

# District Leadership Practices That Foster Equity: How Educational Leaders Enact and Support Culturally Responsive Practices for English Learners

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DISTRICT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT FOSTER EQUITY: HOW EDUCATIONAL  
LEADERS ENACT AND SUPPORT CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES FOR  
ENGLISH LEARNERS

Dissertation

by

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with Matthew Bishop, Deborah S. Bookis, Allyson Mizoguchi and Thomas Michael Welch, Jr.

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Education

May, 2020

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and Thomas Michael Welch, Jr.

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By

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**Abstract**

Demographic shifts in American society and public schools have increased the urgency among educators and other stakeholders to ensure educational equity and excellence are a reality for all students (Brown, 2007; Dean, 2002; Gay, 2000; Johnson, 2007). One very notable shift in the United States has been the dramatic enrollment increase of English Learner (EL) students. Supporting ELs' achievement on standardized testing and increasing their graduation rates have been particular challenges, the meeting of which has required school districts to think differently. Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) has been one solution, through the application of which districts can focus on teacher preparation, culturally responsive curricula, school inclusiveness and the engagement of students and parents in community contexts. This study is part of a larger study that examined leadership practices that foster equity, included twenty semi-structured interviews of district leaders, school leaders, and teachers. Findings from this study indicate that school leaders have enacted and supported culturally responsive behaviors to educate ELs and suggest how leaders might employ CRSL behaviors for the dual purpose of supporting ELs' achievement on standardized testing and increasing their graduation rates.

### **Acknowledgment Page**

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## CHAPTER ONE <sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Problem Statement and Research Question**

The United States offers the promise of opportunity for all students to have equal and equitable access to high-quality education that will prepare them for college and careers. Education is intended to strengthen and support a society by developing the knowledge and skills of each of its citizens (Cramer, Little & McHatton, 2018). However, our nation continues to struggle to deliver this promise as evidenced by persistent disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes for all learners.

Inequity in education has harmful implications for a healthy democratic society. For example, the gaps in educational achievement experienced by Black and Latinx students continue to widen to the point where many youth, especially low-income students of color, are unprepared for a labor market requiring increasingly complex skills (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Research of our prison population shows that over half of those incarcerated are high school dropouts and possess poor literacy skills and undiagnosed learning disabilities (Barton & Coley, 1996). Disparities in learning opportunities and academic outcomes have contributed to America's decline in educational performance in comparison with other nations (Blackstein &

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 1 was written by in collaboration with the authors listed on the title page and reflects the team approach of this dissertation in practice: Matthew Bishop, Deborah S. Bookis, Sandra Drummey, Allyson Mizoguchi and Thomas Michael Welch, Jr.

Noguera, 2016). Indeed, inadequate access to high-quality teachers and resources for non-Asian students of color threatens the strength of our democracy. As Darling-Hammond (2007) stated, “Our future will be increasingly determined by our capacity and our will to educate all children well” (p. 319).

The persistent academic achievement gap (e.g. Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, and Koschoreck, 2001) still experienced by historically marginalized students is also reflected in significant measures such as graduation rates, advanced course enrollment, and college admission rates. Skrla et al. (2001) go on to assert that culturally and linguistically diverse students “experience negative and inequitable treatment in typical public schools” (p. 238). Such inequitable treatment has lasting effects for students, leading to national trends of over assignment to special education, tracking into lower-level academic classes, and facing disproportionate disciplinary measures and ultimately a disproportionate drop-out rate.

To address educational inequity, reform efforts have often taken the shape of federal legislation aspiring to provide historically marginalized students equitable opportunities to learn. Such efforts saw the creation of landmark legislation such as Title 1 of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, originally intended to solve the problems of poverty through supplementing school funding and providing more resources for children of low-income families. Nearly a decade after the Title 1 Act passed, more substantive guidelines for school districts led to the eventual development of further national school reform policies of the eighties and nineties designed to mitigate the achievement gap (Cohen, Moffitt & Goldin, 2007). In a push for national accountability and a heightened focus on closing achievement gaps, in 2001 the federal government tied state allocations of Title 1 funds through the attempted reform efforts of No Child Left Behind (Wrabel, Saultz, Polikoff, McEachin, & Duque, 2018). The most recent

reform effort led by the U.S. Department of Education passed in December 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In a more refined approach to equity in schools, one of the guidelines specifically highlighted in the new ESSA policy calls for schools and school leaders “to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps” (*Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015).

ESSA represents the first time federal policy explicitly highlights the importance of leadership in fostering equity (Young, Winn, & Reedy, 2017). It reflects a recent shift in thinking that leadership is an essential component of achieving equitable outcomes and opportunities for all students. As Anderson (2003) and Alsbury and Whitaker (2007) state, nearly 50 years ago, researchers considered the teacher the most vital component for implementation of reforms; two decades later, research focused on the school as an institution as the means to educational change. The standards-based reform movement and accountability systems of the mid-1990s (Anderson, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2006), along with the demands for the success of all students, led to the view that districts and district leaders had “unavoidable if not desirable” (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007, p. 4) roles in reform.

Recognizing the importance of district-level leadership in student achievement and reducing inequity, we conducted this study to gain a deeper understanding of the practices that district leaders leverage in their efforts to enact equity for all students. These practices may have direct influence on equity work at the district level, and may also support leadership at other levels within the district that in turn fosters equity work elsewhere. While the literature is replete with school leaders’ practices that impact equitable access and outcomes of historically marginalized students (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Leithwood, Patten & Jantzi, 2010; Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010), there is a gap in the literature

that explores how district leaders' practices might do the same. Specifically, we explored the following research question: How do district leadership practices foster equity? Our study examined several aspects of the school district leadership context, including: fostering a sense of belonging, fostering equity talk, educating English Learners, teacher leadership, and succession planning to support leadership transition.

### **Individual Studies and Conceptual Lens**

The dissertation in practice team identified equity practices in several aspects of the school district context, with the intent of contributing to the field of educational equity research by examining how district leadership practices foster equity. Thematically, each of the five team members examined a specific aspect of school district leadership through a particular equity lens and how leaders are challenged with prioritizing this vision to benefit all students (see Appendices A through D for individual study abstracts). Table 1 summarizes the focus areas of each of the five researchers in the group by investigator, research question and the conceptual framework used to guide the individual studies.

Table 1

#### *Five Studies of the Role of District Leadership Practices in Fostering Equity*

Investigator	Research Question	Conceptual Framework
Bishop	How do district leaders help foster a climate of belonging for students of color?	Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)
Bookis	How do district leaders use framing processes when engaging in equity talk?	Collective Action Framing
Drummey	How do educators enact or support	Culturally Responsive

	culturally responsive behaviors for ELs?	School Leadership (CRSL)
Mizoguchi	How do district leaders set the conditions for teacher-led equity work?	Teacher Leadership
Welch	How do the practices of district leaders foster equity through planning for future changes in leadership?	Human Capital Theory

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## Literature Review

The goal of the subsequent literature review will be to orient the reader to prior research relevant to the team's dissertation in practice. In this section, we provide our definition of equity that will be used throughout the study after exploring various definitions from the research. Secondly, we highlight the challenges of inequity in Massachusetts. Third, we discuss the importance of leadership in fostering equity work at multiple levels of the district. Fourth, we describe both the internal and external challenges leaders face in keeping a focus on fostering equitable practices. Finally, we present a review of the literature that highlights promising practices of district, school, and teacher leaders guided by a vision for equity in education.

### What is Equity?

Equity is a challenging and complex idea to define. Throughout the literature review we discovered variations of the definitions of equity and ways it can be explained. This may be one contributing factor to persistent inequities: if we don't know what it is, how do we talk about it? How do we create conditions for it and operationalize it? The inherent complexity may also explain the rationale for recent legislation to include equity in its purpose statement. Debates



about equity often evoke a zero-sum scenario, a perception that if we do more for those who are disadvantaged it will mean there will be less for the advantaged (Blackstein & Noguera, 2016). In this section, we explore the multiple ways to understand the idea of equity and then present our research study's operational definition.

**Equity, not equality.** In an effort to define equity for our study's purpose, it is important to first clarify the distinction between "equality" and "equity." Since equality assumes that everyone receives the same share, one can define educational equality as students receiving the same support, opportunities, instruction, and resources in the spirit of fairness for all. With the diverse needs of students, providing the same level of support for all is insufficient in ensuring positive outcomes for all learners. Consequently, each student must be provided with instruction and support based upon their individual needs. Therefore, an equal education may be inherently unequal (Cramer et al., 2018).

**Equity as outcomes.** One way to approach the definition of equity is to describe the outcome or the aspiration for students, or the full talent development of every young person. Boykin and Noguera (2011) insisted that both access and outcomes are necessary to achieve equity: "Equity involves more than simply ensuring that children have equal access to education. Equity also entails a focus on outcomes and results" (p. vii-viii). In practice, this would entail defining the skills, knowledge and dispositions with which students should graduate, helping students explore their strengths and passions, and disaggregating school and district-based data by subgroups to assess student progress towards those goals.

**Equity as opportunity.** Some researchers and organizations define equity in terms of the educational opportunities afforded to students and/or the extent to which students have access to all the opportunities offered. For example, the Professional Standards for Positive School

Leadership (2015) stated for Standard 3 that, “Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (p. 11). In practice this translates to removing barriers that exist to opportunities such as eliminating leveling within a discipline, creating a sense of belonging for all students, implementing effective instructional and family engagement practices, providing teachers with opportunities to lead and make equity-based decisions, and reducing or eliminating participation fees.

**Equity as commitment.** Closely aligned with access and outcomes is the commitment district leaders bring to their work of creating more equitable learning environments. District leaders are in a position to set policy and procedures that have profound ramifications on student access to opportunities, and as a result, the outcomes of those opportunities. How they approach this work - or the operational principle that guides this work - is another way to define equity. Hart and Germaine-Watts (1996) discussed equity as an operational principle that shapes policies and practices that impact the expectations and resources available. In addition to writing policy and providing resources, an operating principle also greatly impacts district leaders’ practices, such as how they engage in equity talk, enact federal policies, and prepare for leader transitions.

**Equity as affirmation.** Recently, researchers have begun to define equity in terms of how educators view and affirm students, as this is what creates a foundation for operating principles and all other activities that ensure more equitable learning cultures. Pollack (2017) stated that “equity efforts treat all young people as equally and infinitely valuable” (p. 7), while Fergus (2016) went even further, explaining that each person’s unique experiences should be considered in coordinating practices and outcomes. Egalite, Fusarelli and Fusarelli (2017) expanded the definition of equity by defining an equitable community as “one that pursues the

common good by affirming the identities of constituent groups defined by race/ethnicity, gender, national origin, language, sexual orientation, religion, disability, and the intersection of these identities” (p.759). In practice, district leaders promote inclusive and strength-based practices and find ways to encourage cooperation among and between groups of students.

**Equity as systems.** Scott (2001) built on Egalite et al.’s (2017) idea of an equitable community by asserting that systemic equity is the “ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner—in whatever learning environment that learner is found—has the greatest opportunity to learn” (p. 6). To further contextualize his definition, Scott (2001) enumerated five goals of educational equity: comparably high achievement and other student outcomes, equitable access and inclusion, equitable treatment, equitable opportunities to learn, and equitable resource distribution. The first goal, comparably high achievement and other student outcomes, focuses on maintaining high academic achievement while pursuing minimal achievement and performance gaps for all identifiable groups of students. The second goal, equitable access and inclusion, focuses on engaging all learners within a school by ensuring all students have unobstructed access and involvement in the school’s programs and activities. The next goal, equitable treatment, asks leaders to strive for an environment that is characterized by respectful interactions, acceptance, and safety so that all members of the school community can risk becoming invested. The fourth goal, creating opportunities to learn, centers around ensuring all students have access to high standards of academic achievement by giving them the appropriate academic, social, and emotional support. Finally, equitable resource distribution calls for leaders to ensure that the distribution of all resources supports learning for all.

**Our operational definition of equity.** Our literature review confirmed that equity can be understood and addressed from multiple perspectives: outcomes, opportunity, commitment,

affirmation, and as a system, making it even more challenging to discuss and address. For the purpose of this study, we drew on the different perspectives discussed previously to operationally define equity as the commitment to ensure that every student receives the opportunities they require based on their individual needs, strengths, and experiences to reach their full potential. Different aspects of our definition may have been highlighted in our individual studies, but overall, our work was anchored in our operational definition of equity.

### **Issues of Equity in Massachusetts**

Within the context of inequity nationwide as described in our Problem Statement, Massachusetts is explicit in its commitment to equity. For example, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education stated the following in its 2015-2019 Equity Plan in response to ESSA requirements:

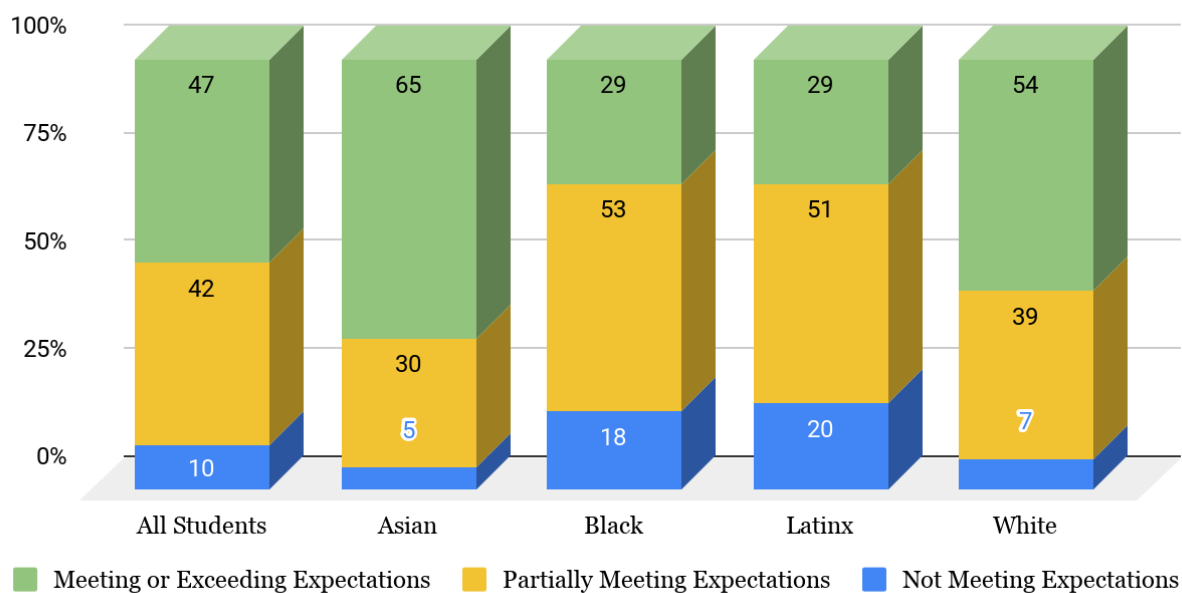
The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) has set high standards and expectations for all students in the Commonwealth, and holds all accountable to those standards and expectations. However, while ESE may celebrate successes, we are aware of ongoing proficiency gaps and inequities. These give us a constant impetus to do better in eliminating all gaps and inequities on behalf of our nearly one million students. (p. 4).

However, despite a focus on equity, experiences for students of color in Massachusetts mirror the national trends. According to the *Number One for Some* report released by The Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership in 2018, even though Massachusetts is perennially affixed among the national ranking lists in state achievement, students of color still face “glaring and persistent disparities in opportunity and achievement” (p.1). While Massachusetts scores on the international PISA assessment would place the Commonwealth first among the 35

participating countries, the scores for Black and Latinx students would place the Commonwealth twenty-eighth (p. 4). Figures 1 and 2 below show that a significantly lower percentage of students of historically marginalized students (Black, Latinx, economically disadvantaged, English language learners, and students with disabilities) met grade-level expectations in both English Language Arts and mathematics than their counterparts based on 2017 MCAS data.

Figure 1

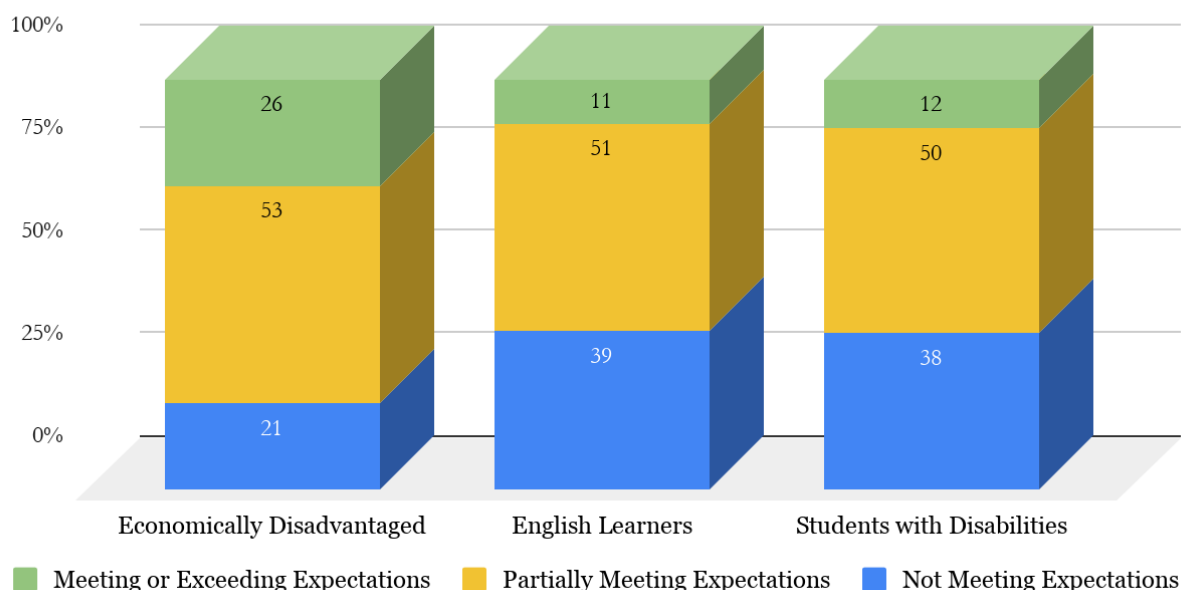
### Percent of 3rd graders meeting grade-level expectations in English Language Arts, 2017 Next-Gen MCAS



Adapted from Number One for Some (2018), p. 4

Figure 2

### Percent of 8th graders meeting grade-level expectations in Mathematics, 2017 Next-Gen MCAS



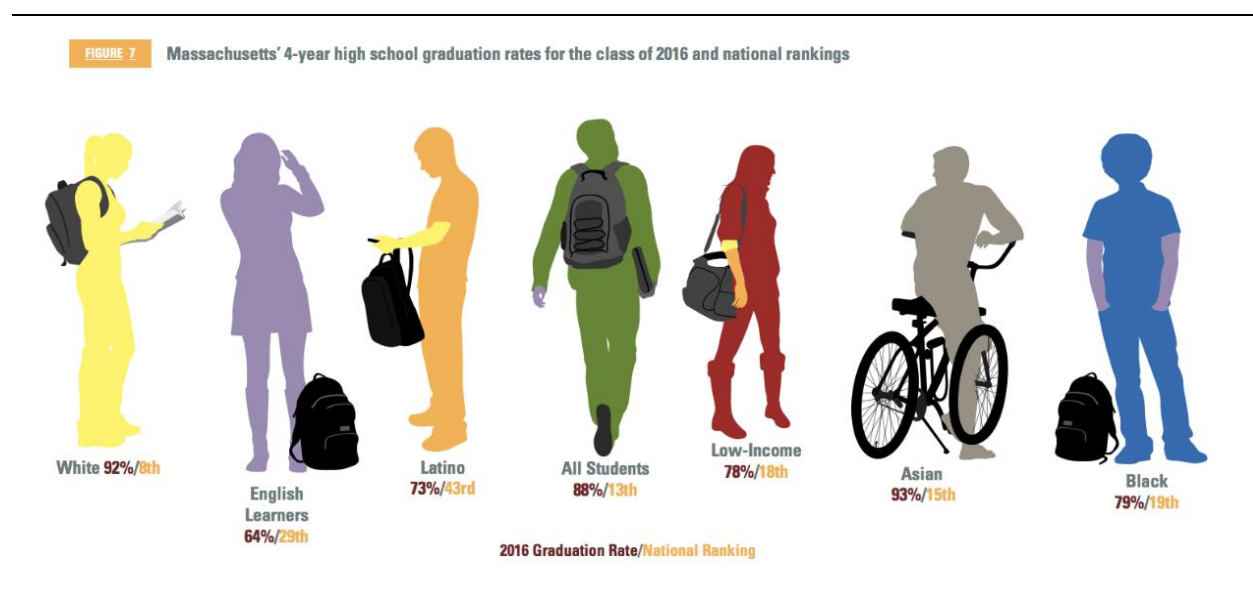
Adapted from Number One for Some (2018), p. 4

The achievement gap that students of color in Massachusetts experience is directly related to the opportunity gap in their access to early childhood education, high quality teachers, and rigorous programs of study. Black, Latinx, and Asian families in Massachusetts all have a lower rate of children enrolled in early childhood education compared to their white peers. Furthermore, students of color are three times more likely to have a teacher who lacks content expertise in the subject they teach, making closing any gaps they might have much more unlikely. At the high school level, students of color are completing rigorous programs of study at a lower rate than White students, and are underrepresented in Advanced Placement coursework. Such gaps in opportunity have dire consequences for students in four-year high school graduation rates (see Figure 3) and in the fact that over a third of Black students and a quarter of

Latinx students at Massachusetts state universities have to take at least one remedial course. This leads to a more difficult path to college completion, and only 10 percent of Black and Latinx Community college students graduate in three years. As concerning are the four-year college graduation rates, with less than half of Massachusetts students of color graduating within six years (*Number One for Some*, 2018).

Figure 3

Percent of four-year high school graduation rates for the class of 2016 and national rankings



Number One for Some (2018), p. 5

## Leadership Matters

Leadership for creating, sustaining and promoting equitable school systems is vital as evidenced by current research and the explicit statement for leadership in ESSA. Within school systems there are visible, clearly titled leadership roles, as well as others that are not quite as

visible or defined. In this section we review the literature according to two different levels (district and school) of leadership and the roles contained within each level.

**District-level leadership.** One level of leadership whose positive impact on creating equitable learning systems and student learning outcomes that has become increasingly clear is district-level leadership. The Superintendency comprises one of the roles within district-level leadership along with those whose roles pertain to an area of focus across the whole district.

***Superintendents.*** While some researchers question the impact of district-level leaders on educational reform, empirical literature demonstrates evidence that central office administrators can have a significant impact on student outcomes (Leithwood & Prestine, 2002; McFarlane, 2010). McFarlane (2010) argued that the superintendent is the pivotal leader at the district level and is the most powerful position in a public school system that can foster improvement reform. Effective superintendents create goal-oriented districts by focusing on the following: analyzing data, providing supports, communicating student learning outcomes, setting expectations, offering professional development (Bredeson & Kose, 2007), annually evaluating principals, reporting student achievement to the board, observing classrooms during school visits, and gathering resources for instruction (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The superintendent's leadership can either positively or negatively affect school cultures, climates, values, and motivation. McFarlane (2010) argued that the best way for superintendents to be effective is to improve their leadership practices "across districts through collaborative and participative leadership" (p. 57). Moreover, such effective leadership practices will "positively influence school personnel and school improvements to enhance student learning outcomes and performance" (p.55).

***Other district-level leaders.*** Marzano and Waters (2009) asserted that district-level leaders have an impact on student achievement. Specifically, their meta-analytical study sought



to determine the relationship between district level leadership and student achievement. Their analysis of 27 related studies that represented 2714 districts studied between 1970 to 2005 brought them to the conclusion that when district leaders are effective, student achievement across the district is positively affected. Furthermore, Marzano and Waters (2009) claimed that district-level leaders are effective when they are engaged in the following five initiatives: (a) ensuring collaborative goal setting, (b) establishing non negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (c) creating broad alignment with and support of district goals, (d) monitoring achievement and instruction goals, and (e) allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction. Effectively fulfilling these responsibilities leads to a measurable positive effect on student achievement.

Epstein, Galindo, and Sheldon (2011) supported the idea that district-level leaders can have a positive impact on improving teaching and learning. As referenced in Young's (2017) literature review, "A growing body of research has consistently demonstrated that leadership is one of the most important school-level factors influencing a student's education" (p. 707). Specifically, by directing their organization, managing the people within the organization, leading vision and goal development of the school and district, and improving the instructional agenda in their schools and districts, leaders influence student learning and development (Leithwood et al., 2006). Epstein et al. (2011) also found that district-level leaders are a "persistent and significant variable" (p. 487) when fostering partnership and increasing outreach to involve all families in their student's education.

In their narrative synthesis of 81 peer-reviewed articles, books, policy and research reports, and other pieces on the subject of the role of school districts in reform, Rorrer, Skrla and Scheurich (2008) concluded that district-level leaders have an "indispensable role, as

institutional actors, in educational reform” (p. 336). Rorrer et al. (2008) assert that districts serve four essential roles in reform: (a) providing instructional leadership, (b) reorienting the organization, (c) establishing policy coherence, and (d) maintaining an equity focus. It is the last role, focusing on equity, that they argue should give direction to the other three.

By focusing on equity, Rorrer et al. (2008) argued that school districts can disrupt and displace institutional inequity. Districts can displace inequity by owning these two roles in district reform: owning past inequities and foregrounding equity, especially through the use of data. Acknowledging and taking responsibility for past inequity in student performance, rather than justifying it, provides the district with purpose and a moral response to improve outcomes for all students.

**School-level leadership.** At the level of the school, both building leaders and teacher leaders can have a significant impact on student achievement by creating new systems of support, engaging with families, improving instruction, and building a culture of belonging.

**Principals.** The vital role of principals in successfully implementing reform efforts to support the achievement of historically marginalized students is well-documented (e.g. Theoharis, 2010; Louis & Murphy, 2016; DeMatthews, 2018). In their analysis of 116 surveys by teachers and principals, Louis and Murphy (2016) determined that equitable student achievement outcomes correlated with the culture of curiosity, trust, and caring in the building that the principal had established. This degree of organizational learning, a direct result of the principal’s professional trust in the teachers, had a positive result for historically marginalized students in particular. Analyzing the leadership strategies that six principals used to disrupt injustice in their schools, Theoharis (2010) found in the case of five principals, their efforts had a “significant impact on marginalized students and their learning” (p. 348). Specifically, on a

structural level, these principals worked to (a) eliminate segregated programs, (b) increase rigor and access to opportunities, (c) increase student learning time, and (d) increase accountability systems for the achievement of all students (p. 342). Underscoring these efforts was an unwavering commitment to equity held by each principal; Theoharis stated, “The first breaking-the-silence lesson from these principals that can be offered is the importance of believing that equity is possible” (p. 367).

DeMatthews’ (2018) secondary analysis of data from three former studies of social justice leadership also emphasized the importance of principals in student achievement. As DeMatthews noted, the principal is at the intersection of the institution, the community, and powerful historical forces that have led to the marginalization of some students. Therefore, the potential impact of the building leader is extensive yet fraught: “Principals who lead for social justice must think about multiple planes and dimensions because marginalization is an intersectional issue without any one specific root cause or remedy” (p. 555). Working in tandem with the staff and the community to foster equitable outcomes for students, the principal has powerful reach (DeMatthews, 2018).

**Teachers.** The effect of teacher leadership on student outcomes is relatively unstudied; for example, in their 2017 review of 54 articles related to teacher leadership, Wenner and Campbell found that “the effects of teacher leadership were limited to the effects on the teacher leaders themselves and the colleagues of these teacher leaders” rather than student learning (p. 150). When it comes to teacher-led equity work in particular, research is scarce. However, much research has captured the importance and centrality of the classroom teacher in student outcomes, indicating that there is no greater impact on student learning than the effectiveness of the classroom teacher (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 1997). Also, we know from research on teacher

leadership that when given the autonomy and trust by their principals to employ new instructional practices -- including those that positively impact learning for all learners -- teachers feel empowered, confident, and more engaged in their craft (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Wenner and Campbell (2017) also noted that a high level of teacher leadership in a school fosters a stronger sense of commitment among all teachers to educating their students and setting high expectations for them (p. 152).

Our research on why leadership matters revealed that leadership can positively impact student experiences, and thus student achievement. These actions -- establishing strong visions and goals, creating systems to improve instruction, fostering family and community engagement and partnerships, and building productive and inclusive cultures -- are aligned with the practices of equity focused leaders as delineated in the aforementioned review of equity definitions. This piqued our interest to explore and to better understand how district leaders foster equity practices in our five research question areas.

### **Challenges to Leading with Equity**

As district leaders leverage specific practices in their efforts to enact equity for all students, they may encounter challenges to their work, both from within their systems and from external sources. The research pertaining specifically to the role of superintendents in fostering an equitable approach to education has not focused on the challenges created by changing demographics (Shields, 2017). Furthermore, Alsbury and Whitaker's (2007) qualitative four year study of superintendents revealed that "practicing accountability, democratic decision-making, and social justice, in certain contexts, may be incompatible" (p. 170), indicating the complexity of the challenges with which district leaders contend.

**External challenges.** Some of the challenges of leading with equity come from sources outside of the school system itself, yet can have a significant impact on how and what decisions are made. Foremost among these is federal policy, most recently ESSA. Egalite et al. (2017) traced the historical efforts of federal educational guidance to better understand the equity impact of efforts to decentralize governance. Their findings suggest that the new law will need to be adhered to so that already existing inequities are neither reinforced nor intensified. ESSA also specifies an increased focus on educational leaders' roles in implementing federal goals for education. However, Young, Winn and Reedy (2017) contended that this focus on leadership and leadership development could be derailed by both state and federal activities. This finding is exemplified by Mattheis' (2017) four-year ethnographically informed study which found that district leaders are policy intermediaries who interpret and implement state and federal policy. This requires district leaders to make decisions that, at times, prioritize external demands over constituent needs, "which can result in unintended consequences of implementing integration initiatives in ways that replicate, rather than disrupt, existing structural inequities" (Mattheis, 2017, p. 546).

Increasing resegregation of schools also poses an external challenge to equity-minded district leaders. Orfield (2001) noted that, "for all groups except Whites, racially segregated schools are almost always schools with high concentrations of poverty" and "nearly two-thirds of African-American and Latino students attend schools where most students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch" (p. 320). Clearly, race segregation collides with funding for schools. Property tax revenues and state funding formulas impact the resources available for teaching and learning from personnel to instructional materials and facilities (Darling-Hammond, 2007); "thus

students most likely to encounter a wide array of educational resources at home are also most likely to encounter them at school” (Kozol, 2005, p. 320-321).

Cultural and racial deficit thinking among policy makers and the public in general can also inhibit district leaders’ equity efforts (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). If the predominant thinking is that certain cultural or racial groups lack effort or practice poor child rearing, then shifting mindsets becomes paramount in the work of leaders. This is because those with power and influence will ensure that their priorities are given time, attention and resources (Rorrer, 2006; Roegman, 2017). Simultaneously, district leaders need to navigate shifting demographics within their local contexts that may bring conflicting norms and values. This necessitates the need for leaders to expand their definitions of equitable practices, and impacts their decision-making processes and actions for equity (Shields, 2017; Shields, LaRocque, & Oberg, 2002).

**Internal challenges.** Factors within the institution may pose challenges to equity work as well, including the skill, will, and capacity of the leaders. It is well documented that leaders may not have the deep knowledge of culturally proficient practices required to advance equity work nor possess a disposition and identity that stays focused on this work (Skrla and Scheurich, 2001; Rusch, 2004; Lyman & Villani, 2002; McKenzie et al., 2008; Marshall, 2004; Boske, 2007). Brown (2004) and Mezirow (2000) describe the discomfort and disequilibrium that equity work causes for leaders. Additionally, a consistent focus on equity can be compromised by misalignment between the values of the building and district leaders on issues such as equity, especially during times of unexpected leadership transition (Snodgrass-Rangel, 2018; Tran, McCormick & Nguyen, 2018). With only 6% of district leaders and 20% of building leaders identifying as people of color, a sustained priority given to equity work is hindered (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). Policies and practices within the institution may also impede equity efforts. For

example, in her research on equity work in schools, Darling-Hammond (2007) noted that unequal access to college preparatory and Advanced Placement courses, tracking policies, and the relative shortage of well-qualified teachers in high-minority schools serve to thwart the academic advancement of students of color.

In his qualitative study of seven social justice leaders, Theoharis (2009) enumerated formidable bureaucracy, unsupportive central office administrators, and prosaic administrator colleagues as three internal barriers that disrupt equity work. Leaders felt the multiple layers of bureaucracy and addressing the minutiae of demands and expectations of district demands took valuable time, energy and focus away from their equity work. Furthermore, leaders highlighted numerous cases in which district level leaders caused “extra work” with demands, and not understanding the inequities in the district, caused resistance to advancing equity efforts. Finally, colleagues, both district level and principals, not having the “drive, commitment, or knowledge to carry out an equity-oriented school reform agenda” (p. 101).

The consequences of both the internal and external barriers take a large toll on leaders. Theoharis (2009) highlighted that leaders for equity articulate the “stress, frustration, and pain” (p. 110) that accompanies this work, and acknowledged that maintaining an equity vision “came at a price” (p. 110). Furthermore, Theoharis (2009) asserted that navigating the barriers in the pursuit of equity has adverse physical and emotional effects on leaders.

As described above, we have learned that school leaders may encounter a variety of challenges to their equity work, including policy implementation, racially segregated school demographics, deficit mindsets, a lack of culturally proficient practices, and bureaucracy. To overcome these challenges and sustain their commitment to equity, leaders must thoughtfully adjust their current practices and develop new ones. With these challenges in mind, we were able

to probe more deeply into the leadership practices that emerged from our individual studies. Which practices are a direct response to vexing challenges? Which practices have evolved and strengthened more effortlessly? As we embarked on our five research studies related to equity, we acknowledged the challenges implicit in each study and therefore anticipated a more comprehensive understanding of the promising leadership practices that foster equity.

### **Promising Equity Practices**

Much research has been conducted on efforts by teachers and principals to achieve equitable outcomes for all students. For example, in his research of urban schools with comparatively high graduation rates, Noguera (2012) notes that “strong, positive relationships between teachers and students are critical ingredients of their success” (p. 11). Probing more deeply into the leadership style of the principals at those schools, Noguera pointed to the importance of mentorship and personal connections between school leaders and their students in setting a culture of high achievement. Also related to the role of the principal, Kose (2009) noted the importance of the building leader in providing optimal professional development for social justice in order to realize “the long-term goals of creating and continuously improving socially just student learning, teaching, and organizational learning” (p. 654).

Leaders can also model equitable practices as a way of fostering equity work. One way is for district leaders to “explicitly model the learning and risk-taking that are essential to effective change as they reform their own practice” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003, p. 13). Rusch (2004) stated that leaders need to learn to be able to facilitate discourse about controversial topics, specifically because it unearths values and biases and causes productive unease. When discourse challenges assumptions, new thinking and ideas emerge to address inequities. Other modes of learning in which leaders can explore new ideas and integrate these into existing understandings



include: cultural autobiographies, prejudice reduction workshops, reflective analysis journals, cross cultural interviews, and diversity panels (Brown, 2004).

From our reading of the current research, it is clear that effective equity work requires sustained, diverse and reflective efforts occurring throughout the district leadership team. While much research has been conducted on the impact of building leadership and classroom teachers on equity, there is a gap in the research related to district-level leadership practices. The dissertation in practice team identified equity practices in several aspects of the school district context, with the intent of contributing to the field of educational equity research by examining how district leadership practices foster equity.

### **The Five Studies**

Leading for and with equity is a challenging endeavor for any district leader. The goal of this dissertation in practice was to better understand how district leaders engage in practices that support and advance equity, defined as a commitment to ensure that every student receives the opportunities they require based on their individual needs, strengths, and experiences to reach their full potential. Each of the five individual studies addressed a specific district context for equity guided by its own research question (see Table 2). The next five paragraphs summarize the purpose and the methodology of each individual study.

Table 2

#### Researchers' Contexts for Equity and Research Questions

Investigator	Context for Equity	Research Question
Bishop	Sense of Belonging	How do district leaders help foster a sense of belonging for students of color?
Bookis	Equity Talk	How do district leaders use framing processes when

Drummey	Culturally Responsive School Leadership	engaging in equity talk? How do educational leaders enact or support culturally responsive behaviors for ELs?
Mizoguchi	Teacher Leadership	How do district leaders set the conditions for teacher-led equity work?
Welch	Leadership Transitions	How do the practices of district leaders foster equity through planning for future changes in leadership?

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**Climate of belonging.** In order to foster equity, schools need to nurture an ecology of belonging for all students. However, Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, and Lash (2007) asserted that typical schools and school cultures may alienate students of color as they often are not responsive to their needs. Therefore, district leaders pursuing equitable schools have a responsibility to ensure school environments cultivate a sense of belonging for students of color. Bishop (2020) examined district leaders' perspectives around efforts to foster a sense of belonging for students of color and was guided by the following research question: How do district leaders foster a sense of belonging for students of color?

**Equity talk.** Another way to advance equitable changes is for district leaders to engage in equity talk. In Bookis (2020), equity talk is defined as discourse in which equity beliefs and values are challenged, inherent biases are examined, equity is at the forefront, and the notion of equity is framed in a way that supports common interest. The inquiry and reflection that occurs during discourse transforms new frames of reference. New frames of reference become the foundation for decisions and actions that create more equitable systems for learning. The purpose of this study was to explore how district leaders foster equity talk as their discourse transitions them to decisions and strategies that address equity. More specifically, it addressed the following

research question: How do district leaders use framing processes to increase their ability to engage in equity talk?

**Culturally responsive behaviors.** A review of research shows ELs are the fastest growing student population in the United States; however, successfully educating them has been and continues to be a unique challenge for our country's public schools. With the overarching theme of how district leadership practices foster equity, this particular study analyzed how culturally responsive behaviors employed by district and school leaders helped to maintain an equity focus for EL students. Although research about culturally responsive leadership has focused on urban and demographically diverse settings, less attention has been given to how these behaviors might be focused in support of ELs. Accordingly, Drummey (2020) explored culturally responsive leadership focused on supporting EL students. Specifically, this study was guided by the question: How do educational leaders enact and support culturally responsive behaviors for ELs?

**Teacher leadership.** With their close proximity to learners, teachers play an integral role in establishing an equitable educational experience for all students. Thus, Mizoguchi (2020) explored how the district leadership cultivated and supported a culture of teacher leadership when it came to equity work. With equity serving as an overarching theme for this study, and using the concept of teacher leadership, this study addressed the gap in the research by studying the leadership practices of district administrators in supporting teachers with their equity efforts. Specifically, this study answered the following research question: How does the district leadership set the conditions for teacher-led equity work?

**Leadership transitions and equity.** Many leaders within a public school district embrace the principles of educational equity to guide transformative work that focuses on the

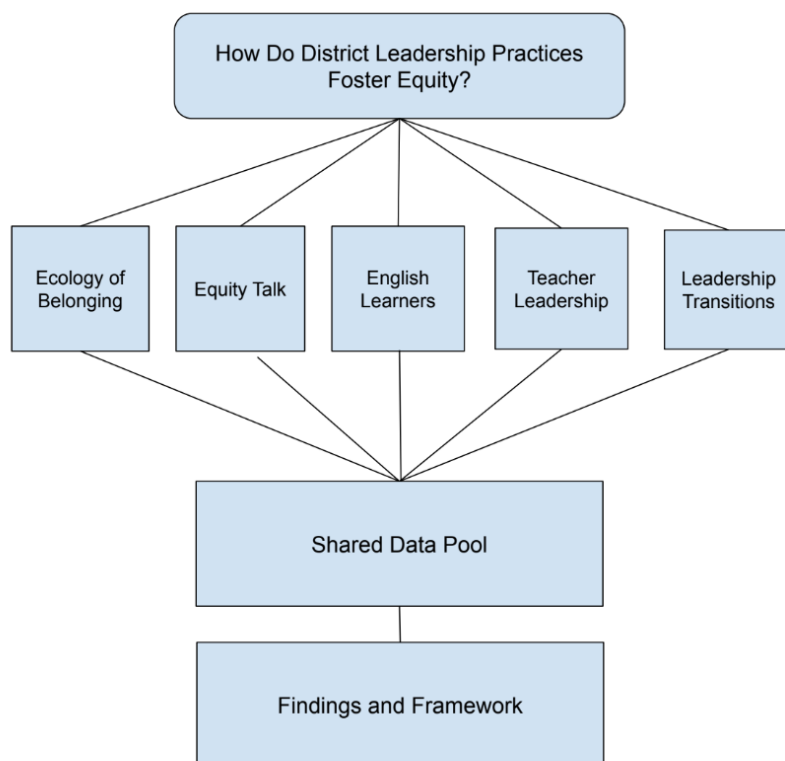
growth of students and adults alike. However, the daily obstacles, cultural barriers, and competing priorities seemingly pull the focus of district leadership in multiple directions, making the prioritization of equity a challenge. Thus, Welch (2020) examined how district-level and school-level leaders leverage a proactive approach of assessing, selecting, developing, and promoting talented individuals who are aligned with sustaining and promoting educational equity within their district as candidates for future leadership positions. This study examined how school district leaders support equity through the transition of key leadership positions within the district. Additionally, the study investigated how the best practices of leadership development strategies were aligned with maintaining a focus on equity and elements of succession planning. Specifically, the research question addressed in the study investigated: How do the practices of district leaders foster equity through planning for future changes in leadership?

### **Synthesis of the Five Studies**

As described in the preceding paragraphs, each individual study explored one facet of district leadership practices related to equity. Guided by the five perspectives of equity discussed earlier in this chapter, we looked specifically at practices that district leaders leveraged to lead with equity through a focus on outcomes, opportunity, commitment, affirmation, and systems. Viewed collectively, a synthesis of these five studies resulted in the creation of a broad framework that district leaders could implement in fostering equity (See Figure 4).

Figure 4

Synthesis of the Five Studies



The following chapter will outline the methodology the team used to conduct the research on equity practices in school district leadership.

## CHAPTER TWO<sup>2</sup>

### METHODOLOGY

Recognizing the importance and influence of district-level leadership on student achievement and reducing inequity, the overarching purpose of this dissertation in practice was to examine how district leadership practices foster equity. We conducted this study to gain a deeper understanding of the practices that district leaders leverage in their efforts to enact equity for all students. Specifically, the team focused on:

- Fostering a climate of belonging for students of color
- Exploring how the system engages in equity talk
- Ensuring equity for English Learners
- Setting conditions for teacher-led equity work
- Preparing for future leadership transitions while maintaining a focus on equity

Chapter 2 describes the design of the study, site and participant selection, and methods that the team utilized to conduct the research. To answer the research questions, data was collected and analyzed by all members of the dissertation in practice team, and then presented in the findings section of the study.

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 2 was written in collaboration with the authors listed on the title page and reflects the team approach of this dissertation in practice: Matthew Bishop, Deborah S. Bookis, Sandra Drummey, Allyson Mizoguchi and Thomas Michael Welch, Jr.

## Study Design

The dissertation in practice used an exploratory qualitative case study design to address the primary research question of this project: How do district leadership practices foster equity? As defined by Creswell (2013), the case study methodology attempted to answer *how* and *why* questions that were designed by the research team, and provided a thorough description and representation of an individual or group within a defined setting. This study fits Creswell's (2013) criteria as the team's overall research question attempted to answer specifically *how* district leadership practices foster equity, as well as explored a single school district, which is a defined system. Furthermore, this case study was categorized as exploratory since it focused on developing an understanding of how leaders foster equity within the organization when there is no defined set of outcomes (Yin, 2003).

The team collected and analyzed data within a four-month time period. Within that time, the goal of the team was to develop a sound understanding of how school district leaders at multiple levels and in different departments collectively worked toward fostering equity as a strategy to provide opportunities and to close achievement gaps that exist in the school district. Findings through this qualitative exploratory case study approach were detailed and insightful in nature, providing an opportunity for others to learn from promising practices and potential challenges facing the district designated for study.

**Site selection.** We conducted our research in a public school district located in the Northeast United States. For purposes of anonymity, we refer to the school district as Monarch Public School District (MPSD). Two distinct criteria drove our site selection process. First, we identified a school district that had a stated focus on equity. During our initial site selection process, we discovered that the newly hired superintendent of MPSD was highlighting equity at

the forefront of his entry plan. Consequently, we discovered two documents that provided evidence of MPSD's focus on equity: the incoming superintendent's memo to the school committee explaining the creation of the Office of Educational Equity and Community Empowerment and a memo to the school committee with the job descriptions of the Chief Equity Officer and Chief School Officer. Together, these documents indicated to us that MPSD was a district that had a focus on equity.

Second, we wanted to conduct our research in a medium- to large-sized public school district. Presumably, a public school district of 10,000-15,000 enrolled students allowed for access to an extensive district-level leadership team, multiple schools of different grade levels, the potential to interview a large percentage of school leaders, and more of a variation of policy and programmatic initiatives to explore through an equity lens. Another criteria for selection was a district with a racially and linguistically diverse student population. Targeting a district of this size with a diverse student enrollment led to more opportunities to examine how leaders foster equity (Mills & Gay, 2019; Creswell, 2013). We gathered information regarding student enrollment and school distribution from the state's education department website (School and District Profiles, n.d).

According to the district profile, MPSD had a population of approximately 14,000 students, and a student population which consisted of about of one-third Asian, one-third Hispanic, one-third White, and with small percentages of African-American and Multi-race. Furthermore, with regard to linguistic diversity, approximately one-third of students' first language was not English, one-quarter of students were English Language Learners, and there were almost 70 different languages represented in MPSD.



**Participant selection.** The members of the dissertation in practice group engaged with a variety of district-level leaders, school-level leaders, and other key stakeholders who provided insight to how the selected district fostered equity. In particular, this study included participants who were in a leadership role. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for the study. This strategy was necessary based on the short timeline for data collection and the need for the team to access key leaders in the district who were able to share their detailed experiences in working with equity (Creswell & Clark, 2011). In addition, we employed a snowball sampling method whereby participants familiar with the district's work in equity led to the identification of others connected to how equity was fostered within the organization (Mills & Gay, 2018). In this study, the research team was intentional by engaging knowledgeable members of the district who both understood equity and had a leadership role in fostering conditions to support equity.

District-level leaders who participated in the study held both decision making and supervisory roles within the organization. Beyond the superintendent of the selected district, the other participants at the district level held positions within the organization that supported a team of administrators. The study targeted the experiences of the superintendent and others in the organization who may be one level under the districts' leader on the organizational chart.

To better understand how all leaders within the school district fostered equity, it was equally important to explore the roles of school-level leaders. In addition to the numerous aspects of direct influence that principals and assistant principals have on the students described in the review of literature, factors such as responsiveness to students of traditionally marginalized groups, intentional staff training in equity, and developing a sense of belonging and inclusivity are key elements in fostering equity at the school-level (Ross & Berger, 2009). Participants in the study included principals who supported a variety of grade levels.

Finally, the research team sought teachers' voices who had a wealth of knowledge about the organization but were not directly connected to the district office. A goal of including teacher voices and insights was to gain a fuller understanding of how the district approached its equity work in the eyes of constituents outside of the district office and school leadership role. In the following table (Table 3), participants are listed according to these three aforementioned categories.

Table 3

Interview Participants

Interview Participants
District-level Leaders (11 Participants)
Superintendent
Chief Equity and Engagement Officer
Chief Schools Officer
Chief Academic Officer
Coordinator of Family Resource Center
Coordinator of Special Programs
Coordinator of English Language Education Program
Coordinator of Teacher Academy
Confidential Secretary
District Support Specialist
District Attendance Coordinator
School-level Leaders (2 Participants)
Principals
Stakeholders (7 Participants)
Teachers

## **Data Collection**

This collaborative dissertation in practice utilized four sources for data collection: semi-structured interviews, observations, document reviews, and field notes. We discuss each of these in turn.

**Semi-structured interviews.** We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with district and school level leaders and teachers utilizing a snowball sampling method. The interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in person by at least two members of the DIP team. A semi-structured interview format provided the flexibility of using predetermined, mostly open-ended questions and the option to ask follow-up questions based on the interviewee's responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each interviewee received a letter of intent, outlining that the purpose of the interview was to gain a better understanding of the practices district leaders leverage in their efforts to enact equity for all students. Before each interview began, interviewees were required to sign a consent form.

Participants were interviewed separately for a maximum of 60 minutes using the same set of core questions related to their equity work. Interview questions were crafted to capture both a holistic picture of the district's equity leadership practices and to serve our individual research studies. Throughout the interviews, we monitored information related to district leadership practices that foster equity efforts. As Weiss (1994) noted, "Any question is a good question if it directs the respondent to the material needed by the study in a way that makes it easy for the respondent to provide the material" (p. 73) (see Appendix F for the interview protocol).

The interview questions were field tested with an educator outside of the study prior to use to gauge applicability and sequencing. The DIP team transcribed individual interviews, and major themes and ideas were coded accordingly.

**Document review.** The research team conducted an extensive review of documents related to the district's work on equity. The team searched MPSD's website for publicly available documents online, such as school committee agendas/minutes, strategic implementation plans, district policy documents, and coordinated program review findings that pertained to equity. Further, the team reviewed the school committee links to locate documents such as school committee agenda, minutes, policies and procedures. Additionally, the team collected any documents that were made available at superintendent coffees and the Family Resource Center. These documents were a valuable source of information in qualitative research. They were also ready for analysis without the necessary transcription that is required with observational or interview data (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Specific documents used will be listed in each individual study.

**Observations.** The research team observed as many leadership meetings in person as possible. This included six school committee meetings, two school committee policy sub-committee meetings, one school committee finance sub-committee meeting, one school community partnership sub-committee, two superintendent parent coffee hours, and one professional learning workshop. A member of the research team was present for each observation, which was recorded and later transcribed. Being present for each observation allowed for "highly descriptive" field notes to be scribed such as room layout, participant demographics, non-verbal language, and the overall tone of the meeting. These notes allowed for the researcher to add a "reflective component" which provided further detail and

understanding of the collected data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 151). School committee meetings were observed in person or by way of public video recordings to gather information about the discourse district leaders use when interacting with the community.

### **Data Analysis**

The following section will explain the general methods the team used to analyze the data collected. A more detailed description of individual data analysis methods is discussed in Chapter 3 of each individual study and a summary is listed in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Summary of Data Collection by Researcher

Individual	Methods
Bishop	Semi-structured Interviews; Document Review
Bookis	Semi-structured Interviews; Document Review; Observations
Drummey	Semi-structured Interviews; Document Review
Mizoguchi	Semi-structured Interviews; Document Review
Welch	Semi-structured Interviews; Document Review; Observations

Qualitative data collected by research team members was compiled and placed in a shared folder on a secure server for analysis. Interviews, document review, and observations were equally weighted in this study. The team found that the documents supported and confirmed the data collected in both interviews and observations. The team created an analytic memo to record observations, questions, and insights as the data was analyzed. This analytic memo used by the

team was comparable to a research journal entry or blog-- a place to “dump your brain” about the participants, phenomenon or process under investigation (Saldaña, 2013, p. 42). This memo served as “the transitional process from coding to the more formal write-up of the study” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 50).

Coding processes (Saldaña, 2013) were used by individual researchers to analyze transcribed text from the audio-recorded interviews and focus groups. According to Saldaña (2013) “a code . . . is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data” (p. 3). Each individual team member read the transcribed data and worked to decode meaning of the text. A second read through of the text enabled each reader to determine the appropriate codes. During a third reading, readers assigned codes, thus encoding the text (Saldaña, 2013). Each team member employed an inductive process to construct a coding paradigm. This process included open coding (generating initial categories) and axial coding (identifying and refining key categories). The last step involved selective coding by establishing the connections between categories, thus constructing a paradigm that enabled each member to explain and describe their findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Attempting to maintain inter-rater reliability with coding, each member asked another research team member to check the assigned codes to the data. Although disagreements were seldom, they were handled by discussing the different viewpoints about the appropriate code. After exchanging ideas, the final coding decision was left to the initial coding researcher. A more detailed description of each individual coding process is presented in Chapter 3 of each individual study.

Findings from each individual study were then brought to the entire team for analysis. The team used the five perspectives of equity described in Chapter 1 as a general framework and

then contributed and organized their individual findings under each perspective. Subsequently, the team discussed the data, and identified the patterns within each perspective of equity. Next, the team looked within each component to identify further patterns. Ultimately, after discussion the team came to a consensus about the overall pattern of the data and used it to answer the larger group research question.

### **Methods Limitations**

Limitations in this study are connected to the use of an exploratory case study design, time constraints, and the use of interviews, focus groups, and document reviews as collection tools.

**Case study design.** Using an exploratory case study design limits the study to a single school district. As a result, perspectives garnered from our descriptive data collection may not be representative of the majority of other districts in Massachusetts. To minimize this limitation, we framed our results in terms of a particular district but still anticipated the findings to be useful in their application to similar contexts, of which there are many across the commonwealth.

**New leadership team.** The district leadership team of MPSD had only been assembled for four months -- with many people in newly created positions -- when the researchers began the study. Findings were based on data that had only begun to emerge following the superintendent's launch of the district's equity efforts. Thus, we studied district leadership practices that were occurring in the context of a great deal of change for the district and represented the very beginning of what we hope will be a years-long, sustained, systemic effort. A future study in five years of the district's leadership practices that foster equity could yield different findings than ours here because of the unique timing of our study.

**Participant Demographics** Through data collection and analysis, the team discovered that the superintendent of MPD was trying to diversify the executive cabinet team. However, the research team did not ask each interview participant for demographic data. Collecting this data would have allowed the research team to consider each participant's positionality. Knowing this data might have impacted the research team's understanding of participant answers and subsequently the interpretation and analysis of the findings.

### **Individual Biases/Positionality**

In order to provide insight as to how the research team might arrive at a particular interpretation of the data, we considered our positionality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since this study explored the concept of equity, it was important to note that all members of the research team demonstrated a passion and held a commitment to equity. Furthermore, each researcher approached this study from the perspective of their own identity. Our team of five consisted of three women and two men, of which two are Asian-Americans and three are White researchers. A more detailed discussion of individual positionality can be found in Chapter 3.



## CHAPTER THREE<sup>3</sup>

### HOW EDUCATIONAL LEADERS ENACT AND SUPPORT CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

#### **Problem Purpose and Research Question**

Demographic shifts in American society and public schools have increased the urgency among educators and other stakeholders to ensure educational equity and excellence are a reality for all students (Brown, 2007; Dean, 2002; Gay, 2000; Johnson, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Nieto, 1999; Riehl, 2000). One very notable shift in the United States is the dramatic enrollment increase of English Learner (EL) students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018) there were nearly 5 million English language learners in U.S. public schools in fall 2015. This represented 9.5% of public school students, an increase from 8.1% in 2000.

These demographic shifts can be challenging for school districts, especially when it comes to supporting EL's achievement on standardized tests and graduation rates. In fact, in 2017, EL students performed 37 points lower than the average score (226) of their non-EL peers on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), otherwise known as the "nation's report card." School districts, therefore, have had to think differently about how they educate and support ELs. One approach of thinking differently is culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) (Khalifa, Gooden and Davis, 2016). By employing the CRSL framework, districts might

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<sup>3</sup> Chapter 3 was written by Sandra Drummey

focus on teacher preparation, culturally responsive curricula, school inclusiveness, and the engagement of students and parents in community contexts. Although research about culturally responsive school leadership has focused on urban and demographically diverse settings (Uro and Lai, 2019), less attention has been given to how CRSL might be focused in support of ELs. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to explore culturally responsive school leadership focused on supporting ELs. Specifically, this study was guided by the question: *How do educational leaders enact and support culturally responsive behaviors for English Learners?*

### **Literature Review**

This review discusses issues relating to educating ELs. The first section assists in understanding ELs and the challenges they are experiencing in U.S. schools. The second section examines the culturally responsive school leadership framework and offers examples of how district and school level leaders enact and support culturally responsive behaviors in education.

### **The English Learner (EL)**

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 71A defines EL as, “a child who does not speak English or whose native language is not English, and who is unable to do ordinary classroom work in English without assistance or support.” Today, 300 different languages are spoken by EL children in our nation (Council of the Great City Schools, 2019) and all school districts are required to assess English language proficiency (ELP) levels of those identified as ELs at the time of school registration. These EL students bring cultural and linguistic assets, however they face a greater likelihood of lower graduation rates, academic achievement, and college enrollment than their non-EL peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) of the U.S. Department of Education reports that “in 2015-16, 84

percent of students nationwide graduated from high school on time (in four years and accounting for transfers). For ELs the rate was 67 percent, up from 57 percent in 2010-11, but well below the rate for non-ELs. It is concerning that despite their linguistic, cognitive and social potential, many ELs - enrolled in grades K-12 in U.S. schools - are struggling to meet the requirements for academic success, and their prospects for success in postsecondary education and in the work force are jeopardized as a result (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017).

However, opportunity exists according to Cook-Harvey, Darling-Hammond, Lam, Mercer and Roc, (2016) for districts and schools to equitably design education systems to ensure that the students who have historically been underserved by these same education systems receive an education that prepares them for the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What follows is a discussion about Culturally Responsive School Leadership and how the four strands of its framework offer examples of behaviors that educators can enact and support within their educational systems in an effort to provide an equitable education for EL students.

### **Culturally Responsive Leadership**

Culturally Responsive School Leadership focuses on how school leaders can effectively serve minoritized students-those who have been historically marginalized in school and society (Khalifa, 2018). Like other students, minoritized students struggle with a range of academic and personal issues, including low school performance, but they do so in a culture that disproportionately disciplines them and questions their intelligence leading to discomfort in school (Khalifa, 2016). A comprehensive review of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) resulted in a framework of four clarifying strands: critical self-awareness, culturally

responsive curricula and teacher preparation, culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and engaging students and families in community contexts (Khalifa, Gooden & Davis, 2016).

**Leader's critical self-awareness.** Critical Self-Awareness is the leader's critical consciousness of culture and race that serves as a foundation to establish beliefs that undergird his/her practice. Leaders need to have an awareness of self and an understanding of the context in which they lead. The ability of educational leaders to critically self-reflect about their biases and their practice is integral to both transformative (Cooper, 2009; Shields, 2010) and social justice (Bogotch, 2002; Brown, 2004; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Theoharis, 2007) leadership. One example of how critical self-awareness might manifest in district leadership behaviors for ELs includes the commitment to continuous learning of cultural knowledge and context (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006). For instance, a district leader can rely on school data to learn about the cultural backgrounds of the student population in addition to their academic progress. A second example is practicing transformative leadership for social justice and inclusion (Alston, 2005; Gooden, 2005; Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Shields, 2010). Furthermore, Andrews and Grogan (2001) call for inspiring leaders to "understand their ethical and moral obligations to create schools that promote and deliver social justice" (p. 24).

**Culturally Responsive Curricula and Teacher Preparation.** Culturally responsive teacher education preparation is necessary, even when teachers are from the same cultural, racial, and socioeconomic background of students (Gay, 2002, 2010; Irvine, 2002, Ware, 2006). In this strand, Khalifa, et al. (2016) highlights the crucial role of the leader in ensuring that teachers are and remain culturally responsive. Thus, the leader articulates a vision that supports the

development and sustaining of culturally responsive teaching. The framework explains that this outcome can be achieved by recruiting and retaining culturally responsive teachers, securing culturally responsive resources and curriculum, mentoring and modelling culturally responsive teaching and offering professional development. An example of this behavioral strand would be for the leader to create culturally responsive learning PD opportunities for teachers (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Voltz et al., 2003). A second behavior would be to use school data to examine cultural gaps in achievement, discipline, enrichment, and remedial services (Skrla et al., 2004). By doing so, district leaders can assess if programs are working and if not, what can be done to improve them.

**Culturally Responsive and Inclusive School Environments.** Culturally responsive and inclusive school environments challenge exclusionary policies, teachers, and behaviors (Kahlifa, 2011; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). In addition to recruiting, retaining, and developing teachers directly, school leaders must actually promote a culturally responsive school context with an emphasis on inclusivity (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Riehl, 2000; Ryan, 2006). This can be accomplished by working with teachers to find creative ways to offer classrooms that embrace the richness of students' diverse cultural backgrounds. Having structures and systems in place to welcome and include the cultural identities of students will benefit both the school and the community. It is important to acknowledge, value and use indigenous cultural and social capital of students (Khalifa, 2010, 2013). Another example is bringing the community into the school and establishing a school presence in the community; this happens by leveraging school resources for cultural responsive schooling (Khalifa, 2016). One way of bringing the community into the school is to reach out to leaders in the community that can offer different perspectives, either as experts in their field, professionals, community workers or activists. It would benefit

the students to hear and see how these community partners contribute to society. An additional example is to use student voice (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012).

Student voice can take the form of creative expression through speech or in writing.

**Engaging Students and Families in Community Contexts.** The fourth layer of culturally responsive leadership highlights the ability of the school leader to engage students, families, and communities in culturally appropriate ways (Khalifa, 2012; Walker, 2009). Speaking (or at least honoring) native students' languages, creating structures that accommodate the lives of parents, or even creating school spaces for marginalized student identities and behaviors all speak of this community aspect (Khalifa, et al 2016). Another behavior of this strand is to use the community as an informative space from which to develop positive understandings of students and families (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006). For instance, offering events for families to gather and share information and resources. One example of how behaviors in this strand might be practiced by district leaders is connecting directly with students (Gooden, 2005; Khalifa, 2012; Lomotey, 1993). Working closely with students to offer mentoring and organizing community service projects together are ways to engage them.

## **Methods**

A full discussion of the methods utilized during our overarching study can be found in Chapter 2. Unique to this individual study is how qualitative data and documents were collected and analyzed.

## Data Collection

**Semi-Structured Interviews** In order to explore culturally responsive school leadership focused on supporting ELs in a district, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 members of the district leadership team, two school leaders, five teachers and two EL teachers. These participants were interviewed using the same protocol asking questions that pertained to educating ELs. A sampling of the questions asked are shown in Table 5. These focused questions assisted in answering the individual research question.

Table 5  
Sample Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
How do educational leaders enact and support culturally responsive behaviors for English learners?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. As you look around the district, what do you see going on to help individual kids be successful?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. With English Learners?</li> <li>b. With accessing the challenging curriculum?</li> <li>c. Partnering with families</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Tell me how your work is helping to meet students' unique needs.               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Tell me about a challenge doing this</li> <li>b. How did you respond to this challenge?</li> <li>c. With English Learners?</li> <li>d. With different cultures?</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

**Document review.** Five different documents were reviewed because they spoke to EL educational programing and the stated direction of the district. All of these documents were public and accessed online via the district's website or the U.S. Department and state websites. These documents included, The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Massachusetts State ESSA Plan Update. The reviewed informed how federal and state reforms are working with

school districts to advance equity for ELs through educational programs. Document review of the district's English Language Education Program Plan of 2018 was selected to shed light on how the district created purpose for the work of culturally responsive leadership. The district's new strategic plan (2019), and its mission and vision statements were also reviewed to better understand how the district stated its commitment to equity. These documents were especially reviewed to triangulate the interview data collected.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were conducted with 20 members of the district. They were central office personnel, in addition to school principals and teachers. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Subsequent to listening to each interview, I read the transcripts and highlighted phrases, that evidenced behaviors of culturally responsive leadership. I then organized a table listing the four strands of the framework and entered the behaviors from both interviews and documents into the appropriate strand. For example, if an interview or document revealed evidence of Critical Self-Awareness as defined, I would add the evidence under that strand in the table. Table 6 below is a sample of my initial coding manual. I then went back and highlighted all data that pertained to educating English Learners using one color and all data that pertained to equity another color. This coding process provided me the ability to analyze the evidence I was searching for.



Table 6  
Evidence of culturally responsive behaviors in the district

CRSL Framework Strand	Definition	Evidence of Behavior/Interviews	Evidence of Behavior/Documents
Critical Self-Awareness	Leader needs to have an awareness of self and understanding of the context in which they lead.	Superintendent stated that he struggled in school, and was suspended and served detention many times.	
Culturally Responsive Curricula and Teacher Preparation	Recruiting and retaining culturally responsive teachers, securing culturally responsive resources and curriculum.	District recognizes the lack of diversity among the teachers, is working with local colleges to offer training for paraprofessionals.	District implemented Student Success Plan introduced by the Dept. of Education.
Culturally Responsive and Inclusive School Environments	Leaders must actually promote a culturally responsive school context with an emphasis on inclusivity.	One leader stated, "We want to make sure that students feel that their school is a great place, a place they want to be in."	English Language Education Program Plan (2018)
Engaging Students and Families in Community Context	Ability of leaders to engage students, families, and communities in culturally appropriate ways.	The Office of Equity and Engagement is the first point of contact for new families offering welcoming services.	School information translated in various languages.

## Positionality

I am currently an Assistant Superintendent for a Catholic diocese in Massachusetts. I have spent my entire career in education working for Catholic schools. Since their inception, Catholic schools have educated immigrant children. Similar to public schools, Catholic schools are also experiencing the recent increase of EL student enrollment and the educational challenges are the same. Catholic schools need to be prepared to accept these students and provide them a

holistic education. My hope is that this study will assist dioceses and districts by providing research to examine ways to educate ELs successfully.

## **Findings**

By further examining each of the framework's four strands in turn, I was able to demonstrate how the district attempted to enact and support a system wide approach of the CRSL behaviors at both the district and school levels.

### **Critical Awareness**

Critical Awareness was evidenced in the interview data from three district leaders. For example, the superintendent practiced personal self-reflection and personal knowledge of the cultures he led. In terms of personal self-reflection, he shared that he himself struggled in school and reflected on how often he was in detention or suspended. "It's the good people around me that have helped me learn that through those struggles I became better." In addition, he shared that he became a teacher because of his experiences as a student and believed as a leader his job was to make sure that the students in his district have access to every opportunity. During his short five-month tenure, he had discovered and stated that, "access for students is limited to only some kids and not all." He further said, "The lines for those who have access and those who do not, typically follow linguistic, racial and income lines." Having an understanding of the context in which he leads was evidence that this leader practiced the behavior of critical awareness.

Furthermore, Critical Awareness was evident in the superintendent's efforts to be a transformative leader and one who leads for social justice. For example, he stated,

The first thing I did here was to make sure that I could articulate my belief system, all of us have those embedded beliefs. I try to be transparent with everyone so I articulate to everyone that my decisions will come based on the kids who are in most need. I define that

for everyone by saying my job is to be a voice for the voiceless. So, while I'm trying to listen and understand and make decisions that are based on what I'm hearing from the community, it's not going to be a decision simply based on the loudest voice in the room, it's going to be a decision based on the greatest need in the room. Sometimes that means it's going to be the quietest voice.

Critical reflection involves coming to grips with one's own identity and juxtaposing that against the identity of the students. A district leader that especially exemplified this worked closely with educating English Learners. She stated,

I always see the faces of students who are similar to me because I share some of their backgrounds as well. I was originally from Cambodia and was a refugee myself and had to learn English. I had academic gaps and I never had schooling before arriving in the United States. I struggled being an English Learner, so I really understand and try to advocate for families and students.

Another strong example of this was evidenced in my interview with a central office member. She shared,

You know, I had plenty of struggles in my life and I feel like it's important to give back to your community. I feel I owe the students that are facing similar circumstances that I faced growing up, the opportunity to see someone who is still here and able to make a difference.

### **Culturally Responsive Curricula and Teacher Preparation**

For culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation to be successful, the leader needs to support the development and sustainability of culturally responsive teaching. My research revealed that the district had systems in place to support this framework strand.

First, the district had in place a system that offered culturally responsive co-curricula programs for EL students. These programs were represented in The English Language Education (ELE) Program Plan posted on the district's website. It explained that for PreK-12, three program models were designed to support acquisition of English language and academic knowledge. The models are Newcomer Academy, Intermediate, and Advanced. ELs in grades K-12 are placed into an ELE program based on their English proficiency testing results, educational background, and other pertinent data.

My interview with the Coordinator of English Learner Education revealed a second system. She explained that this past year the district created a Google spreadsheet that now gave the EL educators a visual of all EL students and the scope of their proficiency levels. This data provided current information about students' progress or lack thereof. I learned from the Coordinator that ESL teachers met once per month with district leaders to review the individual educational programs of ELs to make determinations about the effectiveness of the students' extra-curricular instruction. She further explained that this practice built in accountability for EL instruction and showed responsiveness to the students' needs because it was reviewed and adjusted regularly by the ESL team.

In conjunction with the data review process, the district had implemented the Student Success Plan introduced by the Department of Education. The coordinator for English Learner Education informed that the plan identified students that have not made progress and targeted them for additional support. By identifying their learning goals, the EL teacher teams can see what strategies teachers can implement to improve student learning.

I learned additional information about how the district had specialized programs in place for EL extra-curricular instruction from my interviews with two school level EL teachers. For

example, they shared with me that the schools offered pre-teaching to some students, small group instruction for others, and newcomers get pulled out of general education classes. Pull out for English language services was small group instruction, included reading stories and building the English language through songs and pictures. Push into classrooms provided support in reading, writing, or math depending on the grade and the class. Each school had an English learner coach who provided professional development to classroom teachers, either after school or during common planning times. The coach also had the responsibility to keep track of how many hours students needed for instruction in terms of English language development instruction. EL coaches were careful to ensure that the teachers who had the largest number of newcomers had proper EL certification and support.

I was informed by the Resource Office coordinator that the district invested in teacher preparation by recently ensuring that all teachers received Sheltered Immersion Endorsements (SEI) through the Department of Education. She added that cultural responsive training was offered to all school leaders the prior year, but a few other district leaders and teachers reported that additional professional development in this area is still needed. The superintendent is in agreement with this as he stated,

I think our teachers will be the first to share with you that they're not reaching every kid. So, teachers either say I need some help reaching my students who are non-native English speakers, or I need help shaping this curriculum so it's more representative of the diverseness in my classroom." He further stated, "What we are not doing well is that 69 different languages are spoken, and primarily, historically most communication was occurring in English. Furthermore, the data shows that we have a disproportionate number of suspensions for students of Hispanic background.

Using student voice is also a behavior of this framework strand. It was interesting to learn that the district has begun work in this area. The superintendent shared that the district hosted a professional development day that was led by high school students. He stated,

We wanted to get insight into the curriculum. A student questioned Huckleberry Finn. So now the Academics Office is analyzing the curriculum based on student feedback, and on the impact of that particular piece of curriculum and how it relates to how she is hearing it as an African American student.

### **Culturally Responsive and Inclusive School Environments**

Within this district, there was some evidence of structures and systems in place that offered culturally responsive and inclusive environment. My visit and interview with the coordinator of the Family Resource Center revealed that they are working to offer families not only school, must also local access to resources and agencies. She shared with me school informational brochures that were translated in different languages, such as Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic for families. In addition, the schools' websites offered a translator component for families. Another example was the district's efforts to ensure a racially balanced school choice model. The coordinator of the Family Resource Office further shared the process the district used to register new students. She explained that they are assigned to a school in Kindergarten through Grade 8 based on the following placement criteria: space availability, sibling preference, ethnicity balance and place of residence. Furthermore, the district's website stated, that, "In addition to using placement criteria, the Family Resource Coordinator will also consider Special Education needs, gender, and English Language Learner status, to ensure students in all schools are being placed equitably."

Evidence of culturally responsive and inclusive behaviors was shown in the district's efforts to connect directly with students by offering a back to school block party for students and families. At that event, students were given backpacks and district personnel were present to answer questions and to help educate families about the resources available to them within the district and the community. The superintendent shared that it allowed him the opportunity to meet and to listen to families.

Additional evidence in this strand was revealed in an interview with a central office member, she acknowledged how the district valued indigenous cultures of the students. She revealed that,

A few years ago, we had an influx of Burmese. I didn't know anything about Burma, so we had someone come in from the university and talk to us about what's going on in Burma and how the people are displaced. It's really important to learn why they are coming and the trauma they are bringing with them.

### **Engaging Students and Parents in Community Contexts**

Offering opportunities for engagement of students and parents was a stated goal of this school district. The district's website, offered a vision statement that listed 5 Pillars, with the fourth Pillar stating that, "Every Educator Engages Parents, the Community and Partners". Evidence of the district engaging students and parents in community context was evidenced by the superintendent organizing family and community coffees. It was shared by the superintendent that a good number of families attended, and through the translation assistance from his executive assistant, he was able to communicate with them. In his interview, the superintendent stated that,

It's just to listen and learn, but sometimes those conversations lead somewhere else as to working with the two students I am now mentoring. Connecting directly with students in this way is a behavior of this framework's strand.

There appeared to be an understanding in the district, that parents are partners in the education of the students. The director of the Family Resource Center stated,

I have to be sure that I partner with different organizations to assist our families because we cannot do it alone as an agency. We have to be sure that we are able to provide wraparound services to students, because students come to us with different needs.

This Center also organized family educational classes throughout the year. Such events included education about bullying and social media.

A central office member shared that last year she established a district wide English Learner Parent Advisory Council. We established an informal one, but our goal this year is to establish a formal one. They have bylaws and roles and positions for parents and training of parents so that we can become individuals that can help advocate and guide the services and programming that we have in our schools." He elaborated by stating, "We need to promote leadership in families and in parents, so that they can help advocate and also gives them a voice that partners with the district."

In subsequent interviews with district leaders, it was revealed that additional work is needed to engage students and parents in community contexts. For example, a district leader stated,

What really gets family is that sense of community and that they are welcomed in our schools. I don't know if all families feel like they are really welcome in our schools. You're not welcomed if nobody can speak your language and nobody understands.



Another central office member shared that,

We need to work on bringing the parents onboard. So, this is the piece we struggle with for years, and even I remember making personal phone calls, one on one calls inviting parents for open house. It's a community responsibility. Somehow, we need to motivate parents to be more involved to be more successful.

### **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to explore culturally responsive leadership focused on supporting ELs. In doing so, I purposely searched for evidence of the behaviors put forth in the culturally responsive leadership framework and how these behaviors manifested in working with EL students and families. Analysis of the data found that educational leaders and teachers in the MPSD directly employed behaviors of the four strands of CRSL to support the EL student and family population. Furthermore, my study revealed that systems and structures were strategically in place by the Monarch Public School District (MPSD) to support this work. Continuing to employ CRSL behaviors for ELs can assist to address the achievement gap for this student population. My study revealed, it is important for all district stakeholders to be involved in the educational process for ELs. The following sections share the potential implications this study's findings may have on practice in light of current research. Although practicing CRSL behaviors support educational outcomes for ELs, specific recommendations will be discussed that can assist in advancing these efforts.

#### **Leader's Critical Self Awareness**

Leaders must have an awareness of self and an understanding of the context in which they lead (Khalifa, et al. 2016). Consistent with research, leaders in MPSD shared in interviews their own personal educational experiences where they struggled to succeed academically. When

reflecting on their educational backgrounds, they shared how they now strived to provide new opportunities for underserved students, including ELs. Delpit (1995) asserts that if educators do not have some knowledge of their students' lives outside of paper-and-pencil work, and even outside of their classrooms, then they cannot accurately know their students' strengths and weaknesses. The new superintendent understood the importance of knowing the complex student population he served and data revealed that he initiated his leadership by purposely making efforts to be present and articulate his vision. Kay & Greenhill (2013) put forth that the challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> century superintendent, along with managing complex fiscal realities, is to offer a compelling vision of a 21<sup>st</sup> century model of education, while being intentional and purposeful about leading an entire system toward achieving these outcomes.

Many states and school districts serving ELs are not spending sufficient time or money to create comprehensive programs based on successful practices that have been proven to provide ELs with the education and interventions needed (Horsford & Sampson, 2013). As a result, districts are lagging behind in their planning to improve academic outcomes for ELs (Council of Great City School, 2009). By providing future training on cultural responsiveness for school leaders and staff, additional knowledge will be gained and will strengthen the capacity to create equitable learning opportunities for ELs in the MPSD. In addition, it will strengthen the cultural awareness of district leaders and teachers. Culturally responsive (or relevant) teaching has been described as "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 382). This means teachers can learn how to make curriculum accessible for EL students to understand. Boykin and Noguera (2011) inform that we must get them to be active agents in their own learning processes.

It would benefit the district to place an urgency on cultural responsive teaching. The superintendent has identified that both the teachers and students are thirsting for it. With teachers in particular, it is clear that a one-shot workshop approach to professional development is woefully insufficient (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Although, the district's academic office has already begun analyzing the curriculum, it would benefit the district to insert a line item in the budget so that high priority is given to quality culturally responsive professional development and curriculum review.

### **Culturally Responsive Curricula and Teacher Preparation**

To maintain cultural responsiveness in schools, Khalifa (2016) argues that leaders must recruit and retain culturally responsive teachers, secure culturally responsive resources and curriculum, mentor and model culturally responsive teaching, or offer professional developments around CRSL. There is a national shortage of bilingual teachers (Cross, 2017), creating a demographic mismatch between educators and the rapidly growing population of EL students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). MPSD identified that there was a need to recruit a more diverse teaching staff. Building a diverse pool of educators prepared to teach culturally responsive curricula is critical to this district's efforts to offer an equitable education for EL students. Although district leaders were aware of this particular problem and have begun planning for partnerships with local colleges to recruit new teachers and educate their currently employed paraprofessionals, it would benefit the district to develop a plan that embeds a timeline of action steps to ensure this initiative's success. Research informs that many bilingual and diverse teacher candidates work as educators while they are students (Osterling & Buchanan, 2003). One way to retain these teacher candidates may be to offer incentives, such as certificate completion bonuses. For low-income teacher candidates, who are disproportionately bilingual and

diverse, two common barriers are the inability to pay tuition and a loss of wages due to missing work to attend classes (Connally, Garcia, Cook, & Williams, 2017). Finding ways to offer currently employed and new teachers scholarship assistance to overcome financial barriers may assist in building a diverse teaching staff.

### **Culturally Responsive and Inclusive School Environments**

Consistent with research (Khalifa, et al., 2011), leaders within the MPSD attempted to create inclusive school environments that were culturally responsive. In many instances, leaders expressed their desire to have EL students succeed academically and feel included. Continuing to examine EL instructional practices will help the district in providing solutions to the challenges in educating ELs. For instance, Echevarria, Vogt & Short (2012) offer research on sheltered instructional practices and share examples of sheltered instructional techniques to include having a clear content and language objectives, building background knowledge, providing information in a comprehensible way, teaching learning strategies, and providing students with opportunities to interact with peers and teachers.

It is recommended that the district find additional and creative ways to allow for EL student voice. For example, one way to continue student voice would be to allow student involvement in the curriculum analysis underway by the district. This strategy will empower students to offer their input in regard to the curriculum they are being taught. When students have a say in their own learning, they build their sense of academic self-efficacy and are more likely to engage deeply in challenging academic work. In addition, by helping students see and express themselves within a larger social environment, the exercise of student voice can develop skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration, all of which are essential civic— and workplace—attributes (Bron & Veugelers, 2014).

Furthermore, research shows that leadership practices can assist in building social capital. Khalifa (2012) found an urban school leader increasing student achievement and garnering trust by establishing a strong community presence, creating opportunities for parents to come into the school, and participating in community-based advocacy. More recently, Green (2016) showed how a principal supported school reform and community involvement by: (a) positioning the school as a social broker in the community; (b) linking school culture to community revitalization projects; and (c) connecting instruction to community realities. It would benefit the district to continue to investigate successful practices to build community engagement.

### **Engaging Students and Families in Community Contexts**

Kalifa (2018), suggests that leadership in schools should happen in close collaboration with communities, and it should empower children and families; such leadership signals that an equitable power-sharing relationship between communities and schools is optimal. The data revealed that there are conflicting views about the engagement of families. For example, the Resource Office is certainly working to welcome and support families, however, other district employees admitted that families are not involved enough.

Similar to valuing the voices of students, it would benefit the district, as culturally responsive leaders to also value the voices of the community (Sosa, 1996). Poor involvement of Hispanic parents in schools is often criticized by school personnel, but (Sosa, 1996) argues that “the root of the problem is that Hispanic parents cherish beliefs and expectations different from those cherished by the schools and by the parents whom the schools most frequently engage” (p. 341). Given the diverse population of this school district, it would benefit the educational leaders to investigate additional ways to include community voices on a regularly basis. The

evidence is now beyond dispute when schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life (Henderson & Berla, 1994) p.1. Once again, the data showed that the superintendent and his central office team have begun efforts to meet and work with families. However, it would benefit the district to place an emphasis on this and create an Outreach Task Force that can collect data via surveys to determine the best ways to develop meaningful relationships with family members. Knowing individuals at a deeper level brings confidence and trust to work in unity. In his work in communities, Vargas (2013) introduced the concept of “co-powerment,” a practice he believes is more collaborative than the hierarchical relationships often implied by the idea of empowerment. He explains that co-powerment is communication that seeks to lift the confidence, energy, and agency of another person, self, and the relationship. It is lifting the power of self and others. The better we become at co-powering, the more we grow deeper relationships that develop our power to create positive, personal, family, and community change.

It is important to note that this school district has a very large EL student population. Located in a gateway city for many refugees, the district continually worked with a transient population of students. This requires support from many systems and structures. The new superintendent understood the context of the student population he led. After examining the systems and structures currently in place, he began to make changes for improvement. Close monitoring of EL academic progress, in addition to offering inclusive school environments are important in planning for success of these students. It will benefit the district to conduct a cultural audit. The audit may incorporate focus groups, surveys of stakeholders, in addition to a review of key policies and practices to gauge the baseline state of cultural competency in the district. The results of the audit will assist the district to identify areas of strengths and areas for

improvement. This will allow the district's leadership team to develop strategic goals. Brown asserts that:

For real reform to occur in today's schools, a complete transformation must take place. It is not enough to have teachers change their teaching and classrooms to reflect their students' diversity; the schools they teach in must also become culturally competent educational systems.

In terms of equitably educating ELs, this study revealed that the new superintendent and central office personnel have made equitable education for ELs in addition to all students a high priority in the district. Interview data showed that the superintendent attempted to give all stakeholders of the district an opportunity to understand the new equity vision proposed by his leadership team. It will benefit the leaders to continually communicate their equity vision to all stakeholders whether it be in writing or by the action steps taken. Including parents and community partners in this work will further promote a sense of inclusivity.

### **Conclusion**

This individual study concluded that leaders and educators in this school district employed the behaviors of culturally responsive school leadership to improve EL achievement and advance equity. Under the direction of a new superintendent and central office staff, a new equity vision has been set to further deepen the mission of the district. He explained in his interview that the new equity definition has three parts: eliminating the achievement and opportunity gaps among diverse populations, ensuring equitable funding across diverse schools, and treating every family with dignity, courtesy and respecting cultural understanding. The change the new superintendent is planning will be difficult and will take time, but a continued commitment to his vision will hopefully improve academic outcomes for ELs. Achievement disparities are a symptom of longstanding system inequities (Brown, 2003), and as with any

effort that aims to improve the human condition, the work is deeply personal; connected to our beliefs and values; and requires perseverance driven by will. This study's findings can serve as a guide for districts who are striving to become culturally responsive. Employing CRSL behaviors can assist to create changes required to improve educational equity for EL students in our country. However, enacting and supporting these behaviors are proven to not be enough in doing so. It is very possible that looking through an equity lens that involves outcomes, opportunity, commitment, affirmation and systems, in addition to employing CRSL behaviors may be enough to overcome the challenge of successfully educating ELs.

## **CHAPTER FOUR<sup>4</sup>**

### **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Our research team explored how district leaders' practices foster equity. Each individual study examined a specific aspect of the school district context in order to better understand how the leaders engaged in practices that foster equity. Specifically, Bishop (2020) focused on fostering a climate of belonging for students of color. Mizoguchi (2020) explored the conditions for teacher-led equity work. Bookis (2020) examined how district leaders used framing processes when engaging in equity talk. Drummey (2020) investigated culturally responsive behaviors to

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter 4 was written in collaboration with the authors listed on the title page and reflects the team approach of this dissertation in practice: Matthew Bishop, Deborah S. Bookis, Sandra Drummey, Allyson Mizoguchi and Thomas Michael Welch, Jr

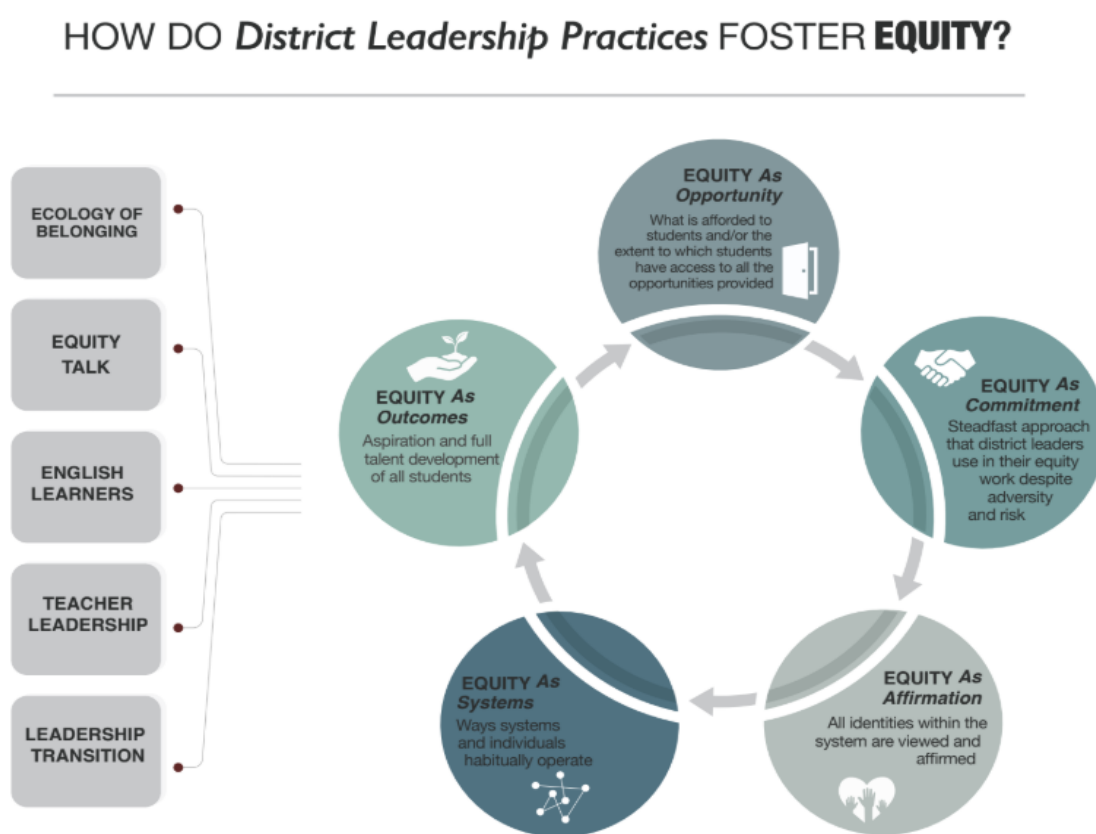


support English Learners (ELs). Welch (2020) sought to understand how district leaders planned for future changes in leadership.

We defined equity as the commitment to ensure that every student receives the opportunities they require based on their individual needs, strengths, and experiences to reach their full potential. Equity can be understood and addressed from multiple perspectives: outcomes, opportunity, commitment, affirmation, and as a system. Figure 4.1 shows the focus of each individual study and a summary of five perspectives of equity that each member of the research team examined.

Figure 4.1

Five perspectives of equity



Below, we discuss the importance of each perspective and address the challenges for district leaders. In addition, we offer recommendations to overcome these challenges.



### **Equity as Outcomes**

Equity as outcomes is the full development of students' talents. It also involves efforts to foster students' aspirations by providing them educational experiences to achieve their aspirations. In order to determine outcomes, educational leaders need to define the skills, knowledge and dispositions with which students should graduate. Consistent with equity as outcomes research (Nieto, 1996; De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park; 2006), our research found district leaders should articulate outcomes for students. These student outcomes could include a feeling of belongingness, dispositions and attitudes towards school, the development of passions and strengths, and extra-curricular participation. Examples from our studies included the analysis of English language proficiency data to monitor the progress of EL students (Drummey, 2020), monitoring disproportionality in enrollment, achievement, and suspension rates (Bishop, 2020), and the use of the iReady data system to uncover disproportionality in MCAS scores (Mizoguchi, 2020). Another way equity as outcomes manifested in MPSD was in students' freedom to explore their strengths and passions by participating in a Poetry Slam and an activism unit (Mizoguchi, 2020).

Our studies primarily found that MPSD focused on disaggregated school and district-based achievement data to assess student progress toward state-defined achievement outcomes even though we did find limited district leadership practices that focused on non-academic outcomes data (Bookis, 2020; Welch, 2020). If equity means the full development of student

talents, then it is important to have not only a broader definition of outcomes rather than one that is narrowly defined by only academic data, but also multiple avenues for student learning (O'Sullivan & Dallas, 2017; Shushok & Hulme, 2006). Such avenues could include the development of skills in Social Emotional Learning (SEL), the arts, technology, access to advanced curriculum, etc. The data collected and analyzed by district measures should align with those defined outcomes.

One of the greatest challenges in equity for outcomes is defining a vision for student outcomes by articulating the skills, knowledge and dispositions with which students should graduate. Because equity work requires seeing the full potential of every child (Zygmunt & Cipollone, 2019), taking into account their own goals and passions, one challenge in defining outcomes is supporting the staff to develop “an asset orientation instead of one focused on deficits” (p. 18). However, this takes time, persistent professional development, steady leadership, and planning to achieve. Furthermore, monitoring less measurable outcomes, such as a students’ sense of belonging and relationships with teachers (Singleton, 2018) that are vital for student achievement, can be equally as challenging.

It is important for districts to establish a vision of equity that focuses on a full definition of student outcomes because over time, creating this vision will provide coherence to all of the district’s work. This allows leaders to not only define the outcomes desired, but also to monitor progress and provide opportunity to periodically reevaluate the outcome objectives so continuous improvement is realized. Deciding on how to measure some of the data points can be an additional step. Building a timeline for this work and providing capacity for those responsible for its success is also recommended. Lastly, continuing to engage all stakeholders in conversations

about equity and why multiple pathways for students are important to equitable outcomes is essential.



## **Equity as Opportunity**

Creating and expanding educational opportunities for students is a cornerstone of equity work. Opportunity can be manifested in many different ways, such as students' access to services, technology, support, and a sense of ownership over their learning; families' sense of belonging within the district; and the staff's access to professional learning and leadership opportunities that enhance their equity work. Educational outcomes for students of color are much more a function of their unequal access to key educational resources, including skilled teachers and quality curriculum, than they are a function of race (Darling-Hammond, 1998). To ensure access to such opportunities, district leaders need to identify and address existing barriers using clearly defined outcomes as a guide. For example, opportunity may be expanded via culturally proficient teaching, equitable resource allocation, and efficient structures and systems (Mattheis, 2017).

In line with this research, MPSD engaged in various approaches to creating and expanding educational opportunities for students. Examples of such opportunities included: classroom lessons that expanded student voice and choice (Mizoguchi, 2020); the creation of a new staff position devoted to family outreach (Welch, 2020); a racially balanced practice of school assignment for newly enrolled English language learners (Drummey, 2020); efforts to diversify district staff (Bishop, 2020; Welch, 2020); and increased resources for translation and interpretation (Bishop, 2020; Drummey, 2020). Indeed, we found it encouraging to witness leaders' persistent focus on heightening educational opportunity.

The challenge for districts is that students cannot achieve equitable outcomes without opportunities, and opportunities will not exist without a critical understanding of the barriers in the way. Research shows that identifying barriers to educational access and creating new educational opportunities can be challenging (Williams, 2018). For example, creating access requires a wholesale shift in mindset around inclusivity so that the teachers and district decision-makers can identify the needs of each unique learner and address them. Teachers need to understand the strengths of their students' community and family contexts in order to capitalize on them in the classroom (Zygmunt & Cipollone, 2019). They also need the skills to create and deliver culturally responsive lessons to their diverse students (Hawley & Nieto, 2010). This requires sustained professional development for all staff, which can be a challenge for districts in terms of time and resources. A mindful and committed approach to this work also requires a shared lens of cultural responsiveness, persistent attention, abundant data related to student outcomes, and a strong dose of humility.

In order to address such challenges, leaders should consider the following purposeful steps. First, district leaders should develop a coherent system for identifying barriers (such as using a district data analysis team with defined data inquiry process), and hence heightening opportunities, that is based on defined outcomes (Williams, 2018). Understanding where opportunity can be enhanced, and where barriers to educational opportunity exist, should determine the district's priorities from an instructional, systemic, and philosophical perspective. Second, setting up conversations so that the flow of ideas is clear, ideas are connected to a common interest, and multiple perspectives are incorporated help to keep students at the focus of the decision-making process (Bookis, 2020). Lastly, district leaders should also have reflective structures (such as annual equity audits) to regularly assess how the district is working toward

establishing equitable opportunities for students (Rorrer, et al., 2008). Being transparent about ongoing student achievement and areas of challenge will help determine new opportunities for students that are consistent with the district's definition of equity.



### **Equity as Commitment**

Commitment is an essential aspect of leadership when undertaking equity work, especially since such work may come with adversity and risk. However, district leaders' commitment to equity makes a difference in students' lives and outcomes (Leithwood & Prestine, 2002; McFarlane, 2010). In accord with other scholarship (e.g., Rorrer et al., 2008; Meyers et al., 2019), our research found that commitment to equity took many forms, including: consistent, clear messaging (Bishop, 2020; Bookis, 2020; Welch, 2020); the acknowledgment of current exclusionary practices (Bishop, 2020); the creation of new executive cabinet positions aligned with equity (Welch, 2020; Mizoguchi, 2020); the presence of a plan to recruit a more diverse staff (Drummey, 2020); and ensuring that the voices of historically underserved families and students were included in decisions (Bookis, 2020). These practices, while varied, publicly demonstrate district leaders' commitment to equity and creates a shared understanding of its importance throughout the community. Further it keeps those engaged in the work accountable to one another.

Creating a shared understanding of equity builds trust. This trust helps stakeholders understand the actions district leaders take and builds support for those actions, which enable district leaders to stay committed to enacting equitable outcomes (Horsford & Clark, 2015; Rorrer et al., 2008). Consequently, district leaders can not only more easily navigate the distractions and challenges of district leadership such as local and state mandates, and politics,

but they can also focus on shifting the fixed mindsets of reticent stakeholders. Attempting to shift these mindsets requires resources, time, and especially district leader commitment.

By committing to equity, school district leaders can disrupt and displace institutional inequity (Rorrer et al., 2008). This requires district leaders to develop a strategy towards creating an equitable environment. District leaders should clearly articulate their beliefs about students and learning when talking with various stakeholder groups, ensure a common definition of equity within the district, engage in community conversations, and make equity data transparent by ensuring it is in a format understandable and accessible by the community. A true commitment requires the time and resources to keep equity front and center throughout the district. Furthermore, district leaders should build a team committed to equity. This entails hiring district and school leaders who possess a commitment to equity work, providing training to build leadership capacity to engage in difficult conversations, and developing a pipeline of future leaders to ensure the commitment to equity is strengthened. By assembling a team who demonstrates a commitment to equity, district leaders can combat fixed mindsets, as well as ensure equity remains a priority in the district.



### **Equity as Affirmation**

Equity as affirmation is how all identities within the system are viewed and affirmed. Affirming identities and encouraging cooperation among and between groups of students, educators, and leaders are essential components to foster inclusive environments. Schools serve as environments that intentionally and unintentionally communicate messages about individual capabilities, importance of their contributions, and expected outcomes (Allen, Scott, & Lewis,

2013). Consistent with equity as affirmation research (Khalifa, 2018; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006), our research found that commitment to equity as affirmation took the form of: articulating statements about the value of the district's diversity (Bookis, 2020); employing staff who are representative of the district's demographic data (Bishop, 2020; Drummey, 2020); developing leadership initiatives that prioritize equity (Welch, 2020); and empowering educators to make equity-based changes in their practice including family engagement practices (Mizoguchi, 2020).

These findings were encouraging because affirming individual identities and encouraging cooperation among and between students and groups of leaders are key district leadership practices. Unless leaders actively work to foster identity affirmation, schools risk marginalizing and alienating students of color (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007; DeMatthews, Carey, Olivarez, & Saeedi, 2017; Smith & Kozelski, 2005; Khalifa, 2018). Since Theoharis (2007) found that improving school structures and strengthening school culture improves student achievement, district leaders who are in pursuit of equitable schools should go to great lengths to ensure schools in their charge have an "ecology" of belonging (Bishop, 2020).

Even so, maintaining a focus on equity may be challenging for some district leaders, because school environments are not typically responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of the diverse students they serve (Calkins et al., 2007). Consequently, students of color are more likely to be disciplined, referred for special education services, fail to graduate, and take vocational classes as opposed to college preparatory classes (Smith & Kozelski, 2005; Bal, Afacan, & Cakir, 2018). DeMatthews et al. (2017) furthers this claim by arguing that the marginalization and alienation of students of color are the "result of a myriad of factors, with one of the most important being systematic and interpersonal racism plaguing the lives of students of



color, their families, and their communities” (p. 549). Such systematic racism can lead to an environment in which microaggressions go unchecked and are further perpetuated through such cues as verbal and non-verbal hidden messages and perpetuate feelings of inferiority (Allen, 2012).

To counter the challenges of alienation and marginalization, district leaders should create environments that validate cultures and identities. They can accomplish this by: ensuring Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) practices in the district (Khalifa, 2018; Mizoguchi, 2020), creation of identity-affirming spaces (Carter, 2007), using language and messaging that affirms equity work (Bookis, 2020), and engaging families and local community contexts to affirm the different cultures served (Bishop, 2020). Finally, district leaders who wish to foster inclusive school environments should deliberately and strategically ensure all students feel a climate of belonging (Khalifa, 2018; Theoharis, 2009).



### **Equity as Systems**

Districts’ organizational systems that support equity can enhance or hinder those efforts. Systems pertain to anything from staffing to recruitment, from data analysis to professional development, and are critical to the operational efficiency of the district; in addition, these systems reveal the district’s commitment and approach to equity. As defined by Scott (2001), systemic equity is “the transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner has the greatest opportunity to learn enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-

sufficiency for school and for life” (p.6). Aligned with this definition, we found that MPSD had established some ways of creating systemic equity, including the prioritization of budget and staffing decisions that advance equity (Welch, 2020); the development of teacher and leadership pipeline programs (Bishop, 2020; Mizoguchi, 2020; Welch, 2020); and leveraging accountability systems for student assignment and professional development that address the specific needs of traditionally marginalized subgroups (Drummey, 2020).

These findings were promising because structures and systems within schools affect students’ opportunities to learn (Hawley & Nieto, 2010). When a district ensures that long-term, sustainable systems are in place to support equity work, it is optimizing the conditions for educational opportunities for all students. Systems built on equity such as transportation routes, school assignment, resource allocation, hiring practices, and professional development guide the actions and decisions of its staff (Berg & Gleason, 2018). Systems are also important because they reflect a district’s values and beliefs; therefore, because they drive or inhibit action, a district should work collectively on shaping beliefs around equity *while* transforming systems at the same time (Berg & Gleason, 2018).

Establishing systems to support equity is challenging in the current context of many public school districts. The lack of continuity in leadership due to frequent changes in the superintendent position limits the coherence in the direction of a school district and can disrupt systemic equity (Welch, 2020; “Urban School Superintendents,” 2014). Frequent changes in district leadership can stall or prevent initiatives and structure reorganization that support equity work. Furthermore, lack of capacity of the people leading the work to advance equity presents itself as a challenge when responsibilities are not solely focused on creating equitable conditions for students (Calkins et al., 2007). Educational systems do not always support authentic

conversations about race among its staff (Singleton, 2018). Additionally, given the importance of regular self-reflection in equity work (Rorrer et al., 2008), effectively assessing how the organization is working systemically towards equity brings another layer of complexity; a critical yet challenging part of this effort is ensuring that everyone is familiar with existing systems (Berg & Gleason, 2018).

To mitigate the barriers of establishing systemic equity, district leaders should dedicate time to capacity building around equity issues and then assessing which systems need to be replaced. To begin, schools must engage in open and authentic conversations about racial achievement disparities supported by district leadership (Singleton, 2018). Equity initiatives and values should be truly owned by the culture of the district rather than a forced priority of one individual leader. While having a systemic approach to equity at the school level is important, building systemic equity should be “unapologetically top-down” (p.30) and must be strategically developed and implemented by the district leadership team (Singleton, 2018). Even when preparing for or managing through leadership changes, the systems that support an overarching vision promoting core values of educational equity must be maintained (Cruickshank, 2018). To accomplish this, district leaders should focus on communicating priorities of establishing an equitable system, with clearly articulated aligned goals for each department and periodic evaluations of those goals. In short, a goal of establishing systemic equity requires a planful approach to make the district “leader-proof,” and therefore resilient to the inevitable changes in the superintendent position.

### **Conclusion: A New Way to Look At Equity**

As Darling-Hammond (2007) states, “Our future will be increasingly determined by our capacity and our will to educate all children well” (p. 319). In order to effectively educate all

children, district leaders need to foster equity. This qualitative case study examined how district leadership practices foster equity. As we explored the practices of district leaders, we noted that examining equity through the five perspectives of outcomes, opportunity, commitment, affirmation, and systems provided a framework for district leaders. As such, we recommend that district leaders utilize the five distinct perspectives as interrelated components of a framework to foster equity within their district.

Using this new framework to foster equity will provide a systematic approach for district leaders. As we have demonstrated, fostering equity at a district level requires leaders to address each of the five components. To this end, we offer to think about the five components not as a hierarchy, but rather as a system of gears (see Figure 4.2); each gear is deeply interconnected with the others and none is more important than the other. Each gear relies on the speed, force, and direction of the others, and for district leaders this means that once they start equity work, all gears will start to turn. In our framework, speed refers to how quickly the district enacts the work associated with a particular gear; force refers to the amount of pressure applied on a particular gear at any one time; and direction refers to the vision of an equitable learning environment.

Figure 4.2

## Equity Framework



District leaders should understand that not all gears will require the same force, turn in the same direction, nor turn at the same speed. We strongly suggest that districts assess what their strengths and improvement areas are for each component. From there, districts can decide which components need immediate attention, and those that require a longer, more strategic plan to address. For example, if districts are just starting equity work, they may choose to start with equity as outcomes by defining their vision for the aspiration and full talent development of all students. However, if a district has clearly defined equity outcomes and opportunities, then the district may want to create the systems for equity and plan future work around affirmations and commitment. Ultimately, all five gears of the equity framework need to be addressed for district leaders to be successful in fostering and maintaining equitable learning environments.

Our nation continues to struggle to deliver educationally equitable experiences for all of its students. Therefore, today's district leaders need to be adept at not only examining equity

within a district, but also addressing equity within the district. Literature contends that district leadership practices can have a significant impact on student outcomes (Leithwood & Prestine, 2002; McFarlane, 2010). Consequently, we offer district leaders this framework to fully address all five components of equity. Utilizing this framework will provide support and guidance for district leaders as they engage in this very challenging work.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Abstract for Matthew Bishop's Individual Study**

#### **District Leadership Practices That Foster Equity: Creating an Ecology of Belonging**

In today's educational landscape many school environments alienate students as they often are not responsive to their cultural and linguistic needs. Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) is a high leverage strategy that helps meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students by guiding school leaders towards fostering a climate of belonging. While much of the CRSL literature centers around building-level leadership, a gap exists in better understanding district leader efforts to foster a climate of belonging. As part of a larger qualitative study of district leadership practices that foster equity, the purpose of this individual case study was to explore how district leaders in a large Northeast school district foster a climate of belonging. Interview data from ten district leaders as well as an examination of public and local documents provided data for analysis using CRSL as a conceptual framework. Findings indicate that while the district was engaging in some individual CRSL practices by working to promote culturally responsive school environments and engaging students, parents, and local contexts, a systematic and strategic approach to fostering a climate of belonging was absent. Recommendations include developing a district-level, deliberate approach to fostering a climate of belonging, conducting a detailed equity audit, and instituting a comprehensive CRSL professional development plan for building-level leaders.

*Keywords:* Leadership, Equity, Culturally Responsive School Leadership, Climate of Belonging

## **Appendix B**

### **Abstract for Deborah S. Bookis' Individual Study**

#### **District Leadership Practices That Foster Equity: Equity Talk Through Framing Processes**

Leading for equity is a challenging endeavor. One leadership practice that fosters equitable learning environments is engaging in dialogue and reflection. When district leaders participate in dialogue and reflection, their discourse helps them derive meaning, and in turn, shapes their understanding of the critical and complex issues related to fostering equity. As part of a group qualitative case study about district leadership practices that foster equity in one diverse Massachusetts school district, the purpose of this individual study was to better understand how district leaders used framing during dialogue and reflection. More specifically it addressed how they used framing processes (Bedford and Snow, 2000) when engaging in equity talk. Utilizing inductive reasoning for data gathered by semi-structured interviews, observations, and document review, this study identified equity talk manifesting as one of three themes: diversity as an asset, decision-making processes, and use of data and feedback. Understanding how and when specific framing processes are used can empower district leaders to be more strategic in impacting stakeholder thinking and language and maintaining an equity focus.

## **Appendix C**

### **Abstract for Allyson Mizoguchi's Individual Study**

#### **District Leadership Practices that Foster Equity:**

#### **The Role of District Leadership in Teacher-Led Equity Work**

As a result of pressing educational inequities that can be traced to students' race, ethnicity, class, home language, and learning needs, many districts prioritize equity work in their strategic plans and mission. With their close proximity to student learning, teachers can play an integral role in furthering equity efforts. Studies have pointed to the building principal as the leader most influential in creating a culture of teacher leadership; however, there is a gap in the research related to how the *district* leadership sets the conditions for this culture. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how district leaders in one Massachusetts school district set the conditions for teacher leadership, specifically in enacting efforts to support the learning of all students. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and document review. Findings indicate that district leaders can cultivate teacher leadership in equity work when they provide meaningful professional development opportunities, when they consistently support building principals, when their messaging about the importance of equity is clear, and when they provide formal leadership roles and opportunities to teachers. Although several steps removed from the locus of the classroom, district leaders can play a critical role in fostering a culture in which

teachers are trusted, supported, and prepared to reach every learner.

## **Appendix D**

### **Abstract for Thomas Michael Welch, Jr.'s Individual Study**

#### **District Leadership Practices that Foster Equity:**

#### **Succession Planning Guided by Equity as a Tool for Leadership Development in School Districts**

Oftentimes, during the transition of key leadership positions in the public school district setting, multi-year initiatives and core values are disrupted as a new leader assumes their role. The purpose of this research is to examine how district leaders leverage a proactive approach to planning for transitions in key leadership positions. This dissertation used a case study of an urban district with a stated core value of equity to examine the approach of assessing, selecting, developing, and promoting future leaders. Through document reviews, meeting observations, and 14 interviews, this study examines the transition of key leadership positions within the district by addressing the following research question: How do the practices of district leaders foster equity through planning for future changes in leadership? Using the framework of succession planning, findings of the study included the complexities of the district's approach to planning for future human capital needs in alignment with the values of equity, through both existing strategies and the goals of a new superintendent. Additionally, the bar was raised for initiatives to develop talent from within the organization as pipeline programs were re-emphasized and meeting the needs of students and families were prioritized. Finally, the district aspired to sustain these

efforts through systemic equity and a recommitment to ensuring linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity among leadership positions. This case study suggests the complex nature of organizational change and the importance of coherence in supporting the vision of the district during periods of leadership transition.



## Appendix E

### District Leader Interview Protocol

#### Opening Reminders

We will begin the interview with reminding the participants of the purpose and procedures of the interview.

- The interview is being recorded. However, you can request that I turn off the recording during any point in the interview.
- Anonymity will be protected and pseudonyms will be used in final data reporting.
- All questions are optional and you can end the interview at any time.
- Interview focus: This interview will focus on your experiences and work in MPSD.

1. Tell me how you see your work fitting into the district's mission.
2. As you think about your job, what gets you up in the morning?
3. As you look around this district, what do you see going on to help individual kids be successful?
  - a. With English Language Learners?
  - b. With accessing the challenging curriculum?
  - c. Partnering with families?
4. Tell me how your work is helping to meet students' unique needs.
  - a. Tell me about a challenge doing this.
  - b. How did you respond to this challenge?
  - c. With English Language Learners?
  - d. With different cultures?
5. When you look around the district, what do you see teachers doing to meet students' unique needs

- a. How much are they doing on their own?
  - b. How much is formal?
  - c. How much support do they need from you?
6. How do you and your team evaluate whether teachers are meeting students' unique needs?
  - a. How often do these discussions occur?
  - b. What do you do when they are not?
7. Tell me about your department/team's planning processes to ensure your work is aligned with the needs and priorities of the district.
  - a. How do you determine the needs, priorities, and equity issues?
  - b. Who is involved in the planning process to ensure MPSD is meeting the needs of all students? Are community stakeholders involved in the process? School-level leaders? District-level leaders?
  - c. Is this planning done on a yearly basis? More or less frequently than once a year? Are multi-year plans created?
8. Now we are going to think about when significant leadership changes occur at the school or department level. Can you describe the process of identifying candidates within MPSD to take on leadership roles and the process of transitioning these candidates to new leadership roles in the district?
  - a. How are potential leadership candidates who understand and embrace equity and other core values of MPSD identified and developed over time?
  - b. What role does the Human Resources, Personnel, and Recruitment Department play in purposefully providing an opportunity for leaders to advance within the school district?

- c. Are future district-level and school-level leaders identified over time through a specific process (district-driven or in partnership with an external organization such as a local university)? If so, explain how candidates are identified.
  - d. Can you tell me about a district leader who you have identified for promotion in the past? Moved up in the ranks? What qualities did they have that are aligned to district values?
  - e. How does specific training aligned to district values occur?
9. Did you personally experience intentional leadership development opportunities as you were promoted as a district-level or school-level leader? If so, please explain one example of how MPSD prepared you to understand its core values.
- a. In your experience, describe the strategic onboarding process for district-level and school-level leaders as they transition into their new role. Is there typically an overlap in responsibilities as a succession in leadership occurred?
10. MPSD has a very diverse student population. How does the staff learn about the different cultures they serve?
- a. How does this knowledge make its way into the classroom?



