructional leaders should extend beyond the principals to include other formal and informal leaders (Spillane et al., 2009). Similarly, principals, all of whom identified themselves as instructional leaders, described efforts to motivate and support positive changes in teaching and learning by working in "partnership" with coaches and teachers in their schools. In these efforts, they distributed leadership through both formal (coaches) and informal (peer-peer learning) ways. In addition, principals structured PLCs, data team meetings and collaboration time to support formal OTL, while recognizing how conversations and interactions during these forums created opportunities for incidental learning to occur during social interactions throughout the school day. Furthermore, principals described explicit attempts to differentiate support for their teachers (Knapp et al., 2010), including how they negotiated pacing and access to necessary supports when setting expectations. Lastly, similar to Anrig (2015), who found trust and time as essential for developing the levels of deep collaboration between administrators and teachers that led to significant improvements in low-income districts, leaders in Wymona identified trust and time as critical to supporting and building their staff's capacity.

Nevertheless, despite clear attempts to "lead the learning" (Honig, 2012), our data suggests some leaders at the elementary level attempted to improve achievement scores by narrowing the curriculum. In these schools, social studies and science were neglected

to provide opportunities for longer instructional blocks in literacy and mathematics. Similarly, some leaders focused on improving test scores of the "bubble students" (Booher-Jennings, 2005), who were on the border of being proficient on the state exam, and focused instruction on explicit test preparation strategies).

While these types of test gain strategies are commonly used by schools with varying achievement levels and different types of subgroup failures (Weinbaum, et al., 2012), there are costs associated with relying primarily on this strategy. A focus on test gain without improving opportunities to learn (OTL) can create an illusion of improvement (Pullin & Haertel, 2008).). In these circumstances, for example, instruction typically does not focus on developing student's critical thinking skills. Instead, instruction focuses on developing students' test taking skills and skills that cannot be generalized beyond the test or the academic setting (Jacob, 2005). An emphasis on test gain strategies can also lead to over-classification of students as Limited English Proficient (LEP) and special needs, thereby inadvertently reinforcing educational inequity and further marginalizing underperforming students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Dentith, et al., 2013).

Leaders implemented evidence based decision-making practices. Evidence-based decision-making was infused throughout almost all leaders' efforts to improve achievement and equity. Multiple forms of data, including surveys, observational data, assessment scores and evaluation trends were used to make systemic change imperative (Wright & Harris, 2010); set direction, prioritize improvement and strategically allocate resources (O'Dogherty & Ovando, 2010). Survey and observational data were also used to understand and shape beliefs and culture.

A synthesis of our data suggests the district was in the beginning phases of effectively using evidence to inform educational practice in a way that leads to improved achievement For example, central office personnel, principals and coaches appeared to value evidence and were attempting to use data to inform decisions about instruction Furthermore, leaders allotted time for staff to collaboratively review multiple measures of achievement data on an ongoing basis and attempted to focus collaborative conversations on understanding data These moves reflect efforts to foster the types of meaningful conversations that Wayman et al. (2012) suggest can lead to common understandings about teaching, learning and data; an important aspect of organizational improvement. However, while use of data was apparent throughout the district, clarity surrounding buy-in, effectiveness and consistency of use among leaders was unclear (Finnegan, et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, while findings suggest leaders had a common preliminary understanding of how data can inform instructional practices that lead to improved student achievement scores, there did not appear to be a common understanding of the potential of data to also inform the opportunities students were given to learn (Pullin & Haertel, 2008; Wayman et al. 2012). In this respect, a strict focus on achievement-related data at the classroom level appeared to eclipse other types of educational data that could be used to detect potential learning inequities. For example, leaders did not appear to be examining discipline, attainment, or advanced placement data for proportionality across subgroups, or for the prevalence of "opportunity gaps" which can lead to underachievement.

Leaders promoted equity through responsiveness. Education is often referred to as the Great Equalizer (Scutari, 2008) and many scholars suggest that public school districts can improve achievement by attending to equity (Hewson et al., 2006; McIntyre, 2016; Rorrer et. al, 2008; Theoharis & Brooks, 2012; Turner, 2014). Our data found that leaders were attempting to attend to equity by owning past inequities relative to the larger student subgroups, and by making efforts to correct past inequities by responding to the needs of individual students.

Leaders acknowledged past inequities by explicitly identifying and owning that achievement disparities did exist between SWDs, ELLs, and economically-challenged students and their white and economically advantaged peers In their attempts to correct past inequities, leaders focused on providing opportunities and empowering both administrators and teachers to apply potential solutions (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2010; Turner, 2014), which they did by promoting both high expectations and a student-centered learning environment. For example, the district invested in instructional and emotional support systems (OECD, 2012) by strategically designating instructional coaches, equity coordinators and adjustment counselors for every building, over time. In addition, the district invested in research-based instructional programs at the elementary level, such as the responsive classroom and a research-based literacy program based on the Response to Intervention (RTI) model. Lastly, in an attempt to respond to students' individualized needs, the district employed a multi-faceted approach to professional development in ways that were equity oriented (i.e. co-teaching, responsive classroom, data-driven instructional interventions).

Many scholars of social justice leadership (Capper & Young, 2014; Orosco & Klinger, 2010; Scanlan, 2013) caution that leaders must be mindful of important factors such as inclusion and integration when attempting to narrow the achievement gap. For example, on one hand, RTI models provide "interventions" designed to support struggling learners, and they can prevent the over-identification of students for special education (Capper and Young, 2014). On the other hand, RTI can often remove students from general education classes, which has been found to increase segregation, particularly along race and class lines (Orosco & Klinger, 2010). Similarly, counselors are an important resource for students, but without the proper understanding of inclusion, leaders can unknowingly reinforce exclusion and restrict OTL for students if they must miss class time in order to access counseling services.

Additionally, in their efforts to be responsive, leaders described attempts to create socially just learning communities (Theoharis, 2007; Wright & Harris, 2010). For example, adjustment counselors' efforts to ensure students had warm coats and turkey to eat during Thanksgiving reflected an understanding of the importance of attending to the needs of the whole child (McIntyre, 2016). These kinds of efforts were consistent with those made by certain social justice leaders when attempting to "strengthen school culture and community" in Theoharis' (2007) study on social justice leadership.

Although leaders were attempting to implement socially-just practices that were responsive to the needs of students, leaders did not appear to be promoting cultural proficiency throughout the district, which Wright and Harris (2010) found to be a key strategy used in districts that reduced the achievement gap. Leaders appeared to understand language and special education needs and the impact of poverty but had not

appeared to acknowledge or unpack how race and ethnicity impacted achievement. There also did not appear to be a complex level of understanding of the historical struggles pertaining to race, ethnicity and culture that might inhibit students' opportunity to learn. For example, when describing their efforts to improve learning for ELL students, one of the larger student subgroups, there was no clear acknowledgement of how cultural and ethnic factors that are tied to language differences affected children. The next section will discuss how leaders enacted the four essential roles as conceived by Rorrer et al. (2008) during their efforts to improve achievement and equity.

Leaders Enacted Rorrer et al.'s (2008) Four Essential Roles to varying Degrees

While exploring district leaders' efforts to improve achievement, we explored in-depth the degree to which the actions of a district leadership team reflected an enactment of the four essential roles for district leaders in educational reform as conceived by Rorrer et al. (2008). Our data confirms Rorrer et al.'s assertion: district leaders in Wyoma were enacting these roles, albeit to varying degrees (see Table 4.1), in their effort to improve achievement and advance equity across the district. At the same time, data also suggests leaders did not have a common definition or understanding of these roles, nor did they have a common understanding of what implementation of these roles should look like. Similarly, enactment of these roles varied in degree, according to position and setting. Two possible explanations for these findings are the fact that the district's improvement process initially began at the school level (the level 3 school) and that here has been turnover in leadership positions over the past several years. The following expands on these findings by describing how the individual roles were enacted.

Table 4.1

How District Leaders' enacted the four roles as conceived by Rorrer, et al., (2008)

Individual Study	Role	Key Findings
Lawson, 2016	Instructional Leadership: Generating Will	Used transformational leadership and distributed leadership to build and sustain will; used resources, inducements and data to reinforce will.
Cushing, 2016	Instructional Leaders Building Capacity	Used observation, ongoing review of data, supervision and evaluation system to monitor instruction and efforts to improve instruction; procured fiscal and human resources to deploy an instructional coaching model.
McLaughlin, 2016	Reorienting the Organization: District Culture	Made efforts to decipher their organizational culture; used subgroups dynamics to influence culture change; empowered early the desired change.
Botelho, 2016	Establishing Policy Coherence: Mediating Policy	Response to policies was not proactive or deliberate; crafted policy by attempting to understand policy requirements and flexibility for implementing; reflected on the degree to which policy reinforced and/or conflicted with district goals and needs. Mediated policy by bridging and buffering implementation to serve local interests.
McIntyre, 2016	Maintaining a Focus on Equity	Owned past inequities and established vision and plan for correcting past inequities; allocated resources by adding positions that support "the whole child" by investing in positions, professional learning and curriculum that supports equity-oriented practice.

Providing instructional leadership. As described in the previous section, Rorrer et al. (2008) identified providing instructional leadership as the first role in a district's efforts to reform. This study confirmed that all leaders engaged in the "proactive administrative behavior" of providing instructional leadership by generating will and building capacity in ways that were supported by research (Daresh, 1991; Firestone, 1989; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). The two sub-roles of Instructional Leadership, Generating Will and Building Capacity, were examined independently.

Generating Will. Conclusions drawn from Lawson's (2016) inquiry were consistent with Rorrer et al.'s (2008) findings on two levels. First, the role of generating will was an "element" of leaders' efforts to provide instructional leadership. The second finding builds off of their assertion that the type of will necessary to initiate or sustain improvement, "does not arise automatically nor simply in response to external environments" (p. 315). The study concluded that leaders attempted to intrinsically motivate staff by acting as transformational leaders and distributing leadership in many ways that connected with an individual's values, beliefs and desires. Furthermore, when enacting these leadership constructs, leaders sought to use extrinsic motivators (praise and recognition, data to show growth, and resources such as time and professional learning opportunities) in ways that promoted individual's feelings of competence and sense of self-determination, which are the factors most strongly associated with employee engagement and the high levels of commitment required to realize sustainable improvements (Deci & Ryan, 2000; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003).

Furthermore, leaders enacted this role while contending with economic, political, and cultural forces that played out differently depending on position (superintendent versus coach; new leader v. long term leader) and context (elementary or. high school). In this respect, it is not surprising that although leaders utilized the same leadership constructs, many leaders employed them in different ways. For example, some leaders used transformational strategies that focused on shaping beliefs by reviewing data, where others concentrated on building trusting relationships. Despite these types of differences, all attempts to generate will reflected a strong commitment to improving teaching and

learning (Daresh, 1991) by attempting to intrinsically motivate stakeholders to engage in the work of improving achievement and equity.

Building capacity. Rorrer et al. (2008) illustrated the fundamental importance of building capacity to maintain reform efforts as new challenges arise. Cushing (2016) explored district leaders' specific actions to build capacity as well as how district leaders prioritized capacity-building actions to improve student achievement.

According to Rorrer et al. (2008), there are three main strategies that proactive district leaders use to build capacity: (a) using communication, planning, and collaboration to coordinate and align constituent's work; (b) monitoring teacher and leader goals, classroom instruction, and efforts to improve instruction through transparent use of available data for accountability; and (c) procuring the necessary resources focused on improving instruction.

In regard to how district leaders are building capacity to improve achievement and advance equity district-wide, Cushing (2016) found that district leaders were primarily consistent with the last two of the three strategies enumerated by Rorrer et al (2008). First, school and district leaders observed instruction while checking to see that efforts to improve instruction were being implemented by teachers. They were also effectively using the new supervision and evaluation system as part of this monitoring. Second, district leaders procured the fiscal and human resources to deploy an instructional coaching model across the district. They recognized that past professional development was largely ineffective and worked to rectify that reality. Coaches modeled lessons for teachers, monitored progress of instructional changes, and provided resources for teachers.

Despite this, implementation variations surfaced relative to the communication and collaboration necessary to align the work. For example, leaders varied in how they used coaches. Complicating this were teaching duties that had been added to coaches' responsibilities. Some leaders explicitly stated that the district was undertaking too many initiatives without clear communication or an understanding of what actions were effective. A lack of communication and alignment between district leaders resulted in fragmentation and a lack of clear vision for capacity-building efforts. In conclusion, while Wyoma district leaders were found to be building capacity in ways that were largely consistent with Rorrer et al (2008), many of their efforts were in the beginning stages and required monitoring.

Reorienting the organization: district culture. Rorrer et al. (2008) argue that two sub-roles exist beneath the role of reorienting the organization: refining and aligning organizational structures and processes and changing the district culture. McLaughlin (2016) explored the latter. That exploration discovered a need for a clearer conceptualization of culture shaping within Rorrer et al.'s framework, a push by Wyoma's district leaders to change their culture, and disconnectedness in their approaches.

In their brief discussion of the shaping of district culture, Rorrer et al. makes three main points: (a) culture is made up of norms, expectations, and values; (b) culture that supports reform is important for districts to create; (c) normative expectations are necessary to promote reform. This study attempted to add structure and depth to Rorrer et al.'s framework.

Many Wyoma leaders expressed the importance of beliefs in impacting positive change for students. After applying a conceptual framework based on Schein (2010) to exploring the culture shaping efforts of district leaders, McLaughlin (2016) confirmed that Wyoma leaders were working to shape their culture to help improve both achievement and equity. Attempts to shape culture included: making efforts to decipher their organizational culture, using subgroup dynamics to influence culture change, and empowering early adopters of the desired change.

While efforts were being made by the district to create these positive cultural shifts, the type of tactics utilized generally varied between leaders. There was no singular, or even primary, approach to shifting the district's culture. Based on their own unique experiences and training, individual leaders implemented different methods. In addition to not having a common approach, interview data indicated that these leaders also did not have a common framework or language to think about or discuss culture shaping.

While exploring the role of reorienting culture, this study discovered two notable findings about leaders efforts to shape district culture. First, district leaders believed in the need to shape their culture. Second, their efforts to shape culture demonstrated a disjointed, inconsistent approach. These leaders met Rorrer et al.'s expectations of working to create a culture supportive of improvement. They also had been trying to develop norms and values that support change (Deal & Peterson, 2009). In order to assess the level to which that is occurring, future researchers will also need to apply their own conceptual frameworks due to the the limited description of district culture provided in Rorrer et al.'s study.

Establishing policy coherence. Establishing policy coherence emerged as a third essential dimension. According to Rorrer et al. (2008), district leaders are critical to establishing policy coherence. This role has two subcomponents: mediating federal, state, and local policy; and aligning resources with district needs. In doing so, district leaders take on a "pro-active policy making stance" (Spillane, 1996, p. 65) adapting state and federal policies to serve local goals and needs and allocating resources in a strategic fashion.

With respect to how district leaders were attempting to establish policy coherence, Botelho (2016) found that district leaders were clearly working to navigate federal and state policies in a manner that was somewhat consistent with the role described by Rorrer et al. At times, they explicitly considered their crafting policy coherence role and took on this role fully. In doing so, they discussed how they worked to understand what a particular policy required and how much flexibility existed in implementation. They then explicitly reflected upon the degree to which the policy reinforced and, or conflicted with the goals and needs of the district. Finally, leaders mediated the policy by implementing it in a manner that best met those local needs (Honig & Hatch, 2004). This part of the process involved bridging or buffering policies to serve local interests.

However, this role of establishing policy coherence was enacted inconsistently. Most leaders did not seem to craft coherence in a proactive and deliberate manner. This was especially true of building leaders who typically failed to be able to speak explicitly of this role. Others employed bridging and buffering strategies but did not seem to be able to reflect clearly upon the reasons for doing so. Additionally, building leaders seemed inclined to bridge, and not buffer, policies thus making it difficult for them to

protect schools, teachers and students from negative unintended consequences that might result from some policies. Regardless of how individual leaders enacted the role, a clear and consistent understanding of the role of establishing coherence did not appear to exist.

Maintaining an equity focus. According to Rorrer et al. a focus on equity is a "pivot point for reform" (p. 329). In exploring this role, McIntyre (2016) sought to understand the ways in which leaders enacted the two subcomponents, which includes owning past inequities and foregrounding equity for other leaders. This study found that district leaders in Wyoma enacted each subcomponent to varying degrees. How they went about enacting each subcomponent is described previously in greater detail. In general, leaders owned past inequities by making equity an explicit value in their reform agenda (strategic plan), which laid the "foundation on which members of the school community construct common ground and the school culture" (Ancess & Ort, 1999, p.3).

Consistent with Rorrer et al.'s assertion that successful districts operationalize an equity plan that fosters the belief that all students can learn, leaders foregrounded equity by employing a calculated process for achieving equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students. Specifically, the leaders process for foregrounding equity involved acknowledging their limitations in teaching to many of the diverse populations and attempts to address prior inequities through collaboration and partnerships.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of our findings and current research on systemic reform, the following section provides recommendations for practice that can be used to guide the future efforts of district leaders seeking to improve achievement and equity system-wide. In this section we discuss how district leaders can fulfill the following recommendations for

practice: make equity and explicit and defining collective value; focus instructional leadership efforts on improving educational outcomes; become "data-informed;" and last, but not least, use Rorrer et al.'s (2008) theoretical framework to guide systemic reform efforts.

Make Equity an Explicit and Defining Collective Value

Rorrer et al. (2008) contend that districts that successfully improve achievement and equity do so by demonstrating a "value commitment" that involves making equity a "defining, explicit value, and a desired outcome" (p.334). The following sections discuss how leaders can make equity a defining value by developing their understanding of equity and by foregrounding equity.

Develop an understanding of equity. While acknowledging past inequities and making allowances for correction are important steps in the improvement process (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2010), it will serve district leaders well to make equity an explicit and defining collective value in the district. First and foremost, leaders must understand that there is a relationship between achievement and educational equity (Brown, 2004). Educational equity involves the distribution of educational resources towards learning opportunities that support optimal achievement outcomes for all students (Kahle,1998; Noguera, 2007), where inequity, creates opportunity gaps and leads to low levels of achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The works of Kahle (1998) and Noguera et al. (2012) can deepen leaders' understanding of how inequitable educational practices perpetuate achievement disparities. Capper and Young (2014) can further deepen leaders understanding of not only what inclusion/integration means, but also the importance of

making this understanding the "central, visible, unambiguous anchoring feature of all . . .

practices" (Capper & Young, 2014, p.162).

Second, leaders' understanding of achievement disparities must not be limited to

the context of education. Leaders must be mindful of the fact that school systems do not

exist in isolation from the community. Therefore, the community's social and economic

capacity must also be understood and potential linkages between the school and

community that aim to build the capacity of both should be explored (Datnow, et al.

2005). Leaders must also understand the broader context, including but not limited to, the

history of inequity and factors such as the economic and social capacity within a

community that can perpetuate inequity (Datnow et al., 2005; Johnson, 2007).

Furthermore, leaders understanding should include the impact of inequity on educational

attainment, social and occupational mobility, and our nation's position in the global

economy (Darling- Hammond, 2010; NRC, 1997). By understanding the factors and

forces that contribute to inequity, leaders will be better equipped to foreground equity as

a defining value.

Foreground equity. One way to begin foregrounding is to determine if leaders

are inadvertently promoting inequitable practices by evaluating how learning

opportunities are distributed among students across the district. Equity audits are one way

to assess for both opportunity and outcome gaps (Hehir, 2012; Skrla, et al., 2011). Equity

audits are used to examine the extent to which access to quality teachers and enrollment

in honors classes, discipline rates, dropout rates, college acceptance rates, and

representation in special education is proportionately represented by different groups of

students (Noguera, et al., 2012; Skrla et al., 2011). Results of the equity audit should inform a plan for instituting equitable practices and close existing opportunity gaps.

Professional learning opportunities for leaders (Brown, 2003; Johnson, 2007) that focus on culturally-responsive instructional leadership will develop leaders' ability to understand their role and responsibility when it comes to supporting equity. For example, training in culturally proficient leadership can enable leaders to gain insight into how individual biases and often-unconscious "blind-spots" reinforce leadership practices that reinforce inequity. At the same time, training in social justice leadership can increase leaders' knowledge and awareness of the history and traditions of a diverse student body (Theoharis, 2007). By developing the ability to practice culturally-responsive instructional leadership, district leaders will be able to recognize their own critical consciousness, biases, assumptions and privileges, and understand how they impact the learning environment. As a result, leaders will increase their ability to proactively develop policies and practices that support equitable learning opportunities, and pedagogy and community based partnerships that are culturally responsive (Johnson, 2007).

Focus Instructional Leadership Efforts on Improving Educational Outcomes

District leaders play an important role in improving achievement and equity across the system (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Spillane & Thompson, 1997) and are most likely to support student learning by providing instructional leadership (Honig, 2007; 2012). Thus, it will serve leaders well to focus their attention on improving teaching and learning in ways that leads not only to improved achievement scores, but also to improved educational *outcomes* (Datnow, et al. 2005). Knapp et al.'s (2010)

study, *Leadership for Learning Improvement*, can assist leaders in positively affecting student outcomes by providing guidance on how to (1) invest in staffing and other resources that support equitable learning improvements, (2) develop and exercise distributed instructional leadership within the school, and (3) and transform central office work practices and the district-school relationship in order to develop and sustain instructional leadership capacity. Honig (2012) and Burch & Spillane (2004) provide further guidance by illustrating how leaders can sustain instructional leadership capacity by acting as brokers of information and boundary spanners.

Support and develop principals' capacities to provide instructional leadership. The principal's capacity to provide instructional leadership is another critical aspect of district leaders work to support student learning (Honig, 2010). Findings from this study noted that all principals identified themselves as instructional leaders and viewed the work of improving both teachers' capacity and student learning as a priority. District leaders attempting to bring systemic improvements to scale should nurture this mindset in principals. Additionally, principals (and all formal and informal leaders) should be provided with ongoing job-embedded professional supports and OTL that strengthen their capacity to provide instructional leadership. Of particular importance is the ability of principals to effectively examine evidence that reflects the "quality of teaching" and how to use that evidence to support teachers in improving how they teach (Leithwood, et al., 2004).

Provide high quality opportunities for ongoing professional learning across all levels of the system. Formal opportunities to learn through workshops and courses play an important role in supporting improvement. However, reform efforts are more

likely to achieve scale if professional learning opportunities: are closely connected to the content of classroom practice; are sustained over time; and involve modeling, mentoring and coaching (Datnow, et al. 2005). Thus, it will serve leaders well to focus efforts on providing both leaders and teachers opportunities to learn "during and from" the daily work (Bryk, Camburn & Louis, 1999; Spillane, et al., 2009). Instructional coaching models and the collaboration structures implemented in Wyoma public school district are examples of ongoing, job-embedded OTL, which relied on social interactions for the transfer of information.

The transfer of information through social interactions is essential to learning and knowledge development (Frank, Zhao, & Borman, 2004). Therefore, it will benefit district leaders to be mindful of the power of conversation when planning to make large-scale changes in practice (Datnow, et al. 2005. The casual and informal conversations that occur throughout the workday and that result from accidental encounters among and across stakeholders have a tremendous influence on both the success and failure of reform (Datnow et al. 2005; Scanlan, 2013).

Although this study did not focus on sociocultural learning perspectives (Gee, 2008), an understanding of the theory can aid leaders in creating the conditions that will enable social processes to serve as a valuable tool for professional learning and for garnering the commitment needed for improvement to occur. Sociocultural learning theory underscores that actions and interactions between and among individuals and their environment are fundamental to learning and knowledge. Many scholars of this theory view schools as "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998) comprised of groups who share a common practice and learn how to pursue this purpose "with and from" each

other (Scanlan, 2013). PLCs, vertical teams, and data review teams are also examples of communities of practice that can provoke new ideas and the rethinking of old mindsets (Mezirow, 2000); they can further be used to promote socially just learning communities (see Scanlan, 2013). Additionally, communities of practice that occur across grade levels and settings create opportunities for boundary spanning, which can minimize conformity and groupthink (Burch & Spillane, 2004). Lastly, communities of practice can also foster trusting professional relationships and the kinds of "relational linkages" that Datnow et al. (2005) posit are essential to reform. The works of Wenger (1998), Gee (2008), Knapp (2008) and Scanlan (2013) can provide a lens for understanding sociocultural perspectives of learning and inform practices that promote continuous professional learning afforded by the social processes that occur within and between communities.

      Become "data-informed." When planning for data use, leaders must not only develop the capacity to use data, they must be able to use it wisely and make meaningful connections with data (Wayman et al., 2012) in ways that support both achievement and equity. Beyond developing their own capacity to use data effectively, leaders must know how to build the district's capacity. Therefore, leaders should be informed, not driven, by data. Capacity building efforts to become data-informed should be developed for both leaders and teachers. According to Wayman et al. (2012), three important steps to cultivate a data-informed district are: (1) developing shared district-wide understandings of the continuous process of data analysis as opposed to quick outcomes; (2) providing a content-focused collaborative environment for job-embedded professional learning opportunities, similar to the Wyoma Public School District data team model; and (3)

leveraging computer systems that are easily accessed and supported district-wide that support rather than overwhelm collegiality and professional community.

Leaders should, furthermore, develop data-related district policies to build capacity for data use (Wayman, et al., 2012). Specifically, leaders should develop policies that: (1) address context and how data is used; (2) foster positive attitudes toward data by mitigating structural barriers, (3) mandate principals develop data strategies and act (e.g. computer data systems professional development and collaboration time); and (4) that seamlessly integrate data systems for educators to improve rather than impede instructional outcomes with minimal technical skill. Using the aforementioned actionable steps, district leaders can implement improvement strategies for both achievement and equity by being data-informed.

Use Rorrer et al's (2008) Theoretical Framework to Guide Systemic Reform Efforts

Rorrer et al.'s framework regarding the four critical dimensions of leadership provides not only a promising theoretical framework for future studies (Leithwood, 2010), but also a propitious guide for the practice of district leaders who are working to improve achievement and equity system-wide. The team found that district leaders in Wyoma were enacting all four roles, to varying degrees, in ways that were consistent with Rorrer et al.'s theory. However, in Wyoma and districts throughout the nation involved in the complex and challenging work of systemic reform, enacting the roles in a more informed, proactive and deliberate manner can have tremendous value.

For this reason, leadership teams should be introduced to Rorrer et al.'s (2008) framework in an explicit and constructive manner. Because this framework is not a prescriptive process, when preparing for reform, leaders should think about the respective

context in which they will be implementing the four roles and how to implement the framework accordingly. Leaders should also develop a common definition of each role. A common understanding of both the district context and the four roles can aid leaders in determining what implementation should look like and what strategies could be used to successfully implement each role. Furthermore, given that the composition of all leadership teams will inevitably change over time, it will serve leaders well to incorporate strategies for orienting new leaders (formal and informal) to Rorrer et al's framework into respective improvement plans. In taking these steps, the hope is that leaders would come to deeply understand the four roles so they could proactively enact them and continuously monitor the application of each of the roles in a systematic way while reflecting upon their progress towards improving achievement and equity in the district. This type of research-based, multi-dimensional leadership approach would provide a unified practical framework for reform that all central office and building leaders could share. At the same time, it provides the necessary flexibility for leaders to focus more directly on certain roles and subsequent relevant goals and initiatives based upon the current context of the district. The individual studies associated with this research project can provide specific guidance on how district leaders can effectively enact each of the four roles in service to improvements in achievement and equity system-wide.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The heavy reliance on interview data and the lack of existing case study research using the full model created potential weaknesses in the study's reliability and transferability. While this study provides detailed insight into the perceptions of leaders in the mid-sized district, there are inherent limitations to the transferability of its

conclusions. The core of this study's data is composed of self-reported interviews gathered over the course of several months. While some documents were examined to create context and confirm espoused beliefs and values, the bulk of the data consists of the unverified views of participants. The lack of additional data forms to further triangulate conclusions and lack of longitudinal data limit the extent to which the researcher is able to confirm the actual implementation of the roles addressed in the study.

The second of our challenges was the lack of empirical studies that attempted to test Rorrer et al.'s full theory. The researchers found the theory to be a compelling conceptualization of the complexity of the task of raising student achievement while focusing on equity. On the surface that may to appear to present challenges to the study's transferability; however, this study's intent was not to create a set of universal responses to its research questions. Rather the researchers desire was to begin the process of detailed examinations of bounded cases. At the conclusion of their work, Rorrer et al. called for future research to build a series of case studies to examine the roles that district's play. This study represents one of the building blocks of that comparative process.

Future researchers can overcome these concerns with the benefit of time. First, with additional site time researchers could pair large amounts of observational data with the perceptions of respondents over a longer period of time. Second, with the passage of time, future research teams will likely have produced numerous additional case studies using the framework. This will give future studies an opportunity to place itself within a growing body of research that will both reinforce and challenge its own findings.

Conclusion

The persistence of the achievement gap continues to pose a significant threat to the overall stability of the United States. As a result, district leaders are faced with tremendous pressure to improve achievement and equity for all students with little to no guidance. Rorrer, et al. (2008) proposed a theory of district leaders as institutional actors that involves the enactment of four essential roles leaders play in reform, however these roles are not well understood.

This qualitative case study explored the degree to which a district leadership team, attempted to enact the four essential roles as conceived by Rorrer et al. (2008), while working to improve achievement and equity. This study's conclusion is that leaders were attempting to (1) Provide Instructional Leadership (2) Reorient the Organization, (3) Establish Policy Coherence, and (4) Maintain an Equity Focus to varying degrees, as conceived by Rorrer et al. Furthermore, findings revealed that district leaders' support of ongoing, job-embedded professional learning and efforts to improve teaching and learning in a data-informed and equity-oriented way were prominent components of their reform work.

Overall, this study suggests that the implementation of the essential roles of Rorrer et al. (2008) can serve as a promising guide for the practice of district leaders who are working to create the complex changes required for improving achievement and equity system-wide. Synchronously, our study serves as a call for additional case study research of districts' efforts using Rorrer et al.'s framework.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Question alignment key

OAQ = Overarching Questions	**RC** = Reshaping Culture
GW = Generating Will	**PC** = Establishing Policy Coherence
BC = Building Capacity	**MEF** = Maintaining an Equity Focus

* Probes in italics

1. Please describe your current role in the district? And how long have you worked here? **(OAQ)**
   a. *What does this work look like day-to-day?*
2. How are you (along with other leaders in the district) working to improve achievement for ALL students in the district?
   a. *What's happening?* And *what is your involvement/role in this work?*
   b. *Are you making efforts to improve outcomes for groups of students that are struggling? What does that look like?*
3. What is the district's vision for teaching and learning?
   a. *How is it communicated? And how do you feel about it?*
4. What strategic goals and initiatives is the district currently pursuing?
5. How did you get (motivate) people to want to do the initiatives/work? **(GW)**
   a. *Was there resistance?*
   b. *How did you respond?*
6. What strategies were most effective in motivating people? Which were least effective? **(**
   a. *For example, ...*
7. How did you keep the initiatives going once started?
   a. *What got in the way?*
   b. *How did you handle it?*
   c. *How did you keep people motivated?*
8. Are there any key people you rely(ied) on to keep the work going?
   a. *Who? Why?*
9. What are you doing to help your staff to improve their practice? **(BC)**
   a. *Encourage experimentation*
   b. *Structured settings/time to discuss teaching and learning*

      c. *Professional development*

10. How did you decide what to do? What was your process for deciding what to focus?

      a. *In terms of structured PD, how do you decide what you do?*

11. Districts are often full of staff who have deeply held beliefs. Tell me about how you go about trying to understand what your staff really believes. **(RC)**

      a. *How did you come to that judgment (about their beliefs)?*

      b. *Do the staff's beliefs aligned with your desired beliefs for the district? How?*

      c. *Do the beliefs your staff speak about truly reflect what they believe? Artifacts*

      d. *Can you give a specific example of a way you approached trying to understand your staff's beliefs? How did it go?*

12. So, can you tell me about a time when you have tried to shape these beliefs?

      a. *Can you give a specific example of a way you approached trying to shape your staff's beliefs? How did it go?*

      b. *Is it possible to shape a district's beliefs?*

      c. *How important is culture-shaping in relation to other leadership tasks?*

13. What federal and state policies/mandates are you most focused on implementing? **(PC)**

14. How do you think these policies reinforce the goals and needs of the district?

15. In what ways do you think these policies conflict with the goals and needs of the district?

16. How do you implement these policies in a way that addresses local goals and needs? What does that look like?

      a. *How have you leveraged these policies to meet local goals?*

      b. *How have you adapted policies to meet local goals?*

      c. *How do you implement policies that conflict with the current needs and goals of the district?*

      d. *If there were no mandates to fulfill, how might the efforts of the district to improve achievement and equity look different?*

17. Currently, who are the students that you are struggling with? Why do you think they are not doing well in school? **(MEF)**

      a. *What makes you say that*

      b. *What are the barriers impeding their academic, social and/or emotional growth?*

      c. *What processes structures and/or practices need to be examined in order to remove the barriers?*

18. Are their any students you think might fall through the cracks?

      a. *Who are they? And what makes you say that?*

19. What have leaders done to improve the outcomes for those students?
    a. *If you were to change anything to further improve achievement of those students, what would that change look like?*
    b. *What changes might the school implement on its own to support those students?*
    c. *What would be the nature of district level change necessary to improve outcomes for those students?*