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CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:  
THE SUPERINTENDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE TENETS OF CRITICAL  
CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN ITS DEVELOPMENT

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by

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# Critical Consciousness and Educational Leadership: The Superintendents' Understanding of the Tenets of Critical Consciousness and the Role of Social Networks in its Development

by

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## **Abstract**

Disrupting systemic racism and moving towards true diversity, equity, and inclusion mandates committed leadership. As a school district's foremost educational leader, the superintendent has an influential role in ensuring equity. A superintendent may effectively address the systemic inequities present in public education through critically conscious behaviors. To engage in this work effectively, a superintendent needs support. Research has demonstrated that formal or informal networks can positively influence a superintendent. However, there is a gap in the literature explaining how critical consciousness reveals itself in a superintendent's work and less research about how network participation can advance a superintendent's critically conscious practices. (Daly Finnigan, 2012; deLima, 2010; Froehlich et al., 2020; Liou & Daly, 2014; Moolenaar et al., 2010). In response, this study explored how superintendents understood the tenets of critical consciousness in practice. Additionally, this study examined how social networks influenced a superintendent's practice and contributed to critically conscious practices. Therefore, the research questions that guided this study are how, if at all, does a superintendent understand the tenets of critical

consciousness? And secondly, what role, if any, does a superintendent's participation in formal or informal networks have on developing critical consciousness and leadership? For the purpose of this study, the tenets of critical consciousness formed the conceptual framework and included critical reflection, critical self-efficacy, and critical action. In addition to this, the literature review of informal and formal networks provided the lens to examine what influence, if any, participation had on superintendents' critical consciousness development. This investigation employed a qualitative case study of six superintendents identified as equity-based leaders and utilized a semi-structured interview process and document review. Findings revealed that superintendents did not use the formal language of critical consciousness. Despite this, evidence showed that the superintendents exhibited the tenets associated with critical consciousness. Additionally, results suggested that both formal and informal networks played a significant role in supporting superintendents, especially during times of challenge.

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

### Introduction

Social justice demands that those with power challenge the stark realities of systemic racism and disparities in society. If the United States is ever truly to uphold its ideal of “justice for all,” then it must confront the inequities it purports to oppose. However, confrontation will require leaders’ development of critical analysis (awareness and reflection), critical agency (a belief in one's ability to be a change agent), and the willingness to act. Critical consciousness, the seminal work of Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, provides a lens for this research team. Seider and Graves (2017) describe critical consciousness as a "person's ability to recognize and analyze oppressive forces shaping society and to take action against these forces" (p. 2). Accordingly, we believe that examining this philosophy within one Massachusetts school district may contribute to the knowledge base toward advancing the necessary work to disrupt oppressive forces existing in public education and society-at-large.

Although systemic racism has been interwoven into the U.S. since its founding, the combined impact of COVID 19 and the nation's racial reckoning is being referred to by some as a dual pandemic (Yip, 2020). For this group study, we defined systemic racism as “mutually reinforcing systems and policies that limit power and access to opportunities to generate and perpetuate inequity” (Yip, 2020). Moreover, there are those who believe the dual pandemic has thrust the nation into a moment of social awareness, precipitating an interrogation of the existing systems and practices (Yip, 2020). Among other events in our history, COVID-19 has illuminated and further exacerbated systemic racial inequities in the U.S. educational system. For

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<sup>1</sup> The authors listed below collaboratively wrote this chapter which reflects the team approach of this project. Authors include: Tamatha L. Bibbo, Ceronne B. Daly, Pauline Lugira White, June Saba-Maguire, and Geoffrey Walker

example, millions of students in urban schools have little to no access to technology needed to access educational opportunities during school closures; whereas, in other more affluent districts, students have access to curriculum, teachers, and live instruction, resulting in far more time on learning than those learning from home (Yip, 2020).

Furthermore, studies have revealed that students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and their families are more likely to have less access to resources and receive little to no information from the school than their White counterparts (Yip, 2020). Given the current socio-political climate and these highlighted inequities, school districts and leaders must interrogate all aspects of equity work to assess the quality of experiences for all students, recognizing that racist systems still exist. These systems need to be acknowledged and dismantled so that all students, particularly our historically marginalized populations, experience learning without barriers. As a research team, we were curious to examine the efforts of district and school leaders to foster and advance the development of critical consciousness in order to mitigate and disrupt the cycle of inequity. An equitable democracy depends on having critically conscious citizens (Seider and Graves, 2020). This is currently a need that persists in schools, specifically for students of Color in (urban) public education. This work is essential for school leaders to undertake because, as the theory of critical consciousness details, inequity is sustained when the most affected people are unable to decode their social conditions (El-Amin et al., 2017). Furthermore, when educators and students identify oppressive systems and believe that they can make a change, they are better prepared to act to disrupt those systems.

This research team recognized that all levels of a school system are integral to promoting practices toward disrupting inequity and advancing equitable practices. Additionally, we asserted that leadership profoundly influences whether a district takes the meaningful and necessary steps

to enact effective practices addressing these inequities. We believe that developing an understanding of critical consciousness strengthens an educational leader's capacity and influence to enact equity-aligned practices and policies. Although there is limited empirical research on the intersection between critical consciousness and educational leadership, this group study added to the literature by examining the efforts of district and school leaders to foster and advance the development of critical consciousness. As such, our research question asked: How do educational leaders foster and cultivate the development of critical consciousness in schools? This qualitative case study researched the practices of district leaders, school leaders, and educators and sought evidence of the existence of the elements of critical consciousness, which included critical analysis (awareness and reflection), critical agency, and critical action. Additionally, one study examined how students experience and respond to leaders' practices. These elements informed the research team's analytical process.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The concept of critical consciousness derives from the work of Paulo Freire, who believed that the purpose of education was to liberate students from oppression. Freire (2005) theorized that the goal of education is to empower oppressed peoples to understand and analyze the oppressive forces and injustices that impact their lives and then act to work against those forces. Freire believed the pedagogical approach to support critical consciousness is a model in which teachers and students co-investigate through a problem-posing method. This process leads to learners who can be critical of their oppressive conditions and be empowered to resist such forces. (Beckett, 2018).

Freire proposed a cycle of critical consciousness that involves gaining knowledge about systems and structures that create and sustain inequity (via critical analysis); developing a sense



of power or capability (critical agency); and ultimately committing to taking action against oppressive conditions (critical action) (El-Amin et al., 2017). As Freire suggested, we believe educators have the power and opportunity to impact the development of critical consciousness within a school system. Consequently, school leaders and educators, as change agents, must create the conditions where analysis and interactive discussions further their capacity to: (1) build their awareness; (2) develop a belief in one's political efficacy; and (3) determine and engage in authentic civic action (Abdullah, 2020). Therefore, this proposed group study examined leaders' efforts to advance critical consciousness in a school district focused on equity work.

While Freire (2000) is credited with *conscientização* or critical consciousness theory, he did not present a conceptual model for this theory (Jemal, 2017). Since Freire's work, researchers have studied critical consciousness as an overarching framework with interconnected components. Radd & Kramer (2016) describe critical consciousness as "an ongoing and growing awareness and knowledge of power, privilege, and oppression combined with a habit of openness and learning to disrupt injustice and create more just action, processes, structures, and circumstances" (p. 584). Watts et al. (2011) conceptualized critical consciousness as consisting of three distinct yet overlapping components: (a) critical reflection, (b) political efficacy, and (c) critical action. Similarly, Seider & Graves (2020) defined their components of critical consciousness as social analysis (awareness/ reflection), political agency (acting on/ belief one can alter the system), and social action (action). Though differing terms, these definitions are grounded in Freire's work, for "Freire viewed the relation between reflection and action as reciprocal. Critical reflection is generally considered a precursor to critical action—people do not act to change their social conditions without some consciousness or awareness that their social conditions are unjust" (Watts et al., 2011, p. 47). Furthermore, Jemal (2017) asserted that "If

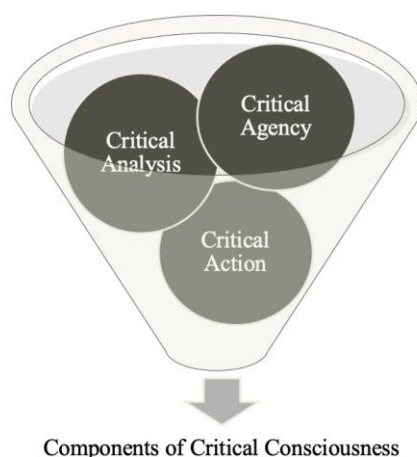
implemented within urban education... Critical Consciousness theory could help achieve a system of education that is just, equitable and liberating" (p. 602).

The critical consciousness framework is relevant to the United States as racial and economic inequities exist that impact the lives of students and their families. Scholars have augmented Freire's work towards developing a framework that conceptualizes critical consciousness as three overlapping elements in a Venn diagram. For this study, the research group operationalized critical consciousness through the Seider & Graves (2000) model: critical analysis, critical agency, and critical action. See Figure 1 below for a diagram of Seider & Graves' (2000) conceptualization of three distinct components that together create critical consciousness. These are not linear strands; thus, the funnel represents the continual overlap and need for each tenet in order for the outcome to be critical consciousness.

### Concept Map of Conceptual Frameworks

**Figure 1**

*Critical Consciousness Components*



(Seider & Graves, 2020)

## **Literature Review**

This research team's literature review started by exploring the development and fostering of critical analysis among district and school leaders. Next, the team examined the role of critical agency on school leaders and students. We finished with an analysis of the literature about critical action among school leaders, including youth development. We furthered the literature review by reviewing critical consciousness as being the nexus of equitable leadership and then correlated it with race.

### **Critical Analysis of School and District Leadership**

Perhaps the tenet of critical analysis (awareness and reflection) serves as the most vital factor to becoming a truly critically conscious society. As Cooper (2009) states, "as demographic change alters the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic makeup of school populations throughout the United States, there is a dire need to reframe education accountability discourse and policies" (p. 694). Therefore, students need leaders who are aware of personal and collective ideologies and biases in schools. The next section examines leadership in school settings. We provide an example of how the critical analysis of school leaders impacts equity and social justice. Following this section, we discuss district-level leadership, specifically how the superintendent's critical analysis influences district-level commitments to equitable practice.

### ***Superintendent and District Leadership***

Research has consistently provided evidence that an organization's ability to change requires the organization and its leaders to be adaptive (Honig & Honsa, 2020). Accordingly, self-reflective leaders need to be reflexive and creative thinkers and direct their actions toward eliminating inequities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). However, few studies demonstrate how superintendents or district leaders engage in opportunities that advance awareness of

oppressive structures and practices (Drago-Severson, 2012). Brown (2004) found this gap exists despite our knowledge that "increasing adult learner awareness of how we are all agents of change as educators is a vital part of development. Helping adults see how this new awareness and acknowledgment can be focused and acted on in a meaningful way in real schools and real communities is...critically important" (p. 97).

In her study, *Transformative Leadership: Working for Equity in Diverse Contexts*, Carolyn Shields (2011) assessed two principals and their abilities to affect educational and more significant social change. She found that awareness of justice and democracy is a crucial component of equitable leadership development. She posits the term "transformative leadership," which "recognizes the need to begin with critical reflection and analysis and to move through enlightened understanding to action—action to redress wrongs and to ensure that all members of the organization are provided with as level a playing field as possible—not only with respect to access but also with regard to academic, social, and civic outcomes" (p. 572). Shields claims that the first tenet of this theory to transform schools is to acknowledge power and privilege to confront inequity systems. Since superintendents and district leaders significantly influence student outcomes, there is a moral imperative to increase their consciousness. In turn, research demonstrates that this awareness will enable district leaders to engage in the personal critical reflection necessary to challenge and disrupt inequities and to support this awareness growth in others (Watts et al., 2011.)

### ***School Principals***

Consistently espoused throughout our study is that social inequities permeate public schools. Scholars recognize that school leaders are often unprepared for the difficulty of social justice leadership (Cooper, 2009). Furthermore, the principal as the primary school leader has a

significant impact on perpetuating inequity and, conversely, promoting equity reform. Cooper's (2009) research demonstrates that even equity-oriented school leaders are unaware of their blind spots. In her qualitative study of three elementary school principals in North Carolina, two of whom were White and one African American, she found contradictions between espoused commitments to equity and actual practice (Cooper, 2009). The schools included rapidly shifting demographics that represented increasing diversity. The principals felt they maintained equitable and inclusive environments by recognizing cultural differences (i.e., celebrations that acknowledge cultural groups), but they often "fell short of exemplifying cultural work" (Cooper, 2009, p. 718). While the study affirmed these principals were committed to serving their diverse student population, the findings indicate that in some instances, they were unaware "that their schools were becoming tense and separatist" (Cooper, 2009, p. 718).

### **Critical Reflection of School and District Leadership**

In their findings, Watts et al. (2011) refer to critical reflection as the "social analysis and moral rejection of societal inequities" (p. 46). Diemer et al. (2016) defined this reflection as the ability to perceive inequalities and recognize dominant culture and privilege. The researchers continued by describing critical reflection as a process of analyzing historical dilemmas and practices that continue to persist in school districts (Diemer et al., 2016). Therefore, research argues that the development of critical consciousness through the tenet of critical reflection is a definitive practice for district leaders.

Moreover, research supports that the practice of critical reflection amongst school and district leadership contributes to the eradication of inequitable practices. Jemal's (2017) definition of critical consciousness includes an examination of everyday realities in order "to analyze the relationships between personal contexts and the wider social forces of structural oppression that restrict access to opportunity and resources and thus sustain inequity and

perpetuate injustice that limits well-being and human agency" (p. 608). He further delineated critical reflection as:

1. Thinking critically about accepted beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and assumptions;
2. Detecting the hidden interests underlying personal and social assumptions and beliefs;
3. Identifying how history impacts the present details of everyday life and how ways of thinking and feeling serve to maintain and perpetuate the existing system of inequality (p. 608).

Researchers identified that critical reflection has two separate components that must occur concurrently: perceiving inequalities and embracing egalitarian beliefs (defined as thinking about ideological social status). These researchers assert that inequality cannot be separated from the recognition of privilege and the systems and structures that uphold this oppression. Overall, becoming aware of one's privilege and power is necessary to critically reflect and determine action steps to disrupt inequities (Diemer, 2016; Jemal, 2017). In a longitudinal, mixed-methods study of five predominately Black and Latinx public charter schools, with different pedagogical approaches, Seider et al. (2020) found an increase in critical reflection in BIPOC students during their high school years “fueled by a desire to prove wrong the stereotypes embedded in racist structures and institutions” (p. 2). The study, however, did not examine the development of critical reflection among adults in the same school settings, so future research may prove valuable.

### ***Critical Reflection as a Leadership Strategy***

Although limited literature exists about the necessity of critical reflection as a fundamental aspect of leadership, studies suggest that in order to change social conditions, individuals must act upon oppressive environments and systems. Critical consciousness is often seen as cyclical and involves the three tenets of critical analysis (which includes awareness and reflection),

critical efficacy and critical action. Although most literature suggests that critical reflection often drives action toward necessary change, this can be an iterative process. Jemal's (2017) study of critical consciousness found that critical reflection requires a school leader to "go beyond a cognitive state to include capacity, ability, skill, or realization of one's power to conduct a critical analysis of structural oppression and potential actions to challenge inequities within socio-political environments (p. 607). Both Diemer (2016) and Jemal (2017) recognize critical reflection as a capacity-building exercise as one becomes aware of the social, political, and economic systems that exist to hold historically marginalized groups down. Diemer et al. (2017) report that "critical consciousness scholarship posits that critical action presupposes some degree of critical reflection—or that people do not blindly participate to change societal inequalities without first reflecting on what those inequities are" (p. 476). Finally, Jemal found (2017) that the critical awareness and critical reflection of educators "most likely would not result in Freire's goal of liberation from an oppressive reality... because analysis without action does not produce tangible change" (p. 606); thus, the need for critical action.

### **Critical Agency of Educational Leadership**

Critical agency is the concept that describes the extent to which one believes in their ability to create or effect social or political change. It is the extent to which people feel that their actions will lead to results or consequences, as they strive against oppressive forces. Scholars have also used political agency as another term to describe the same concept (Seider & Graves, 2020). Critical agency is particularly important because a body of research has identified the connection between high levels of agency and activism. For example, people who think their actions have the power to create change are more likely to take action (Beaumont, 2010). Critical

agency is an important component of critical consciousness because this concept can move a person from recognizing and analyzing injustice to taking action against injustice.

In educational leadership, critical agency is relevant and important in a number of ways. First, critical agency is an essential aspect of developing educational leaders' own critical consciousness. Second, educational leaders grapple with how they foster critical agency in their staff, teachers, parents, and community members in order to empower their community to implement change. Finally, schools must work to develop critical agency in youth, and educational leaders are responsible not only for fostering environments where efficacy can occur, but also for developing educators' ability to exhibit the three tenets of critical consciousness.

### **Critical Action of School and District Leadership**

Critical action can be defined as an individual or collective action to produce social change (Rapa et al., 2018). We are living in a moment where some school districts have become incubators for critical action. In some civics and social studies classes, students learn about historical movements that have been catalysts for present-day movements like Black Lives Matter. These social movements may pave the way for students to engage in individual and mass action (Seider & Graves, 2020). Rapa et al. (2018) argued that critical action promotes positive occupational outcomes despite structural and social barriers. Opportunities to engage in activism during adolescence and exposure to activist mentors and organizations can profoundly affect an individual's self-concept and worldview (Seider & Graves, 2020). This participation fosters future civic and political involvement, thus dismantling the oppressive systems that perpetuate marginalization (Seider & Graves, 2020). As a result, districts and school leaders have a responsibility to create such conditions for critical action.

School leaders can take several steps to cultivate critical consciousness in their communities. Seider and Graves (2020) examined schooling for critical consciousness and



reported that school leaders helped set the stage and create an environment where critical consciousness had the potential to flourish and grow. One important way leaders do this is by establishing the values and vision of the learning community. Overt communication from the leader around critical thinking, social justice and action were found in schools that fostered critical consciousness in students (Seider & Graves, 2020). School leaders communicate the importance of critical action to students, families, teachers, and faculty. Another strategy used by leaders is to create learning spaces such as affinity groups and social/community service groups to foster critical action (Andrews & Leonard, 2018). Leaders can also use student voice and student activism to promote the importance of critical action (Diemer et al., 2021). Finally, leaders can select courses and coursework to engage people in participatory action research (PAR) or other curriculum focused on critical action (Bertrand, 2018).

### ***Critical Action and Youth Development***

A commitment to activism refers to an individual's propensity to engage in a wide range of social action behaviors (Seider & Graves, 2020). Through the work of school districts and school communities, Seider & Graves (2020) suggest that the actions of writing letters to newspapers, contributing to a political campaign, engaging in protests, or boycotting particular businesses or products are all actions that reflect critical action which is the ultimate goal of critical consciousness development. Furthermore, Godfrey and Grayman (2014) suggest that youth critical consciousness is important from a societal perspective, as it can play a central role in addressing unjust systems, challenging marginalization in society, and promoting positive community development. National and local communities rely on the awareness, reflection, efficacy, and action of their youth. During this time of cognitive development, adolescents can think abstractly about larger societal systems and their place in those systems to develop a coherent understanding of political and social structures for the first time (Godfrey & Grayman,

2014). According to Godfrey & Grayman (2014), youth critical consciousness has significant ramifications for developing other key outcomes and competencies in adolescence, such as mental health, occupational outcomes, and civic engagement.

Finally, Seider & Graves (2020) state that civic skills refer to the capacities necessary for genuine civic involvement, such as running a meeting, giving a speech, and writing a letter or email about a civic issue. Schools create the environment for students to practice these skills to develop an orientation for participation and leadership. Civics classrooms provide youth with the space to engage in experiential learning opportunities that foster critical action. Action fosters youth civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions by supplementing textbooks and lectures with more experiential approaches to civic learning such as simulations of democratic processes, classroom discussions, community service-learning projects, youth participatory action research, and meaningful student governance opportunities (Seider & Graves, 2020). Rapa et al. (2018) found a connection between critical action and career outcomes for students in their longitudinal study of 1,482 middle students from seventh grade until the age of 29. This study suggests that critical action plays a significant role in fostering career expectancies in late adolescence among marginalized African American youth by negotiating social identity threats and structural constraints, thereby providing them with a pathway to engagement and social mobility (Rapa et al., 2018). In short, when school leaders provide students with the opportunity to engage in critical action, they are preparing them for future endeavors. Although critical action is important, Diemer et al. (2017) assert that critical action must be in concert with critical reflection and (or) critical motivation in order to foster social mobility.

### **The Nexus of Critical Consciousness and Leadership**

Radd & Kramer (2016) wrote that "the idea of critical consciousness is often attributed to Freire (1970) as a skill intended for those who are oppressed or marginalized, and it denotes the

ability to recognize the myths, operations of power, and social relations that limit one's freedom and full inclusion" (p. 583). In this group study, we contend that critical consciousness is a vital part of leadership. It is the praxis of critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action that informs a critically conscious leader. As Radd & Kramer (2016) posit, "positional leadership (i.e., administration) involves both privilege and power, [and] we see critical consciousness as utterly essential in order to use that power justly, democratically, and humanely" (p. 586).

Schools are complex organizations that operate with both visible and invisible norms. The historical origins of American educational systems were designed and intended to sustain inequity. Over the last few years, many schools and school districts have expressed a commitment to becoming anti-racist and investing in diversity and inclusion. As a result, school leaders given their positionality and their responsibility to staff and students, have a heightened responsibility to lead these efforts. Capper et al. (2006) argue that "school leaders need to embody a social justice consciousness within their belief systems or values. Moreover, this requires a deep understanding of power relations and social construction including White privilege, heterosexism, poverty, misogyny, and ethnocentrism" (p. 213). Our study explored how leaders at various levels manifest the praxis of analysis, efficacy, and action.

In order for leaders to create these practices, they must value and embrace the discourse that various spaces could engender concurrently. For example, one of our studies relies on a transformative leadership framework to address the development of critical consciousness among White educators. In her book *Transformative Leadership: An Introduction*, Shields (2011) explains that "to be truly transformative, the processes of leadership must be linked to the ends of equity, inclusion, and social justice" (2011, p. 6). Additionally, Radd and Macey (2014) explore the practices leaders employ to support educators of color to develop critical consciousness.

Radd & Macey (2014) note:

Systemic equity change requires deep and broad assessments of our current practices and systems to discern which of our current structures, processes, beliefs, and norms contribute to ongoing inequities. This work is messy, complicated, and hard! It takes will, courage, and humility to unearth and articulate the assumptions that underlie our practice and our system. It takes commitment and critical reflection to deeply analyze the role each of those elements plays in either maintaining the status quo or creating meaningful change for equity (p 8).

Here Radd and Macey (2014) remind leaders to create and foster structures and practices that validate equity and embrace the challenges that are created when they attempt to disrupt the status quo and strive for transformation. This recognition is even more important when race and racist outcomes are ever-present.

### **Critical Consciousness and Race**

In order to develop a more complete and nuanced understanding of how individuals develop critical consciousness, our team believed it was important to examine the intersections of critical consciousness and race (Marchand et al., 2019). Through the lens of race, critical consciousness highlights oppressive systems and structures (Bell, 2016) and provides a foundational context for critical race theory. Both frameworks are rooted in the oppressive conditions faced by historically marginalized people. Critical race theory (CRT) speaks to the specific constructs of race and racism in the United States. Solorzano (1997) defines the impacts of racism as follows: one group believes itself to be superior; the group which believes itself to be superior has the power to carry out the racist behavior, and racism affects multiple racial/ethnic groups. This definition assumes that racism is about institutional power, and BIPOC in the United States have never possessed this form of power (Solorzano, 1997).

According to Solorzano (1997), CRT centers on the lived experiences of BIPOC who have been victims of persistent stereotypes. In schools, these stereotypic traits can be used to justify: (1) having low educational and occupational expectations for BIPOC students; (2) placing BIPOC students in separate schools and, in some cases, separate classrooms within schools; (3) remediating the curriculum and pedagogy for BIPOC students; (4) maintaining segregated communities and facilities for BIPOC; and (5) expecting BIPOC students to one day occupy certain types and levels of occupations. Through critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action, these stereotypes might be eradicated. Similar to Freire's definition of critical consciousness, critical race theory has an activist aspect, the end goal of which is to bring change that will increase social justice (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Critical consciousness has been used in various contexts to make sense of how oppressed people reflect on and act to change perceived inequities and how these same people "identify, navigate, and combat the structural constraints that limit human agency and well-being" (Diemer, 2017, p. 15). However, researchers who study critical consciousness seldom focus solely on race. Diemer et al. (2017) further espouse that critical consciousness is "informed by disparate strands of scholarship that frame how oppressed or marginalized people think about and respond to inequitable socio-political conditions" (p. 15), including how their identity impacts such conditions. In a longitudinal, mixed-methods study, El-Amin et al. (2017) analyzed five urban schools to describe how critical consciousness development can increase students' (particularly Black students') academic motivation and achievement. Fifty Black high school students were interviewed to understand how schools can develop student's critical consciousness and promote stronger academic achievement. In their study, El-Amin et al. note that "Black students can achieve at higher levels when schools teach them how to see, name, and challenge racial oppression" (p. 18). They further detail that "critical consciousness about racism

specifically, can motivate Black students to resist oppressive forces through persisting in school and achieving in academics" (p. 20).

Other researchers, Freire (1970) included, do not delineate race as the only oppressive factor in critical consciousness. In every relationship, power dynamics are fluid, depending on various factors such as gender, age, ableism, and socioeconomic status. Yet, if we acknowledge that 92% of today's educators in Massachusetts identify as White, while the student body is increasingly BIPOC, it is clear that race and racism maintain a power dynamic in our schools that must be addressed. El-Amin et al. (2017) challenge educators to conduct critical self-reflection, critical reflection, and personal and collective action, for we "cannot claim to be concerned with closing academic gaps without taking seriously the question of how to give Black students the language and skills they need to understand the social conditions working against them" (p. 22). Additionally, Seider et al. (2020) reported that they were not making a direct correlation between an awareness and understanding of racism and Freire's (1970) definition of critical reflection. Rather, they found that their research points to the potential of a relation between marginalized youths' academic achievement and their understanding of the roots and consequences of oppressive social forces such as racism" (p. 454). Ultimately, their study demonstrated a narrowing of racial and economic opportunity gaps as the result of incorporating critical consciousness programming into schools for BIPOC students.

In essence, critical consciousness is the realization and analysis of one's ability and power to improve schools, students, and the larger community. Moreover, critical consciousness in schools requires educators to analyze, question, and discuss access and opportunity in their schools and ways they may reinforce these current structures. In order to change these access points, directly addressing the need to develop critical analysis, give space for critical reflection, and foster critical action allows "dialogue [that] creates new possibilities and opportunities for

relationships and interconnections" (Jemal, 2017, p. 613). Whether critical consciousness can be applied to those who identify as White continues to be a debate among scholars (Seider, 2020), who note that a different framework may be better suited for those from a dominant racial group. However, for the purposes of this study we will be employing the fundamental tenets of critical consciousness as a universal framework.

In summary, studies support that critical analysis is a necessary first step to understanding the systemic and racial inequities present in public schools. Research indicates that this is true for all key stakeholders in this study – superintendents, district leaders, principals, and students. Following analysis (awareness and reflection), literature indicates that critical efficacy must occur in order to recognize and challenge the status quo and systems that perpetuate inequities. Finally, studies demonstrate that these tenets combined can lead to the critical actions that disrupt systems of inequity. However, little research exists that explores the role of district and school leadership through the complex lens of critical consciousness.

This group study sought to contribute to a much-needed body of research. Studying how school and district leaders develop critical consciousness in themselves and among the educators and the students they serve may prove valuable to transforming schools and disrupt systemic inequities. Additionally, findings from this study may help to identify effective leadership practices for promoting critical consciousness that leaders could use to strengthen and improve their practice. As a result, this team examined the research questions as stated in Table 1 below and applied the conceptual frameworks as we gathered and analyzed our data.

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**Table 1**

***Individual Research Questions***

Name	Research Question(s)	Conceptual Framework
<b>Tamatha Bibbo</b>	How, if at all, do <b>white school leaders</b> develop critical consciousness in themselves? What leadership practices, if any, do white school leaders employ to engage their educators in critical consciousness?	Critical Consciousness Transformative Leadership
<b>Ceronne B. Daly</b>	What practices do district and/or school leaders employ to support the development of critical consciousness in educators of color (EOCs)? How do <b>educators of color</b> experience and respond to these practices?	Critical Consciousness Critical Professional Development
<b>Pauline Lugira - White</b>	How do <b>adult learners</b> narrate their experiences that support critical consciousness? How does the race of educators impact the experience of adult learning?	Critical Consciousness Critical Race Theory
<b>June Saba - Maguire</b>	How, if at all, does a <b>superintendent</b> understand the tenets of critical consciousness? What role, if any, does a superintendent's participation in formal or informal networks have on developing critical consciousness and leadership?	Critical Consciousness
<b>Geoff Walker</b>	What practices, if any, do school leaders implement to foster the development of critical consciousness in their <b>students</b> ? How do students / recent alumni and faculty describe and understand their leaders' efforts to establish a school context that contributes to students' critical consciousness development?	Critical Consciousness Social Justice Leadership



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

### Methods

This qualitative descriptive case study examined the efforts of district and school leaders to foster and advance the development of critical consciousness. As such, the sections below describe the overall study design, the data collection, and analysis procedures.

#### Design of the Study

Our team conducted a qualitative study because "our overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). This qualitative research study used both case study and a grounded theory approach because the case study method allowed a focus on in-depth analysis within a bounded system, and in our case, our bounded system or our unit of analysis was a single school district in Massachusetts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Grounded theory had us apply an inductive stance that required us to focus on the data and use our analysis to build a theory in response to our study's research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

#### Sampling Selection

We employed purposive or purposeful sampling to select the district and participants we studied which allowed us to gather information-rich data. This data enabled us to pursue the analysis and substantial triangulation needed to answer each of our research questions. In order to locate district and school leaders engaged in critical consciousness, this team conducted pre-study interviews and inquiry meetings with various local experts and conducted a document review to learn more about leaders who may be engaging in one or more elements of critical

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<sup>2</sup> The authors listed below collaboratively wrote this chapter which reflects the team approach of this project. Authors include: Tamatha L. Bibbo, Ceronne B. Daly, Pauline Lugira White, June Saba-Maguire, and Geoffrey Walker

consciousness. These interviews and meetings supported the team's ability to understand the context of potential sites for our research. We worked with the recommendations from college faculty and committee chairs and identified a site that provided rich and meaningful data that addressed our research questions and overall topic.

Given that our individual studies focused on different participants within the district, we determined the following criteria to be important in selecting a study site. We sought a K-12 suburban public district with a large enough population to include multiple school sites with a statistically significant number of BIPOC staff. The team identified a superintendent who participates in formal or informal social networks and has a reputation or proven record of engaging in or supporting anti-racism and equity-centered practices. Finally, we sought to observe a district that could serve as an example of anti-racism and equity-centered practices. As a result, we sought nominations through experts in the field and through peer networks. For this team's work, we have employed Ibram X. Kendi's definition: "One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea" (Kendi, 2019. p. 13).

This criterion was designed to identify a purposeful sampling. Since we proposed that school leaders' equity-centered practices contribute to critical consciousness, selecting the right study site was critical. Consequently, our ability to gain access to people in our selected district who have been focused on social justice and equity-centered work ultimately determined the quality of our critical consciousness research (Creswell, 2019).

### **Participation/ Research Relationship**

As a result of the team's reflective analysis and partnership with PSAP alumni, faculty, mentors, and committee chairs, we generated a list of districts for our research study. This list included districts focused on equity-centered work and elements of critical consciousness, such as opportunities for faculty and staff to build self-awareness, engage in critical reflection, and

conduct critical action. Once our research site was confirmed, we identified our participants in order to build and sustain our research relationship. As Maxwell (2013) explains: "the process of negotiating a relationship is much more complex than these phrases suggest; not only does it typically require ongoing negotiation and renegotiation of your relationships with those you study, but it rarely involves any approximation to total access" (p. 90). As Maxwell concedes, building relationships is complex, and with our study participants, this relationship has been further complicated by the restrictions in place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Special care had been required of each of us as team members to carefully support participants' evolving needs, maintain flexibility, and focus on continually sustaining trust during our data collection processes.

The team was fortunate to engage with willing individuals for this study (Merriam, 2016). In Table 2 below, this list represents participants and their racial identities that were relevant to the research. Investigating these participants' perspectives supported our research by illuminating information that supported our understanding of the scope of critical consciousness work that currently exists in the district:

**Table 2**

*Participant List*

Method	Participant and Race
Semi-Structured Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Six BIPOC and two White teachers</li> <li>→ Three BIPOC Central Office Staff</li> <li>→ Two BIPOC and four White Superintendents</li> <li>→ One BIPOC and eleven White School Leaders (Principals, Assistant Principals, Deans, etc.)</li> <li>→ Four BIPOC students</li> </ul>

<b>Focus Group</b>	→ One BIPOC and five White educators in focus group
<b>Questionnaire</b>	→ Forty-four BIPOC school based and central office staff
<b>Observation - Professional Development</b>	→ Seventy-five school-based faculty and staff (teachers, staff, school leaders)

## Data Sources

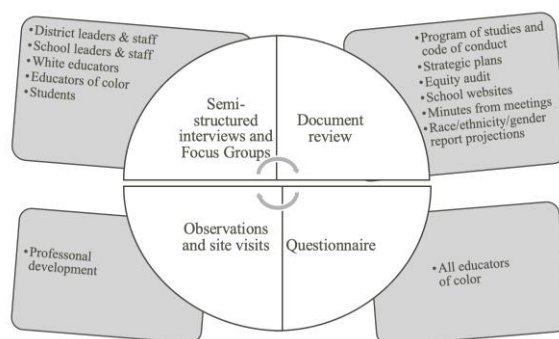
This study collected data through a case study of a particular district and practices within the district as a bounded system. As Yin (2009) describes, there are three reasons for a case study approach: “1. case studies are pertinent when your research addresses a descriptive question; 2. the case study method favors the collection of data in natural settings, compared with relying on derived data; and 3. the case study method is now commonly used in conducting evaluations” (p. 5). Acknowledging that “case study research involves systematic data collection and analysis procedures” (Yin, 2009, p. 6), we chose a case study approach to garner information that we examined to understand further our specific research topic in real-world contexts and situations.

This descriptive case study of a suburban district researched an equity-centered superintendent and his participation in formal and informal networks, and district and school leaders and staff engaged in critical consciousness practices. For example, whereas one member of the team examined the role of White educators, another member focused on examining what BIPOC staff felt about the support they received in the district. We applied various data sources (e.g., interviews- both individual and focus groups, a questionnaire, and district documents) to answer our research questions and provide documentation to code, triangulate, and confirm responses, for “good case studies benefit from having multiple sources of evidence” (Yin, 2009,

p. 10). Figure 2 below represents the data sources we collected during our study. The arrows moving in a continuous pattern demonstrate that the data collection process occurred in cycles and not linearly. These four processes were both concurrent and occurred at various times during the fall of 2021.

**Figure 2**

*Data Sources*



***Semi-Structured Individual Interviews***

Semi-structured interviews were employed to assess and gather data to answer our research questions about critical consciousness in the school district we studied. In this type of interview, because questions were flexibly worded, the team was able to respond to each situation and allow new ideas to emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a result, the responses provided authentic evidence to explain how/why some schools have been involved in critical consciousness, how critical consciousness has impacted relationships, leaders' mindsets and attitudes, and inclusive practices. As Figure 2 detailed above, we conducted several interviews with various stakeholders over time; both individually and in dyads or triads. These various interviews offered different perspectives and allowed the team to analyze findings at the district and school levels. When the team conducted semi-structured interviews, we used a co-

constructed protocol which allowed for conversational follow-up and/or clarifying questions, as opposed to a static survey.

### ***Focus Groups***

In addition to individual interviews, the team was able to conduct focus groups (a variant of interviews) with small groups of role-alike participants such as school-based staff. The focus groups were able to verify and provide more insight into the critical consciousness work being promoted and/or fostered across the district or school settings and/or the structures in place that supported such work. One team member conducted two different focus groups of three educators each who reported to different White school leaders in order to better understand their perspectives and perceptions. The purpose was to hear from many voices and verify for accuracy, for focus groups have proven to be effective because the "nature of interactive discussions reveals information not available during individual interviews" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 114). These voluntary school-based focus groups provided important and relevant information about the communication about, participation in, and experience with critical consciousness. The focus groups worked well because there was an absence of a power differential and the topic was relevant and valuable to the group (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016).

We also recognized that limitations existed when using focus groups such groupthink, power dynamics, and/or dominant, negative voices altering the responses (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016). In order for the researchers to focus on mitigating these potential barriers, we conducted focus groups in dyads which allowed one researcher to focus on asking the questions and the other managed note taking and recording.

### ***Document Review***

A review of district documents provided our team with information about the structures and policies that supported the development or implementation of critical consciousness. The

school-based and/or district level documents that were collected were based on interview and focus group information (e.g., professional development plans, meeting notes/ minutes/ agendas, School Improvement Plans, Strategic Plans, job satisfaction survey results, school committee presentations, annual budget) and were triangulated with other data sources to analyze the development or support of practices that developed critical consciousness. Collecting documents allows for a quick analysis of what exists, and what does not, in terms of policies and where these may be executed in practice. Although Merriam & Tisdell (2016) found that the documents may be incomplete or not useful because they have not been developed for research and may be "incongruent with emerging findings based on observational or interview data" (p. 181), document review can be completed efficiently and cover a breadth of material when studying a system. Our study relied on document review to check the information we learned about in interviews and focus groups, primarily reviewing documents our participants named as relevant.

### ***Observations and Site Visits***

This form of data collection provided the team an opportunity to identify participants' actual behavior, school environments, and/or events, rather than relying solely on individuals' self-perceptions shared through individual interviews and/or focus groups. As Merriam and Tisdell note, "An observer will notice things that have become routine to the participants themselves, things that may lead to understanding the context" (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016, p. 139). In this case study, our observations captured the processes and systems that continually fostered critical consciousness; and even demonstrated systems, structures, practices that did not function properly. These observations further supported the data collected from document review, interviews, and focus groups and provided contradictory information that we discuss in our findings. These observations and site visits were documented through field notes such as written notes and recorded dictation. Our field notes provided further evidence that was used to

construct meaning and understanding of the district and schools studied. As Merriam and Tisdall (2017) describe, "observations are also conducted to triangulate emerging findings... they are used in conjunction with interviewing and document analysis to substantiate findings" (p. 139). These triangulations of the data both confirmed and called into question what we learned from other data sources.

### ***Questionnaire***

A questionnaire of educators provided a broader range of responses from teachers and/or school/district leaders regarding critical consciousness understanding, perceptions, and implementation. Creswell & Guetterman (2019) write that "questionnaires are forms used in a survey design the participants in a study complete and return to the researcher" (p. 627). Our questionnaire served as a reliable tool to provide comprehensive, additional data from multiple voices across the district, which could be used as a cross-reference tool with other data sources. As we sought to gain a representative picture of the characteristics and attitudes of a large group of educators, we selected to use a survey method to supplement our other data collection methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Since we used the team-designed questionnaire protocol to capture descriptive data, we did not need to use a pre-designed instrument with a validated scale. According to Creswell & Guetterman (2019), "the advantage of this type of questioning is that your predetermined closed-ended responses can net useful information to support theories and concepts in the literature. The open-ended responses, however, permit you to explore reasons for the closed-ended responses and identify any comments people might have that are beyond the responses to the close-ended questions" (p. 220). Therefore, we administered the questionnaire to collect more detailed demographic information, solicit individual and focus group participants and invite BIPOC staff



to share their knowledge of potential school or district level practices that supported their personal and collective development of critical consciousness.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to our study, this team piloted our interview questions on a sample population. This allowed us to refine our questions with a similar population of interviewees from outside of the target district. This pilot process enabled the team to test our interview protocol so that our questions were more aligned to collecting the data we needed to inform our study's research questions. We not only collaborated to combine and share interview questions, but in order to avoid multiple interviews with similar participants, we also conducted these interviews and focus groups in dyads, when possible, and then shared our data.

Because race is a factor in three of our individual studies, whenever possible we also conducted individual interviews and focus groups in a mixed-race dyad. Another purpose of the semi-structured interview was to increase validity by comparing responses to other data sources as we moved through the coding and analysis stage (Merriam and Tisdall, 2016). Moreover, our interviews allowed for a depth of analysis between the district and school leaders and enabled the team to collaborate and share our data and responses. As Maxwell (2013) notes, "observation is often used to describe settings, behavior, and events while interviewing is used to understand the perspectives and goals of actors" (p. 102). As a result, our interview protocol detailed and ensured our participants remained anonymous and their responses confidential to "adhere to rigorous ethical standards" (Booth et al., 2016, p. 82).

### **Entering the Field**

Our team finalized our site selection and started our research both in person and virtually in the Fall 2021. We conducted three months of research and engaged in more than twenty-seven

semi-structured interviews, two focus groups, and received a total of 44 questionnaire responses from school based and central office BIPOC teachers and staff.

### **Data Analysis**

Our team used various data sources to examine the efforts of district and school leaders to foster the development of critical consciousness. We conducted our initial research by reviewing the documents we determined relevant to our individual studies. Following the document review, the team conducted interviews, observations/site visits, administered a questionnaire to all school based and central office BIPOC staff, and conducted focus groups using identified protocols. As Merriam & Tisdall (2016) explain, to complete intensive analysis, all materials need to be organized and easily accessible, and consequently we created a "systemic archive" (p. 233) of the data. This analysis led to emerging categories and themes that determined our findings and a theory to better understand our research.

The process we used to identify emerging trends involved several steps, including multiple rounds of coding our findings (Saldaña, 2013, p. 100), reviewing the data as a team to determine themes, and moving from "coding to theorizing" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 96). We utilized an online coding program Quirkos when completing our first and second coding cycles. In our first cycle, we individually constructed a word or phrase representing emerging ideas in our data and then compared and discussed our emerging codes. In our second round, we expanded and condensed these terms into larger categories (Saldaña, 2013).

Finally, cross-referencing these sources and our findings, the team triangulated the data and uncovered trends. We reviewed and reflected on the data to determine our key findings and conclusions to answer each of our research questions. The team maintained a detailed process memo that documented both individual and collective steps in the research process.

## Positionality

The researcher's position impacts and affects the research process at every stage and in every way. This includes *how* and *why* certain research questions are asked and how data is collected and analyzed. Positionality issues are "methodological issues particularly related to the researcher's role in conducting studies, that are theoretically grounded in any critical perspective analyzing power relations" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a qualitative study grounded in a critical perspective, it is important to acknowledge the positionality of this research group. Our group is made up of five members with a variety of backgrounds and identities. We are all currently in educational leadership positions in Massachusetts. As Table 3 details, four of our members work in urban public-school districts, and one works in a suburban district. Four of the members identify as female, and one as male. Two members identify as Black/African American, and three members identify as White. While members may identify from different class backgrounds growing up, all members currently identify as "middle class."

All researchers share a collective commitment to active anti-racism and equity-centered leadership or disrupting inequities for our students and in our communities and country. We all bring this sense of purpose to this study. These intersections help us to make meaningful connections to the work of critical consciousness. Diverse perspectives and experiences allowed us to situate our analysis and research in critical consciousness through our deconstructed lens of critical analysis, critical agency, and social action.

In order to account for biases, we bring to the research, each team member kept a journal of reflections about the research process as it related to their positionality. In this way, our goal was to proactively mitigate biases to the best of our abilities.

Table 3

*DIP Team Positionality*

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Urban/Suburban /Rural School District</u>
Female	Black/African American	Central Office Administrator	Urban
Female	Black/African American	School Leader	Urban
Female	White	School Leader	Suburban
Male	White	School Leader	Urban
Female	White	Central Office Administrator	Urban

**Limitations**

Fundamentally, limitations occur when conducting case study analysis, and our study poses several possible challenges (Creswell, 2019). Conducting a research study is arduous under normal circumstances, and the global pandemic has increased this challenge. We recognize that superintendents and school leaders are preoccupied with urgent matters, making it difficult for them to consider dedicating time to research that takes them away from daily demands. For example, we had to ensure that we could gain approval to access the various sites needed to conduct our research. Therefore, this process was complicated by the uncertainty of the pandemic's impact on the Fall 2021 and the reopening of schools.

Next, our overarching conceptual framework of critical consciousness may be unfamiliar to many practitioners in the field, making selecting a site that allows us to explore the phenomenon somewhat challenging. We needed to look for the tenets of critical consciousness

by relying on our college faculty and committee chairs' knowledge of district and school leaders who demonstrate a commitment to equity work. Further complicating our selection of a site was that our study topics required us to choose multiple forms of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2019). Each study had a distinct factor that required finding a multi-faceted site. Therefore, it was critical that we had the assistance of those who have state-level knowledge in order to identify an appropriate study site.

While we had been optimistic about collecting data for our research, we were also conscious of qualitative studies' limitations of relying on human perspectives. Thus, we were constrained by the filter of the interviewer and the interviewee (Creswell, 2019). Therefore, to effectively answer our research questions with reliable data, we needed to clarify what information we desired by asking descriptive and relationship inquiries to elicit the necessary data to answer our research questions. Moreover, the two most popular methods in a qualitative study, observations and interviews, were challenging for an inexperienced research team (Creswell, 2019). As a result, we sought guidance and feedback to ensure the instruments we used (i.e., protocols for observations and interviews) were tightly constructed. Furthermore, each of us piloted our interview questions and adjusted as necessary.

As Massachusetts educators, researching a Massachusetts study site and participants with whom we may have professional relationships, we were vigilant about the ethical issues of confidentiality. We minimized this issue by working closely as a team to interpret results, ensuring we are lessening the effect of researcher bias. These limitations meant establishing a trusting rapport quickly so our participants were confident enough to share information freely and honestly. We accomplished this by being clear about our purpose and intentions, relying on

past experience with Boston College, and building relationships through establishing friendly, professional relationships within the district.

### **Conclusion**

With hate crimes on the rise, the storming of the United States Capitol Building by White supremacists, increasing assaults on BIPOC, and continued murders of unarmed Black men, the space between the espoused values of a just democracy and the reality are apparent to many school and district leaders (Seider & Graves, 2020). Critically conscious leaders want to act in ways that support justice and transform the school system and the broader community (Radd & Kramer, 2016). This research explored how educator practices contribute to critical consciousness and surfaced ways in which educators across levels enact critical consciousness in order to fulfill their espoused values. This study informs practitioners about effective ways to support critical consciousness in schools and educational systems in order to disrupt the inequities we still experience today in our school systems.

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

### THE SUPERINTENDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE TENETS OF CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN ITS DEVELOPMENT

#### Statement of the Problem

Disrupting systemic racism and moving towards true diversity, equity, and inclusion requires committed leadership. As a school district's foremost educational leader, the superintendent has an influential role in ensuring equity. Research suggests that school leaders' specific practices increase district capacity toward more equitable student outcomes (Welborn, n.d.). Inherently, a superintendent's "positional leadership (i.e., administration) involves both privilege and power" (Radd & Kramer, 2016, p. 586) for potentially changing the beliefs and actions of school leaders about equity, thus improving the educational experience for students (Honig & Honsa, 2020; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Moreover, for superintendents to ensure equity-based practice, they must possess a deep understanding of what constitutes racially and ethically conscious leadership (Gustafson et al., 2020).

Some might argue that one accepts a superintendent's position knowing it is isolating work and is cognizant of the inherent personal and professional risks (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). I argue that one cannot appreciate the pressures until they have experienced the reality, despite the presumed knowledge gained through experience. Research purports that school leaders with collaborative relationships benefit from peer support, leading to deeper equity commitments (Daly & Finnigan, 2012). Regrettably, a superintendent's actions toward disrupting inequity systems often meet resistance (Hatch & Roegman, 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> June Saba-Maguire authored this chapter.

Similarly, to school leadership, research supports the idea that formal or informal connections can provide superintendents the emotional and social support and reinforcement to withstand the challenges inherent in this work.

Although there is ample research about the influence of networks within education, less scholarly evidence exists regarding the impact of a superintendent's participation in a network toward developing critical consciousness (Daly Finnigan, 2012; deLima, 2010; Froehlich et al., 2020; Liou & Daly, 2014; Meier & O'Toole, 2003; Moolenaar et al., 2010). Thus, the effect of network participation, especially related to developing the tenets of critical consciousness in superintendents, was the focus of this study. The research questions that guided this inquiry were: *How, if at all, does a superintendent understand the tenets of critical consciousness? What role, if any, does a superintendent's participation in formal or informal networks have on developing critical consciousness and leadership?* I specifically explored how network participation influenced the tenets of critical consciousness as an essential framework toward equitable leadership. Knowing the importance of critical reflection, self-efficacy, and action, I contend that a superintendent is more apt to successfully navigate the challenges of leading for equity.

### **Conceptual Framework**

As detailed in Chapter 1, critical consciousness is the framework derived from the work of Paulo Freire. Freire established that critical consciousness involves gaining knowledge about the systems and structures that create and sustain inequity (critical awareness and analysis); developing a sense of power or capability (critical reflection); and ultimately committing to acting against oppressive conditions (critical action) (El-Amin et al., 2017). Over time scholars have added to or revised Freire's work. Seider and Graves (2020) and others have redefined the



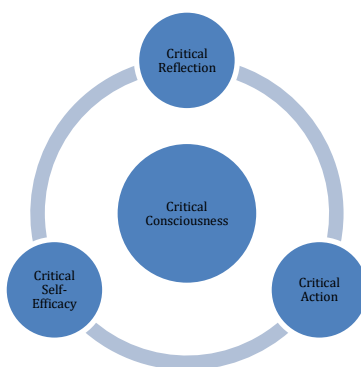
components that make up critical consciousness as three aspects that overlap, social analysis, political agency, and social action. (Seider & Graves, 2020; Jemal, 2017).

Scholars assert the need for clarity and coherence in the critical consciousness knowledge base and further claim that educational models grounded in its tenets can cause educational systems to be more equitable and liberating (Jemal, 2017). Freire's work pointed to the oppressed person as the individual who becomes critically conscious; however, he also emphasized that oppression dehumanizes the oppressed and oppressors. Freire (2000) believed that people must think critically about the realities of oppression and challenge inequitable social conditions to become fully humanized. While the research did not imply superintendents are oppressors, I extended Freire's ideas and operationalized them through this conceptual framework and study design. Research supports that superintendents who recognize institutional inequities and oppressive systems in public schools demonstrate critical consciousness tenets (Radd & Kramer, 2016).

Furthermore, other researchers, for example, Seider and Graves (2020), developed Freire's concepts of critical consciousness and refined them through the tenets of social analysis, political agency, and critical action. To examine this phenomenon, Figure 1 below demonstrates the modified terms as operationalized by Seider and Graves (2020) to include critical reflection (social analysis), critical self-efficacy (political agency), and critical action (social action). This figure represents the tenets of the critical consciousness framework and its alignment with the literature. At the same time, the three tenets in the outer ring of circles represent the relationship to each other and the central idea, although they are not sequential or cyclical. Each tenet symbolizes a key indicator needed for critical consciousness development.

**Figure 1**

### *Tenets Relationships to Critical Consciousness*



### **Literature Review**

Critical consciousness is a factor in developing a clear understanding and commitment to equitable practices. Currently, a buzzword in society and education, equity, is a significant issue, and a shared understanding of equity issues is far from complete. Scholars purport educational equity is central to the purpose of public education, yet its actual meaning remains elusive (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Gaining knowledge and awareness of equitable practices requires a superintendent to think “about leadership practices that result in social justice and educational equity” (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). So, connecting critical consciousness to equitable leadership practices requires engagement in collective learning to develop shared understandings (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Consequently, social networks provide opportunities for collective learning to occur (Daly, 2010).

For this study, equity means recognizing (critical reflection) that “fairness in processes and outcomes within the context of historical, economic, social, and institutional forces have resulted in an unequal playing field” and removing barriers that lead to unequal outcomes (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020, p. 2). Within this conceptual representation, equity demands a restructuring and transformation of educational systems. Furthermore, the superintendent must

understand what constitutes equity and translate this knowledge and understanding into practice. As a result, the development of critical consciousness may, in turn, create an organizational culture committed to equity (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). This study investigated network participation as a factor contributing to a superintendent's development of critical consciousness. With this in mind, I explored how social network participation influenced a superintendent's critical consciousness development.

Therefore, this literature review includes a brief overview of social networks and the formation of formal and informal networks. This section is followed by examining how social networks influence the development of critical reflection and critical self-efficacy. Next, I examined whether networks may influence critical action and, finally, I connected social networks' influence on the development of critical consciousness.

### **Social Networks**

*In organizations, real power and energy is generated through relationships. The patterns of relationships and the capacity to form them are more important than tasks, functions, roles, and positions.*  
 ----Margaret Wheatley

How and why superintendents form and participate in networks could determine whether professional interactions advance critical consciousness development. Networks may be formal constructions comprised of superintendents who primarily lead districts similar in size, structure, and student population. Conversely, networks may be loosely coupled and result from superintendents who share similar interests and commitments.

One formalized way to study networks, Social Network Theory, emerged through the early work of Jacob Moreno and is called Sociometry (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010). His research illuminated the critical influence social structure has on actors. The field continued to expand based upon its capacity to utilize multiple analysis levels, e.g., individuals, teams, and

organizations (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010). Borgatti and Ofem (2010) explain that social networks comprise nodes (individuals/actors) with shared ties that bind them to create an entity.

In order to positively influence educational outcomes, superintendents must engage in collaborative professional relationships. One way to ensure this is through participating in formal networks. Notably, researchers have found that “there is nothing inherently positive or negative about a network: it can be flexible and organic, or rigid and bureaucratic; it can be liberating and empowering, or stifling and inhibiting; it can be democratic, but it may also be dominated by particular interests” (de Lima, 2010, p. 2). Within education a myriad of terms are used to describe networks including, “alliances, coalitions, collaborations/collaboratives, clusters, consortia, development groups, families, partnerships, federations, groupings, territories, trusts, and zones” (de Lima, 2010, p. 3). However, scholars caution that using the terms interchangeably does not clarify the group’s purpose and could lead to its trivialization, perhaps leaving it devoid of meaning or intent (de Lima, 2010). This study sought to investigate whether collaborative professional interactions in networks might positively influence a superintendent’s capacity to enact improved educational outcomes for marginalized students.

Understanding the pattern of relationships reveals how networks facilitate educational change. For example, research clarifies that trust and personal relationships influence networks (Paulsen et al., 2016). Additionally, research suggests that superintendents may participate in networks considered informal or more tightly constructed formal configurations (Paulsen et al., 2016). The characteristics and differences between networks consider “formal ties (who gives information to whom); affective ties (who likes to interact with whom); proximity of ties (who is close to whom), and cognitive ties (who knows whom)” (Paulsen et al., 2016, p. 211). Consequently, how and why networks form may directly impact their purpose.

### ***Social Network Formation***

**Formal Networks.** Upper-level management often forms, maintains, and embeds formal networks in a structure (Paulsen et al., 2016). Leithwood and Azah (2015) describe the characteristics of effective formal networks as having four common features: widely shared, having purpose and focus, ensuring there is a system to monitor progress, and providing participant support. In their study of 450 district and school leaders, Leithwood and Azah (2015) utilized survey data to identify conditions that characterize effective networks. Their findings indicate that “conditions likely to increase the value of collaboration for network members include clear goals for collaboration, members’ direct engagement in one another’s thinking and a focus on the application of new knowledge to authentic problems of practice” (p.414). Furthermore, their findings suggest that participation in a formal leadership network leads to professional learning and encourages school leaders to participate. Therefore, networks emerge as a possible district and school leadership development strategy.

**Informal Networks.** Research demonstrates that informal networks emerge as individuals enter a relationship (Coburn et al., 2013). Additional studies suggest that homophily, “the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than between dissimilar people,” may account for the formation of informal networks (Coburn et al., 2013, p. 229). According to Rigby (2016), an individual’s selection determines informal networks. Rigby (2016) demonstrates that participation in an informal network can lead to reinforced, extended, challenged, or diminished ideas. In her qualitative cross-case study of six first-year principals in an urban school district in California, she found that network participation significantly influenced participants’ conceptualization of leadership. One significant finding was that informal network participation can affect an individual’s focus on inequitable outcomes for

marginalized students and can encourage them to challenge the status quo systems permeating public schools (Rigby, 2016). This finding suggests that individuals with similar equity commitments may organically attract one another. However, although informal networks emerge as relationships are formed, researchers also argue that proximity and expertise are the primary reasons individuals form ties (Coburn, et al, 2013).

Importantly, providing opportunities for people with similar interests and commitments can lead to organically formed relationships outside the formal network. Coburn et al.'s (2013) study illustrates how informal relationships developed through a three-year-longitudinal study of a midsize urban district implementing a new math curriculum. Findings demonstrated that shifting dynamics significantly influence teachers' network ties. For example, during the first two years of implementation, homophily and proximity proved to be the main reasons teachers formed ties. In year 2, as the curriculum initiative intensified, associations emerged based upon interest in mathematical practice and perceptions of expertise in this area of teaching and learning (Coburn et al., 2013). However, despite initial progress during the first two years, year 3 saw a change in leadership and a policy shift toward a new focus resulting in a dramatic decrease in prioritizing mathematical practice. Thus, this study provides evidence that personal and professional relationships influence network engagement and demonstrates that a policy change can disrupt a district focus. Therefore, this study contributes to an understanding that network participation can affect a district's commitment to improvement efforts. Connecting with those with similar expertise leads to support for maintaining focused and shared commitments.

### ***Social Networks and Influence on Critical Reflection and Critical Self-Efficacy***

An organization's ability to regularly change and grow in response to its needs requires being adaptive (Honig & Honsa, 2020). Accordingly, self-reflective leaders need to be reflexive

and creative thinkers and direct their actions toward eliminating inequities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Brown (2004) describes self-reflection (critical reflection) as a process through which self-examination involves a “deep examination of personal assumptions, values, and beliefs” (p.720). Coupled with reflection, engagement in critical discourse allows leaders to build meaningful understandings of issues of inequity, biases, and how the individual perceptions each of us hold directly influence leadership practice (Brown, 2004).

In a study examining how principals engage in opportunities to renew themselves through critical analysis (reflection), Drago-Severson (2012) found that study participants expressed a desire to engage in ongoing reflective practice with colleagues to support their development, sustainability, and renewal. Through qualitative interviews with a diverse sample of 25 public and private school principals, research revealed that “principals in the study yearn not just for more private reflection time, but also for ongoing opportunities to engage in reflective practice groups with other principals” (Drago-Severson, 2012, p. 9). Numerous principals expressed that participating in a group with thoughtful colleagues promoted their learning, helped them manage leadership complexities, decreased their isolation, and ultimately helped them sustain themselves (critical self-efficacy). Furthermore, research indicated that superintendents should prioritize allocating time and resources to support their leadership work (Daly & Finnigan, 2012). Scholars assert that critical reflection increases a leader’s awareness of oppressive structures and practices and helps them gain the confidence and ability to work for collective change (Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Drago-Severson, 2012). Conceivably, the superintendency could be more isolating than a principalship and may require equal, if not more, consideration.

Participation in a social network influences a leader’s positive sense of efficacy (or agency). As Liou and Daly (2020) found, self-efficacy beliefs of superintendents might play a

critical role in their capacity to manage policy and lead equity change efforts, for self-efficacy is the degree to which an individual perceives their competence (Bandura, 1977). For this study, I equated self-efficacy to political agency, which in turn meant building the confidence to act. Participation in a social network influences a leader's positive sense of efficacy (or agency). An example of this exists in Liou and Daly's (2020) examination of a leader's network connectedness to the development of self-efficacy. Their qualitative case study of a districtwide leadership team in a 30-school district in California found that districts that encourage social networks and diverse interpersonal relationships develop leadership teams with strong ties that enhance self-confidence. Although this study focuses on leaders within a district, its results indicate the importance of reciprocal relationships on building superintendents' self-efficacy via network interaction.

### ***Social Networks and Critical Action***

Researchers have long recognized that politics substantially influence a school system's internal operations (Larson, 1997). For example, Björk and Browne-Ferrigno (2014) point to the early years of the education reform movement when a "superintendent's acuity for deftly handling special interest group influence on decision-making processes became a hallmark of highly effective superintendents" (p.128). Examples of the actors in an educational, socio-political environment include executive cabinet members, district and school leaders, school committees, teachers' unions, community members, local and state politicians, parent groups, media, social media, and local activist groups. Thus, the socio-political sphere produces powerful expectations for superintendents to respond to multiple constituent groups.

For this reason, having a network of trusted confidants provides the backing a superintendent needs to navigate the complexities of the position. A qualitative study by Kruse et



al. (2018) found the positive influences network participation has on sustaining a superintendent, particularly in times of uncertainty. By examining 12 superintendents' experiences participating in monthly meetings, findings indicated that networks provided participants safe spaces. These participants reported that "there are not many other people with whom they can speak frankly, share frustrations, and admit uncertainties" (Kruse et al., 2018, p. 93). This finding indicates that through networks, a superintendent's peer interactions may influence their awareness, learning, and ability to withstand and navigate sociopolitical pressure.

Additionally, superintendents must have strategies accounting for their district's organizational context. Political and constituent groups must advise the superintendent's approach to the difficult work of leading. Scholars assert that superintendents with a repertoire of strategies fare best as they confront leadership's socio-political demands (Klocko et al., 2019). Roegman's (2017) seven-year qualitative study of three superintendents found that network participation offers a crucial opportunity for leaders tackling the issues of inequity and:

served as a powerful aspect of their occupational contexts to gain support and insight for leadership. The network provided participants with regular opportunities to share their challenges and ideas for new initiatives over several years, and all of the participants valued this support (p. 25).

Leveraging relationships developed through networks bolsters a superintendent's propensity toward action. Therefore, research indicates that participation in a network offers an opportunity to engage in the complexities of the position and *critical action*, a key tenet of critical consciousness.

In summary, studies demonstrate that disrupting the inequitable educational structures and systems that preserve the status quo remains challenging (Daly & Finnigan, 2012).

Moreover, studies prove that inequalities are reinforced when professional learning and dialogue do not lead to action addressing racism, power asymmetries, and structural roots (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). Research is also clear that a superintendent can address these systemic problems; however, managing these issues, particularly alone, is complex. Encouragingly, the literature demonstrates that participation in formal and informal networks can positively influence equity-centered leadership, while the tenets of the critical conscious frameworks provide a lens for analysis. This literature synthesis aligns with the study findings and reveals how networks develop a superintendent's understanding of critical consciousness.

## **Methods**

### **Study Design**

The systemic inequities pervading public school systems require intervention. As the district leader, a superintendent's moral imperative must move the district toward change to address systemic injustice. Unfortunately, superintendents will encounter inevitable daily difficulties in this pursuit. Therefore, how superintendents leverage networks to support their understanding and development of critical consciousness underpins this qualitative study. To accomplish this purpose, I conducted a phenomenological case study that included six superintendents who were actively participating in a formal or informal network and who demonstrated a commitment to equitable leadership practices (Creswell, 2019).

A phenomenological case study allows qualitative researchers to focus on the shared experience within a particular group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain that "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 15). The researcher's responsibility is to translate the data through carefully

constructed analysis so the reader can comprehend its "essence" (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 26, 2015). Thus, case study research was well suited to investigate the "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 2017) relevant for this study. Moreover, it is important to note that qualitative case study research mainly utilizes selective or purposeful sampling (Yin, 2017). For this case study, the unit of analysis (superintendents) represented a bounded case study due to the specific shared characteristics of study participants. Next, I describe the criteria for site selection, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.

### ***Sampling***

First, I utilized purposeful sampling to select a site where evidence existed of a superintendent's involvement in networking combined with the presence of the tenets of critical consciousness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To select a unit of analysis, I considered the perspectives of Boston College professors, mentors, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education contacts, and professional colleagues. Appendix A describes the initial criteria used for the site selection. Next, through purposeful sampling, I relied on the superintendent in the district we performed our group study to identify others as belonging to their network (Creswell, 2019). Through snowball sampling, I selected six superintendents for this case study. The sample included the superintendent leading the district studied by our research team, one superintendent recommended by the DIP's district superintendent, three superintendents recommended by members in my DIP group, and one superintendent I identified. In all, using this selection protocol, as illustrated in Table 2, I interviewed six superintendents of varying races, gender, years in education, and years in the role of superintendent.

**Table 2**

*Demographics of Superintendent Participants*

Race	Gender	Years in Education	Years in Role	District Type
White	Male	36 years	9 years	Urban/Suburban
White	Female	44 years	8.5 years	Urban/Suburban
White	Male	41 years	16 years	Urban/Suburban
White	Male	25 years	7 years	Urban/Suburban
African American	Male	21 years	3 years	Urban/Suburban
Latina	Female	25 years	2 years	Urban/Suburban

### ***Data Collection***

**Semi-Structured Interviews.** A fundamental characteristic of qualitative research is collecting data through the interview process, which authors describe as "conversations with a purpose" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 108). Three commonly used interview types are highly structured, semi-structured, and unstructured or informal (Weiss, 1995). For this study, I employed semi-structured interviews since, in general, qualitative research demands a more open-ended and less structured format (Weiss, 1995). A semi-structured design allows the researcher to ask open-ended questions and become more specific in questioning if necessary (Seidman, 2006). This flexibility illustrates qualitative research's aim to understand "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 6). I used OTTER software to record and transcribe interview data.

By interviewing superintendents, I elicited data that helped describe a network's influence on their perceptions about developing critical consciousness. I designed interview questions to investigate the development of these tenets. Before conducting these interviews, I piloted the questions by interviewing one superintendent, not included in this study, which allowed me to prioritize questions based on time, responses, and initial data. Appendix B provides the framework from which I drew my questions. Furthermore, a critical consideration for

maintaining confidentiality included using a secure, password-protected website to store data (Seidman, 2006). Participants also signed an electronic, written consent.

**Fieldnotes.** Taking detailed notes is a vital research function. Although often described by researchers as a seemingly arduous task, it produces the raw data from which the study's findings emerge. I dedicated a notebook and kept detailed notes to ensure quality and authenticity. Immediately after each pre-and post-interview, I drafted notes. Appendix C includes the field notes protocol I employed for note taking.

**Document review.** Researchers use documents and artifacts because of their accessibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I reviewed meeting agendas and minutes from past formal Urban Superintendents' Network (USN) meetings for this study. Additionally, I reviewed the participating district's website and strategic plan. Appendix D includes the protocol used to examine these documents for evidence of the tenets of critical consciousness.

**Data analysis.** Analyzing data happens simultaneously with data collection. Accordingly, analysis emerged organically during the investigatory process. I investigated and chose the coding service Quirkos, as it helps organize large quantities of data to identify emerging themes and findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Although Saldana (2013) explains that coding is just one way to analyze data, it was my primary analysis method.

Moreover, I used a combination of coding methods for the analytic process. First, using OTTER, I listened to individual interviews. Next, I transferred the transcription to Quirkos. Then I read through each script individually. Following this, I read through each script again and coded data using the deductive approach based on the interview protocol groupings. My initial coding sought evidence supporting the three tenets of critical consciousness as conceptualized for this study. These codes were critical reflection (CR), critical self-efficacy (CS), and critical

action (CA). My next coding cycle involved reading through the scripts again, and this time, coding for instances where I identified formal or informal networks. Then I coded data based upon evidence of formal or informal networks' linkage to the tenets of critical consciousness.

### ***Limitations***

Conducting a research study is arduous under normal circumstances. The continued impact of the global pandemic increased this challenge exponentially. Urgent matters occupied superintendents and school leaders, making it challenging to participate in research that took them away from daily demands. Additionally, accessing in-person interviews for interviews was extremely limited because of social distancing. Furthermore, attending leadership meetings proved impossible.

The unit of analysis for this study included six superintendents; therefore, the sample size could be considered minor with limited data. As a result, findings from this study may not be generalizable to other groups and/or settings (Saldana, 2013). Furthermore, I selected the superintendents in this study because of evidence of their equity commitments; half of the participants were members of the Urban Superintendents' Network (USN). This exploratory study, therefore, provides initial themes about the role of network participation in influencing critical consciousness and the superintendency. Findings may not be reflective of superintendents who do not view equity work as a leadership priority.

### **Findings**

In the following section, I discuss the findings of my two research questions: (1) How, if at all, does a superintendent understand the tenets of critical consciousness? (2) What role, if any, does a superintendent's participation in formal or informal networks have on developing critical consciousness and leadership?

## **Tenets of Critical Consciousness**

To answer the first research question, I examined how a superintendent understands the tenets of critical consciousness. For this case study, critical reflection, critical self-efficacy, and critical action provided the conceptual framework that guided the analysis.

### ***Superintendents' Understanding of Critical Reflection***

Findings from this study indicated that superintendents understood and practiced critical reflection. In fact, all six superintendents organically used the word *reflection* several times throughout the interview. Notably, a direct correlation to reflecting upon equity issues and how this connected to a school or district practice change was evident. Surprisingly, critical reflection emerged as an essential component of developing critical consciousness over time. In fact, all six superintendents articulated that it was very early in their careers when they began to recognize the inequities present in public education. Each person talked about being drawn to education, leadership, and specifically the superintendency due to "a sense of purpose" and "a calling." Markedly, during these interviews, four superintendents became somewhat emotional and appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their equity leadership practices. Clearly, these superintendents believed that their commitment to challenging systemic inequities played a large part in driving their leadership practice.

Additionally, superintendents offered evidence that critical reflection is key to transformation. One superintendent stated, "I am constantly reflecting about the ability to affect change." While another furthered, "I am constantly reflecting upon how I am creating an environment where you can positively affect change, particularly for marginalized students."

Interestingly, when asked directly about the importance of critical reflection in practice, three participants talked about the practice as significant to their work. For example, one

superintendent discussed the importance of critical self-reflection, pointing out that it is through this process that "one is becoming self-aware and raising these questions and being willing to change is a huge step forward." Still, another superintendent vividly described an occasion where awareness of inequities resulted in reflection about the systems creating these disparities, sharing:

I remember looking at the audience of students, which is probably at least 80% of students of color. I'll never forget ...we have an award-winning fine arts program...on the stage was our band ... there was not one student of color sitting up there.

The superintendent further explained that in a school with a high percentage of students of color, this was a "jarring revelation." Clearly, the superintendent recalled this moment and spoke with great emotion about the necessity to act to change how the system created this glaring inequity.

Moreover, each interviewee spoke about the significance of reflection, with several comments, such as... "Okay, how can I do that differently? What else do I need to bring to the table? What data do I need? Did I go too fast?" Ultimately, critical reflection manifested itself first through acknowledging awareness as a first step. A common thread was the reflective process and its connection to a belief in one's capacity to challenge inequities and make change.

Conversely, evidence emerged that there is not often structured time or a conscious effort for this to happen. For example, one respondent felt as if the demands of the job often prohibited the opportunity, sharing: "it's up to me to make time for my own self-reflection," and "you're just so busy that there's no time for self-reflection." Yet, when questioned more about their opportunities for reflection, the participant realized that, in fact, reflection was part of their daily practice stating, "I always put the kids as my lens...Who am I doing this for?" and "Why am I



doing this...becomes my guideposts." Significantly superintendents understood that reflection often catalyzed their work, and there is a clear need to embed intentional efforts for this purpose.

### *Superintendents' Understanding of Critical Self-Efficacy*

Markedly, each superintendent in the study shared a strong belief in their ability to make a difference in the lives of marginalized students. In fact, the superintendents in this study understood that their competency was a key to making change. For instance, knowing they can make a difference appeared to promote a sense of self-efficacy, with one superintendent claiming, "I can actually make an impactful difference for kids and families." Still another stated that, "over my career, I have developed more courageous leadership, just taking a stand, and I'm not going to be fearful of a decision that I've made." Undoubtedly, superintendents recognized that taking a firm stance on issues required a solid sense of self and the ability to withstand the resulting scrutiny and criticism.

The data from superintendents revealed perseverance as a necessary characteristic of critical self-efficacy. Indeed, several superintendents described struggling with complex racial and equity issues and the need to have clear values and self-confidence. For instance, one superintendent voiced frustration, sharing that whatever equity steps they took, these steps were "viewed by many as not enough" and expressed a worry that "I'm not sure how to get there." Additionally, this superintendent noted that the district has taken significant steps toward becoming an anti-racist district and yet lamented, "we don't fix race problems, you know, overnight with a policy." The superintendent furthered, "if I didn't have a strong belief in my leadership, it would be impossible to withstand some of the criticisms." Similarly, another superintendent spoke about the difficulties of leading work through turmoil, expressing:

...and if it doesn't work out, you could find that you are out of work and maybe unemployable because it's so public. There's not a lot of appetite for superintendents to necessarily want to take a big courageous stance...you have to believe in yourself.

Clearly, superintendents recognized the precariousness of their positions and the risks associated with challenging the status quo.

### ***Superintendents' Understanding of Critical Action***

Superintendents understood that critical action is inextricably linked to change. Each superintendent expressly referred to a time when they took critical action to change inequitable systems impacting students of color. Therefore, although not articulated as critical action, there were clear instances of this practice. For example, one superintendent described a realization that inspired them to change the Student Resource Officer (SRO) role and its influence on reinforcing a sense of accomplishment, stating:

We're going to be looking at discipline data ... we're finding that reporting of more incidents of students of color...it was empowering moment ...talk about our commitment to being anti-racist and ... calling out in a public space with a lot of white people in the community who may not be thinking of it that way.

Yet another superintendent spoke about the need to act publicly by embedding a commitment to equity in the district strategic plan. For instance, one of the district's core values stated: "Equity: We will disrupt institutional biases and end inequitable practices, so all students have an equal chance at success." This superintendent believed that embedding equity commitments in the strategic plan was "essential" to establishing accountability.

In another example, the same superintendent who recognized the disparity of students of color in the high school band also described an immediate convening of stakeholders tasked to

devise a plan to ensure students of color had increased access to the same opportunities as their white peers. The superintendent's ability to engage in critical reflection and demonstrate self-efficacy resulted in the critical action that disrupted the inequities in that music program. In turn, the high school band now reflects the student population. This commitment represents an example of the coalescence of the three tenets of critical consciousness. First, there is a recognition of the need to engage in profoundly reflective work that demonstrates critical analysis. Then there is evidence of critical self-efficacy by having the courage to engage others in work.

In summary, critical reflection was an essential step in strengthening the other two tenets of critical self-efficacy and critical action. Engaging in reflection allowed superintendents to recognize the inequities existing in their districts. Engaging in self-efficacy gave the superintendents the confidence and perseverance to take action, and critical action provided an opportunity to disrupt inequities.

### **Formal/Informal Network Supports**

Literature asserts that network participation can lead to collaboration and offer professional learning experiences that advance the development of critical consciousness (Kruse et al., 2018). Hence in this next section, I discuss the data related to my second research question: what role, if any, does a superintendent's participation in formal or informal networks have on developing critical consciousness and leadership? First, I discuss the superintendents' experiences with formal network participation and its connection to the development and support of critical consciousness. Then, I describe how informal networks foster superintendents' critical conscious development.

### ***Critical Consciousness Development and Formal Network Participation***

Superintendents recognized formal network participation in developing the tenets of critical consciousness. Moreover, they realized that enlisting support through formal groups of like-minded colleagues is essential to pushing forward and confronting equity issues. All superintendents expressed the value of formal peer-related and inter-organizational networks to advance equity work. There were several instances where the tenets of critical reflection, critical self-efficacy, and critical action emerged from formal network participation. For example, three superintendents identified the Urban Superintendent's Network (USN) for advancing policies around the inequities of Chapter 70 money. As the major program providing state aid to public schools in Massachusetts, urban districts were experiencing increasingly difficult budget deficits due to increasing operating costs. In turn, urban public-school superintendents began to aggressively advocate for increased state aid. USN provided an opportunity for these superintendents to come together on a regular basis, develop relationships that they then leveraged for statewide advocacy.

One USN superintendent noted that network meetings advanced opportunities for reflection, planning, and action, which ultimately led to the Student Opportunity Act (SOA). As such the SOA was signed into law in 2019 and is meant to infuse funding into communities experiencing high-poverty rates. The superintendent described how members of the network leveraged their collective capacity to advocate with local and state legislators for increased and fair foundational funding. The passing of the SOA resulted in a significant increase in financing for underrepresented communities.

Furthermore, the three USN participants expressed an understanding of the vast divide between urban and suburban communities' challenges. They spoke about the importance of meeting with district-alike leaders. One urban superintendent emphasized the importance of

intentionality and acknowledged that there were more opportunities to influence policies because of this formal statewide collaborative network. For instance, the statewide equity and diversity initiative was described as critical to the USN and is included on every meeting agenda. For example, a superintendent stated that "bringing people together to focus on the issues of equity allows for collaborative focus across the state."

Additionally, one superintendent described the USN network as a type of "affinity group." Still another claimed, "having that resource.... it's helpful because, in this context, it is the kind of opportunity to check on my sanity with others who are experiencing similar equity challenges." In another illustration, a superintendent described meeting with the USN group for the first time and walking away thinking, "oh my goodness, this is where I belong..." and "these people get the equity challenges." These examples demonstrate how superintendents used formal networks to identify others with similar commitments.

Networks proved helpful to superintendents in taking critical action. Suburban superintendents asserted that participating in formal networks supported the tenets of critical consciousness development. For instance, one superintendent pointedly shared how during the political unrest of the pandemic and George Floyd murder, the network members knew they had to take a public position. Relying on one another, the network members collaborated and produced a mutual public stance denouncing the violence against Black Americans and supporting their communities of color. Furthermore, another suburban superintendent said that in the case of "racial equity," having network support "helps propel you to take the next step." One superintendent shared that the network "rallied to get together...to make a public statement denouncing violence against Black Americans."

Superintendent networks were not the only type of network upon which participants relied. They also identified their core leadership teams as vital members of their formal networks. Although they seemed to understand that their positional authority may influence these relationships, several pointed to leadership team members as meaningful support in leading the work of their respective districts. For example, one superintendent stated, "my core team, specifically my assistant superintendent, is someone I rely heavily on," while another named the "principal team" and still a third talked about the executive level team as being key members to rely upon to address the "challenges of the day-to-day work." Although these networks existed through district employment, evidence supported the importance of strong internal relationships.

Every superintendent named various networks they depended upon and interacted with frequently to support themselves in their equity work. One superintendent emphasized, "not to just rely on your superintendent colleagues to lead the way," and furthered that one must get others invested. Hence, you are "not just to get together and say this is what we think is important." All superintendents spoke about needing to enlist the larger stakeholder groups, including school committees, executive or cabinet-level district leaders, principals, community stakeholder groups, business communities, local higher education institutions, and other educational organizations. Correspondingly, a superintendent stated that "all of those partnerships, business partnerships included... would give kids and their families the support they need by just bringing people together with the school department being ... the hub." All superintendents referred to enlisting stakeholder groups as critically important to pushing equity work. All six superintendents interviewed for this study expressed sincerity about the value they felt formal network participation afforded them and offered evidence aligning with critical consciousness tenets.

### ***Critical Consciousness Development and Informal Network Participation***

Critical consciousness tenets also proved to be a magnet for informal networking. In fact, informal networks grew out of formal networking because of shared beliefs that represented the tenets of critical consciousness. Therefore, the findings indicated a reciprocal relationship between informal networking formation and critical consciousness.

**The Formation of Informal Networks.** Although all superintendents highly regarded formal networks, four of them spoke to the informal networks that resulted due to their interactions with certain people within those networks.

Three individuals shared that they developed closer relationships with some members of the formal networks and based these connections on: sharing common beliefs, trusting certain people, gender, race, proximity, and sharing similar equity commitments. For example, one superintendent explained, "I reach out to people who have this common equity belief and experience." Another participant noted, "you really trust only three or four people who you can truly be reflective with." There were also clear examples of gender and race as primary drivers of informal connections and how shared traits can support self-efficacy. One female superintendent shared, "I have wonderful women in my life...that I am close to in education," and "they lift me up." While another superintendent talked about the importance of connecting with someone who shares the same race saying, "so the job comparisons are so big ... but either way, I can ask the tough questions...that I might be hesitant to ask others about, and this gives me more confidence." Some superintendents expressed that informal networks emerged based upon the need for emotional support.

Furthermore, one superintendent identified having developed informal networks based upon opportunities to have professional interactions, such as state and national conferences. The

superintendents frequently spoke about the issues of inequity as drawing them to certain individuals. One interviewee shared emotionally about how these "strong relationships" and "valued colleagues" often served to sustain them as they dealt with the often "emotionally depleting issues." While there was an emphasis on proximity, there was also a recognition that interacting with relatable colleagues drove who superintendents engaged with outside of formal meetings. It was clear that formal networks, such as USN, served a purpose of collective advocacy and political action. In contrast, informal networks were more valuable for supporting day-to-day challenges and emotional and personal growth.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that the three key tenets of critical consciousness often overlap and intersect. Superintendents shared instances where all three tenets intersected and resulted in the enactment of change, resulting in the disruption of inequity. Critical reflection was viewed as a way to promote critical self-efficacy and critical action. The six superintendents in this study indicated that the tenets of critical consciousness were central to their formal network participation, which supported growth and helped sustain them in their work. They also emphasized how critical consciousness organized and influenced their informal networks. The following section discusses the implications of these findings.

### **Discussion**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore how a superintendent understands the tenets of critical consciousness in practice. Additionally, this study examined how social networks influence a superintendent's practice and contribute to critically conscious reflection and action. The research questions that guided this study were: (1) How, if at all, does a superintendent understand the tenets of critical consciousness? And secondly, (2) What role, if



any, does a superintendent's participation in formal or informal networks have on developing critical consciousness and leadership?

Earlier mentioned literature suggests that critical consciousness development in superintendents partly means gaining knowledge and awareness of equitable practices by thinking "about leadership practices that result in social justice and educational equity" (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). Moreover, scholars report that "leveraging relationships developed through networks bolster a superintendent's propensity toward action" (Roegman, 2017). Consequently, strong formal and informal networks with like-minded leaders are needed to confront and disrupt inequitable educational systems and structures. Furthermore, data analysis suggested that critical reflection, critical self-efficacy, and critical action were present in superintendents' practices. Additionally, data revealed that formal and informal network participation played a role in understanding these essential tenets of consciousness.

### **Superintendents' Understanding of the Tenets of Critical Consciousness**

While research is limited to supporting the need for critical consciousness development, this study highlighted how critical consciousness tenets cultivated equity-minded superintendents' practices. Furthermore, the findings showed that while superintendents do not necessarily use the term "critical consciousness," they did, in fact, demonstrate its three tenets of critical reflection, critical self-efficacy, and critical action. Critical reflection appeared repeatedly throughout the interviews. Clearly there is a need to provide intentional opportunities for superintendents to reflect about practices and objectively identify inequities in their districts. Additionally, researchers have consistently found that superintendents who are equity-minded lead by being critically reflective "about leadership practices that result in social justice and educational equity" (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015).

Moreover, researchers have purported that the {critical} self-efficacy beliefs of superintendents play a crucial role in their capacity to manage policy and lead equity change efforts (Liou & Daly, 2020). As previously discussed, research suggests that the degree to which an individual positively perceives their capacity to make change is a vital factor affecting feelings of competence (Bandura, 1977; Liou & Daly, 2020). The superintendents interviewed for this study shared multiple examples of the importance of self-efficacy in leading through resistance that occurs in the face of equitable change. Concrete evidence existed that the superintendent's confidence and belief in themselves made a decided impact on their capacity to engage in the actions needed for systemic change.

Finally, researchers claim that critical action or "committing to acting against oppressive conditions" is necessary to ensure systemic transformation (El-Amin et al., 2017, p. 20). Critical consciousness provides a clear framework for understanding equity leadership practice, and the superintendents in the study demonstrated how they understood their leadership in relation to the key tenets. Superintendents in this study established that for change to occur there must be critical action. When inequities in these districts were disrupted it was a result of superintendents' decisions to act.

Therefore, superintendent preparation and induction programs must include a clear focus on explicitly developing superintendents understanding of the tenets of critical consciousness. Consequently, professional learning opportunities will provide a meaningful bridge to an understanding of systemic inequities. Furthermore, federal and state policy makers need to develop expectations and guidelines requiring superintendent licensure candidates demonstrate an understanding of the critical consciousness tenets. This can be done through comprehensive oral and written examinations. Finally, future research should examine the impact a

superintendent's understanding of the critical consciousness tenets has on district leadership practices.

### **Early Evidence of Critical Consciousness and the Pathway to the Superintendency**

The participants in this study revealed that a superintendent's development of critical consciousness has deep roots. In fact, all six superintendents articulated that it was very early in their careers when they recognized the inequities present in public education. Each person talked about being drawn to education, leadership, and specifically the superintendency due to "a sense of purpose" and "a calling." Furthermore, because each expressed a desire to make a difference in society as a significant factor in pursuing the superintendency, identifying potential equity leaders early on could play a crucial role in recognizing strong leaders.

Correspondingly, superintendents' commitment to working within marginalized communities is a significant factor in deciding to work in a district. In addition, each participant spoke about an early career recognition that a largely underserved and marginalized student population existed and identifying a need for systemic change. Superintendent responses clearly supported the need to reflect as significant to their work and often this topic produced emotional responses. These findings pointed to a need to provide superintendents time to connect with what drew them to their work through intentional efforts to create the space for critical self-reflection.

Moreover, researchers have purported that for superintendents to ensure equity-based practice, they must possess a deep understanding of what constitutes racially and ethically-conscious leadership (Gustafson et al., 2020). Data supported that superintendents are in a continuous state of reflection and actively thinking about ways in which they are contributing to an environment to positively affect change.

In light of these findings, evidence demonstrated that superintendents' knowledge continues to develop throughout their careers. As previously stated, superintendent licensure and induction programs should explicitly include components that address the development of critical consciousness. Also, professional organizations that support superintendents must recognize that the development of critical consciousness tenets is key to their equity work. Additionally, superintendent hiring committees should understand these qualities to guide their selection process, thereby better ensuring the hiring of superintendents committed to equity work.

### **The Overlap and Intersection of the Tenets of Critical Consciousness**

Moreover, evidence emerged about how the aspects of critical consciousness overlapped and intersected. While each tenet was meaningful, an evidenced change occurred when all three factors were present. Indeed, several superintendents shared similar instances when they became aware of inequities existing within their district and had to be reflective in a way that reinforced their sense of efficacy to take the necessary action to disrupt such systems.

Undoubtedly, mere words do not necessarily signify a real commitment to action; however, proof exists when change occurs. Indeed, disruption to inequity happens when critical action is represented by "doing what it takes" to become a consciously anti-racist leader. Therefore, preparation programs must include strong content addressing the tenets of critical consciousness and provide experiential fieldwork with superintendents engaged in this work.

### **Networking Matters**

Formal and informal networks played a prominent role in providing opportunities for building collective capacity to confront issues of inequity. Importantly, all six superintendents acknowledged leadership strength in Massachusetts toward providing "ongoing and high quality"

opportunities to meet with colleagues and peers. Repeated references to the importance of the USN and the Superintendent Roundtable Networks offered proof of the need to provide networking opportunities. Interestingly, superintendents reported relying on the informal networks that sometimes form due to being brought together through formal network settings. Furthermore, these resulting relationships serve to affirm a superintendent's shared beliefs, often aligning with the tenets of critical consciousness.

Similarly, the superintendents leading more suburban districts recognized the formal networks created through DESE and MASS as powerful and essential groups they connected with frequently. Comparable to USN superintendents, they expressed a need to communicate with others according to their geographical location because of the "pertinence" of specific areas and demographic conditions. This opinion, commonly expressed, pointed to a need for supporting superintendents through geographic and demographic networks. For these reasons, a clearer understanding of critical consciousness tenets via intentional, focused networking efforts can strengthen superintendents' efforts at equity leadership throughout the State.

Superintendents were clear about the value of participating in formal and informal networks. Also evident was the reliance of superintendents on each network for different purposes. The study showed that formal networks often served as springboards for the formation of informal networks. Therefore, superintendent leadership groups, i.e., DESE and MASS, should plan intentional professional learning that includes critical consciousness development. This will also provide opportunities for superintendents to build connections with other leaders facing similar challenges.

These actions will lead to superintendents deepening their understanding of the inequitable systems and structures permeating public schools. Thus, leveraging the existing

network structures might provide a platform to deliver critical consciousness content and strengthen the superintendent's ability to lead equity work.

Equally important are the relationships that superintendents develop outside the formal network. Currently, there is a superintendent shortage which is compounded by a high turnover rate. Informal networks often provide the support superintendents need to sustain themselves in this difficult work. Not to be overlooked, superintendents must have emotional support for this demanding work. Colleagues or critical friends are valuable assets and as this study revealed, racial affinity relationships are powerful in supporting leaders as they navigate this difficult work. States should strongly consider formally planning these types of structures for both aspiring and current leaders. It should not be solely on the superintendents to seek out relationships that support and sustain them in their work.

Evidence indicated that beyond formal structures, equity-minded leaders seek each other out for advice and support. However, not all leaders, or superintendents, come to the work with the same understanding or commitment to lead through the lens of critical consciousness. Consequently, educating, examining practices, and holding superintendents accountable to lead the work of equity for all students is necessary. Therefore, formal network leaders would do well to urge participants to connect in authentic, meaningful ways that include opportunities to develop supportive relationships with critical friends outside of structured meetings. Furthermore, researchers should closely examine how networking can lead to building collective capacity among superintendents to challenge and make meaningful change to inequities in public schools.

## Conclusion

This study explored superintendents' understanding of the conceptual framework of critical consciousness and how informal and formal networking may contribute to this knowledge. Although the term critical consciousness was not readily identified, superintendents participating in this study demonstrated the tenets of critical consciousness (critical reflection, critical self-efficacy, critical action). Even so, through the participants' responses, it was clear that these tenets were present in how these superintendents approached their work.

All six superintendents reported that formal network participation significantly reinforced their equity practice. Moreover, the tenets of critical consciousness were present in discussions about the focus of network meetings, and the type of support garnered through these opportunities. The informal networks that often emerge from formal network opportunities are also meaningful to developing critical consciousness. These networks tend to be more personal and appear to offer more ongoing support as superintendents navigate through the day-to-day challenges of the position.

Finally, the contributions of this study add to the growing body of literature about the need to develop the critical consciousness of superintendents. Furthermore, an understanding of critical consciousness tenets may assist superintendents in framing their equity efforts, for as previously noted, the superintendency can be isolating and challenging. Moreover, formal and informal network participation provides opportunities to build coalitions leading to collective capacity. Consequently, having intentionally designed support systems is vital to sustaining superintendents in this work and may be a key to retaining strong, equity focused educational leaders. In conclusion, understanding critical consciousness equips superintendents to recognize, confront, and take the actions needed to disrupt inequitable systems and formal and informal

networks provide the emotional support and collective efficacy necessary to assist them in making meaningful change.



## CHAPTER FOUR<sup>3</sup>

### Discussion

This team dissertation explored district and school-level leadership and its connection to Critical Consciousness. Our overarching research question was: How, if at all, do educational leaders foster and cultivate the development of critical consciousness in schools? Specifically, we sought to undertake a multi-faceted examination of critical consciousness at multiple levels of leadership. As such, we researched leadership and critical consciousness issues for superintendents (Saba-Maguire, 2022), district leaders (Daly & Lugira, 2022), school-based leaders (Bibbo & Lugira, 2022), educators (Bibbo, Daly, Lugira, Walker, 2022), and students (Walker, 2022). Our study also addressed how critical consciousness interfaced with racial difference with a focus on both educators of color and white educators confronting injustice.

The primary focus of our study was one school district in Massachusetts that has been working in various ways toward critical consciousness and racial justice. Chapter Four begins with discussing the district's strengths toward working with the district leaders and school leaders to develop two of the tenets of critical consciousness, critical analysis and agency. Next, we will examine the final tenet of critical consciousness: critical action and consider how the district might further expand its efforts to enact this. In addition, we looked at how engineering and leveraging networks provided powerful opportunities for professional development and deeper understandings of the tenets of critical consciousness and the district's role in becoming an anti-racist organization. We will then discuss how leaders' positionality related to race influenced their identity in their school communities and will further examine how each tenet intersects to

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<sup>3</sup> The authors listed below collaboratively wrote this chapter which reflects the team approach of this project. Authors include: Tamatha L. Bibbo, Ceronne B. Daly, Pauline Lugira White - White, June Saba-Maguire, and Geoffrey Walker

construct an organizational climate and culture committed to disrupting the inequitable systems and structures harming BIPOC students. We conclude this chapter by offering policy, practice, and research implications and recommendations for the district and the field of education.

### **Critical Analysis & Agency through Self-development**

In our study of the Freetown\* School System, we found that leaders, at both the district and school levels, have engaged in critical awareness and critical reflection as an act of personal growth. In order to accomplish this, they utilize networks, coaches, feedback, and effective professional development (individually and collectively). We discuss each in turn below along with our recommendations for implementation.

#### ***Expand Networks for District and School Leaders***

Our collective studies revealed that regardless of positionality, race, or gender, having intentional networks of support is crucial to moving district and school leaders toward confronting institutionalized inequities. Our analyses revealed that developing the tenets of critical consciousness is not work that can be undertaken alone. For this reason, we assert that creating opportunities via networks, both informal and formal, can provide a foundation for this needed support. We further found that joining with other leaders who share similar beliefs and commitments offered the opportunity to cultivate racial equity commitments. Furthermore, networks that ground their work with critical consciousness in mind can have a broad impact on leadership development.

We uncovered that networks can take many forms and that frequently the composition and focus of a network dictates its impact. Literature purports that the characteristics of networks are directly impacted by those who construct them, who participate, and their objective (Paulsen et al., 2016, p. 211); consequently, how and why networks form directly impact their ultimate purpose. Scholars have asserted the need to clarify a network's purpose otherwise the work of

the network can be trivial (deLima, 2010). Accordingly, our research revealed that networks, for example, the Urban Superintendents' Network (USN), had a clear purpose and focus, and the work of this network aligned well with the tenets of critical consciousness and supported Superintendents in leading equity work.

We suggest that the intentional use of the essential language of consciousness might further assist superintendents with recognizing and challenging inequitable systems and practices in education across entire school systems. Research has demonstrated that having clear goals increases the likelihood for collaboration and new learning can occur (Leithwood & Azah, 2015). As a result of new learning, superintendents have the power to take their learning back to the district and influence other school leaders. Providing district and school leaders with the opportunities to engage in networks will only strengthen the work of equity within school districts and across the state, for networks provide the support system often needed to make equity a priority and an urgent focus.

Formal networks can serve as a springboard for other supports that will lead to critical consciousness development. For example, in the Freetown School District, because of network participation, the superintendent learned about equity based coaching opportunities. Understanding the value of this professional learning and networking, the superintendent was able to leverage this knowledge within the district and offer the same opportunity for coaching to other school and district leaders within the school community. Notably, the superintendent became aware of this support structure because of network participation. Having a forum for information dissemination led to extending and furthering opportunities for others to seek self-development.

Not only do formal networks have an impact on a leader's ability to push forth an anti-racist focus, but we also found that informal networks emerge due to a desire and need to

collaborate. The strength of informal networks should not be overlooked. In many ways, these informal connections provide the ongoing support that superintendents, district, and school leaders need to sustain them through the daily challenges of equity work. Therefore, in addition to establishing formal networks within their school districts that have a clear focus on equity, superintendents must also value the impact and power of informal networks between and among their school leaders. By designing intentional opportunities for collective learning and collaboration focused on developing critical consciousness, leaders inherently will build trust and relationships with colleagues that they can lean on when confronted with conflict. Through these connections, leaders can establish informal networks within their district that support their ability to lead for equity.

**Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Expanding Networks.** Overall, our study revealed that interpersonal relationships and connections among people dramatically influenced their confidence, focus and ability to engage in the challenging work of anti-racist leadership. Therefore, policies must be drafted and enacted with the specific purpose of ensuring that district and school leaders have the time and space to delve deeply into issues of systemic and structural racism. Building networks with this focus is one way to strengthen the commitment to this work. Additionally, state and district-level policymakers must consider embedding this work into teacher and leader preparation programs. Becoming an anti-racist educational organization cannot be left to chance and instead must be intentionally designed, with an expectation that all district and school leaders participate in this work. At the same time, recognizing that support systems via formal networks offer a powerful way to develop this systematic understanding is necessary.

State and district level practices can serve to construct effective networks. Thus, those who plan agendas and the focus of networks must have a firm understanding of what being

antiracist means. Furthermore, social justice and equity work cannot be achieved through “one and done” professional development. Accordingly, networks offer ongoing opportunities to develop relationships, create trust, establish rapport, and build ties that support the meaningful advancement of antiracist work.

Our study has demonstrated that networks have a positive and lasting impact on participants. There is a need to explore further how a district can become a racially just organization that develops district and school leaders' critical consciousness through purposefully constructed networks. Future research should investigate how network participation might directly strengthen a superintendent's commitment to this work and strengthen the will and skill of other leaders in school districts.

### ***Expand Diversity Coaches focused on Anti-Racism for Leaders***

Having a coach who has demonstrated expertise and a deep understanding of equity work is crucial to success. Scholars agree that individual coaching, as opposed to workshops and seminars, proves most effective in promoting adult educator growth (Knight, 2005). It was clear that the district and school-level leaders found great value in working with diversity coaches to help them to understand more confidently, and thereby, effectively navigate the work. In response to the nation's racial reckoning, coaches often function as a thought partner and can guide district and school leaders grappling with rapidly evolving situations. Moreover, because coaches are experts in this work, they can act as powerful allies when leaders confront the inevitable pushback present in this work (Knight, 2005). A potential added benefit is that the coaching relationship can provide a source of guidance and assistance that may last far beyond the formal association. For example, a number of white school leaders shared that having a BIPOC coach, secured through partnerships with local universities and outside organizations, provided them the necessary mentoring in order to engage in critical conversations about race

and systemic inequities. Estrella-Henderson and Jessop (2015) conducted a research study that focused on the impact of coaching for school and district leaders who were working to eliminate racial achievement gaps between students. In their study, they showed that school and district leaders benefited greatly from the specific and individualized support of a professional coach and were motivated to set and achieve goals, as well as discuss how the results contribute to the success of all students.

Similarly, the white leaders we interviewed also referenced relying on their professional and personal coach. This was particularly important as they navigated the challenges that came as school leaders dedicated to anti-racism and anti-racist practices including recruiting and retaining BIPOC staff, leading and fostering professional development, gathering feedback from school community members who identify as marginalized, and making change.

### **Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Expanding**

**Coaches for All Leaders.** Coaches have had a meaningful impact on those leaders who have maintained this support system and invaluable resource. More formalized coaches are needed in the Freedom School System for all leaders, with a purposeful structure that allows for feedback and input of particular individuals. Research on the benefits of mentors and professional coaches for all school leaders, particularly white school leaders, may prove prudent. Furthermore, a need exists for coordination and baseline understanding of the coaches' roles and responsibilities, alignment K-12 among the coaches' expectations, and expertise in mentoring leaders, particularly those white leaders who need more support, in order to become an active anti-racist organization. Furthermore, the role of race and coaching connections may impact the degree to which the relationships are successful. Therefore, future research should consider how race and coaching relationships intersect.

### ***Foster Affinity Groups for BIPOC Staff***

While many BIPOC staff valued the district's commitment to creating affinity groups, they had varying experiences across the district. The district's BIPOC staff reflect the rich intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and language; however, the current affinity groups are not as representative. Even though the district sanctions affinity groups, they are organized and facilitated by the participants, therefore the momentum and longevity of the groups vary depending on the availability of the "participant" facilitator. Leaders' professional networks require thoughtful, facilitated structures that allow leaders to be fully immersed in the experience. BIPOC staff also need to be only participants in order for them to take full advantage of the learning space.

### **Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Fostering**

**Affinity Groups.** As we affirm the value of networks and coaches for the development and sustenance of equity-focused work for superintendent, district and school leader affinity groups, leaders need to champion the development of a network structure for BIPOC affinity groups. BIPOC affinity groups need to be a combination of formal and informal networks both focused on professional learning and on personal healing. To that end, leaders need to allocate resources to convene multiple facilitated affinity groups across the district, assuring the opportunity for consistent development of learning and healing spaces available for all BIPOC staff. In addition, BIPOC affinity groups should also be a formal part of new teacher induction programs, therefore institutionalizing the network and better supporting retention of BIPOC educators.

### ***Create opportunities for leaders to receive critical feedback***

Despite the above-mentioned support systems, the absence of agency for some leaders was a theme we uncovered. In most of our studies, agency or staff empowerment was limited to

engagement in, or opportunities for, feedback. For example, district and school leaders could not provide explicit examples of educator, student, or family empowerment that shifted the power structures that have impacted historically marginalized communities of learners. Furthermore, despite interview questions that focused on agency as one of the main critical consciousness' components, responses were limited or nonexistent. Additionally, we found a disparity between what white leaders and BIPOC educators viewed as agency. Often white leaders shared that they provided staff "agency" by encouraging them to organize or lead anti-racist professional development or lead race talk, whereas, the BIPOC educators did not view this as agency, but rather as tokenizing or another example of representation. As a result, across our studies we found the lack of agency, or empowerment, as a theme.

### **Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Offering**

**Opportunities for Feedback.** Prior research has shown how social justice efforts by leaders can go wrong without active engagement and/or listening to the voices and perspectives of groups who have been traditionally marginalized by school systems, such as: people who identify as BIPOC, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+, people experiencing poverty or homelessness, students, and people with limited English proficiency (Radd & Grosland, 2018). The people who have, or are experiencing marginalization in and by the system, can provide valuable insight into how to rectify some of these fundamental problems. Leaders should be strategic in ensuring that the voices of peoples who have experienced or are experiencing oppression from the system are present in decision and policy making. Listening to these perspectives will support leaders' abilities to analyze systems of oppression within districts and schools. Specifically, BIPOC staff insist on Leaders creating opportunities for voices to be heard, coupled with the power to influence decision making and action.



***Require leaders to participate in effective leadership professional development***

Leadership professional development is a key component in the effectiveness of a school district. District and school leaders, particularly the superintendent, cast the vision for district priorities, often made public through professional development offerings. Leaders facilitate the implementation of districtwide practices through these adult learning opportunities and staff accountability. The role of district leaders is critically important; therefore, the work of leadership professional development should be aligned with district priorities while simultaneously differentiated to meet the individual needs of diverse leaders. Understanding the experiences and needs of leaders creates an opportunity for strategic and intentional learning opportunities. This type of learning approach is not typical throughout the field of education. The tenets of critical consciousness provide a mechanism for a superintendent to engage district and school leaders in professional development that attends to diverse learning needs.

Scholars such as Swanson & Welton (2019) and Seider & Graves (2020) recognize that critical consciousness must occur at both a personal and institutional level. As the findings demonstrated, those white school leaders who had been engaged in their own identity journey, in conjunction with professional development offered in the district, demonstrated critical consciousness including critical analysis, agency, and action. Although school leaders detailed a focus first on individual identity formation through critical analysis, they also understood that, as district and school leaders- most of them white- have positions of power and privilege, and therefore must provide transformative experiences for educators in their schools through promoting the agency of others and via specific leadership actions. At the district level, through engaging as participants in professional learning opportunities, leaders must examine and dismantle systems that uphold and reinforce racist structures and policies; similarly, at the school level, leaders are charged with confronting and changing inequitable practices that impact their

staff, students, and families. As Swanson & Welton (2019) found “leaders must encourage their staff, both White and people of color, to take risks and be willing to lean in and engage in racial dialogue that is uncomfortable” (p. 736). Self-awareness and social analysis, core tenets of critical consciousness, required educators to commit to both personal and institutional learning experiences and opportunities.

### **Critical Action for Social Justice Leadership**

A final tenet of Critical Consciousness is critical action, or the engagement in political or social activities, that disrupt inequalities (Diemer et al, 2016; Jemal, 2017; Seider & Graves, 2020). For leaders to be committed to social justice leadership, they are compelled to lead and take action steps towards more equitable outcomes for students. In our studies, we found that district and school leaders engaged in a number of leadership practices and critical actions that work towards a student experience that is equitable, transformative, and “a gateway to academic motivation and achievement for marginalized students” (El-Amin et al., 2017). These actions included but were not limited to: amplifying and elevating voices of marginalized peoples; leading professional learning opportunities for faculty and staff; creating opportunities for conversations on race; facilitating instructional leadership for critical consciousness; and diversifying their staff.

### ***Leaders amplify and validate the voice and experiences of historically marginalized peoples***

Understanding the voices of stakeholders across the district is critical in order to honor diverse experiences. The amplification of educator and student voice can bring clarity and direction to the work of becoming an antiracist in practice. Educators across the district have engaged in critical analysis, leading to critical actions that empower students. By validating voices that may regularly go unheard, those experiences create the conditions for a more unified district. District and school leaders have the opportunity to reflect on the implementation of

professional development and practices that have been polarizing versus inclusive. Through the collection of data, the different types of experiences of BIPOC leaders and educators vary from those of white leaders and educators. The amplification of diverse voices builds awareness and understanding where these elements have not been considered. Leaders have the influence to create inclusive dynamics to support awareness and reflection. One finding that was common to some individual studies was that educational leaders who foster critical consciousness engage in the political process of schools and districts. One way is through engagement with and amplifying the voices of peoples who have been historically marginalized by schools and school districts. For example, it was found that one strategy school leaders used to engage in a critical consciousness was to engage with students in conversations about injustices within the schools and how to rectify them. School leaders met with students regularly to hear about their experiences and ideas on how to create a more just and equitable school community. The superintendent of this district also engaged directly with students in an effort to hear their perspectives on how to become a more equitable district.

Similarly, it was found that leaders needed to engage more deeply with educators of color in order to better understand how the district, at times, marginalized their voices and perspectives. Educators of color mentioned that while some school and district initiatives around increasing equity were well-intentioned, these initiatives fell short and could have been more effective if they had included the voices of educators of color. The district's core values center on respecting the diversity of thoughts and engaging in antiracist advocacy. Representation matters at all levels of the organization, especially when and where decisions are made. BIPOC representation should be considered essential in all decision-making processes such as: budgeting, hiring, and participating in family engagement, student discipline, and student support services teams. Leaders need to advocate for representation, thereby acknowledging the value

that the diversity of perspectives BIPOC staff offer. Most notably to lead an anti-racist organization, one must create the conditions for all staff to feel valued in the organization.

Leaders who understand that race, ethnicity, and linguistic diversity coupled with professional training and their lived experiences makes BIPOC staff unequivocally valuable are then able to advocate for BIPOC representation throughout the organization.

### **Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Amplifying**

**Voices.** Overall, participants in our studies longed for more consistent, ongoing, meaningful opportunities for staff and students to be empowered. Seider and Graves (2020) claim that, “feelings of political agency represent a key dimension of critical consciousness that allows individuals to transform their ability to analyze oppressive social forces into meaningful social action challenging these forces” (p. 64). Participants expressed an appreciation for how they felt empowered to be involved in decision making and wanted more consistent, ongoing opportunities for themselves and their students. Findings suggest that agency is a critical component of promoting school-wide change; therefore, district and school leaders should actively seek ways to empower staff and student voice, particularly those who have been defined as marginalized, and provide more opportunities for leading this work in order to address systemic biases. Future research on ways to generalize these findings in order to create more equitable systems may prove worthwhile. Additionally, research should further explore the implications for offering staff opportunities to provide feedback to determine its impact on increasing staff agency and efficacy.

While relationship building with a variety of stakeholders, and in particular those from traditionally marginalized communities, was found to be important, it was also found that leaders needed to be able to navigate the tumultuous political environment of education. Superintendents need to have the fortitude and ongoing support to navigate difficult conversations with board and

community members. We suggest that to do this effectively, a superintendent needs internal and external systems of support. Furthermore, this support must be focused and intentional. The political landscape that superintendents navigate is often perilous. It is a position, much like an elected official, accountable to the public. Superintendents must be able to hear the diverse opinions and perspectives of the community and at the same time have the courage to challenge inequities often resisted by the most vocal, empowered members of a community.

Similarly, this study found that at times school leaders need to navigate parents and community members are on different ends of the political spectrum. For example, on January 7th, the day after the insurrection at the Capitol, leaders needed to listen to community members who were advocating for different approaches to communicating with students. All of this work requires leaders to have political acumen to be able to lead in ways that engage in the practice of critical consciousness.

**Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Developing Political Acumen.** It is difficult for educational leaders to lead for critical consciousness in schools and institutions that continue to engage in practices and traditions that are racist, classist, homophobic, and unjust. These challenges have increased in the last several years in some communities with the rise of far-right activists, an example of which are the attacks on the teaching of Critical Race Theory in schools. Opposing and changing oppressive practices not only requires the will and courage of educational leaders, but also the political skill and acumen to be able to navigate districts and schools as complex political organizations (Ryan & Higginbottom, 2017).

It is not enough for leaders just to listen to voices of those experiencing marginalization, leaders should take action to amplify the voices that are often drowned out by voices advocating for status quo. In systems, such as Freetown, where there is a disproportionality in the

demographics between educators and students, it is essential that leaders work to rectify this imbalance. For example, in the district studied, 67% of the students are BIPOC and yet only 9% of the educators in the system are BIPOC (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2022). The implication of this disparity is that leaders have the responsibility to work to amplify the voices of BIPOC students and educators in an effort to be leaders who work towards equity and equitable outcomes.

***Leaders implement effective professional development for all***

The superintendent and district level leadership should create differentiated learning opportunities to support the intersectional and diverse needs of educators across the district, for effective professional development provides district staff with opportunities to engage in learning in a differentiated manner. Teachers and school leaders need to be aware of– and prepared to– influence the structural conditions that determine the allocation of educational opportunities available within a school (Banks et al., 2005). To this end, Trivette et al. (2009) assert that professional development includes multiple opportunities to learn and master new knowledge, material, and practices, and that any one opportunity includes varied experiences to learn, practice, and process the target of training. In one study, we found that school leaders believe that professional development should be top down and compulsory. District leaders and school leaders should be afforded the opportunity to learn and master equitable practices in order to engage educators with learning opportunities at the school level, yet this is not enough. White school leaders reported that they had received professional development focused on antiracism and social justice in a manner that acknowledged and honored the intersections of race and the experiences of diverse learners, and yet reported that they did not feel ready to lead.

Most white leaders detailed that they had the content- awareness and analysis- yet lacked the belief that they are expert enough to function as the sole leader of this work. They claimed that they would defer to other experts, and instead, participate in the learning process; for as white leaders, they did not want to project an expert stance while also aware of their whiteness. This is a significant tension. We found that white leaders often default to experts or colleagues of color to lead this work so that they do not appear to be acting as the sole experts on race and racism. There is both an assumption that BIPOC educators are more able and have more lived experiences to deliver the professional development through an authentic lens; however, those who identity as BIPOC have reported that they want and need the white leaders to “step up” and thoughtfully and collaboratively lead the anti-racism work. Without breaking this cycle, the work will not fully be embedded, and this tension and frustration will linger (Welton et al. 2015).

Consequently, effective professional development for white leaders must include opportunities to practice leading these conversations about race and racism and building their confidence and skill in leading adult learning on these topics.

### ***Leaders create opportunities for race talk***

In order to develop and foster critical consciousness in schools, one leadership action in which district and school leaders engaged was discussion on race or “race talk.” Critical awareness and analysis requires educators to reflect on their identities, including race, and be open and willing to engage in dialogue and discussion on race and its impact on teaching, learning, and leading. In each of our studies, we found that in order to foster critical consciousness in others, effective leaders facilitated, coordinated, and supported efforts to amplify staff and families’ experiences including conversations on identity. We found that in order to engage in critical discussions on race, school leaders had to be race-conscious and

become critically aware of the habits, practices, and behaviors they display and uphold.

As researchers found, race-consciousness involves ongoing self-reflection and internal exploration of identity in order to understand how educators consciously and subconsciously participate in a system of racism (Swanson & Welton, 2019). For example, “principals who engage in race conscious dialogue and practices should help their staff critically examine how the system of racism plays out in their school community” (Swanson & Welton, 2019, p. 736).

Openness to discussing race and its impact on policies and practices that uphold inequities must be a first step, particularly for white school leaders. Although research has found that leading race talk may be challenging for white educators, white leaders should be encouraged and empowered to move from a race-evasive stance and embrace the discomfort needed to lead and foster conversations about race openly and often (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). As a result, engaging in action such as race talk is a necessary step towards an anti-racist school and a critically conscious school community and leadership development programs should give thoughtful consideration to supporting white leaders in understanding their own racial identity and moving past white fragility and color evasiveness.

**Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Creating and Maintaining Effective Professional Development.** The role of district and school leaders in the creation and implementation of consistent and effective professional development is paramount. Trivette et al. (2009) assert that professional development includes multiple opportunities to learn and master new knowledge, material, and practices, and that any one opportunity includes varied experiences to learn, practice, and process the target of training.

Critical consciousness development supports educators with the awareness of the inequities within our society to meet the needs of diverse learners (King, 1991). Therefore, district leadership should determine district wide priorities and a multi-year professional



development plan that addresses these priorities. This professional development should be part of a policy set forth by the superintendent in conjunction with other district offices. Professional development should be mandatory. Furthermore, all district and school leaders should participate in a specific leadership track to support their facilitation of professional development for central office staff and school-based staff. In addition, minimally the Professional development plan should be assessed on an annual basis for effectiveness and impact. The district can anonymize the survey but collect gender, race, ethnicity and linguistic diversity data and location either school based or central office. This process will allow for continuous improvement and opportunities for all voices to be valued. Lastly the Freetown district needs to consider how to incorporate this essential professional development into their mentoring and induction plans for new staff members. This would provide staff who are new to the district the support they need during the onboarding and mentoring process.

***Leaders engage in instructional leadership for critical consciousness***

Ultimately, schools exist to educate students, and the job of leaders is to ensure the best conditions are in place for students to learn and develop. Leaders who aim to support the development of critical consciousness in their schools and in their students can do this by engaging in instructional leadership (City et al, 2009). Through instructional leadership, Leaders can positively impact the instructional core and support more equitable relationships and classroom experiences for all students. Instructional leadership for critical consciousness can come in a variety of forms. We found that some school and district leaders took action through involvement in courses and curriculum. Curricular equity audits that examined practices such as the diversity of texts and the level and quality of civics education was something in which both district and school leaders engaged. The district's Diversity Equity and Inclusion team had a curriculum subcommittee who was tasked with examining the material and assignments being

presented to students. Both the middle and high schools recently launched state directed civics projects, or Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) projects. Some of these projects, presented to the school committee, were examples of self-directed learning opportunities supporting the development of student critical consciousness. While teachers, students, and school leaders named specific departments where topics of social justice were being examined, extracurricular and cocurricular activities such as the Black Student Union were also cited as critical to the student experience in their cultivation of their critical consciousness. One important action of educational leaders to support critical consciousness development was through their work as instructional leaders.

### **Implications/Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Growing**

**Instructional Leadership Opportunities.** While effective educational leadership has many aspects, it is important to note that the ultimate goal of our school systems is youth development, and thus instructional leadership is paramount (Grissom et al., 2021). In the myriad of challenges that educational leaders now face, we recommend that leaders make policies that support schools becoming places where students can develop their critical consciousness. Some of those policies may include curricular equity audits, implementing Ethnic Studies courses, expanding co-curricular opportunities for students such as affinity groups and other clubs, providing professional development for teachers, setting goals for and assessing critical consciousness, and embedding YPAR in schools' curricula. Leaders must maintain the practice of keeping an instructional lens as paramount to their practice. Finally, we recommend that more research is conducted to better understand which practices educational leaders, at both the district and the school level, should engage in order to positively impact the development of critical consciousness in students.

### ***Leaders diversify and retain staff***

We found that the school leaders with whom we studied made explicit efforts to recruit and retain a diverse staff in order to reflect the demographics of their students and families. Our research has uncovered that as challenging as it is to recruit BIPOC staff, it is much more difficult to create an environment that retains them. District and school leaders in our study have implemented intentional, systemic hiring practices focused on recruiting BIPOC educators. A few leaders shared strategies that have been put into place to retain BIPOC educators including mentors, coaches, and affinity groups, yet this remains an area of growth. As research has shown retention of BIPOC staff is essential to creating and maintaining a school climate and culture that will allow students, particularly those who traditionally have been denied access and opportunity, to be successful in their educational experience. Further research is needed to provide guidance on relevant and effective efforts for retaining these invaluable hires.

### **Implications/Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Diversifying Staff.**

Increasing diversity at both the school level and the district level requires leaders to commit to both recruiting and retaining BIPOC staff. Retaining BIPOC staff is more complex because Leaders need to influence the culture of the schools or departments that BIPOC staff join, and that poses its own challenges. BIPOC staff interviewed for this study all described not feeling connected to the district. Some felt that they were not valued for their lived experiences even though they have taught in the district for many years, some felt that their knowledge of their students and families was dismissed even though they share similar racial or ethnic backgrounds, and others felt that they did not get invited to participate in any decision-making spaces. Therefore, for Leaders committed to diversifying the district, representation matters. BIPOC staff need to see themselves represented in all areas of the organization and specifically in the

committees where policy and practices are developed and decided.

### **Final Recommendations for Critical Consciousness Development**

In conclusion, it is critical to evaluate the systemic opportunities for the Freetown district. This research study has provided data that speaks to holistic and strategic steps that could strengthen the critical conscious work of district leaders. The superintendent has prioritized a relentless focus on post-pandemic recovery and rejuvenation, nurturing a sense of belonging for the broader community and becoming an antiracist school district by focusing on the code of character, conduct and support. This work can be accomplished through the lens of critical conscious leadership. A cohesive and systemic approach will create opportunities for awareness, reflection and action throughout the district. The findings of this research study provide a variety of final recommendations in alignment with the superintendent's priorities.

Since our study encompassed a wide range of stakeholders and, therefore multiple data sources, we are confident in putting forth the claim that a superintendent plays a critical role in providing the school district the leadership needed to become an anti-racist organization. Moreover, clear data emerged supporting critical consciousness as a robust framework for a district to examine its understanding of and progress toward ensuring an equitable and inclusive school organization. As we learned, the positionality of a superintendent is influential in setting equity priorities and commitments at the district office and ultimately affects practices at the school level. Subsequently, ensuring strong, equity-minded, active anti-racist, anti-bias leadership over school districts must be prioritized.

As an initial step, Freetown district leaders should seek to understand the current methods for stakeholder engagement in order to create more effective and authentic opportunities for two-way communication and understanding. The exchange of ideas and experiences should involve

the district leaders, school leaders, educators, students, and families. In addition, the district should seek to create spaces for educators of color to share their unique experiences as BIPOC, to voice their concerns about policies and practices, and to be valued as collaborative problem solvers and informed experts based on their lived experiences. As a result, the district will be able to collect data regarding the areas of strength and growth from all stakeholders that could support the priority areas, while simultaneously nurturing a sense of belonging for the broader community. As Ishimaru (2019) found in her study, in order “to move beyond ‘random acts of engagement’ (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010), systemic collaboration practices may need to shift from remediating families and staffing family engagement positions ... to fuel collective organizational improvement and leveraging family expertise to foster professional learning and innovations in designing equitable educational environments (p. 31).

Next, the Freetown district should consider restructuring the work of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Office. Although the majority of the equity centered learning and practices are supported through this office, in order to build capacity through all stakeholders a new approach could support the intent and impact of this office’s work. Through shared responsibility and collective action, alignment of learning and practice could come to scale through district and school leaders. In order to become an antiracist school district that is focused on the code of character, conduct and support for students (who are the major stakeholders), creating a deliberate and measurable plan is paramount. Common languages and practices are critical to this planning. Therefore, the Freetown district should consider mandatory, districtwide learning grounded in the Path to Becoming an Antiracist Organization Framework (Tool Kit for Equity Project). This work lives with all district leaders and with uniformity should be practiced by leaders and educators throughout the district. In support of monitoring progress towards this

district priority, the implementation of the Continuum for Becoming an Antiracist Organization as a tool could provide check and balances for district leaders (Crossroads Ministry).

Some white leaders still demonstrate a color-evasive perspective which has implications on preparation courses and ongoing professional development. Due to the critical need to dismantle inequities in education, leaders must be prepared to guide and lead this work; this may not be possible for those who have a race-evasive perspective. As a result, all candidates for leadership positions should be required to engage in coursework on anti-racism in education and should be required to maintain professional growth and learning on this topic (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011; Welton et al. 2015). Capacity of leaders must be at the forefront of goals for the district and requiring coursework prior to hiring as well as continued development through professional workshops, relying on professional coaches, and expanding networks will prove invaluable in dismantling systemic inequities that remain.

### **Conclusion**

This study was conducted at a pivotal time in our country's history. Not only is the United States in the midst of a global pandemic, but there is also a reckoning with racial injustice and significant threats to our democratic system. Public education has been theorized to have the power to support increasing social justice and strengthening democracy (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1993). While there are leaders and districts pushing to ban Critical Race Theory (CRT) and books about oppression, there are other leaders and districts pushing to become anti-racist and pro-social justice organizations (Kaplan & Owings, 2021). Now, more than ever, school leaders need to be leaders that cultivate critical consciousness if we are to build an anti-racist school setting in which access and opportunity are a reality for each of our students and families regardless of their racial, ethnic, or linguistic attributes.

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## **Appendix A: Site Selection**

### **Proposed Criteria for Selection of Site**

1. The superintendent demonstrates tenets of critical consciousness through formal language and public-facing documentation, including a strategic plan, school improvement plans, and mission and vision statements.
2. The superintendent has served in his/her position for at least two years.
3. The superintendent identifies participation in a formal network and/or an informal network.

## **Appendix B: Superintendent Interview Protocol**

### **Opening Statements:**

- This interview is strictly voluntary. At any time, you may ask to conclude the interview.
- All interview questions are optional. Please feel free to not answer a question.
- All interview responses will be confidential. Although we plan to share our findings with our district, we will take measures to maintain your confidentiality and use pseudonyms to protect participants' identities.
- We are here to listen and learn from you and your experiences. Our position is to examine, not judge, to learn from your expertise.
- We plan to record this interview. At any time, you may request for us to turn off the transcription device.

### **Introduction and Opening Questions**

1. How long have you been in public education? Can you tell me how you came to the role of superintendent?
2. What attracted you to want to be a superintendent in this district?

### **Network Supports**

1. Who are your trusted confidants? Are there people who demonstrate certain qualities whom you reach out to for support more than others? Why?
2. Are there key people whom you rely upon to support you during particularly challenging times? Can you share a story that illustrates an experience of how you relied on that support?
3. Do you intentionally or unintentionally belong to any superintendent or leadership groups? Why?
4. Do you rely on people within formal networks for advice? Who and why?
5. Do you have an informal network of people whom you seek support? Who are they?

### **Defining Equity through Awareness (self-reflection and growth)**

6. Can you recall an experience when you learned of a group of students being marginalized? Tell me about it.
7. Was there a person you sought out to discuss your perspective? Who was it, and why? How did this person or people help you to navigate the situation?

### **Defining Equity through a Sense of Efficacy (confidence you can make a change)**

8. Have you worked with certain people or groups that have made you feel like part of a successful effort toward equity-based work? Who were they, and why?
9. How did this successful effort affect you? Did you have a sense of accomplishment? and do you believe this successful effort bolstered your capacity to keep pushing change efforts? How so?

**Defining Equity through Critical Action (taking actionable steps to confront systemic inequities)**

10. Can you share a story that illustrates your commitment to equity and change, which posed a challenge? How did you respond to this challenge?
11. What evidence have you seen that your commitment to equity has influenced your district policies/practices?
12. What kind of equity centered professional development opportunities have you provided for educators in FPS?

**Closing Questions**

13. What advice do you have for superintendents who wish to lead equity change?
14. Is there anything that I haven't asked that you would like to share with me?
15. Are there white leaders in your district that you can recommend to my colleague to interview?
16. Can you recommend other leaders, or superintendents you think would contribute to this study because of their informal/formal network participation?
17. Do you know of any school leaders or educators who are doing work around social analysis and/or social action around equity or social justice?
18. Do you have questions for me?

## Appendix C

### Field Notes Protocol

TEMPLATE FOR TAKING FIELD NOTES		
Date:		
Site:		
Activity:		
Participants:		
Length of Observation:		
	Observations	Observer Reflections/Comments
Physical Setting		
Participants		
Activities Observed		
Interactions Observed		
Conversations Observed		
Other		
Summary:		
Reflections:		

(Adapted from Merriam and Tisdell, 2016)

## Appendix D

### Document Review Protocol

Title of Document:	Date Produced:
Author:	Location (school/ district):
Context of document/ connection to critical consciousness:	
Objective/ goal of document- how it supports critical consciousness:	
Intended Audience:	
Any bias:	
Contribution to the study: <input type="checkbox"/> critical analysis (awareness/ reflection) <input type="checkbox"/> critical agency <input type="checkbox"/> critical action	

(Adapted from Merriam and Tisdell, 2016)