District Leadership Practices That Foster Equity: The Role of District Leadership in Teacher-Led Equity Work

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DISTRICT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT FOSTER EQUITY:

THE ROLE OF DISTRICT LEADERSHIP IN TEACHER-LED EQUITY WORK

Dissertation
by

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with Matthew Bishop, Deborah S. Bookis, Sandra Drummey, and Thomas Michael Welch, Jr.

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DISTRICT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT FOSTER EQUITY:

THE ROLE OF DISTRICT LEADERSHIP IN TEACHER-LED EQUITY WORK

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ALLYSON LEE MIZOGUCHI

Dr. Vincent Cho (Chair)
Dr. Oh Myo Kim
Dr. Maryellen Brunelle (Readers)

Abstract

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.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the privilege of working with such an incredible dissertation team. Matt, Deb, Sandi, and Tommy: you provided the inspiration, humor, insight, and momentum that I needed to cross the finish line. I learned so much from each of you, and I am proud of our journey and our research. I owe my new understanding of equity – which I will strive to fulfill each day in my work – to you. I am also thankful for the collective support I received from all of Cohort V. Learning about school leadership with such a strong and talented group of educators was truly life-changing.

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My parents, Allan and Ronalee Mizoguchi, were the first people to encourage me to undertake the challenges of this program. Among many other things, they have taught me the importance of study, contribution, and personal growth. They were as dedicated to my success as I was, traveling thousands of miles to lend a hand on the home front when I was in class.

My husband, Troy, kept our family knit together during my many absences over the last three years. He was my quiet cheerleader who knew when to offer support and when to give me space. My children, Kyra and Lou, lifted my spirits at every opportunity and made the room for this experience in their lives as well. I also give my sincere and loving thanks to my sister, Traci, and to my close friends whose sheer enthusiasm for this accomplishment pushed me along, step by step and mile by mile.

Dedication

This is dedicated to the generational bookends in my life who keep me upright and strong: my parents, Allan and Ronalee Mizoguchi, and my children, Kyra and Louis Lefebvre.

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CHAPTER ONE[1]

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 & 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).

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[1] This chapter 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.

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) stated, 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' might practices 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 behaviors for ELs?	Culturally Responsive 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	Human Capital Theory

foster equity through planning for future

changes in leadership?

_____

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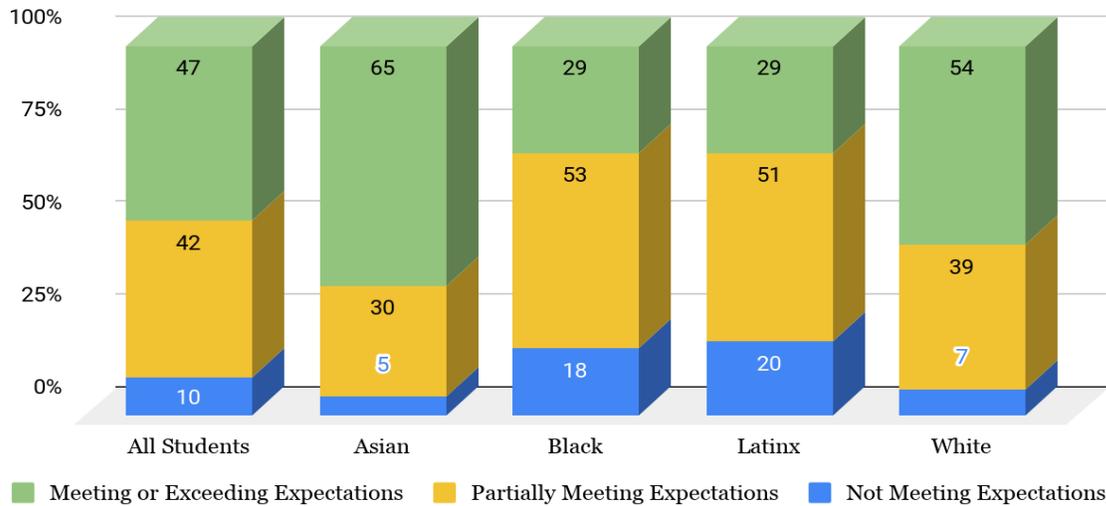
Adapted from Number One for Some (2018), p. 4

Figure 2

Percent of 8th graders meeting grade-level expectations in Mathematics, 2017 Next-Gen MCAS
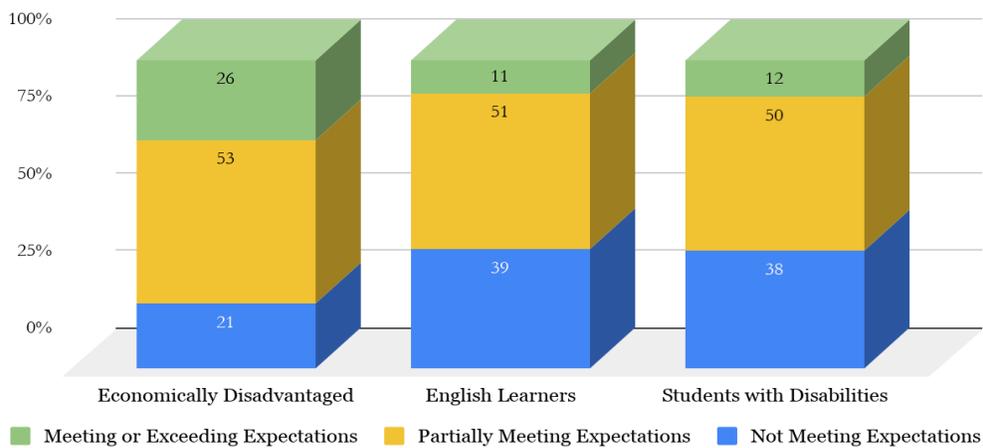
Adapted from Number One for Some (2018), p. 4

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

White 92%/8th

English Learners 64%/29th

Latino 73%/43rd

All Students 88%/13th

Low-Income 78%/18th

Asian 93%/15th

Black 79%/19th

2016 Graduation Rate/National Ranking
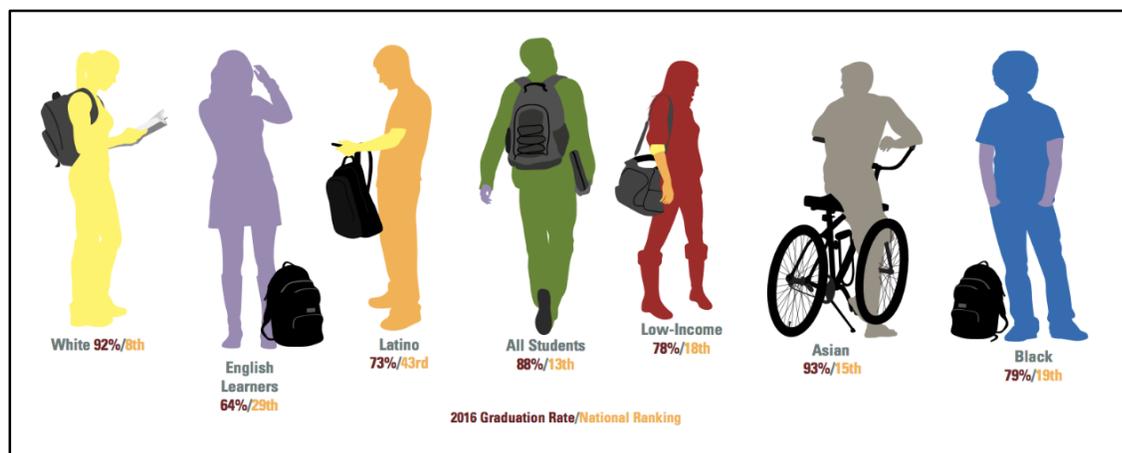
Number One for Some (2018), p. 5

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 engaging in equity talk?
Drummey	Culturally Responsive School Leadership	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?

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. This study 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. 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. 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
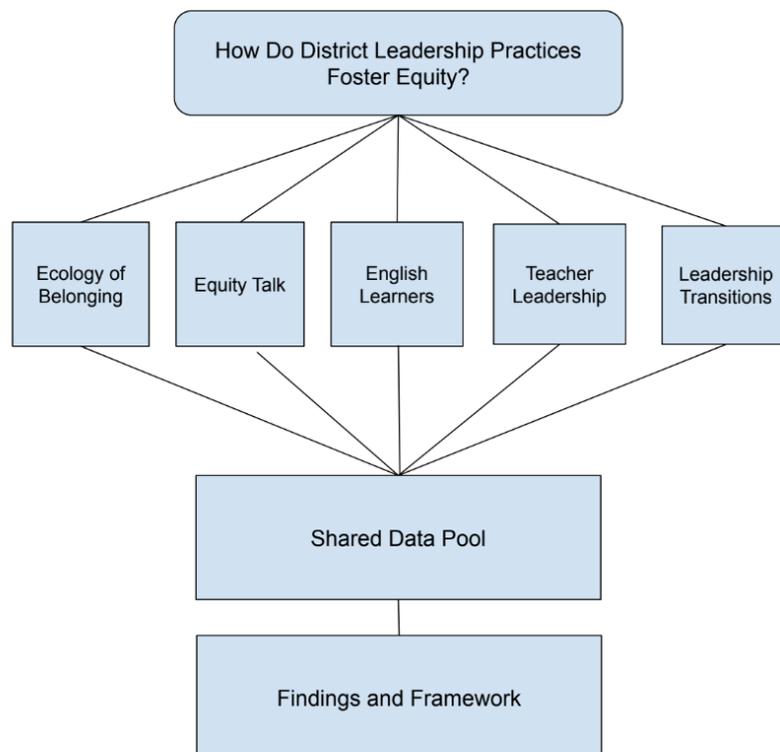
The following chapter will outline the methodology the team used to conduct the research on

equity practices in school district leadership.

CHAPTER TWO[2]

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.

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

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[2]This chapter 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.

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 of about 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 is not English, one-quarter of students are English Language Learners, and there are 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, 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 agendas, 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 are 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 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 MPSD 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[3]

THE ROLE OF DISTRICT LEADERSHIP IN TEACHER-LED EQUITY WORK

The unequal academic outcomes of students of color, students with special needs, students of low socioeconomic status, and non-native English speakers require an urgent call to equity within the education field. Given the complexity of equity work as discussed in Chapter 1, the complicated yet critical role of leadership in ensuring that districts effectively educate all children is well-established (Rorrer, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Williams, 2018). For example, in their article providing a historical overview of educational leadership and social justice, Brooks and Miles (2006) stated, "School leaders are not only uniquely positioned to influence equitable educational practice, their proactive involvement is imperative" (p. 107).

Although principals can significantly influence student achievement and school culture (Barth, 2001; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011), school leaders cannot do this critical work alone. With the growing responsibilities placed on schools, in addition to the generally high turnover rates of leaders, researchers have asserted that schools need leadership by those outside of formal positions (Barth, 2001; Danielson, 2007; Lambert, 2003). Teacher leadership has been increasingly viewed as critical to improving the educational experience of students K-12 (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Patterson & Patterson, 2004; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Indeed, Barth (2001) declared, "If schools are going to become places in which all students are learning, all teachers *must* lead" (p. 444). When we consider best leadership practices related to equity, it is important to understand how teachers can play a leadership role in improving equitable outcomes for their students.

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[3] This chapter was individually written by Allyson Mizoguchi.

Research has pointed to the role of the principal as the leader most influential in creating a culture of teacher leadership within the building (Danielson, 2007; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). However, there is a gap in the research related to how the *district* leadership cultivates and supports a culture of teacher leadership. Therefore, the focus of this study was to examine how one district empowered its teachers to implement strategies designed to meet the needs of all learners. With equity serving as an overarching theme, this study examined the leadership practices of district administrators in supporting teachers with their equity efforts. Specifically, the study was guided by the following research question: How does the district leadership set the conditions for teacher-led equity work?

Literature Review

I conducted this study using the concept of teacher leadership. In this section, I review the prior research pertaining to teacher leadership in order to define its characteristics, discuss its significance, and identify its obstacles and challenges. I also provide some background on the limited examples that tie teacher leadership to matters of equity.

What is Teacher Leadership?

Teacher leadership is rooted in the tenet that teachers play a central role in how a school operates, improves, and fulfills its core educational mission. In their literature review of 100 articles related to this concept, York-Barr and Duke (2004) synthesized teacher leadership as an example of organizational management where, "active involvement by individuals at all levels and within all domains of an organization is necessary if change is to take hold" (p. 255). Teacher leadership is also studied as a form of distributed leadership, a conceptual framework describing leadership as a responsibility that is shared flexibly and consistently among school staff beyond the principal according to the situation and activity (Spillane & Healey, 2010).

Although the exact nature of a teacher leader can be unclear, Wenner and Campbell (2017) arrived at the following definition for the purposes of their literature review: "Teachers who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom" (p. 140). Patterson and Patterson (2004) defined teacher leaders this way: "A teacher who works with colleagues for the purpose of improving teaching and learning, whether in a formal or informal capacity" (p. 74). In multiple definitions, there is the view that in this role, a teacher leader has not only influence on other individual teachers, but also on the school culture as a whole and even the broader profession (Barth, 2001; Danielson, 2007; Patterson & Patterson, 2004).

The behaviors and roles of teacher leaders vary widely in the literature. In their study of teacher leadership behaviors, VonDohlen and Karvonen (2018) categorized 22 informal and formal behaviors exhibited by teacher leaders based on the situation (in the classroom, school, and profession). They analyzed behaviors such as, "I create and maintain a safe and supportive classroom environment," "I lead an extracurricular activity," and "I serve on a curriculum committee in my district" (p. 76). Another set of behaviors was described by Barth (2001), who saw teacher leadership as being engaged in efforts such as shaping curriculum, participating on hiring committees, and designing professional development (p. 444). Similarly, Danielson described "three areas of school life" where teachers may exercise their leadership, which are schoolwide policies and programs, teaching and learning, and communication and community relations (p. 17). In terms of roles, teacher leaders can have both formal roles (e.g. department head, union representative, teacher coach, curriculum specialist) and informal roles (mentor, advice giver, collaborator, project volunteer) (Barth, 2001; Danielson, 2007; VonDohlen & Karvonen, 2018). Regardless of their specific leadership behaviors or role, Wenner and

Campbell (2017) described teacher leaders as "among the most influential leaders in schools" (p. 140).

Why Is Teacher Leadership Important?

This section will describe the benefits of teacher leadership, in particular on teachers, schools, and students.

Benefits to teachers. Teacher leadership has a beneficial, personal impact on teachers' motivation, confidence, and professional growth. York-Barr and Duke (2004) noted that "increased intellectual stimulation, reduced isolation, and reflection and analytic thinking about their practice" (p. 19) were common effects on teacher leaders. Research such as Hunzicker (2012) has focused on the positive impact of teacher leadership on the educators themselves, shown by heightened professional satisfaction with their work and feelings of greater confidence and empowerment. Additionally, teacher leaders find that they are more eager to take strides to strengthen their own practice as a result of greater leadership responsibilities (Hofstein et al., 2004; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). Research such as Donaldson (2007) has also pointed to teacher leadership as a potential solution to the challenge of teacher attrition, where leadership paths offer classroom teachers new and interesting opportunities that deter them from career stagnation. Similarly, teacher leaders also may experience less "drift and detachment" experienced by many in the profession, as a leadership progression and new responsibilities may spark heightened engagement and professional mobility (Duke, 1994).

Benefits to schools. While teacher leadership has a clear impact on the teachers themselves, teacher leaders benefit schools as a whole. Not only do the teacher leaders experience an increase in confidence, but *all* teachers feel more empowered as professionals (Vernon-Dotson & Floyd, 2012). According to Patterson and Patterson (2004), "Teacher leaders

can play a powerful role in determining the overall health of the school" (p. 75). The same study indicated that schools with strong teacher leaders were more "resilient" and "emerge from adversity with an even healthier culture than before" (p. 75). The idea that teacher leaders contribute their expertise for the benefit of the school, community, and even the larger profession is also prominent within the literature. Tapping into teacher expertise about student learning can leverage gains in professional development for their peers, as noted in the review by York-Barr and Duke (2004): "Teacher expertise is at the foundation of increasing teacher quality and advancements in teaching and learning" (p. 4).

Benefits to students. Surprisingly, the research is relatively slim regarding the impact of teacher leadership on measurable student outcomes (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). In a rare study addressing student achievement, Leithwood and Mascall (2008) found that distributed leadership has a "modest but significant indirect effect" on student outcomes as measured by schoolwide results on state-mandated tests (p. 546). In this case, leadership influenced student achievement through teacher work setting and teacher motivation, which the authors thought "should at least be viewed as encouragement for claims about the benefits to students of more widely distributing leadership in schools" (p. 547). Research highlights other kinds of benefits to students. For example, Barth (2001) noted the civic benefits to students as they experience their teachers modeling democratic leadership; students may also experience higher morale in their teachers and greater investment by their teachers in their learning. Students benefit from teacher-led school reform efforts related to issues such as grading, homework, and the master schedule; additionally, they flourish from co-curricular programs that teachers often lead (Danielson, 2007).

Factors that Influence Teacher Leadership

In this section, I describe the most prominent factors in schools that foster teacher leadership as found in the literature, including professional development, school culture, and the role of the principal.

Professional development. There is little doubt that teachers who lead teachers are best motivated and qualified to do this work when they have engaged in professional development. Research such as Yonezawa, Jones and Singer (2011) has indicated that teacher leaders who enrolled in a leadership program benefited from a support network of peers, in addition to a broadened set of pedagogical and content skills. Studies of professional development schools (PDSs) -- collaborations between schools and universities to support experienced teachers -- have found that these professional learning communities foster both leadership as well as the connection between learning and leading. For example, in their study of seven PDSs, Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster and Cobb (1995) found that professional development schools "enable teacher leadership for the teachers who work in them and help to build a future teaching force that assumes leadership naturally as part of a more professional conception of teaching work" (p. 88). In addition to such formal programs, it is essential for the district to have a plan that makes available rich learning opportunities that are convenient and accessible to all teachers so they are prepared to lead and contribute (Danielson, 2001; Lambert, 1998).

School culture. The extent to which a school embraces teacher leadership as part of its culture and mission determines how well it supports teacher leaders. For example, in his study of two middle schools adopting a teacher career ladder program, Hart (1994) determined that the school with the greatest success in implementation already embraced a culture of open communication and trust, and had prominent teacher leaders working visibly toward core

instructional goals. The school with less success had a negative, isolating school culture and did not embrace communication and collaboration as values. In addition to open communication and trust, schools that embrace a culture of constant improvement, inquiry, and adult learning nurture teacher leadership (Barth, 2001; Lambert, 1998).

Similarly, the degree of professionalism and collegiality within the school culture determines the health of teacher leadership. One challenge to teacher leadership that has been noted is the traditionally isolationist, egalitarian attitude of classroom teachers where veering beyond their responsibilities can be viewed negatively by their peers. "Generally speaking, the more ambitious the conception of teacher leadership, the more likely it is to spark conflict" (Cheung, Reinhardt, Stone & Warren Little, 2018). When giving a special role to one teacher or another can create tension, that school culture is not conducive to a strong presence of teacher leaders. However, as noted in Darling-Hammond et al. (1995), when there is a schoolwide priority of student learning and a positive view of teacher leaders, teacher leadership may flourish.

The role of the principal. As noted earlier, much of the research examines the influence of the principal on teacher leadership within the building. The principal has the potential to create a culture where teacher leaders are valued, expected to serve, and supported in their work (Barth, 2001; Danielson, 2007; Lambert, 1998). Through efforts such as creating time and structures for collaboration and securing financial compensation for leadership efforts, principals build capacity for teachers to lead. Principals also encourage teacher leadership by proactively inviting teachers to use their voices in long-term decision-making in formal and informal ways (Danielson, 2007; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). Principals who cultivate a culture of trust, risk-taking, and continuous learning can successfully engender the potential for teacher leaders in

their buildings (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Patterson & Patterson, 2011; Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Challenges of Teacher Leadership

Of course, the presence and cultivation of authentic teacher leadership is neither accidental nor easy. Not surprisingly, one of the most influential factors in inhibiting teacher leadership is the building leader. Poor relationships between the faculty and the administration, or outright resistance to the idea of encouraging teachers to help with decisions or take on more responsibilities, can stop teacher leadership in its tracks. In their study of teacher leader-facilitated professional development, Margolis and Doring (2012) found that when principals are unsupportive, the faculty is not open to and interested in the work of the teacher leader. Other factors noted in studies have been a lack of time, poor planning, poor communication, and nonexistent structures to facilitate teacher leadership (Barth, 2001; Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

When it comes to the theory itself, the literature reveals that one challenge is defining exactly what "teacher leadership" looks like. The concept is muddied by the lack of consensus around how to operationalize this leadership theory (VonDohlen & Karvonen, 2018), in addition to the differing titles that schools use in reference to various leadership positions (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

The capacity for teacher leaders to generate great strides in meeting the needs of all learners seems boundless -- although thus far largely unattended to -- and hence provided the focus of this study.

Methods

The examination of district leadership practices that support teacher-led equity work was part of a larger study that examined leadership practices that foster equity. These leadership practices were examined using a single qualitative case study (Yin, 2009) of a public school district in Massachusetts . In this section, I first describe the school district that served as the setting of this study. Second, I describe the data collection process, and then discuss how the data was analyzed in alignment with my research question. Lastly, I discuss my own positionality as it relates to my research.

Setting

The setting for this research study was a large public school district in Massachusetts serving students in PreK through Grade 12, the Monarch Public Schools. As noted in Chapter 2, the student population was very diverse ethnically, racially, and linguistically. Of note, the district had just experienced a massive turnover in its district leadership team at the time we began our study; the superintendent had just begun his tenure, and several key individuals on his leadership team were new. Also significantly, the district had a stated priority of educational equity.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews and a review of district and school documents were the primary data sources I used to explore my research question. Data were gathered from August to December 2019.

Participant Data. A purposive sample of district administrators and personnel, building principals, and classroom teachers were interviewed. Table 5 below summarizes the participants.

Table 5

Interview Participants

_____

District Leadership
       Superintendent
       Chief Schools Officer
       Chief Academic Officer
       Chief Equity and Engagement Officer

District Personnel
       Secretary to the Superintendent
       Student Support Specialist
       Coordinator of Teacher Academy

Building Leadership
       Elementary Principal
       Middle School Principal
Teachers
       Middle School ELA (2)
       Middle School Social Studies (2)

_____

Interviews. I conducted face to face semi-structured interviews with teachers, building leaders, and district leaders in order to understand how the district leadership team supported the work of teachers at the building level with their equity work. As noted in Chapter 2, a semi-structured interview format allowed for the flexibility of using mostly open-ended questions and the option to ask follow-up questions based on the respondent's responses (Merriam, 2016). Interviews with building and district-level leaders were conducted with at least two research team members; I conducted all interviews with teachers independently. All interviews were in-person and audio recorded while I took handwritten notes.

The interview protocol for building and district leaders was developed collaboratively by our research team and included questions addressing all five individual studies. Interviews with classroom teachers sought to understand their current equity efforts with their individual students and the role of building and district leadership in conducting this work. (See Appendices E and F for the full list of interview questions.) Table 6 lists the questions related to this specific study.

Table 6

Interview Questions Related to Teacher Leadership

Questions for Building and District Leaders

1. As you look around this district, what do you see going on to help individual kids be successful?
2. Tell me how your work is helping to meet students' unique needs.
3. When you look around the district, what do you see teachers doing to meet students' unique needs?
    3a. How much are they doing on their own?
    3b. How much support do they need from you?

Questions for Teachers

1. What is something that excites you that you are doing to help individual students be successful?
2. Do you feel like you can take the lead on this kind of work?
3. What support do you get from the principal or district office in this kind of work?
4. Are you aware that equity is a priority of the district?

Documents. A variety of documents related to the district's equity efforts were collected and analyzed. Most documents were gathered from the district's website and individual schools' websites. Examples of documents included School Committee policies, district curriculum maps, district strategic plans, school newsletters, and school improvement plans. The criteria used in the selection process are as follows:

- *Articulates the district's priority of equity.*

- *Describes the district's plans for making progress in the area of educational equity.*

- *Describes teachers' efforts in supporting the learning of all students.*

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred with an eye towards identifying (1) current efforts by teachers to support the learning of all students more equitably, and (2) themes that pointed to the role of district leadership in fostering teacher-led equity work. Merriam (2016) stressed the iterative nature of this process, stating, "All qualitative data analysis is inductive and comparative in the service of developing common themes or patterns or categories that cut across the data" (p. 269). Data analysis of documents began in October 2019, and analysis of interview data occurred in November 2019 through January 2020. In the following section, I describe the processes for analyzing interview data and documents. Lastly, I describe my research journal.

Interviews. As noted earlier, all interviews were audio-recorded as a file that were later uploaded into the online Otter software for transcription. Research team members polished these raw transcripts by making corrections to the document while listening to the recordings. These transcripts were shared with all team members using an online organizational system in Google Drive that kept the interviewees anonymous but identified their leadership role and the date of the interview. Given the amount of qualitative data, I analyzed the data using both first cycle and second cycle coding to help refine my interpretations and findings (Saldaña, 2013). During the first cycle of coding, I listened to interview recordings and reread interview transcripts looking for specific examples of efforts by teachers that aimed to provide students with new opportunities to learn, thrive, and achieve (examples of teacher-led equity work). I also looked for emerging patterns of district-level leadership practices that fostered this equity work in the classroom. Based on the responses of interviewees, this First Cycle of coding resulted in categories such as classroom rituals and routines, lessons and curricular units, family

engagement, professional development, school culture, and leadership roles. I began to develop an organizational chart for my data collection based on these categories where I recorded descriptions, direct quotations of interviewees, and initial thoughts. This became my coding manual. During Second Cycle coding, I further honed these patterns which resulted in some reorganization and revised grouping of categories and themes. During this cycle, I also discerned the leadership practices that I expected to see based on my review of the literature but did not encounter in my data.

Documents. Documents were collected based on their relation to the themes of the research question, including equity, teacher leadership, and classroom-based practices that elevated educational equity. District documents related to its focus on equity, such as anti-discrimination policies, representation of historically marginalized populations in the curriculum, and messaging from the superintendent on equity, were gathered to see if they aligned with interview data. I was also interested in curriculum maps and any documentation related to formal leadership structures (e.g. Leadership Councils) at the building level. Document analysis served to support and supplement findings that were primarily gleaned from interviews.

Research journal. Throughout this data analysis process, including during transcription, I kept an individual research journal to capture initial thoughts, preliminary codes, changes and refinements in categories, and emerging themes that pointed to my findings (Saldaña, 2013). The research journal served as an important resource throughout this iterative process that revealed and traced my evolving analysis of the data. I continually referenced my journal to uncover and codify my findings and conclusions.

Positionality

During my research, I considered how elements of my identity might inform my gathering and interpretation of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). From a professional standpoint, having worked as a teacher and building leader in a well-resourced, predominantly white suburban school district for most of my career, I was conscious of my lack of experience working with significantly diverse student populations. The challenges around equity that the Monarch Public School District was trying to address were not necessarily challenges that I had personally experienced professionally. As a result, I needed to be thorough and deliberate in my data gathering by using open-ended, probing interview questions and staying attuned to the ways that my own professional experiences and biases could lead me to overlook an important piece of data. I also drew knowledge from a variety of courses and professional development experiences I have engaged in over the years related to culturally relevant teaching and leadership to inform my research. Lastly, I regularly collaborated with my research team members, several of whom have worked extensively in large, demographically diverse school districts, in order to understand more deeply this district's leadership practices related to fostering equity.

In terms of the personal aspects of my positionality, I examined how my own identity informed my research. As a biracial woman of Asian descent, I brought a set of personal experiences related to bias and equity to my research that deepened my interest in fostering equitable educational experiences for all. Although I have enjoyed privilege and opportunity, I understand that limited access to educational opportunity can have a devastating, generational effect on students of color.

Findings

In alignment with my research question, the following section describes the district leadership practices that fostered teacher-led equity work. First, I describe the specific equity

efforts that teacher leaders in the district engaged in. Second, I explain the district leadership practices that set the conditions at the building level for teacher leadership.

Teacher-Led Equity Work

The term "teacher-led equity work" refers to any efforts initiated by teachers, in or out of the classroom, designed to heighten educational equity for their students. In this section, I broadly organize examples of teacher leadership gathered from my research according to efforts conducted in a formal or informal capacity.

Formal teacher leadership. Some equity work was conducted by teachers in formal leadership roles or within a structure that elevated the teachers to act as leaders and decision-makers. For example, one principal described his Instructional Leadership Team as comprised of the Assistant Principal, himself, and three teachers who also serve as the math coach, the literacy coach, and the English language learner coach; this team decided the instructional priorities in the building, which at the time of data collection were writing conferences and small-group instruction in math. Both of these initiatives were designed to identify and support struggling students earlier in the learning process. Also, they were efforts that the principal believed were in alignment with district goals, which he stated was important to maintain: "As a district, you should be speaking a common language and having common approaches." The team also regularly consulted with their classroom colleagues in implementing these initiatives and shared data for discussion; according to the principal, "It's working as a team, it's meeting frequently, it is bringing, you know, teachers into that conversation to inevitably drive us in our initiatives."

A different example of formal leadership for teachers occurred at another school in the district, where a 20-year principal created a Leadership Team to determine the school's vision statement revolving around equity. In reflecting on the creation of this team, the principal stated,

I wanted to be a team of leaders within the school who could influence school policy, and

who wanted to have a say in what the school would look like. We did some work around

sort of envisioning it. What would you like a school to look like? What would be your

ideal school, so on? And we wrote a vision statement.

He later reflected that it was the former superintendent who urged him to "reinvent his

leadership" and foster more opportunities for teachers to have a voice at his school. The

Leadership Team was one such opportunity he subsequently created.

From the teachers' perspective, belonging to their building's formal Leadership Team can

validate their influence on school wide initiatives that directly impact student learning and

closely connect them to building and district leaders. For example, one 6th grade ELA teacher

was asked by her principal to be a part of the Leadership Team at her building -- a designated

turnaround school -- that was responsible for driving the turnaround efforts: monitoring data and

progress, shifting the culture of the school, building family engagement, and grant writing.

Because it was a turnaround school, the team also included district-level leadership supporting

the team's work. It is notable that this teacher's input was pivotal to these foundational issues

affecting the future of this school and its students.

Not all examples of formal structures designed to foster teacher leadership

were empowering to teachers or successful at addressing educational equity. In the case of one

ELA middle school teacher, the lack of expertise and credibility of a literacy specialist created

stress rather than inspiration. The role of the literacy specialist, who worked only at her school

and reported to her team of other literacy specialists at the district level, was non-evaluative and

designed to support the teachers around tasks like tracking achievement data and enhancing

lesson development. However, the literacy specialist had little expertise to offer her and in fact

was the source of much contention: "And I fight with the literacy specialist, thank God she's having a hip replaced. She's a math teacher, but she's a literacy specialist. And the other day I had to call her out...I don't want to take up the fact, but you never taught English a day in your life, so just zip it!" The teacher clearly did not rely on this support to enhance her instruction or work with students.

Some leadership structures were not as effective due to insufficient resources or staffing. For example, some formal teacher leadership positions had important responsibilities but were inconsistently compensated, resulting in some resentment. One middle school social studies teacher had served as the 7th grade "team leader" for four years, leading a group of content-area teachers and a special education teacher. Her role was to coordinate communication, schedule 504 and IEP meetings, and align goals and content among the different disciplines. Despite this hefty charge, she had recently learned that team leaders in other buildings in the district were being compensated while she was not. Given this discovery, as well as a particularly challenging few months in this role, she had recently announced to her team that this would be her last year: "I just said ladies, I've done team leader enough. Somebody's taking it next year." Without compensation to reward her efforts, she was feeling unfulfilled by her leadership role.

An example of insufficient staffing was the district curriculum coordinator role for social studies -- reporting directly to the Chief Academic Officer -- which also included the science content area. Other departments, however, had just one coordinator. Social studies classroom teachers indicated that this was not ideal for enhancing and supporting their work; one teacher stated,

> As far as I'm concerned, this district should have one person in charge of social studies. And one person in charge of science. The curriculum is extremely different to me. The

person in the past that was in charge of social studies and science tried really hard. But

she had been a science teacher for years. They got new materials in the building, a whole

new program...So the focus was on science. And even though we started some work in

social studies, the ball got dropped.

This teacher acknowledged that the absence of a history MCAS test may be a contributing factor

in having a shared coordinator, but also said that the urgency of the science MCAS relegated the

social studies focus to practically nil. Another impact of this shared leadership role is the relative

lack of professional development provided to social studies teachers. One teacher stated, "I have

to kind of find [professional development opportunities] myself. I think part of the problem is

they have just one coordinator for science and social studies. Social studies constantly gets

pushed aside." Without sufficient staffing, opportunities for teacher leadership and growth can be

stunted.

Informal teacher leadership. This section describes efforts initiated by teachers that

have a significant impact on individual learners and, at times, the school community as a whole.

These efforts occurred outside any formal leadership title or role. For these reasons, I consider

each of these efforts illustrative of teacher leadership. Using themes of teacher leadership that

surfaced in the literature review, I organized these examples into the categories of classroom

routines and rituals, the structure and objectives of specific lessons, and family engagement.

They are discussed below accordingly.

Classroom routines and rituals. Some teachers had initiated routines and rituals within

their classrooms that were designed to heighten relationships and skills among students. For

example, one elementary principal described how some of his teachers had altered typical

Morning Meeting rituals to enhance individual relationships with their students. Rather than simply following the prescribed curriculum, he described teachers this way:

Teachers get very creative with [Morning Meeting] and find ways to connect with their students so that the students then share more with their classmates. And I think that the teachers here recognize that the more children share out, the more they own the classroom, and the better they're going to end up doing... So our teachers are very in tune to all the children in their class just based on the nature of how those Morning Meetings work.

In a similar fashion, a middle school ELA teacher began a new classroom ritual where she would "close the [classroom] door" to discuss important issues or upsetting situations with her students. In this way, students were free to express their emotions with each other and to share their personal experiences. She said, "And they're like, oh, is it a 'family talk'? Because I say to them, this is my family here. This is your family. This is our house." By using family terminology as a routine with her students, she communicated to them her deep devotion to them and wanted each to feel safe and loved.

Some classroom routines had the purpose of improving academic achievement rather than relationships. For example, one middle school social studies teacher created a classroom routine to ensure that her most struggling learners were getting her utmost attention. Each year she used MCAS data to identify the dozen or so students who most struggled with determining the main idea of a passage. When her students read passages and answered questions about them in class, she and her paraprofessionals had an intricate, predetermined plan to work individually with each of those students and then pull them seamlessly into a 15-minute extra-help group session specially created for them. She had also developed her own system for recording the

grades for these students in a separate notebook and tracking their progress. This teacher fit her routine into a typical hour-long class block, but she had clearly determined how to use the minutes to optimize support for her struggling readers.

Specific lessons and curricular units. Some teachers had created particular lessons and units of study outside the prescribed curriculum map designed to elevate their students' engagement and achievement. For example, one 7th grade social studies teacher expanded the Supreme Court unit to include cases specifically connected to her students' backgrounds. She described delving very deeply into Thurgood Marshall, and cases such as *Brown vs. Board of Education,* in order to celebrate people of color who live exceptional lives and teach issues of inequity very pertinent to her students. She said,

> You try to teach them in a way that they understand that there are people who are of their race that were important too. Because those are the ones that they're going to be, 'Oh, this is really related to me.' I do want to teach more about those more cultural things that maybe aren't a part of the curriculum that would relate to them very well.

Similarly, one middle school ELA teacher described her intentional use of literature that represents diverse backgrounds so her students feel more connected to the texts. Again, this teacher took it upon herself to select this literature, with the consultation and support of the school's literacy specialist. Even the Chief Academic Officer was cognizant and supportive of this movement to use more diverse texts; she said, "And so all of our texts in the libraries, we want to be reflective of our children, give our children an opportunity to see something else, and then also step into something else." In both cases, the teachers explained that they did not require the explicit permission of their principal, team leader, or curriculum coordinator in order to enhance their curriculum this way.

Building in choice for students during the learning process was another theme within curricular units that teachers created. One teacher allowed students to choose the format of their presentation on Greek architecture in order to honor different learning styles. Another teacher had her students select their issue for a nonfiction "activism" unit:

So the first few years, I really followed the [curriculum] module..but now, you know, if one of the kids was like, 'Well, can I do something on racism and Black Lives Matter?' Sure. Let's do it. I feel like they buy in a little bit more if it's their decision.

Along the same lines of creating flexibility for all learners, one district administrator who regularly visits classrooms observed a teacher of students with autism providing different activities for her learners so that everyone could stay engaged:

Students had multiple means of accessing the learning. Multiple modalities were being tapped upon, and students had multiple ways of actually demonstrating their proficiency with that, and when a student finished early, the next level of stretch learning was prepared for them versus the, "Oh well, go grab a book" or this nebulous "Here's the next worksheet" type thing. So [it was] intentional planning for student learning.

In these examples, teachers took the initiative to adjust their practice in order to strengthen the learning experience for their students.

Family and community engagement. Some teachers also made a strenuous effort to heighten their students' learning by building closer relationships with families and the community. For example, one middle school ELA teacher wanted to incorporate a Poetry Slam into her poetry unit in order to engage with families and publicly celebrate her students' work. She said, "So I said to [the principal], I want to do this Poetry Slam during the day, and I want parents to come. And so [the principal] sort of just said, he said, go with it, go with it!" The

teacher subsequently drew up a plan involving a complex schedule so parents could see their own children read their poems; she also arranged to serve lemonade and cookies. During the Poetry Slam, she said,

> [Parents] showed up in force. And [the principal] kept coming up, checking in… Parents we had never seen before came in proud as peacocks, and the poems, some of them were poems about how you raised me alone. And mothers were crying, it was like an evangelical meeting.

This teacher-initiated idea had the effect of bringing previously absent parents into the building to appreciate their children's work, which had a strong effect on the students' level of effort and self-efficacy.

Related to building family connections, this same teacher decided to provide her personal contact information to all of her students' parents on the course syllabus. "So I say to the kids, my number is on there. Tell your parents, my first name is there. They can call me with any kind of question or text me." Despite widely sharing her personal information, she said the only calls she has received from parents and students were information seeking and appropriate, suggesting that they respected her efforts to support her students' learning: "I have never gotten a bad call from a kid. I've gotten pictures of sunsets." Through this outreach to parents, the teacher was able to leverage more support for her students' success.

A final example of community engagement stemmed from the work of an ELA teacher after her community service student group proposed a food drive for the downtown shelters. However, the teacher soon realized that many of her own students were in need of food. Subsequently, she and some colleagues decided to create a food pantry at the school: "So we talked about it, we thought, you know what, why don't we just do something here? Let's talk to

the principal and see if we have space, and she was like, all about it." An old storage closet soon became the food pantry, and the school now holds bi-monthly food drives to replenish the pantry and has developed a system whereby identified children bring home food in their backpacks. An idea that sprang from several teachers turned into a community-wide effort to support families in need.

District Leadership Practices that Foster Teacher-Led Equity Efforts

In this section, I will discuss the leadership practices at the district level that support teacher leadership when it comes to supporting all learners. In accordance with my framework of teacher leadership, I organized these factors according to professional development, school and district culture, and the role of the principal.

Professional development. Providing teachers with opportunities for professional growth generates capacity for leadership. In addition to scheduling time at the building level for ongoing professional development, the district also had a formal structure designed to support the growth of its teachers. Called the "Teacher Academy," this program enabled teachers to complete their licensure requirements, access professional development, and earn graduate credits through an arrangement with a local university. Notably, courses offered through the "Teacher Academy" were coordinated and taught by the district's own teachers. This program was run by a former classroom teacher and a team of professionals. The content of the coursework was focused on preparing teachers for the challenges of working with diverse learners. By using the resources of their own staff to teach these courses, and by making such learning so accessible to teachers, this structure both empowered and supported teachers in their efforts to meet all learners' needs.

While the Teacher Academy provided formal opportunities for teachers outside of the school day, the district's allotment of time, meaningful content, and resources during teachers' contractual time was also critical for professional growth and fostering leadership potential. At the building level, professional development was offered in alignment with district goals but principals had some discretion in how to frame this time. For example, all principals were engaged in their own professional development sessions at the district level about using the iReady platform to analyze student performance data. This was part of the district leadership's urgency around addressing inequitable student outcomes. How teachers were then taught to use iReady at the building level -- when this training occurred, and with what focus -- depended on the principal's set of priorities. Being able to use iReady to analyze student data gave some teachers deeper information about their students' skills, which led some teachers to create new routines and curricula to support struggling learners. However, some teachers felt that the iReady training was "unnecessary" and felt that "it's not about how to connect with kids." With uneven professional development sessions, not all teachers felt empowered or prepared to change their practice and lead new efforts.

Providing teachers with professional development relevant to enriching their practice was also inconsistent. For example, one social studies teacher felt that her professional learning was quite limited in scope and not as connected to her practice as she would like. Once a year, all social studies teachers were learning about a civics program that had been adopted district-wide, and while it was strong, "it's the only professional development that I get." She felt that most structured learning opportunities were more geared towards MCAS subjects when she would like to "learn more about ways that I can engage students in curriculum." She attributed this lack of

relevant professional development to the lack of a district-wide curriculum leader focused solely on social studies.

District culture. The culture of a school and district can be integral to fostering teacher leadership, where building-level educators are then empowered to initiate efforts aligned with the district's mission. As discussed earlier, a culture that reflects shared goals around student learning, strong communication, and support and trust can nurture teacher leadership. I will address each of these elements separately in this section.

Shared understanding of a common mission. Despite the relative newness of the core district leadership team, the district's focus on educational equity was clearly felt and understood by teachers, administrators, and other district staff. Interview participants voiced that serving all students equitably -- regardless of their socioeconomic status, racial or ethnic identity, or home language -- was a top priority. For example, one key district leader new to his position in July said without hesitation,

> And so by calling out [inequity] and focusing there, that's something that the superintendent has been able to energize the community around. That's actually led to folks being able to stay grounded in the actual work. And that's supporting all of our students to make sure that they're getting the very best every day.

Other district personnel, from top leadership positions to support roles, spoke with similar language and clarity about the priority of equity. Notably, a district staff member in a core clerical role said, "We are all here for the same thing. We're here for the children, regardless of the issues, regardless of the needs."

All interviewed teachers were similarly coherent on their understanding of the district's mission around equity. Not only did they mention the presence and visibility of the district

leadership, but they also articulated an understanding of the district's priorities using statements such as:

- I think that they care about the kids and I think they want them to feel like there's somebody that wants them to succeed here and they want [our district] to push these kids to be better than what they are.

- [Equity] is sort of a message I've heard a lot of, you know, like, just having things more equitable in the district and having teachers in the district that understand the culture and the population.

- You know, I grew up in a family that wasn't educated to know that everybody is created equal, and it comes with education that we do realize this. And I feel as though [the new superintendent] is the first one to bring this in. It's a real message around giving. It's our responsibility to provide [for] every student the opportunity that they need and deserve.

This value of educational equity was not felt by district staff alone. Although students were not interviewed, two teachers indicated during their interviews that they saw evidence among their students that they were aware of the common mission as well. Describing a Thanksgiving lunch that the district provided for students, one teacher said the students "saw that somebody out there is looking out for them...and they want them to feel like there's somebody that wants them to succeed here and to be better than what they are." Another teacher shared that the superintendent had visited her classroom three times, engaging with her students and listening to their concerns and questions. From these visits, she said that students have begun to understand the role of district leadership and that they care about their success, regardless of their challenges as "children of poverty."

Clear message about priorities. Not only was a shared mission apparent in interviews, but staff also described consistent messaging by the district leadership team regarding the priority of equity. One staff member at the district level, describing her enthusiasm about the new leadership team, pointed to the clarity of the Superintendent's message as a reason for her positivity: "He's very articulate, and he's clear on his goals. So nothing is more helpful than knowing where you're going, right? So you're not wasting your time trying to figure it out."

The creation of a district-level position focused entirely on equity efforts, the Chief Equity and Engagement Officer, sent a clear message that equity is a priority in the district and provided structural leadership to these efforts. A persistent message around equity was a key element of School Committee presentations throughout the months of October and November, during which the newly written *Equity and Engagement Policy* was presented by the Chief Equity and Engagement Officer and discussed on numerous occasions by the Committee. In notes from an October School Committee meeting, her comments were summarized as follows:

> She stated that as the district begins implementation of the strategic planning process, an important first step is developing a formal policy and a district statement that clarifies and solidifies the district's commitment toward eliminating these persistent disparities in these achievement and opportunity gaps which affirms that all of our goals, initiatives and staff contributions will be grounded in this mission and moral imperative toward equity.

Here the district demonstrated a commitment to codifying its priority of equity through a transparent policy development process. One district staff member with a student support role described the subsequent development of a Strategic Plan as an example of how the superintendent was striving for clear messaging on his priorities:

...We're working on it now, developing an updated Strategic Plan so that everybody's on

the same page in terms of what that equity work looks like. The definition [of equity] in

and of itself means different things to different people. So right now we're starting to

reach out to staff, parents, the community to talk about, 'What does equity mean to you?'

so that we can then align that and come up with one concise definition.

By deliberately arriving at a shared definition of equity, the district leadership nurtured a culture where all staff and community members spoke the same language about their priorities and therefore moved together in pursuit of those goals. This shared understanding of what students need, and the learning experiences that support their growth, can encourage classroom teachers to create more of these opportunities for students.

Support and trust. The structures in place in the district were inconsistent in the way they supported the leadership and professional growth of teachers. The principals and teachers interviewed described different organizational structures that connected classroom teachers to district initiatives. One building had an Instructional Leadership Team comprised of a math coach, literacy coach, the Assistant Principal and Principal, and the English language learner coach, while the other buildings did not. All buildings reported a grade-level team structure, but the curriculum teams met inconsistently with specialists and coaches. One teacher swiveled between two teams due to understaffing as the only social studies teacher for 160 students, resulting in very little support from either team. The degree of support provided by the specialists was also uneven, ranging from extremely helpful to not at all. One principal clearly relied on his literacy specialist to help align his building's efforts with the district initiatives:

And I ask my literacy specialist, is this aligned with what's going on in the district

because we don't want to go rogue. In math, you know, we had a difficult decision to

make as a school because about four or five years ago, the district went to Eureka Math.
And we really valued what we built. And it got great results. But at the same time, we
don't want to not be aligned with the district.

This building leader clearly valued coherence with the district goals and turned to his specialists
to help inform his teachers' work. At another building, the specialist was described as barely
invested and unclear in her communication as she swiveled between the building and district.

At the district level, however, leaders were clear in describing their individual roles in
supporting teachers and the students they served. For example, when asked how his own role ties
to the district's mission, the superintendent responded by saying "support" multiple times:

The work of our central leadership team and my work should be directly connected to
what happens in the classroom and supporting teachers and principals to better support
kids in the classroom, supporting them with the tools they need to succeed and supporting
them with the learning opportunities that they need to grow as educators and working
alongside of them in schools.

Related to support, the superintendent described a discussion he had with the teacher's union to
explore what the teachers needed in order to better serve the diverse learners in their classrooms.
He explicitly wanted to know what his team could be doing to support the teachers in their work
and admired the openness of the desire among teachers to strengthen their reach:

Our teachers feel supported. At the same time, I think our teachers will be the first to
share with you that they're not reaching every kid. Teachers are looking for help, looking
for support, and also willing to say, here are the things that I can handle within the
classroom. And here are the things that we've got to figure out how we do because it's
above and beyond my skill set as a teacher.

The offer of support to teachers, and their request for support, points to a district that views the work of teachers with students as the most vital element to student success. Similarly, there was a clear line between the district office and the experience of students for the Chief Schools Officer, who responded to the question about his own role this way:

> I think the criticality of my role and my position is to support school leaders and making sure that they are at their very best so they in turn impact or influence their teachers to be their very best. So they then influence their students to be their very best.

The district leadership consistently viewed their role as one of support to teachers.

The role of the principal. Principals clearly play a vital role in determining the degree to which leadership is distributed throughout their buildings. A principal can convey their support of teacher leadership through overt communication, structures and systems, and professional learning opportunities. In interviews when describing their efforts to enhance their students' learning, some teachers described the vocal support of their building leaders. In the examples of the Poetry Slam and the food pantry, the principals not only voiced their enthusiastic support but also contributed to the efforts (helping parents sign in at the main office for the Poetry Slam; finding a space for the food pantry). With curricular work, in cases where teachers consulted with a specialist, team leader, or principal, they were given the green light to pursue their idea even when it strayed from the curriculum map. In some cases, it was unclear whether the teacher had asked permission from a building leader before pursuing an idea (e.g. giving out personal contact information; enhancing the Morning Meeting format), but there were no instances shared during the interviews when a teacher described their principal discouraging or refusing to support an idea. This points to a culture where teachers were trusted by their building leaders to

pursue ideas that supported their students' learning without bureaucracy or an approval process in their way.

At the same time, one veteran principal offered a different view of his own leadership: while he supported teacher leadership, he believed very strongly in his own ideas and liked to see them through. His approach was to "seed" new ideas and let the teachers take them from there:

> If I left this school, these folks all think this is their idea. But it's the way you want it to be, right? I think I probably still have little patience for stupid decisions...and so to some degree, I think my own personal leadership style probably gets in the way of being more open to more teacher leadership. Even as I say this, I've created these forums, and I could give you stories and examples of how teachers have taken on more leadership roles in school. I think my influence is there in part because I'm reluctant to back out of it.

As the building leader, he understandably wanted to infuse the school with his "influence"; at the same time, this principal, as with others, invited teachers to participate in formal leadership teams as a way of incorporating teacher voice into school-wide decisions. The high value of teacher voice was reflected in the importance of the tasks of these teams, such as establishing the direction of professional development, leading the turnaround effort, and changing school culture.

Principals can also validate teacher leadership through demonstrating appreciation and compensation for the teachers' work. One principal paid a small group of teachers during the summer to review student achievement data in order to determine priority instructional practices for the year. At this same school, a teacher serving as team leader was not granted a stipend. It is unclear whether it was within the principal's control to offer a stipend for this leadership position, although it was the teacher's impression that it was.

Discussion

Given that teacher leadership has been increasingly viewed as critical to improving the educational experience of students K-12 (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), this study sought to identify how the Monarch Public Schools district leaders set the conditions for teachers taking the lead in equity work. My findings indicated that teachers who participated in the study had the confidence, knowledge, and latitude to pursue ideas designed to strengthen their students' academic growth and connection to school. Three factors within the district fostered teacher leadership: (1) the district established a clear priority of equity; (2) the district had a number of formal leadership roles for teachers; and (3) the district provided the building principals a balance of autonomy and support, which in turn fostered a culture at the building level where teachers could take the lead on various initiatives with their principals' support. This section will explore the implications of each of these three themes taking into account the current research.

Clear Priority of Equity

Consistent with research on districts that maintain an equity focus (Rorrer, et al., 2008), district leaders attempted to draw attention to equity as the core driver of its instructional and policy decisions. They did this through efforts such as consistent written and verbal messaging with stakeholders, the creation of a new district leadership position devoted to equity, and high visibility within school buildings. Transparency about past inequities, as well as ongoing status updates on student progress, are two additional qualities of districts that maintain an equity focus (Rorrer, et al., 2008). Therefore, it will be important for the district to build on its current communication methods so the message about equity is not simply rhetorical or aspirational, but is also illustrated by current data that is regularly shared with the community.

Research also suggests that a school culture where teachers believe they have the ability and responsibility to help all students learn can foster equitable outcomes (Hawley & Nieto, 2018; Williams, 2018). Although relatively new, at the time of this research the district leadership team had already shared its priority of equity and cultural responsiveness so that teachers participating in the study were aware of, if not inspired by, the messaging. It is unclear whether teachers implemented their specific ideas because of this messaging, but the district would do well to continue communicating its priority of equity to affirm and encourage such work. Additionally, it will be important for the district to celebrate successful equity efforts by teachers as a way to maintain the priority focus. Given that a very small number of teachers were interviewed for this study, it will also be important for the district to continue learning about areas of needed support among its entire staff so that teachers can develop the skills and knowledge to help all students succeed. Districts build capacity for equity work when all educators honor and empower the abilities and cultures of its children (Williams, 2018). To this end, keeping equity as a focus will rely on the daily work of the district's educators and the skills they are able to bring to their efforts.

Formal Leadership Roles

My research indicated a variety of leadership roles at the school buildings, including committee membership, instructional coaches, specialists, and grade or team leaders. Being part of a team or committee, or having a formal role of coach or specialist, is a way for teachers to exert leadership; also, these formal opportunities can strengthen a culture of shared decision-making and teacher voice (Barth, 2001). Making the roles available to teachers is a beginning. Whether the roles engender leadership behaviors and influence student learning relies on the influence of the role (Does the role entail real decision-making and voice?) and the expertise of

the individuals in the role (Do the teacher leaders receive training?). Given the importance of these roles -- both in terms of supporting instruction and student achievement, and in terms of fostering a culture of teacher leadership -- it will be important for district leaders to consider the effectiveness and training of the individuals in these roles, and to make consistent the distribution and qualifications of people in these roles at each building.

Preparation for teachers who undertake such formal roles is critical. A culture of teacher leadership is fostered by professional development that expands skill sets, encourages growth, and provides opportunities to develop leadership skills (Danielson, 2007). Aligning with the research, the district leadership would do well to provide training for teachers interested in taking on more leadership responsibilities. Given that collaboration is also a critical component to teacher leadership (VonDohlen & Karvonen, 2018), it will benefit teachers if the district created more time, consistent across all buildings, for professional development that gives colleagues an opportunity to learn from each other about content and practice.

Autonomy and Support for Principals

Given the importance of principals in fostering a culture of teacher leadership (Patterson & Patterson, 2004; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), it will be important for the district leaders to continue supporting their principals as they encourage shared decision-making and teacher agency in their buildings. Principals who were interviewed in this study described a natural inclination to support teachers through participation on teams and committees. Indeed, according to Lambert (1998), establishing "inclusive governance structures" (p. 19) is a key step to building leadership capacity within a school. To this end, the district would do well to aid principals in expanding opportunities for teachers to participate on internal Leadership Teams that make meaningful decisions on school wide issues.

The importance of trust between teachers and their principal when it comes to sustaining a culture that embraces professional learning and teacher leadership has been well-documented (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Patterson & Patterson, 2004; Barth, 2001). In this study, interviewed teachers described the trust of their principals as they implemented new curricular ideas. Of note, support and trust from the teachers' perspectives sometimes took the form of the principal simply agreeing to the idea or change; sometimes support was much more direct, with the principal providing resources, space, time, or administrative help to bring an idea to fruition. Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) found that principals were "the critical link in stimulating the conversations that led to the classroom practices that are associated with improved student learning" (p. 54). Hence, it will be important for the district to provide professional development for principals so they are not just passive supporters, but active promoters of teacher leadership. Principals must have the skill and vision to deliberately "plant the seeds" for teacher leadership and nurture its growth. Ensuring that teacher agency is not just the absence of administrative resistance, but is encouraged and actualized through structures and processes in place at the building, is an important consideration for the district.

Conclusion

This study explored how district leaders set the conditions for teacher leadership, specifically in enacting efforts to support the learning of all students more equitably. This study concluded that clear messaging about equity as a priority, formal teacher leadership positions, and supportive principals set the stage for teachers to pursue ideas designed to improve student achievement. Schools need teacher leaders to ensure that all students are learning (Barth, 2001). Although several steps removed from the locus of the classroom, district leaders play a critical role in fostering a culture in which teachers are trusted, supported, and prepared to reach every

learner. This study's findings may help district leaders who seek to foster a culture of teacher

leadership in their efforts to achieve educational equity.

CHAPTER FOUR[4]

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 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 5 shows the focus of each individual study and a summary of five perspectives of equity that each member of the research team examined.

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[4] This chapter 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.

Figure 5

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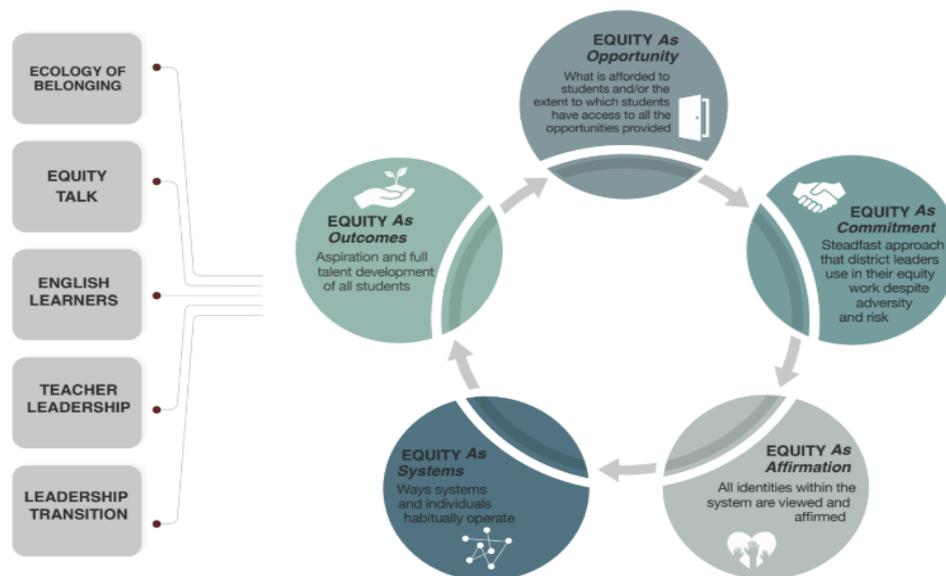
Below, we discuss the importance of each perspective and address the challenges for district leaders. In addition, we offer recommendations to overcome these challenges.

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 belonging, 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

outcome 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 a 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

Darling-Hammond (2007) stated, "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 6); 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 6

Equity framework
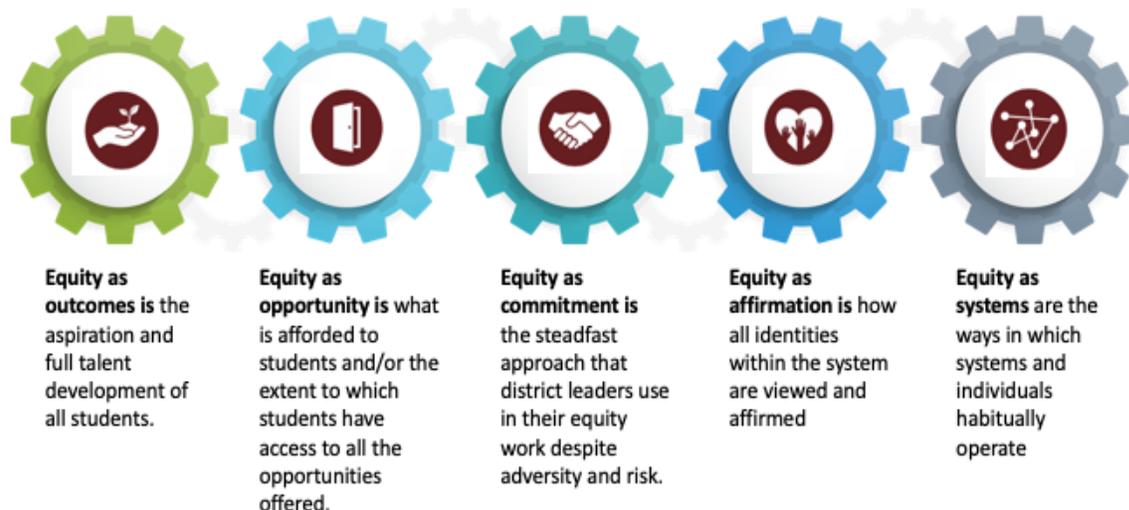
District leaders should understand that not all gears will require the same force, turn in the same direction, nor turn at the same speed. We strongly suggest that districts assess what their strengths and improvement areas are for each component. From there, districts can decide which components need 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: Fostering 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 Sandra Drummey's Individual Study

District Leadership Practices that Foster Equity: How Educational Leaders Enact and Support

Culturally Responsive Behaviors for English Learners

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.

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?

Appendix F
Teacher 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. Please describe your role within the district.
    a. *How long have you been working in this district?*

2. As you think about your job, what gets you up in the morning?

3. When you think about the students in your classroom, what are some of their unique needs and strengths that stand out for you?

4. How do you learn about what your students need to be successful?
    a. *What kind of PD have you received?*
    b. *Who works with you to support your students?*

5. What is something that excites you that you are doing to help individual students be successful?
    a. *How did this come about?*
    b. *Is your building principal aware of these efforts? What about the district leadership?*

6. Do you feel like you can take the lead on this kind of work?

7. What support do you get from the principal or district office in this kind of work?

8. Are you aware that equity is a priority of the district?
    a. *If so, how?*