

District Leadership Practices that Foster Equity: Fostering an Ecology of Belonging

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DISTRICT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT FOSTER EQUITY: FOSTERING AN
ECOLOGY OF BELONGING

Dissertation in Practice
by

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with Deborah S. Bookis, Sandra Drummey, Allyson Mizoguchi,
and Thomas Michael Welch, Jr.

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by
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Dr. Vincent Cho (Chair)
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Abstract

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

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

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DEDICATION

Throughout my educational career, I have been blessed with mentors that encouraged, counseled, and guided me so that I was finally able to achieve my lifelong dream of a higher education. While many students have such supports that assure them access to this higher education, many do not. Therefore, I dedicate this work to all educators and mentors who work tirelessly to help all students develop an academic identity and instill the belief that we are all “college material.” Your support and encouragement truly transform lives.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE	1
INTRODUCTION	1
<i>Problem Statement and Research Question</i>	1
<i>Individual Studies and Conceptual Lens</i>	4
<i>Literature Review</i>	5
What is Equity?	5
Equity, not equality	5
Equity as outcomes	6
Equity as opportunity	6
Equity as commitment.....	7
Equity as affirmation	7
Equity as systems	8
Our operational definition of equity.....	8
Issues of Equity in Massachusetts	9
Leadership Matters	12
District-level leadership.....	12
School-level leadership.....	15
Challenges to Leading with Equity.....	17
External challenges	17
Internal challenges.....	19
Promising Equity Practices.....	20
<i>The Five Studies</i>	22
Climate of belonging	22
Equity talk.....	23
Culturally responsive behaviors	23
Teacher leadership.....	24
Leadership transitions and equity.....	24
Synthesis of the Five Studies.....	25
CHAPTER TWO	27
METHODOLOGY.....	27
Study Design	27
Site selection.....	28
Participant selection.....	29
Data Collection.....	31
Semi-structured interviews.....	31
Document review	32
Observations.....	33
Data Analysis.....	33
Methods Limitations	35
Case study design.....	35
New leadership team	35
Participant Demographics.....	36
Individual Biases/Positionality	36
CHAPTER THREE	37
INDIVIDUAL STUDY: FOSTERING AN ECOLOGY OF BELONGING.....	37
<i>Statement of the Problem</i>	37
<i>Review of the Literature/Conceptual Framework</i>	38
Schools Reproduce Systems of Oppression	38
Systemic inequities and opportunity gaps	39
Exclusionary practices	40
Battling Back: Culturally Responsive Leadership	40
Ensuring equitable school practices	41

Connecting with cultures and the community	41
<i>My Perspective: Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)</i>	42
Promoting Inclusive, Anti-Oppressive School Contexts	42
Engaging Students' Indigenous/Local Neighborhood Community Contexts	44
<i>Methods</i>	45
Data Collection.....	45
Semi-structured Interviews.....	46
Document review.....	47
Data Analysis.....	47
Study Limitations.....	48
Positionality of the Researcher	48
<i>Findings</i>	49
Promoting Culturally Responsive School Environments	49
Recognizing current exclusionary practices.	49
Building social capital	51
Building cultural capital	51
Developing capacity	52
Using data.....	54
Promoting a vision of belonging.....	55
Engaging Parents, Students, and Local Contexts.....	57
Community as an informative space	57
Community as partners	58
Serving the whole family	59
<i>Discussion</i>	61
District Leadership Fostering a Climate of Belonging	61
Recommendations for District Leaders.....	63
<i>Conclusion</i>	65
CHAPTER FOUR	66
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	66
Equity as Opportunity.....	69
Equity as Commitment	71
Equity as Affirmation.....	73
Equity as Systems.....	74
<i>Conclusion: A New Way to Look At Equity</i>	77
REFERENCES	80
APPENDIX A	90
APPENDIX B	91
APPENDIX C	92
APPENDIX D	93
APPENDIX E	94
APPENDIX F	97

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 <i>Five Studies of the Role of District Leadership Practices in Fostering Equity</i>	4
Table 2 <i>Researchers' Contexts for Equity and Research Questions</i>	22
Table 3 <i>Interview Participants</i>	31
Table 4 <i>Summary of Data Collection by Researcher</i>	33
Table 5 <i>Data Collection</i>	45
Table 6 <i>District Leader Semi-structured Interview Questions Connected to the Research Question</i>	46

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 <i>Percent of 3rd Graders Meeting Grade-Level Expectations in English Language Arts, 2017 Next-Gen MCAS</i>	10
Figure 2 <i>Percent of 8th Graders Meeting Grade-Level Expectations in Mathematics, 2017 Next-Gen MCAS</i>	11
Figure 3 <i>Percent of Four-Year High School Graduation Rates for the Class of 2016 and National Rankings</i>	12
Figure 4 <i>Synthesis of the Five Studies</i>	25
Figure 5 <i>Five Perspectives of Equity</i>	67
Figure 6 <i>Equity Framework</i>	78

CHAPTER ONE¹

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement and Research Question

The United States offers the promise of opportunity for all students to have equal and equitable access to high-quality education that will prepare them for college and careers.

Education is intended to strengthen and support a society by developing the knowledge and skills of each of its citizens (Cramer, Little & McHatton, 2018). However, our nation continues to struggle to deliver this promise as evidenced by persistent disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes for all learners.

Inequity in education has harmful implications for a healthy democratic society. For example, the gaps in educational achievement experienced by Black and Latinx students continue to widen to the point where many youth, especially low-income students of color, are unprepared for a labor market requiring increasingly complex skills (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Research of our prison population shows that over half of those incarcerated are high school dropouts and possess poor literacy skills and undiagnosed learning disabilities (Barton & Coley, 1996). Disparities in learning opportunities and academic outcomes have contributed to America's decline in educational performance in comparison with other nations (Blackstein & Noguera, 2016). Indeed, inadequate access to high-quality teachers and resources for non-Asian students of color threatens the strength of our democracy. As Darling-Hammond (2007) states, "Our future will be increasingly determined by our capacity and our will to educate all children well" (p. 319).

¹ This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Matthew Bishop, Deborah Bookis, Sandra Drummey, Allyson Mizoguchi, and Thomas Michael Welch, Jr.

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

To address educational inequity, reform efforts have often taken the shape of federal legislation aspiring to provide historically marginalized students equitable opportunities to learn. Such efforts saw the creation of landmark legislation such as Title 1 of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, originally intended to solve the problems of poverty through supplementing school funding and providing more resources for children of low-income families. Nearly a decade after the Title 1 Act passed, more substantive guidelines for school districts led to the eventual development of further national school reform policies of the eighties and nineties designed to mitigate the achievement gap (Cohen, Moffitt & Goldin, 2007). In a push for national accountability and a heightened focus on closing achievement gaps, in 2001 the federal government tied state allocations of Title 1 funds through the attempted reform efforts of No Child Left Behind (Wrabel, Saultz, Polikoff, McEachin, & Duque, 2018). The most recent reform effort led by the U.S. Department of Education passed in December 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In a more refined approach to equity in schools, one of the guidelines specifically highlighted in the new ESSA policy calls for schools and school leaders

“to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps” (*Every Student Succeeds Act*, 2015).

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

Recognizing the importance of district-level leadership in student achievement and reducing inequity, we conducted this study to gain a deeper understanding of the practices that district leaders leverage in their efforts to enact equity for all students. These practices may have direct influence on equity work at the district level, and may also support leadership at other levels within the district that in turn fosters equity work elsewhere. While the literature is replete with school leaders’ practices that impact equitable access and outcomes of historically marginalized students (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Leithwood, Patten & Jantzi, 2010; Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010), there is a gap in the literature that explores how district leaders’ practices might do the same. Specifically, we will explore the following research question: How do district leadership practices foster equity? Our study will examine several aspects of the school district leadership context, including:

fostering a sense of belonging, fostering equity talk, educating English Learners, teacher leadership, and succession planning to support leadership transition.

Individual Studies and Conceptual Lens

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

Table 1
Five Studies of the Role of District Leadership Practices in Fostering Equity

<u>Investigator</u>	<u>Research Question</u>	<u>Conceptual Framework</u>
Bishop	How do district leaders help foster a climate of belonging for students of color?	Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)
Bookis	How do district leaders use framing processes when engaging in equity talk?	Collective Action Framing
Drummey	How do educators enact or support culturally responsive behaviors for ELs?	Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)
Mizoguchi	How do district leaders set the conditions for teacher-led equity work?	Teacher Leadership
Welch	How do the practices of district leaders foster equity through planning for future	Human Capital Theory

changes in leadership?

Literature Review

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

What is Equity?

Equity is a challenging and complex idea to define. Throughout the literature review we discovered variations of the definitions of equity and ways it can be explained. This may be one contributing factor to persistent inequities: if we don't know what it is, how do we talk about it? How do we create conditions for it and operationalize it? The inherent complexity may also explain the rationale for recent legislation to include equity in its purpose statement. Debates about equity often evoke a zero-sum scenario, a perception that if we do more for those who are disadvantaged it will mean there will be less for the advantaged (Blackstein & Noguera, 2016). In this section, we explore the multiple ways to understand the idea of equity and then present our research study's operational definition.

Equity, not equality. In an effort to define equity for our study's purpose, it is important to first clarify the distinction between "equality" and "equity." Since equality assumes that

everyone receives the same share, one can define educational equality as students receiving the same support, opportunities, instruction, and resources in the spirit of fairness for all. With the diverse needs of students, providing the same level of support for all is insufficient in ensuring positive outcomes for all learners. Consequently, each student must be provided with instruction and support based upon their individual needs. Therefore, an equal education may be inherently unequal (Cramer et al., 2018).

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

Equity as opportunity. Some researchers and organizations define equity in terms of the educational opportunities afforded to students and/or the extent to which students have access to all the opportunities offered. For example, the Professional Standards for Positive School Leadership (2015) stated for Standard 3 that, “Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (p. 11). In practice this translates to removing barriers that exist to opportunities such as eliminating leveling within a discipline, creating a sense of belonging for all students, implementing effective instructional and family engagement practices, providing

teachers with opportunities to lead and make equity-based decisions, and reducing or eliminating participation fees.

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

Equity as affirmation. Recently, researchers have begun to define equity in terms of how educators view and affirm students, as this is what creates a foundation for operating principles and all other activities that ensure more equitable learning cultures. Pollack (2017) stated that "equity efforts treat all young people as equally and infinitely valuable" (p. 7), while Fergus (2016) went even further, explaining that each person's unique experiences should be considered in coordinating practices and outcomes. Egalite, Fusarelli and Fusarelli (2017) expanded the definition of equity by defining an equitable community as "one that pursues the common good by affirming the identities of constituent groups defined by race/ethnicity, gender, national origin, language, sexual orientation, religion, disability, and the intersection of these identities" (p.759). In practice, district leaders promote inclusive and strength-based practices and find ways to encourage cooperation among and between groups of students.

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

Our operational definition of equity. Our literature review confirmed that equity can be understood and addressed from multiple perspectives: outcomes, opportunity, commitment, affirmation, and as a system, making it even more challenging to discuss and address. For the purpose of this study, we drew on the different perspectives discussed previously to operationally define equity as the commitment to ensure that every student receives the opportunities they require based on their individual needs, strengths, and experiences to reach their full potential.

Different aspects of our definition may have been highlighted in our individual studies, but overall, our work was anchored in our operational definition of equity.

Issues of Equity in Massachusetts

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

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

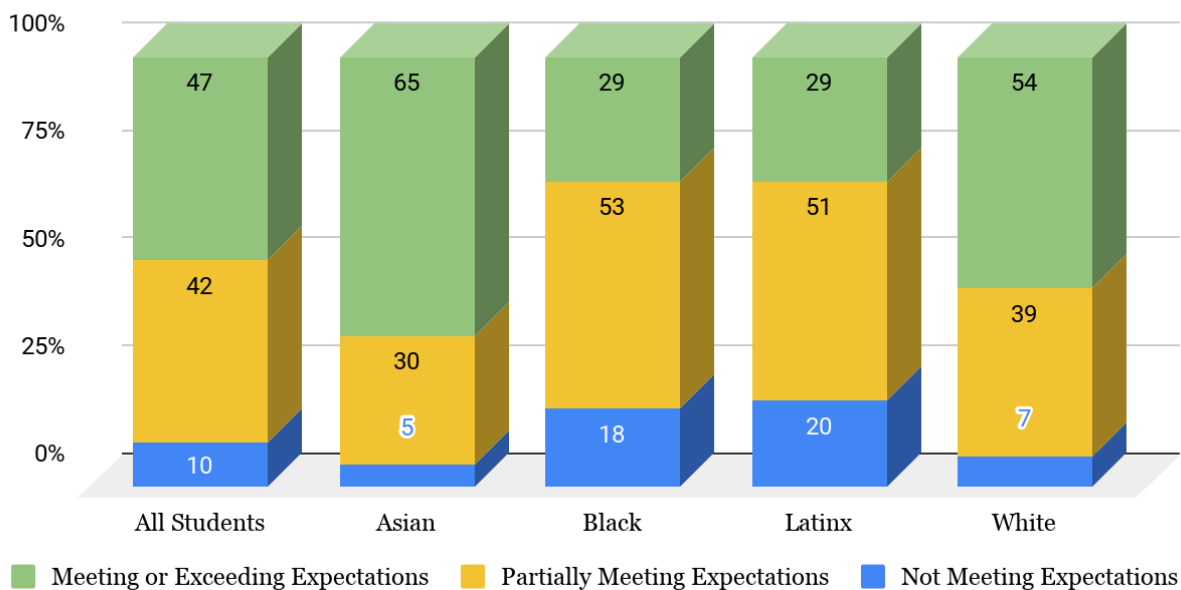
However, despite a focus on equity, experiences for students of color in Massachusetts mirror the national trends. According to the *Number One for Some* report released by The Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership in 2018, even though Massachusetts is perennially affixed among the national ranking lists in state achievement, students of color still face “glaring and persistent disparities in opportunity and achievement” (p.1). While Massachusetts scores on the international PISA assessment would place the Commonwealth first among the 35 participating countries, the scores for Black and Latinx students would place the Commonwealth twenty-eighth (p. 4). Figures 1 and 2 below show that a significantly lower percentage of students of historically marginalized students (Black, Latinx, economically disadvantaged,

English language learners, and students with disabilities) met grade-level expectations in both English Language Arts and mathematics than their counterparts based on 2017 MCAS data.

Figure 1

Percent of 3rd Graders Meeting Grade-level Expectations in ELA, 2017 MCAS

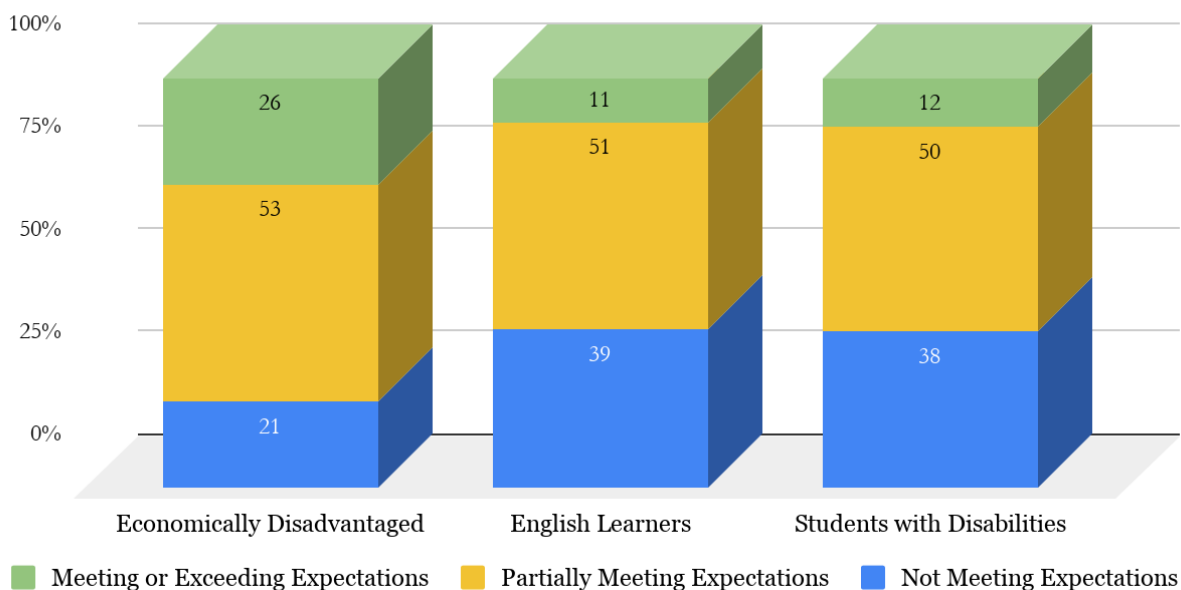
Percent of 3rd graders meeting grade-level expectations in English Language Arts, 2017 Next-Gen MCAS



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

Figure 2
Percent of 8th Graders Meeting Grade-level Expectations in Mathematics, 2017 MCAS

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

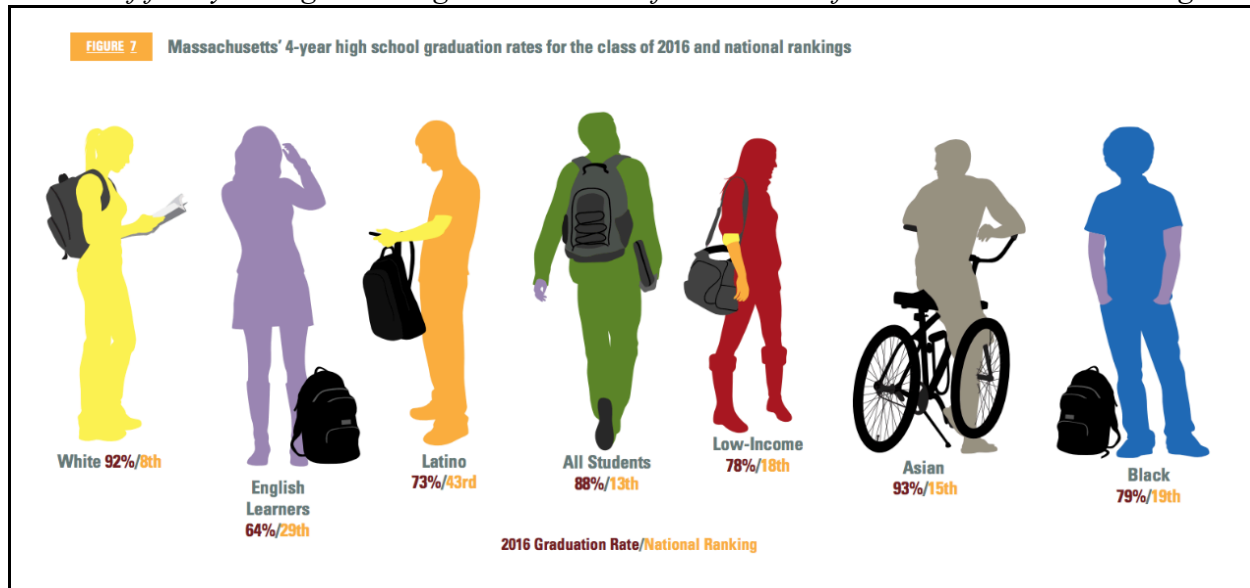


Adapted from Number One for Some (2018), p. 4

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

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

Figure 3
Percent of four-year high school graduation rates for the class of 2016 and national rankings



Number One for Some (2018), p. 5

Leadership Matters

Leadership for creating, sustaining and promoting equitable school systems is vital as evidenced by current research and the explicit statement for leadership in ESSA. Within school systems there are visible, clearly titled leadership roles, as well as others that are not quite as visible or defined. In this section we review the literature according to two different levels (district and school) of leadership and the roles contained within each level.

District-level leadership. One level of leadership whose positive impact on creating equitable learning systems and student learning outcomes that has become increasingly clear is

district-level leadership. The Superintendency comprises one of the roles within district-level leadership along with those whose roles pertain to an area of focus across the whole district.

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

Other district-level leaders. Marzano and Waters (2009) asserted that district-level leaders have an impact on student achievement. Specifically, their meta-analytical study sought to determine the relationship between district level leadership and student achievement. Their analysis of 27 related studies that represented 2714 districts studied between 1970 to 2005 brought them to the conclusion that when district leaders are effective, student achievement across the district is positively affected. Furthermore, Marzano and Waters (2009) claimed that

district-level leaders are effective when they are engaged in the following five initiatives: (a) ensuring collaborative goal setting, (b) establishing non negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (c) creating broad alignment with and support of district goals, (d) monitoring achievement and instruction goals, and (e) allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction. Effectively fulfilling these responsibilities leads to a measurable positive effect on student achievement.

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

In their narrative synthesis of 81 peer-reviewed articles, books, policy and research reports, and other pieces on the subject of the role of school districts in reform, Rorrer, Skrla and Scheurich (2008) concluded that district-level leaders have an "indispensable role, as institutional actors, in educational reform" (p. 336). Rorrer et al. (2008) assert that districts serve four essential roles in reform: (a) providing instructional leadership, (b) reorienting the organization, (c) establishing policy coherence, and (d) maintaining an equity focus. It is the last role, focusing on equity, that they argue should give direction to the other three.

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

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

Principals. The vital role of principals in successfully implementing reform efforts to support the achievement of historically marginalized students is well-documented (e.g. Theoharis, 2010; Louis & Murphy, 2016; DeMatthews, 2018). In their analysis of 116 surveys by teachers and principals, Louis and Murphy (2016) determined that equitable student achievement outcomes correlated with the culture of curiosity, trust, and caring in the building that the principal had established. This degree of organizational learning, a direct result of the principal's professional trust in the teachers, had a positive result for historically marginalized students in particular. Analyzing the leadership strategies that six principals used to disrupt injustice in their schools, Theoharis (2010) found in the case of five principals, their efforts had a "significant impact on marginalized students and their learning" (p. 348). Specifically, on a structural level, these principals worked to (a) eliminate segregated programs, (b) increase rigor and access to opportunities, (c) increase student learning time, and (d) increase accountability systems for the achievement of all students (p. 342). Underscoring these efforts was an unwavering commitment to equity held by each principal; Theoharis stated, "The first breaking-

the-silence lesson from these principals that can be offered is the importance of believing that equity is possible” (p. 367).

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

Teachers. The effect of teacher leadership on student outcomes is relatively unstudied; for example, in their 2017 review of 54 articles related to teacher leadership, Wenner and Campbell found that “the effects of teacher leadership were limited to the effects on the teacher leaders themselves and the colleagues of these teacher leaders” rather than student learning (p. 150). When it comes to teacher-led equity work in particular, research is scarce. However, much research has captured the importance and centrality of the classroom teacher in student outcomes, indicating that there is no greater impact on student learning than the effectiveness of the classroom teacher (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 1997). Also, we know from research on teacher leadership that when given the autonomy and trust by their principals to employ new instructional practices -- including those that positively impact learning for all learners -- teachers feel empowered, confident, and more engaged in their craft (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Wenner and Campbell (2017) also noted that a high level of teacher

leadership in a school fosters a stronger sense of commitment among all teachers to educating their students and setting high expectations for them (p. 152).

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

Challenges to Leading with Equity

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

External challenges. Some of the challenges of leading with equity come from sources outside of the school system itself, yet can have a significant impact on how and what decisions are made. Foremost among these is federal policy, most recently ESSA. Egalite et al. (2017) traced the historical efforts of federal educational guidance to better understand the equity impact of efforts to decentralize governance. Their findings suggest that the new law will need to be

adhered to so that already existing inequities are neither reinforced nor intensified. ESSA also specifies an increased focus on educational leaders' roles in implementing federal goals for education. However, Young, Winn and Reedy (2017) contended that this focus on leadership and leadership development could be derailed by both state and federal activities. This finding is exemplified by Mattheis' (2017) four-year ethnographically informed study which found that district leaders are policy intermediaries who interpret and implement state and federal policy. This requires district leaders to make decisions that, at times, prioritize external demands over constituent needs, "which can result in unintended consequences of implementing integration initiatives in ways that replicate, rather than disrupt, existing structural inequities" (Mattheis, 2017, p. 546).

Increasing resegregation of schools also poses an external challenge to equity-minded district leaders. Orfield (2001) noted that, "for all groups except Whites, racially segregated schools are almost always schools with high concentrations of poverty" and "nearly two-thirds of African-American and Latino students attend schools where most students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch" (p. 320). Clearly, race segregation collides with funding for schools. Property tax revenues and state funding formulas impact the resources available for teaching and learning from personnel to instructional materials and facilities (Darling-Hammond, 2007); "thus students most likely to encounter a wide array of educational resources at home are also most likely to encounter them at school" (Kozol, 2005, p. 320-321).

Cultural and racial deficit thinking among policy makers and the public in general can also inhibit district leaders' equity efforts (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). If the predominant thinking is that certain cultural or racial groups lack effort or practice poor child rearing, then shifting mindsets becomes paramount in the work of leaders. This is because those with power

and influence will ensure that their priorities are given time, attention and resources (Rorrer, 2006; Roegman, 2017). Simultaneously, district leaders need to navigate shifting demographics within their local contexts that may bring conflicting norms and values. This necessitates the need for leaders to expand their definitions of equitable practices, and impacts their decision-making processes and actions for equity (Shields, 2017; Shields, LaRocque, & Oberg, 2002).

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

In his qualitative study of seven social justice leaders, Theoharis (2009) enumerated formidable bureaucracy, unsupportive central office administrators, and prosaic administrator

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

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

As described above, we have learned that school leaders may encounter a variety of challenges to their equity work, including policy implementation, racially segregated school demographics, deficit mindsets, a lack of culturally proficient practices, and bureaucracy. To overcome these challenges and sustain their commitment to equity, leaders must thoughtfully adjust their current practices and develop new ones. With these challenges in mind, we were able to probe more deeply into the leadership practices that emerged from our individual studies. Which practices are a direct response to vexing challenges? Which practices have evolved and strengthened more effortlessly? As we embarked on our five research studies related to equity, we acknowledged the challenges implicit in each study and therefore anticipated a more comprehensive understanding of the promising leadership practices that foster equity.

Promising Equity Practices

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

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

From our reading of the current research, it is clear that effective equity work requires sustained, diverse and reflective efforts occurring throughout the district leadership team. While much research has been conducted on the impact of building leadership and classroom teachers on equity, there is a gap in the research related to district-level leadership practices. The

dissertation in practice team identified equity practices in several aspects of the school district context, with the intent of contributing to the field of educational equity research by examining how district leadership practices foster equity.

The Five Studies

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

Table 2
Researchers' Contexts for Equity and Research Questions

<u>Investigator</u>	<u>Context for Equity</u>	<u>Research Question</u>
Bishop	Sense of Belonging	How do district leaders help foster a climate of belonging for students of color?
Bookis	Equity Talk	How do district leaders use framing processes when engaging in equity talk?
Drummey	Culturally Responsive School Leadership	How do educational leaders enact or support culturally responsive behaviors for ELs?
Mizoguchi	Teacher Leadership	How do district leaders set the conditions for teacher-led equity work?
Welch	Leadership Transitions	How do the practices of district leaders foster equity through planning for future changes in leadership?

Climate of belonging. In order to foster equity, schools need to nurture an ecology of belonging for all students. However, Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, and Lash (2007) asserted that typical schools and school cultures may alienate students of color as they often are not responsive to their needs. Therefore, district leaders pursuing equitable schools have a responsibility to ensure school environments cultivate a sense of belonging for students of

color. Bishop (2020) examined district leaders' perspectives around efforts to foster a sense of belonging for students of color, and was guided by the following research question: How do district leaders foster a sense of belonging for students of color?

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

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

guided by the question: How do educational leaders enact and support culturally responsive behaviors for ELs?

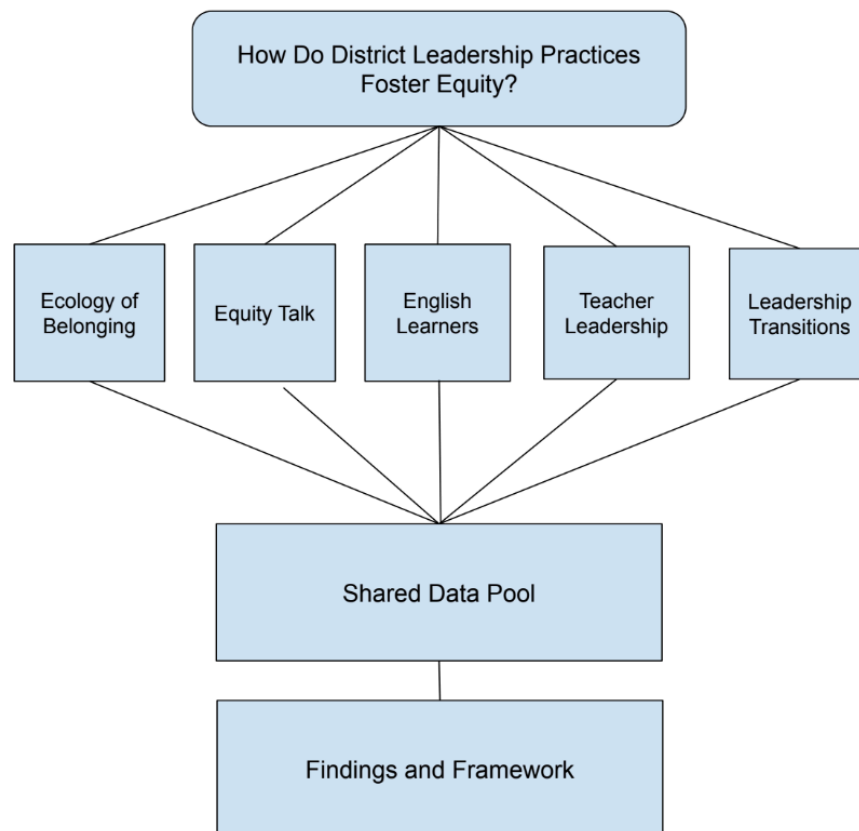
Teacher leadership. With their close proximity to learners, teachers play an integral role in establishing an equitable educational experience for all students. Thus, Mizoguchi (2020) explored how the district leadership cultivated and supported a culture of teacher leadership when it came to equity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

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

Synthesis of the Five Studies

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

Figure 4
Synthesis of the Five Studies



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

CHAPTER TWO²

METHODOLOGY

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

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

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

Study Design

The dissertation in practice used an exploratory qualitative case study design to address the primary research question of this project: How do district leadership practices foster

² This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Matthew Bishop, Deborah Bookis, Sandra Drummey, Allyson Mizoguchi, and Thomas Michael Welch, Jr.

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

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

Site selection. We conducted our research in a public school district located in the Northeast United States. For purposes of anonymity, we refer to the school district as Monarch Public School District (MPSD). Two distinct criteria drove our site selection process. First, we identified a school district that had a stated focus on equity. During our initial site selection process, we discovered that the newly hired superintendent of MPSD was highlighting equity at the forefront of his entry plan. Consequently, we discovered two documents that provided evidence of MPSD's focus on equity: the incoming superintendent's memo to the school committee explaining the creation of the Office of Educational Equity and Community

Empowerment and a memo to the school committee with the job descriptions of the Chief Equity Officer and Chief School Officer. Together, these documents indicated to us that MPSD was a district that had a focus on equity.

Second, we wanted to conduct our research in a medium- to large-sized public school district. Presumably, a public school district of 10,000-15,000 enrolled students allowed for access to an extensive district-level leadership team, multiple schools of different grade levels, the potential to interview a large percentage of school leaders, and more of a variation of policy and programmatic initiatives to explore through an equity lens. Another criteria for selection was a district with a racially and linguistically diverse student population. Targeting a district of this size with a diverse student enrollment led to more opportunities to examine how leaders foster equity (Mills & Gay, 2019; Creswell, 2013). We gathered information regarding student enrollment and school distribution from the state's education department website (School and District Profiles, n.d). According to the district profile, MPSD had a population of approximately 14,000 students, which consisted of about one-third Asian, one-third Hispanic, one-third White, and with small percentages of African-American and Multi-race. Furthermore, with regard to linguistic diversity, approximately one-third of students' first language was not English, one-quarter of students were English Language Learners, and there were almost 70 different languages represented in MPSD.

Participant selection. The members of the dissertation in practice group engaged with a variety of district-level leaders, school-level leaders, and other key stakeholders who provided insight to how the selected district fostered equity. In particular, this study included participants who were in a leadership role. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for the study. This strategy was necessary based on the short timeline for data collection and the need for the

team to access key leaders in the district who were able to share their detailed experiences in working with equity (Creswell & Clark, 2011). In addition, we employed a snowball sampling method whereby participants familiar with the district's work in equity led to the identification of others connected to how equity was fostered within the organization (Mills & Gay, 2018). In this study, the research team was intentional by engaging knowledgeable members of the district who both understood equity and had a leadership role in fostering conditions to support equity.

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

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

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

Table 3
Interview Participants

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

Data Collection

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

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

leverage in their efforts to enact equity for all students. Before each interview began, interviewees were required to sign a consent form.

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

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

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

Observations. The research team observed as many leadership meetings in person as possible. This included six school committee meetings, two school committee policy sub-committee meetings, one school committee finance sub-committee meeting, one school community partnership sub-committee, two superintendent parent coffee hours, and one professional learning workshop. A member of the research team was present for each observation, which was recorded and later transcribed. Being present for each observation allowed for “highly descriptive” field notes to be scribed such as room layout, participant demographics, non-verbal language, and the overall tone of the meeting. These notes allowed for the researcher to add a “reflective component” which provided further detail and understanding of the collected data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 151). School committee meetings were observed in person or by way of public video recordings to gather information about the discourse district leaders use when interacting with the community.

Data Analysis

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

Table 4
Summary of Data Collection by Researcher

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

Qualitative data collected by research team members was compiled and placed in a shared folder on a secure server for analysis. Interviews, document review, and observations were equally weighted in this study. The team found that the documents supported and confirmed the data collected in both interviews and observations. The team created an analytic memo to record observations, questions, and insights as the data was analyzed. This analytic memo used by the team was comparable to a research journal entry or blog -- a place to “dump your brain” about the participants, phenomenon or process under investigation (Saldaña, 2013, p. 42). This memo served as “the transitional process from coding to the more formal write-up of the study” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 50).

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

different viewpoints about the appropriate code. After exchanging ideas, the final coding decision was left to the initial coding researcher. A more detailed description of each individual coding process is presented in Chapter 3 of each individual study.

Findings from each individual study were then brought to the entire team for analysis. The team used the five perspectives of equity described in Chapter 1 as a general framework and then contributed and organized their individual findings under each perspective. Subsequently, the team discussed the data, and identified the patterns within each perspective of equity. Next, the team looked within each component to identify further patterns. Ultimately, after discussion the team came to a consensus about the overall pattern of the data and used it to answer the larger group research question.

Methods Limitations

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

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

New leadership team. The district leadership team of MPSD had only been assembled for four months -- with many people in newly created positions -- when the researchers began the study. Findings were based on data that had only begun to emerge following the superintendent's launch of the district's equity efforts. Thus, we studied district leadership practices that were

occurring in the context of a great deal of change for the district and represented the very beginning of what we hope will be a years-long, sustained, systemic effort. A future study in five years of the district's leadership practices that foster equity could yield different findings than ours here because of the unique timing of our study.

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

Individual Biases/Positionality

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

CHAPTER THREE³

INDIVIDUAL STUDY:

FOSTERING AN ECOLOGY OF BELONGING

Statement of the Problem

Educational researchers have often suggested that school environments frequently marginalize and alienate students of color (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007; DeMatthews, Carey, Olivarez, & Saeedi, 2017; Smith & Kozelski, 2005; Khalifa, 2018). Calkins et al. (2007) assert that this lack of belonging occurs because school environments are not responsive to the needs of the culturally and linguistically diverse students they tend to serve.

DeMatthews et al. (2017) furthers this claim by arguing that the marginalization and alienation of students of color is the “result of a myriad of factors, with one of the most important being systematic and interpersonal racism plaguing the lives of students of color, their families, and their communities” (p. 549). As a result, the grim reality of today’s school landscape is that students of color are more likely to be disciplined, referred to Special Education, fail to graduate, and take vocational classes as opposed to college preparatory classes (Smith & Kozelski, 2005; Bal, Afacan, & Cakir, 2018). Consequently, this often results in students of color feeling a lack of belonging within the very school environments that are supposed to welcome them (Khalifa, 2018).

School environments that recognize multiple forms of diversity help to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Riehl, 2000). Therefore, leaders pursuing an inclusive school environment should deliberately and strategically ensure all students feel a climate of belonging (Khalifa, 2018; Theoharis, 2009). Culturally Responsive School Leadership

³ This chapter was individually written by Matthew W. Bishop

(CRSL), provides school and district leaders a framework to foster a climate of belonging by reducing systemic barriers and incorporating student culture into the school environment (Khalifa et al., 2016). CRSL practices validate students' beliefs and identities, thereby fostering a connection with the school (Khalifa, 2018). Since Theoharis (2007) found that improving school structures and strengthening school culture improves student achievement, district leaders who are in pursuit of equitable schools should go to great lengths to ensure schools in their charge foster an "ecology" of belonging for students of color.

While much of the research surrounding CRSL focuses on culturally responsive school leaders fostering a climate of belonging at the school level (Minkos et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018), less is known about district level CRSL practices that foster a climate of belonging. To fill this gap, this qualitative study will examine district leaders' perspectives around efforts to foster a climate of belonging for students of color. Accordingly, this study will be guided by the following research question: *How do district leaders help foster a climate of belonging for students of color?*

Review of the Literature/Conceptual Framework

This section will give a three part overview of the literature that addresses fostering a climate of belonging for students of color. First, I begin with an overview of how schools may alienate students of color by reproducing systems of oppression. Next, I will highlight research around Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL) practices that create a more inclusive school environment for all students. I end this section with a brief discussion of Khalifa's (2018) Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) model as a conceptual framework for this study.

Schools Reproduce Systems of Oppression

There are many ways that schools reproduce systems of oppression. These include, but are not limited to: holding low expectations for students of color (Yosso, 2005), having a passive response to student disengagement (Khalifa, 2018), and lacking a connection with an adult (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016). In addition to these practices, it is also important to note that systemic inequities that create opportunity gaps and exclusionary practices of schools are two primary ways schools reproduce systems of oppression for students of color.

Systemic inequities and opportunity gaps. To understand how schools reproduce systems of oppression, it is important to understand the ways in which schools create systemic inequities and opportunity gaps for students of color. Banks (2019) maintains that schools may systematically deny equal educational opportunities for students of color, while students from the dominant culture are predisposed to more attainable opportunities. For example, Goldhaber, Cowan, and Theobald (2017) assert that the quality of a teacher is one of the most important school factors influencing a student's academic achievement. Yet, students of color and students in high poverty schools are more likely to be taught by newer, less experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In Massachusetts, Black and Latino students are three times more likely to receive instruction from a teacher who lacks content area expertise ("One for some," 2018).

Another important factor in exploring systemic inequities and opportunity gaps is exposure of a rigorous course of study for students of color. Aldeman (2017) asserts that the academic intensity of a student's high school experience is the most important factor in providing momentum towards completing a bachelor's degree. An examination of the percentage of students completing MassCore, the Commonwealth's recommended program of study for high school curriculum, shows that 81% of high school graduates complete the requirements for

MassCore. In comparison, only 64% of Black students, and 71% of Latino students complete MassCore (“One for some,” 2018). If completing MassCore requirements means that a student is more likely to meet admissions requirements of Massachusetts public colleges and universities, students of color in Massachusetts are at an inequitable disadvantage.

Exclusionary practices. Exclusionary practices are institutional behaviors that create systems of oppression for students of color. Research suggests that school systems mostly value Anglocentric, middle-class norms which has led to the disengagement and marginalization of students of color (Cooper, 2009; Irby, 2014). Furthermore, DeMatthews et al. (2017) highlight that school policies, particularly those involving school discipline, are often imposed in ways that reflect systemic inequity and racial disparities. Irby (2014) contends that discipline systems are “negative byproducts of changing societal views of people of color, inner-cities, youth, and overexposure and gross exaggerations about the nature and extent of school violence and crime” (p. 527). As a result, typical school discipline policies are overly reactive to relatively minor student misconduct, narrowly focused on adherence to behavioral requirements, and follow historic patterns of racial discrimination (Irby, 2014).

Battling Back: Culturally Responsive Leadership

Since research suggests that leadership has a profound impact on equity and narrowing achievement gaps for students of color (Brown, et al., 2011; Ainscow, 2012; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Minkos et al., 2017), it is important to look at leadership practices that are responsive to students of color. Given the majority of principals and the students of color they serve do not come from the same cultural background (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012), it is important for school leaders to utilize culturally responsive leadership practices to serve students of color in their charge (Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL), is

“responsible, meaningful, and powerful” for students of color (Minkos et al., 2017, p. 1264), and when enacted with fidelity and competency, improve outcomes for students of color (Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Minkos et al., 2017).

Ensuring equitable school practices. CRL can foster a climate of belonging by ensuring fair and equitable school policies and practices. A key practice in demonstrating CRL practices within this strand is a leader’s willingness to track and challenge exclusionary systems, policies, and structures, such as disparities in academic and disciplinary trends (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Newcomer and Cowin (2018) claim that culturally responsive school leaders must find “creative ways to negotiate policies that interfere with what they know and believe to be in the best interests of children” (p. 511). They also maintain that to do this work, leaders may even have to find alternative contexts, such as off-site centers, to circumvent policies and mandates that foster systems of oppression. Further examples include eliminating pullout and segregated programs, increasing learning time, and increasing access to advanced classes as strategies for leaders (Theoharis, 2010).

Connecting with cultures and the community. Leaders making connections with their local cultures and community is an important CRL practice (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Specifically, leaders can foster a sense of inclusion by disrupting unwelcoming school climates (Theoharis, 2010; Santamaria, 2014). Along the same lines, reaching out to the community and families of color through multiple means; such as ethnic meetings, community agencies, and using native language communication, sends a message of understanding and fosters belonging (Riehl, 2000; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006).

My Perspective: Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)

Since Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) involves the leadership actions, conventions, and beliefs that foster an inclusive school environment for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Johnson, 2014), this study will utilize Kalifa's (2018) CRSL framework to explore district level leadership practices that promote an ecology of belonging.

In their synthesis of the literature, Khalifa et al. (2016) apply cultural responsiveness to a leadership framework and call for leaders to create school contexts that are responsive to the educational, social, political, and cultural needs of the students they serve. Especially relevant to this study are two strands of Khalifa's (2018) framework. First, the culturally responsive and inclusive school environment strand highlights the ability of school leaders to promote an inclusive, culturally affirming school context. Second, the engaging students' Indigenous community context strand calls attention to a school leader's ability to engage students, parents, and community agencies in culturally appropriate ways. Both tenets of this framework directly address fostering a climate of belonging.

Promoting Inclusive, Anti-Oppressive School Contexts

There are many ways to promote inclusive and anti-oppressive school contexts. These include, but are not limited to: promoting a vision for inclusive instructional and behavioral practices (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Wang, 2018), actively challenging exclusionary practices (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Freire, 2018), developing capacity in culturally responsive behaviors (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000), and utilizing data to discover and track disparities in both academic and discipline trends (Skrla et al., 2004). In addition to these practices, it is also important to support both the social and cultural capital of students of color.

Student social capital refers to the networks of people and community resources that students can access (Yosso, 2005). Fostering social capital among students of color humanizes student identity and creates a climate of belonging for the student, family, and community (Khalifa, 2018). As historically marginalized students have “social capital that is not valued in traditional schools” (Khalifa, 2018, p.116), building social capital networks are crucial as students and families rely on social contacts and community resources for access to information and opportunities. Families of color often feel that information is “withheld” and that the social capital of White families is not afforded to them (Khalifa, 2018). If schools tend to privilege families that have power, access, and special privileges, it often leaves students of color unrecognized, neglected, and unconnected. For example, if districts communicate primarily electronically and in one language, this would isolate historically marginalized families and act as a barrier to important resources, programs, and opportunities for families.

Similarly, developing student cultural capital also promotes inclusive, anti-oppressive school contexts. Student cultural capital refers to “the accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society” (Yosso, 2005, p. 121). Fostering student cultural capital in the construction of academic knowledge increases student achievement (Khalifa, 2018; Reyes & Garcia, 2014; Yosso, 2005). CRSL honors social capital, and fostering experiences to learn about students’ cultures moves mindsets away from deficit-oriented stereotypes (Yosso, 2005). Accordingly, CRSL looks to use resources to build funds of knowledge of local cultures by embedding cultural characteristics into school environments. For example, district leaders ensuring a diverse staff representative of the demographics and cultures of a district would foster cultural capital in the district.

Engaging Students' Indigenous/Local Neighborhood Community Contexts

Engaging students' local Indigenous community contexts is another critical component of increasing a climate of belonging. Bal et al. (2018) assert that in order to transform oppressive and marginalizing systems, leaders should “build strategic and sustained equity-oriented coalitions among researchers, practitioners, students, families, and community members” (p. 1045). Newcomer and Cowin (2018) support this claim when they assert that building relationships with parents and building bridges with the community is an essential component of CRSL. Furthermore, research suggests that an effective way to develop these relationships and to build such bridges is for leaders to practice servant leadership (Alston, 2006; Johnson, 2006). Servant leadership practices allow leaders to engineer a collective social identity thereby “creating a wide-ranging concept of ‘us’ in schools and communities” (Wang, 2018, p. 343).

By engaging local contexts, school leaders narrow the gap between the dominant culture norms and the other cultures they serve. Historically, “non dominant communities’ ways of acting, speaking, and knowing have been devalued and pathologized in the United States” (Bal et al., 2018, p.1044). Khalifa (2018) argues that when minoritized cultural behaviors are not valued, it normalizes behavior common to White students. To non-dominant cultures, this normalization of dominant culture behavior is “assaulting” (Khalifa, 2018, p. 114). Therefore, CRSL calls for leaders to demonstrate a skillful crafting of a collective social identity (Wang, 2018). When non-dominant and local identities are woven into school cultures, it benefits all students within a school (Khalifa, 2018).

The review of the literature suggests that students of color are frequently alienated from school environments through the reproduction of systems of oppression, highlighted by opportunity and achievement gaps, exclusionary practices, and low expectations. To respond to

this alienation, school leaders can foster a climate of belonging by utilizing CRSL practices. By promoting inclusive, anti-oppressive school contexts and engaging students' Indigenous community contexts, school leaders can create an “ecology” of belonging for students of color. While much of the CRSL research focuses on building level leader actions, this study will contribute to the literature by exploring how district level leaders help foster a climate of belonging for students of color.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore how district leaders fostered a climate of belonging. My study was part of a larger one that explored how district level leaders fostered equity practices, thus this qualitative case study drew upon interviews and documents collected as part of a larger team study. A detailed discussion of the methods employed in the overarching study can be found in Chapter 2. Unique to this study was how data was collected, how data was analyzed, and study limitations.

Data Collection

Table 5 provides information regarding data collection. To address my research question, I conducted semi-structured interviews of district level leaders. Furthermore, I conducted a document review of pertinent public district level documents.

Table 5
Data Collection

Method	Source	Number
Document Review	Document	10
Semi-Structured Interview	District Leaders	10

Semi-structured Interviews. I conducted 10 individual semi-structured interviews with ten district level leaders. Participant responses provided insight as to perceptions of district level leaders and their leadership practices that foster a climate of belonging. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. I embedded specific questions (see Table 6) about incorporating local identities, involving the community, and reducing systems of oppression within the context of the larger group’s interview protocol (see Appendix E). Questions were developed by modifying Khalifa’s (2018) reflective questions for leaders. To increase reliability and validity, interview questions were piloted with two teachers outside the scope of the study. Feedback on the clarity and meaning of the questions was used to make slight revisions of the interview questions. For example, an initial interview question read as follows, “What do you feel are the most prevalent cultural identities among students in your district and how does the staff regularly learn about the life experiences of minoritized students?” After piloting this question, the feedback given suggested the question was confusing and contained jargon. As a result, the question was modified to ask “How does the staff learn about the different cultures they serve?”

Table 6
District Leader Semi-Structured Interview Questions Connected to the Research Question

District Leader Interview Question

3. As you look around this district, what do you see going on to help individual kids be successful?

With English Language Learners?

With accessing the challenging curriculum?

Partnering with families?

4. Tell me how your work is helping to meet students’ unique needs.

Tell me about a challenge doing this.

How did you respond to this challenge?

With English Language Learners?

With different cultures?

5. When you look around the district, what do you see teachers doing to meet students’ unique

needs?

6. How do you and your team evaluate whether teachers are meeting students' unique needs?
7. Tell me about your department/team's planning processes to ensure your work is aligned with the needs and priorities of the district.

How do you determine the needs, priorities, and equity issues?

Who is involved in the planning process to ensure MPSD is meeting the needs of all students? Are community stakeholders involved in the process? School-level leaders? District-level leaders?

10. Monarch has a very diverse student population. How does the staff learn about the different cultures they serve?

How does this knowledge make its way into the classroom?

Note: RQ: How do district leaders foster a climate of belonging for students of color?

Document review. A document review of district artifacts was conducted with the aim of exploring how district leaders foster belonging. I reviewed multiple public documents from the website, printed documents that were publicly available in the Family Resource center, and documents that were shared by the district executive cabinet. Reviewed documents were then examined for relevance to fostering a climate of belonging, particularly around practices that promoted culturally responsive school environments and engaging parents and the community. The primary documents I utilized included the Strategic Plan Framework, Superintendent Entry and Transition Update, district mission and vision statements, the District Reorganization Plan, MPSD website Student Services About section, Family Resource Center Welcome webpage, and school committee meeting minutes.

Data Analysis

Data gleaned from the document review and semi-structured interviews provided evidence regarding district level leaders' perceptions on fostering a climate of belonging for students of color. Data for this study was managed and analyzed utilizing Dedoose (www.dedoose.com), an online coding platform. As described in Chapter 2, data was coded using a three-step inductive process (Saldaña, 2013). Data was coded employing Khalifa's

(2018) CRSL components of reducing systemic oppression and engaging the local indigenous community. Khalifa (2018) explains that these two components each contain various subcomponents, and it was these seventeen subcomponents that I utilized as *a priori* codes in my coding manual (See Appendix F). As interviews were coded, three further codes of “feedback,” “monitoring,” and “other” emerged as well. To focus on reliability in the coding process, a research team member looked at a copy of each interview transcript for analysis. The team member read and coded each interview transcript utilizing the *a priori* codes, and then compared results. When there was disagreement, a discussion ensued to come to a consensus on how the data in question was ultimately coded. Furthermore, my coding manual was shared and periodically examined by a teammate for clarity, and subsequently refined to include examples from findings.

Study Limitations

A limitation of this study includes participant selection. While almost all members of the district level leadership team were interviewed, the study is absent of principal, family, and student voice. Consequently, discussion in this study is limited to a district level leader perspective.

Positionality of the Researcher

As an urban turnaround school principal, fostering a climate of belonging for students of color drew me to this study. Consequently, my current position as a building level leader may cause me to have inherent beliefs about the role and expectations of district level leaders. Therefore, my beliefs about district leaders may influence data analysis, findings, and conclusions during this study.

Given that this study centers around race, the ethnicity of the researcher is also a consideration. It is important to note that I am exploring issues of equity and race from a White, male perspective. Consequently, participants of color in this study may not have immediately trusted my intentions. As a result, data may have been withheld as “participants in the study of marginalized groups...are often suspicious of those who are members of the dominant culture doing research on the people of oppressed groups” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 64).

Findings

The research question explored how district leaders help foster a climate of belonging for students of color. It should be recalled that Khalifa (2018) asserts that this work includes promoting inclusive and anti-oppressive school contexts and engaging local community contexts. Consequently, findings in this study are organized as such. The first section explores the district leadership practices used in MPSD to promote culturally responsive school environments. The second section describes how district leaders in MPSD engaged students, parents, and the local community context.

Promoting Culturally Responsive School Environments

A theme emerging from the data was promoting a culturally responsive school environment. District leaders discussed the importance of recognizing current exclusionary practices, building social capital, building cultural capital, building capacity in leaders, using data, and promoting a vision of belonging as foundational strategies to achieve a climate of belonging. I discuss each in turn.

Recognizing current exclusionary practices. Most district leaders acknowledged that exclusionary practices existed in the district, however they had not actively begun to dismantle such practices. The three newly hired district leaders recognized that the district was only

reaching “some” students and they were not reaching were often students of color. These district leaders discussed disproportionate discipline rates, higher proportions of Special Education referrals, and lower achievement than their white peers as exclusionary practices for students of color. Furthermore, these newly hired district leaders conveyed a sense of urgency, and expressed a willingness to begin to “disrupt” the status quo.

Veteran district leaders recognized exclusionary practices as well. One leader talked about the challenge of communicating in the district's 69 languages and that most communication was “occurring in English only.” Another district leader focused on MPSD’s lottery system for pre-K as a prime example of an exclusionary practice. She mentioned that while every family has an “equitable” opportunity to enroll for pre-K, “we all know that there are certain families that...just don't have the social capital to understand that they need to get down here in March and make sure the child's in the lottery. They don't come until July.” Furthermore, this district leader claimed that “socioeconomics and demographics” plays “a lot” into who gets into pre-K.

Both veteran and newly hired district leaders discussed the district’s zoning and school choice program as an exclusionary practice. They expressed that while students theoretically get to elect any school in the district, district guidelines around ratios, class size, and after school programming are exclusionary. A district leader reported that in each school the district strives for a “balance of 72% minority and 28% white” with a 10% variance either way. When it comes to balancing populations, district leaders expressed a constant tension in striking a balance that is acceptable and follows district guidelines. For example, one district leader talked about how once a ratio is met, students of color would not be allowed to attend a high performing school,

even if it was in their neighborhood. However, as one veteran district leader said, “I have to work within the rules until the rules have changed.”

Building social capital. To overcome these exclusionary practices, district leaders discussed a variety of ways they were building student and family social capital. In line with what you might expect, district leaders in MPSD made a conscious effort to ensure all students and families had access to important district and school information. At the time of data collection, the district had just completed translating parent curriculum guides in high incident languages, as well as offering translation for low incident languages in the district. Another district leader talked about the ability to view the website in different languages and also discussed the new phone based translation service available to district leaders when working with families. As one district leader said, “As a district, we try to be very cognizant of the language barriers. And so we try to make sure that we're accessing translators, or translated documents, depending on the educational level of the family and their home native language.”

Building cultural capital. Many district leaders expressed an understanding of the importance of building cultural capital for students and families within the district. Three newly hired district leaders talked frequently about the importance of building a staff that was reflective of the district's demographics. As one newly hired district leader said, “it's a pretty powerful statement when you're in 2019 in Monarch, Massachusetts and a child says, ‘I've never had a teacher in my life that looks like me.’ There's no reason that a child should experience that within our community.” Furthermore, these district leaders talked about the predominantly white staff demographics and how that “matters in a number of ways,” particularly around building stronger student-teacher relationships. Moreover, a diverse staff provides an opportunity for students and families of color to “see themselves inside the organization.” Additionally, these

district leaders talked about recruitment, lack of clear career paths in the community, and lack of a diverse organizational identity as barriers to a diverse district staff.

Besides a focus on a diverse staff, a few district leaders reported local efforts to recruit and train teachers of color within the organization. Recently, the district has written and been awarded a grant to train 18 paraprofessionals of color to become ESL teachers. The grant covers tuition for Collaborative educational services, and the program will end with the paraprofessionals obtaining ESL licensure in Massachusetts. For the 18 candidates, the district is also putting together a 10 week workshop to prepare for the communication and literacy MTEL, a requirement for licensure. While the support was lauded by some district leaders, one veteran district leader did acknowledge that this program was a challenge as the rigor and course load was considerable, and that her “heart goes out to them because it's a challenge.”

A few district leaders highlighted the afterschool program as an area in which the district embraces local identities. When considering programming, it was reported that the district intentionally looks for programming that reinforces the different cultures within the district. For example, programming has been created for local native Spanish speakers, an Angkor dance troupe (traditional Cambodian dance), Taekwondo, and a Black Unity club. Furthermore, two veteran district leaders mentioned the cooking program in which students of color choose and create different cultural dishes to share with their group. While they both articulated the importance of the cultural recipes and the connection with the culture as being the “nature of what we do,” both mentioned their preference for an “organic” approach to learning about the different cultures served as opposed to more formalized learning.

Developing capacity. Nearly all district leaders discussed the importance of developing the capacity of leaders through professional development as an important strategy to foster a

climate of belonging. While many district leaders talked about the importance of professional development and modeling of culturally responsive leadership practices, the three newly hired district leaders talked about the lack of the current skill set around these practices of building leaders and teachers. Most significantly one pronounced her concern about the capacity of teachers as she felt that “our teachers will be the first to share with you that they're not reaching every kid.”

To address the skill gap around culturally responsive teaching and leadership practices, two newly hired district leaders talked about creating and monitoring professional development for all staff. One talked about looking through principal PD agendas to see if “a cultural proficiency thread [was] emerging.” Furthermore, another newly hired district leader talked about an innovative partnership with a local university to create a C.A.G.S. pathway focusing on urban education. This district leader touted this program as “one of the first C.A.G.S. courses in the country that is addressing urban education” and “I just have very high hopes for it.”

Veteran district leaders mentioned the new monthly, day-long leadership meetings in which “cultural competency” is a focus. Specifically, these trainings cover such topics as cultural bias in curriculum, a book study on race, and culturally responsive teaching practices. Along the same lines, her colleague discussed the focus on taking the cultural competency concepts learned at these meetings and employing a “train the trainer model...and leaders go back into their schools and did [the training] with their teachers.” Furthermore, a newly hired district leader commented on the importance of implementing these new meetings. She asserted that the purpose of this CRSL professional development was “to be cognizant of [all the cultural barriers] so that all of our kids feel the safety and joy of what school can be for them.”

Using data. Seven out of ten district leaders described the importance of using data to identify improvement areas, monitor outcomes, and ultimately drive decisions to foster an inclusive school environment. District leaders spoke of new equity focused, formalized monthly data meetings, as well as the expectations for both district level leadership and building leadership to make data-based decisions. Two newly hired district leaders spoke about using data to intentionally shift financial and staffing support in the district based on demographic data.

To ensure that data is being used, the superintendent recently created a Research and Accountability office to monitor outcomes for all students. This office has reinstated previously cut benchmark assessments in order to monitor student progress, as well emphasized monitoring SPED referral rates, graduation rates, and especially discipline data. This led one veteran district leader to recognize the disproportionality in suspension data as “50% of our suspensions are Hispanic males.” Furthermore, one district leader discussed the disproportionality Hispanic males in the summer remedial program and articulated a need to “address that.” As a final example, one district leader discussed the Research and Accountability office identifying a high chronic absence rate and dropout rate for male Hispanics, thus generating a system of tracking, support meetings, and home visits to intervene.

While most district leaders talked about the use of data to support students of color, some newly hired district leaders expressed a desire to use data to further explore student achievement and district programs. One discussed the different school zones in the district and articulated a desire to explore that the driving factor in student achievement “was not ethnicity, but socioeconomic status.” Another district leader expressed that she doesn’t “know yet how our English learners are truly doing right so that's some data that I want to understand better.”

Another district leader furthered this sentiment when she conveyed a desire “to understand how our language programs and our bilingual models are serving our kids.”

Promoting a vision of belonging. District leaders often talked about the importance of promoting a vision of belonging in the district, despite the fact it hasn’t necessarily translated into action. The new district-level leaders spoke about reorganizing systems and structures within the district as a means of promoting a vision of belonging. Primarily they referred to the recent reorganization of the district and the newly created Office of Education Equity and Community Empowerment. Leading this office is the Chief Equity and Engagement officer whose job it is to “lead the district’s efforts to engage students, families and community members as true partners in the educational process.” This position was often discussed as a means to enhance parental and community involvement and was communicated to the community as leading the district’s efforts “to raise cultural awareness and competence among employees across the system to increase the academic achievement of the diverse populations we serve.”

Moreover, seven out of nine district leaders also talked about the superintendent’s willingness to be action-oriented in setting a vision for equity and belonging. Having just started in the district, the superintendent immediately saw an opportunity to serve the students “in most need” and be a “voice for the voiceless.” As he states, he feels his job is to ensure students have a culturally responsive school environment.

My job is to ensure that students want to go to school. That they approach it as part of their community that each school that they belong to feels welcoming and feels like they belong there. I’m looking for is that child enjoying going to school, in the school that they

are assigned to? Do they have friends, are they connected with teachers? Do people notice them and prioritize them?

Furthermore, district leaders discussed the ways in which the superintendent quickly articulated the vision of belonging. For example, the superintendent insisted that one of the first district leadership team meetings be used to develop a common understanding of equity in the district. From this meeting came the district's common definition and vision for equity as meeting the following commitments: “eliminating the achievement and opportunity gaps among our diverse populations, ensuring equitable funding across our diverse schools, and then treating every family with dignity, courtesy, and cultural understanding.” Moreover, these commitments were communicated and articulated in a variety of mediums including the website and even on the back of business cards, leading one district leader to note that it “is on everything.” As a result, one newly hired district leader felt the superintendent has been able to “energize the community...and actually led to folks being able to stay grounded in the actual work.”

While the superintendent has focused on promoting a vision of belonging, the newly hired district leaders openly discussed a “friction” that this vision of belonging is creating. The superintendent talked openly about the resistance he is facing as “there wasn't a real desire to embrace the term equity and the notion of equity.” The superintendent’s continued focus on equity and belonging led one newly hired district leader to comment that the superintendent is “shaking the district. I'm telling you right now.” Another newly hired district leader commented that the inequities in the district were created by preceding administrative teams “several times over.” Newly hired district leaders talked openly about making sure people are “on board” with the direction of the district and that those who “were not on board got the message this district might not be a fit any longer, regardless of how long they have been there.”

While most district leaders discussed the focus on belonging, a newly hired district leader offered that this focus was not yet producing much of a result. She states that the discussion around diversity “sits at more the symbolic level, you know, but I don't think it's leveraged as an asset, you know, like in schools and classrooms.” Furthermore, she stated that “it sounds like people are very proud that we all know each other, we get along, our kids play together, but there's not a deeper understanding of each other.” This sentiment was echoed by another district leader who asserted that “it's kind of disconnected from the action of where the kids are in the classroom right now” and that “you want to, you know, have these philosophical intellectual conversations about what we seek to disrupt.”

Engaging Parents, Students, and Local Contexts

A second emergent theme around fostering a climate of belonging was the ways district leaders felt they engaged parents, students, and the local community. Specifically, district leaders talked about ways to use the community as an informative space, as partners in student learning, and the importance of servant leadership as foundational practices to foster a climate of belonging. I discuss each in turn.

Community as an informative space. District leaders talked about the importance of using the community as an informative space, particularly in the first months of the district leadership transition. Upon entering the district, the superintendent held a series of community forums, breakfast meetings, coffee hours, and even home visits in order to learn about community and family concerns. The superintendent asserted this was foundational to learning about the district and claimed “all of that is learning. And that's all part of, I think, these planning processes to make sure that everybody's connected.” Furthermore, another district leader echoed this idea and commented, “So every opportunity that we have as a chance as a community to

interact in the school committee meetings or some other, this is an opportunity for us to teach one another. It's an opportunity for me to learn, it's an opportunity for me to share what I've learned.”

District leadership highlighted the importance of collaborating and learning about the families they serve. One district leader recalled one of the core commitments of the district was for “every educator to engage parents, the community, and partners” in order to “engage in effective collaboration and responsive communication with all families.” Three district leaders also talked about the importance of knowing the families the district works with. One veteran district leader commented that she felt it was “very helpful” to have had experts come to the district and help the staff learn about the Burmese and Congolese families she works with as it gave her a “lens into the trauma kids were bringing with them.”

Community as partners. District leaders often talked about the use of the community as partners to engage students of color, despite the feeling more could be done. Particularly, some district leaders talked about the new coordinator of the Office of Equity and Engagement as integral to these efforts. As the superintendent’s reorganization document states, “this new position will strengthen the district’s commitment to authentic community engagement.” One district leader offered that partnerships are critical as they help ensure that students are “experiencing the joy of school, right, that they're feeling good about what they're doing. They're feeling success. They're happy. And they want to come every day.”

District leaders also talked about their ability to use district social capital to bring in community partners to assist building level leaders. For example, one district leader talked about bringing the principals together to ask what community partners could benefit their students, and then worked to find a match to satisfy the principals’ requests. Furthermore, another district

leader discussed that working with community partners enables them to provide enrichment to 1,400 students every day after school. Moreover, district leaders talked about a variety of partners that bring high interest activities such as blogging, spoken word, photography, robotics, fine arts, animals from local farms, street art, and Taekwondo studio. Such activities “hit all different types of kids...they don't have the money to pay to do that, so we bring it to them.”

While district leaders talked of the benefits of community partnerships, some spoke about the lack of partnerships with some important local community members. For example, one district leader discussed the lack of partnerships with a large, local university. While she mentioned “pockets of greatness” working on establishing such a partnership, the university has not “embraced” a partnership with the district and valuable resources such as afterschool programs, early college initiatives, and teaching candidates are not being fully utilized. Another district leader talked about how the university has “taken over a big part of our city, but our kids never get any benefit of that” and the university “should have some community obligation to do more work with us.” One district leader felt this lack of partnership from the university particularly hurts students of color as “our diverse kids think, ‘That's not a place for me. That's not for me. That's not where we go.’” Instead, one district leader hoped the university could “get in front of our kids to do anything, even to just be there during homework block, like talk to kids, make relationships, and then get our kids over there in those buildings.”

Serving the whole family. A unique way district leaders engaged with the community was by serving a student’s whole family. This was talked about in a variety of ways, including having dinner programs for students, monthly food pantries, clothing closets, arranging medical care, helping with vaccinations, and providing bus passes demonstrated the district’s commitment to helping families outside of the scope of education. As one district leader

explained, such initiatives helped parents feel like “this school has my child's best interest at hand here. And so they become partners. And that's what we want.”

A prime example of serving the whole family emerged as district leaders often talked about MPSD’s Family Resource Center (FRC). The FRC is located in the main section of the city and is housed in the same building as the central office staff. As part of the Office of Student Services, part of the mission of the FRC is to work “collaboratively with students, parents, staff, and community partners to provide supports that increase student access to instruction and reduce barriers to success in school.” The FRC also houses the McKinney Vento family specialist to help families who are homeless get the assistance they need, and as one district leader asserts, “that's a key resource that we have in the office, and people come in all the time for things that will help them get housing sometimes they might need shelter.” Moreover, one district leader comments, “sometimes [families] just come in looking for food.” Other services, such as family education forums, workshops, and youth events are also held in the FRC. The FRC also sponsors events that seek to build relationships with families by providing social events for all ages that include activities such as face painting, and free books and gifts. The extent of programming of the FRC inspired one district leader to call it “the hub of the district.”

Despite these accomplishments, some district leaders talked about the difficulty getting families of color to engage with the center. One district leader commented that “many of our Southeast Asian families, they come to it from a different perspective. They might say, "Yes, yes, yes. We'll be there." And then they just do their own thing.” Some district leaders expressed frustration about the lack of engagement from families when providing information that is pertinent to their children. For example, one district leader expressed frustration when she

offered a workshop on “teaching a child about vaping, and like 10 parents come.” However, one district leader commented that the way to increase engagement for families of color is to “give out books and crayons and literacy stuff.” Furthermore, one district leader mentioned the coordinator of the FRC “knows she has got to feed them. She has got to have activities. And they can bring their kids.”

Discussion

This study explored how district leaders fostered a climate of belonging for students of color. Findings from this study described the various leadership practices that district leaders identified as promoting a culturally responsive and inclusive school environment. Such strategies included recognizing exclusionary practices within the district; building both social and cultural capital of students; developing leader capacity; using data to drive decisions; and promoting a vision of belonging. Subsequently, I explored district leaders' perspectives on ways to engage parents and the local community context. In particular, I found using the community as an informative space, engaging in community partnerships, and serving the whole family as important strategies district leaders utilized.

In the following section, I discuss district leadership practices in fostering a climate of belonging. Next, I offer recommendations for district leaders. Finally, I theorize the implications of this study for practitioners.

District Leadership Fostering a Climate of Belonging.

Theoharis and Haddix (2011) argue that a focus of leaders pursuing an equity-oriented agenda include creating a climate of belonging for students, staff and families. This study found all district leaders in MPSD actively engaged in this work. However, the fact that the three newly hired district leaders' perceptions often differed from the veteran district leadership was a

key tension in this study. Oftentimes, veteran district leadership felt what they were doing to foster a climate of belonging was making a difference. However, the newly hired district leaders consistently articulated a greater sense of urgency and a need to do more for the students of color in their charge. Furthermore, since all three newly hired district leaders are from outside of the district, they were able to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the entrenched systems and exclusionary practices in the district. Since the demonstration of such regard for students, families, and the community, signifies that district leadership values diversity (Minkos et al., 2017), the conditions are being set for more inclusive environments and ultimately higher student achievement (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006).

Another key tension emerging in this study revolves around whether the district's efforts to foster a climate of belonging is (1) sufficient and (2) effective. While this study highlighted numerous innovative strategies MPSD used to foster a climate of belonging, findings indicate that the district as a whole has yet to achieve the "ethical inclusion" that Santamaria (2014) contends is a tenet of leadership for equity. District leaders often discussed the aim and intentions of their actions, yet rarely were able to concretely demonstrate the effectiveness of their actions with any sort of metric. As a result, district leaders provided this study with the equivalent of their "best guess" in terms of fostering a climate of belonging.

On the basis of this study alone, it is difficult to be certain about the sufficiency and effectiveness of the district strategies to foster a climate of belonging without building leader, family, and student voice. Gaining principal, family, and student voice would allow researchers to triangulate the perceived effectiveness of district strategies with stakeholders' actual feelings of belonging. As noted earlier, leaders often perpetuate a climate of disengagement by valuing norms that often do not align with the different cultures within the district (Cooper, 2009; Irby,

2014). Gaining building leader, family, and student voice would identify if there is any “disconnect” with the district level perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies to foster a climate of belonging. As a result, researchers could more confidently identify high leverage strategies district leaders could utilize to foster a climate of belonging for students of color.

Recommendations for District Leaders

Although a single case study cannot provide a sound basis for the practice of district level leadership, this study suggests that it is important for district leaders to have a clearly articulated, systematic approach to fostering a climate of belonging. This study found that while MPSD has clearly communicated a focus on equity and belonging, results indicated that they do not have a systematic approach towards this end. Districts that employ a haphazard, “ad hoc” approach to creating a climate of belonging default to individual district leaders acting independently and each doing what they think is best to foster belonging. From an organizational standpoint, this lack of a coherent approach will not be effective and efficient in fostering a climate of belonging. Having a clearly articulated plan to foster belonging answers Khalifa (2018) and Theoharis’ (2009) call for deliberate and strategic strategies to promote a climate of belonging.

To effectively leverage district efforts to foster a climate of belonging, it is first important to clearly articulate the academic and opportunity gaps in the district. Khalifa (2018) strongly argues that districts should start by performing a comprehensive equity audit focusing on cultural responsiveness. Such an audit should include a measure of how minoritized students and families are experiencing school climate and a measure to determine whether some communities are privileged or marginalized by the school. Furthermore, this audit should include student voice to measure student disposition and attitudes towards school and school climate. Finally, this audit should gather data to learn about the cultures and families the district serves (Khalifa, 2018). As

a result of this comprehensive equity audit, district leaders would not have to put forth their “best guess” and rather would have a starting point grounded in data to strategically plan equity reforms.

A final way to bring district consistency in fostering a climate of belonging is to create a coherent professional development plan. More specifically, since research suggests that the professional capacity of the principal can have a direct influence on organizational culture (McCarley, Peters, & Decman, 2016; Dumay, 2009; Meyers & Hitt, 2017; Bredson, 2000), the professional development plan should focus on building CRSL competencies in principals. Since understanding the different cultures a district serves helps affirm the identities of individual students (Khalifa, 2018), professional development should focus on learning about and how to incorporate local identities and indigenous contexts. By providing the professional development resources for principals to gain expertise in the skills needed to promote culturally responsive school environments and engage students, parents, and indigenous contexts, district leaders will ensure school environments are more inclusive for the families and students they serve. ■

This study has implications for both school and district leaders, particularly those in urban turnaround settings. Turnaround schools, particularly secondary turnaround schools (Tichnor-Wagner, Harrison, & Cohen-Vogel, 2016), often navigate a myriad of challenges in order to foster a climate of belonging. These challenges include, but are not limited to: lack of cultural responsiveness (Calkins et al., 2007); inadequate capacity of organizational members and unfit structures (Meyers & Hitt, 2017); and entrenched departmental cultures focused on disciplinary knowledge” (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016).

Turnaround leaders play a critical role by promoting a climate of belonging (Theoharis, 2007; Leithwood, 2010; Kistner, Melchoir, Marken, & Stein, 2017). Since many studies assert

that inclusive school environments have a positive effect on student achievement (Banerjee, Stearns, Moller, & Mickelson, 2017; Griffith, 2004; van Derwesthuizen, Mosoge, Swanepoel, & Coetsee, 2005), this study could be helpful for turnaround district leaders as it attempts to provide leaders with some guidance as to the strategies helpful in fostering a climate of belonging for students of color. By doing so, turnaround leaders will set a foundational condition for rapid achievement that turnaround schools require (Griffith, 2004).

Conclusion

While progress has been made to create more equitable school environments in the 65 years since *Brown*, “the results of this grand experiment suggest that proximity alone does not eliminate the socially constructed boundaries that marginalize some students and privilege others” (Smith & Kozelski, 2005, p. 271) Therefore, fostering a climate of belonging is crucial to the success of students of color within a school district. While the new district leadership in this study has clearly demonstrated a renewed commitment to fostering a sense of belonging, a more structured approach is needed. District leaders must know different strategies to promote culturally responsive school environments and how to engage students, parents, and local contexts. For example, literature contends that leaders who facilitate interactions and collaboration with all members of the school community (Wang, 2018), connect with families and the community (Bal et al., 2018; Theoharis and Haddix, 2011), and employ CRSL practices (Khalifa, 2018) will foster a climate of belonging for students of color. All together, these practices will allow district leaders to create an ecology of belonging that will define their district. When that happens, students of color are more likely to not only stay in school, but excel (Brown et al., 2011; Ainscow, 2012; Mandhlangobe & Gordon, 2012).

CHAPTER FOUR⁴

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

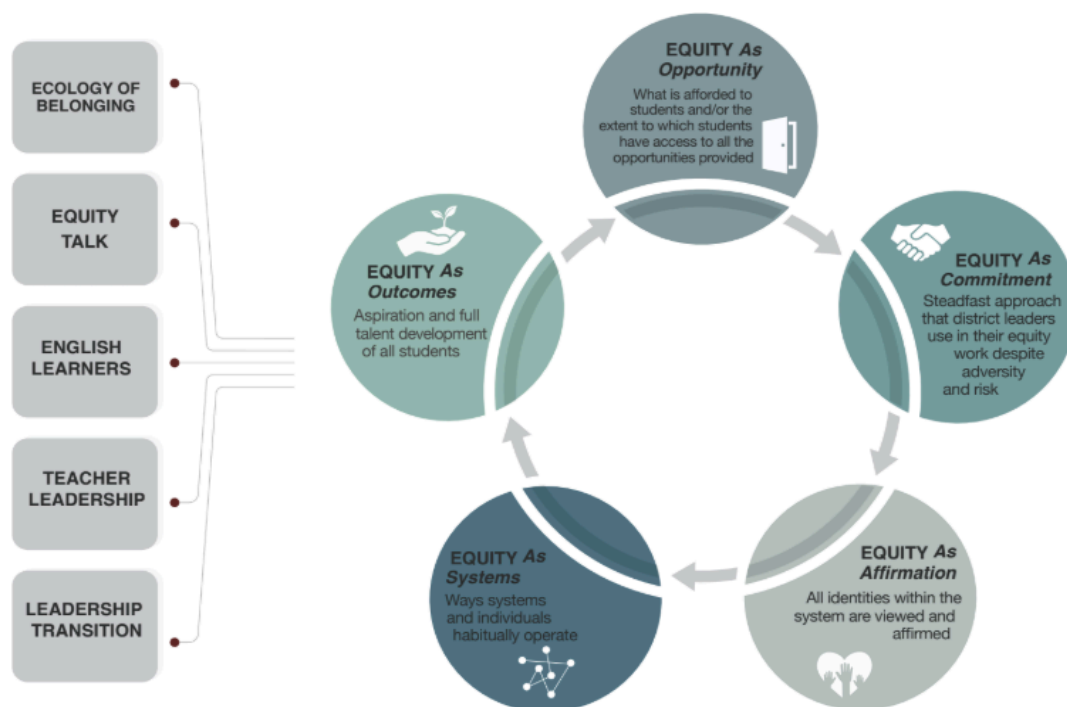
Our research team explored how district leaders' practices foster equity. Each individual study examined a specific aspect of the school district context in order to better understand how the leaders engaged in practices that foster equity. Specifically, Bishop (2020) focused on fostering a climate of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

We defined equity as the commitment to ensure that every student receives the opportunities they require based on their individual needs, strengths, and experiences to reach their full potential. Equity can be understood and addressed from multiple perspectives: outcomes, opportunity, commitment, affirmation, and as a system. Figure 5 shows the focus of each individual study that each member of the research team examined and a summary of five perspectives of equity that set the overall context of the larger study.

⁴ This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Matthew Bishop, Deborah Bookis, Sandra Drummey, Allyson Mizoguchi, and Thomas Michael Welch, Jr.

Figure 5
Five perspectives of equity

HOW DO *District Leadership Practices* FOSTER **EQUITY**?



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

Equity as Outcomes

Equity as outcomes is the full development of students' talents. It also involves efforts to foster students' aspirations by providing them educational experiences to achieve their aspirations. In order to determine outcomes, educational leaders need to define the skills, knowledge and dispositions with which students should graduate. Consistent with equity as outcomes research (Nieto, 1996; De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park; 2006), our research found district leaders should articulate outcomes for students. These student outcomes could

include a feeling of belongingness, dispositions and attitudes towards school, the development of passions and strengths, and extra-curricular participation. Examples from our studies included the analysis of English language proficiency data to monitor the progress of EL students (Drummey, 2020), monitoring disproportionality in enrollment, achievement, and suspension rates (Bishop, 2020), and the use of the iReady data system to uncover disproportionality in MCAS scores (Mizoguchi, 2020). Another way equity as outcomes manifested in MPSD was in students' freedom to explore their strengths and passions by participating in a Poetry Slam and an activism unit (Mizoguchi, 2020).

Our studies primarily found that MPSD focused on disaggregated school and district-based achievement data to assess student progress toward state-defined achievement outcomes even though we did find limited district leadership practices that focused on non-academic outcome data (Bookis, 2020; Welch, 2020). If equity means the full development of student talents, then it is important to have not only a broader definition of outcomes rather than one that is narrowly defined by only academic data, but also multiple avenues for student learning (O'Sullivan & Dallas, 2017; Shushok & Hulme, 2006). Such avenues could include the development of skills in Social Emotional Learning (SEL), the arts, technology, access to advanced curriculum, etc. The data collected and analyzed by district measures should align with those defined outcomes.

One of the greatest challenges in equity for outcomes is defining a vision for student outcomes by articulating the skills, knowledge and dispositions with which students should graduate. Because equity work requires seeing the full potential of every child taking into account their own goals and passions (Zygmunt & Cipollone, 2018), one challenge in defining outcomes is supporting the staff to develop "an asset orientation instead of one focused on

deficits” (p. 18). However, this takes time, persistent professional development, steady leadership, and planning to achieve. Furthermore, monitoring less measurable outcomes, such as a students’ sense of belonging and relationships with teachers (Singleton, 2018) that are vital for student achievement, can be equally as challenging.

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

Equity as Opportunity

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

culturally proficient teaching, equitable resource allocation, and efficient structures and systems (Mattheis, 2017).

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

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

In order to address such challenges, leaders should consider the following purposeful steps. First, district leaders should develop a coherent system for identifying barriers (such as using a district data analysis team with a defined data inquiry process), and hence heightening opportunities, that is based on defined outcomes (Williams, 2018). Understanding where opportunity can be enhanced, and where barriers to educational opportunity exist, should determine the district's priorities from an instructional, systemic, and philosophical perspective. Second, setting up conversations so that the flow of ideas is clear, ideas are connected to a common interest, and multiple perspectives are incorporated help to keep students at the focus of the decision-making process (Bookis, 2020). Lastly, district leaders should also have reflective structures (such as annual equity audits) to regularly assess how the district is working toward establishing equitable opportunities for students (Rorrer, et al., 2008). Being transparent about ongoing student achievement and areas of challenge will help determine new opportunities for students that are consistent with the district's definition of equity.

Equity as Commitment

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

and students were included in decisions (Bookis, 2020). These practices, while varied, publicly demonstrate district leaders' commitment to equity and creates a shared understanding of its importance throughout the community. Further it keeps those engaged in the work accountable to one another.

Creating a shared understanding of equity builds trust. This trust helps stakeholders understand the actions district leaders take and builds support for those actions, which enable district leaders to stay committed to enacting equitable outcomes (Horsford & Clark, 2015; Rorrer et al., 2008). Consequently, district leaders can not only more easily navigate the distractions and challenges of district leadership such as local and state mandates, and politics, but they can also focus on shifting the fixed mindsets of reticent stakeholders. Attempting to shift these mindsets requires resources, time, and especially district leader commitment.

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

demonstrates a commitment to equity, district leaders can combat fixed mindsets, as well as ensure equity remains a priority in the district.

Equity as Affirmation

Equity as affirmation is how all identities within the system are viewed and affirmed. Affirming identities and encouraging cooperation among and between groups of students, educators, and leaders are essential components to foster inclusive environments. Schools serve as environments that intentionally and unintentionally communicate messages about individual capabilities, importance of their contributions, and expected outcomes (Allen, Scott, & Lewis, 2013). Consistent with equity as affirmation research (Khalifa, 2018; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006), our research found that commitment to equity as affirmation took the form of: articulating statements about the value of the district's diversity (Bookis, 2020); employing staff who are representative of the district's demographic data (Bishop, 2020; Drumme, 2020); developing leadership initiatives that prioritize equity (Welch, 2020); and empowering educators to make equity-based changes in their practice including family engagement practices (Mizoguchi, 2020).

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

Even so, maintaining a focus on equity may be challenging for some district leaders, because school environments are not typically responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of the diverse students they serve (Calkins et al., 2007). Consequently, students of color are more likely to be disciplined, referred for special education services, fail to graduate, and take vocational classes as opposed to college preparatory classes (Smith & Kozelski, 2005; Bal, Afacan, & Cakir, 2018). DeMatthews et al. (2017) furthers this claim by arguing that the marginalization and alienation of students of color are the “result of a myriad of factors, with one of the most important being systematic and interpersonal racism plaguing the lives of students of color, their families, and their communities” (p. 549). Such systematic racism can lead to an environment in which microaggressions go unchecked and are further perpetuated through such cues as verbal and non-verbal hidden messages and perpetuate feelings of inferiority (Allen, 2012).

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

Equity as Systems

Districts' organizational systems that support equity can enhance or hinder those efforts. Systems pertain to anything from staffing to recruitment, from data analysis to professional development, and are critical to the operational efficiency of the district; in addition, these systems reveal the district's commitment and approach to equity. As defined by Scott (2001), systemic equity is "the transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner has the greatest opportunity to learn enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life" (p.6). Aligned with this definition, we found that MPSD had established some ways of creating systemic equity, including the prioritization of budget and staffing decisions that advance equity (Welch, 2020); the development of teacher and leadership pipeline programs (Bishop, 2020; Mizoguchi, 2020; Welch, 2020); and leveraging accountability systems for student assignment and professional development that address the specific needs of traditionally marginalized subgroups (Drummey, 2020).

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

Establishing systems to support equity is challenging in the current context of many public school districts. The lack of continuity in leadership due to frequent changes in the superintendent position limits the coherence in the direction of a school district and can disrupt systemic equity (Welch, 2020; “Urban School Superintendents,” 2014). Frequent changes in district leadership can stall or prevent initiatives and structure reorganization that support equity work. Furthermore, lack of capacity of the people leading the work to advance equity presents itself as a challenge when responsibilities are not solely focused on creating equitable conditions for students (Calkins et al., 2007). Educational systems do not always support authentic conversations about race among its staff (Singleton, 2018). Additionally, given the importance of regular self-reflection in equity work (Rorrer et al., 2008), effectively assessing how the organization is working systemically towards equity brings another layer of complexity; a critical yet challenging part of this effort is ensuring that everyone is familiar with existing systems (Berg & Gleason, 2018).

To mitigate the barriers of establishing systemic equity, district leaders should dedicate time to capacity building around equity issues and then assessing which systems need to be replaced. To begin, schools must engage in open and authentic conversations about racial achievement disparities supported by district leadership (Singleton, 2018). Equity initiatives and values should be truly owned by the culture of the district rather than a forced priority of one individual leader. While having a systemic approach to equity at the school level is important, building systemic equity should be “unapologetically top-down” (p.30) and must be strategically developed and implemented by the district leadership team (Singleton, 2018). Even when preparing for or managing through leadership changes, the systems that support an overarching vision promoting core values of educational equity must be maintained (Cruickshank, 2018). To

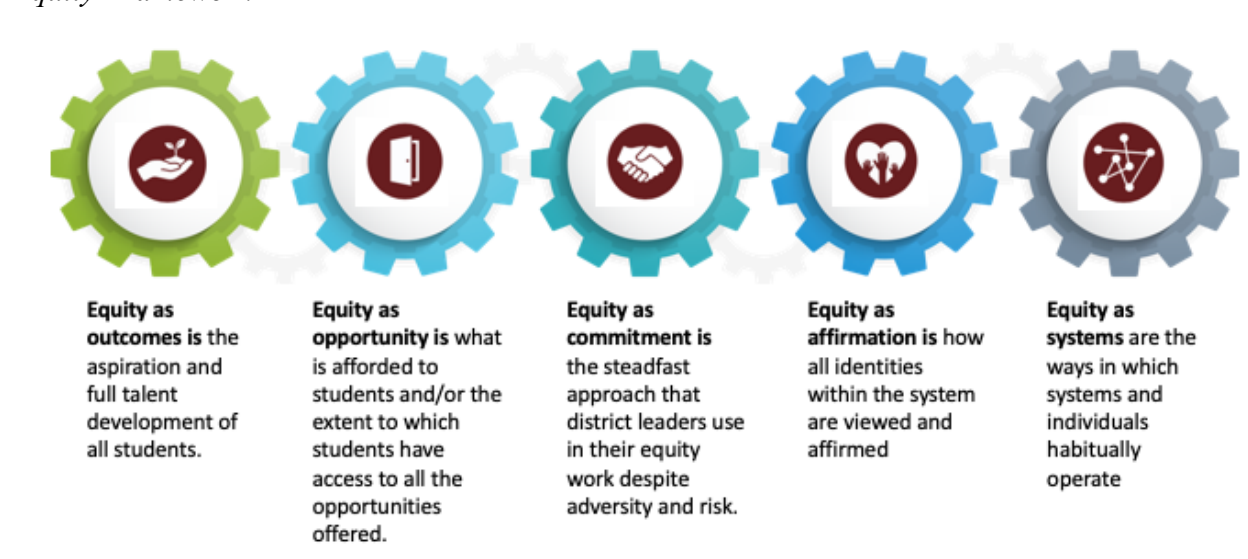
accomplish this, district leaders should focus on communicating priorities of establishing an equitable system, with clearly articulated aligned goals for each department and periodic evaluations of those goals. In short, a goal of establishing systemic equity requires a planful approach to make the district “leader-proof,” and therefore resilient to the inevitable changes in the superintendent position.

Conclusion: A New Way to Look At Equity

As Darling-Hammond (2007) states, “Our future will be increasingly determined by our capacity and our will to educate all children well” (p. 319). In order to effectively educate all children, district leaders need to foster equity. This qualitative case study examined how district leadership practices foster equity. As we explored the practices of district leaders, we noted that examining equity through the five perspectives of outcomes, opportunity, commitment, affirmation, and systems provided a framework for district leaders. As such, we recommend that district leaders utilize the five distinct perspectives as interrelated components of a framework to foster equity within their district.

Using this new framework to foster equity will provide a systematic approach for district leaders. As we have demonstrated, fostering equity at a district level requires leaders to address each of the five components. To this end, we offer to think about the five components not as a hierarchy, but rather as a system of gears (see Figure 6); each gear is deeply interconnected with the others and none is more important than the other. Each gear relies on the speed, force, and direction of the others, and for district leaders this means that once they start equity work, all gears will start to turn. In our framework, speed refers to how quickly the district enacts the work associated with a particular gear; force refers to the amount of pressure applied on a particular gear at any one time; and direction refers to the vision of an equitable learning environment.

Figure 6
Equity Framework



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

Our nation continues to struggle to deliver educationally equitable experiences for all of its students. Therefore, today's district leaders need to be adept at not only examining equity within a district, but also addressing equity within the district. Literature contends that district leadership practices can have a significant impact on student outcomes (Leithwood & Prestine, 2002; McFarlane, 2010). Consequently, we offer district leaders this framework to fully address all five components of equity. Utilizing this framework will provide support and guidance for district leaders as they engage in this very challenging work.

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Appendix A

Abstract for Deborah Bookis' Individual Study

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

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

Appendix B

Abstract for Sandra Drummey's Individual Study

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

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

Appendix C

Abstract for Allyson Mizoguchi's Individual Study

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

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

Appendix D

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

District Leadership Practices that Foster Equity: Succession Planning Guided by Equity as a Tool for Leadership Development in School Districts

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

Appendix E

District Leader Interview Protocol

Opening Reminders

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

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

1. Tell me how you see your work fitting into the district's mission.

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

3. As you look around this district, what do you see going on to help individual kids be successful?

a. With English Language Learners?

b. With accessing the challenging curriculum?

c. Partnering with families?

4. Tell me how your work is helping to meet students' unique needs.

a. Tell me about a challenge doing this.

b. How did you respond to this challenge?

c. With English Language Learners?

d. With different cultures?

5. When you look around the district, what do you see teachers doing to meet students' unique needs?

a. How much are they doing on their own?

b. How much is formal?

c. How much support do they need from you?

6. How do you and your team evaluate whether teachers are meeting students' unique needs?

a. How often do these discussions occur?

b. What do you do when they are not?

7. Tell me about your department/team's planning processes to ensure your work is aligned with the needs and priorities of the district.

a. How do you determine the needs, priorities, and equity issues?

b. Who is involved in the planning process to ensure MPSD is meeting the needs of all students? Are community stakeholders involved in the process? School-level leaders? District-level leaders?

c. Is this planning done on a yearly basis? More or less frequently than once a year? Are multi-year plans created?

8. Now we are going to think about when significant leadership changes occur at the school or department level. Can you describe the process of identifying candidates within MPSD to take on leadership roles and the process of transitioning these candidates to new leadership roles in the district?

a. How are potential leadership candidates who understand and embrace equity and other core values of MPSD identified and developed over time?

b. What role does the Human Resources, Personnel, and Recruitment Department play in purposefully providing an opportunity for leaders to advance within the school district?

c. Are future district-level and school-level leaders identified over time through a specific process (district-driven or in partnership with an external organization such as a local university)? If so, explain how candidates are identified.

d. Can you tell me about a district leader who you have identified for promotion in the past? Moved up in the ranks? What qualities did they have that are aligned to district values?

e. How does specific training aligned to district values occur?

9. Did you personally experience intentional leadership development opportunities as you were promoted as a district-level or school-level leader? If so, please explain one example of how MPSD prepared you to understand its core values.

a. In your experience, describe the strategic onboarding process for district-level and school-level leaders as they transition into their new role. Is there typically an overlap in responsibilities as a succession in leadership occurred?

10. MPSD has a very diverse student population. How does the staff learn about the different cultures they serve?

a. How does this knowledge make its way into the classroom?

Appendix F

Code Book

RQ: How do district leaders help foster a climate of belonging for students of color?			
A priori Code		Definition	Example
Promotes Culturally Responsive Inclusive School Environment	local identities	Accepting and capitalizing on local, indigenous identities	Incorporating local cultures into schools
	Building relationships	Actions that attempt to create positive working relationships	Asking about a student's interest
	Modeling	Modeling CRSL for staff	Reframing negative language
	vision	Promoting a vision for inclusion	Leadership team exercise defining equity
	challenging exclusion	Actively changing systems or behavior that exclude	Reducing suspension rates
	cultural capital	Utilizing student's culture as a strength	Implementing "collectivism" into pedagogy
	social capital	Building social networks for students	Connecting students of color to students of color in college
	student voice	Gaining student perspective	Surveying for students' needs
	Using data	Data based analysis	Equity audit
Engages Students, Parents, and Indigenous Contexts	relationships with community	Actions that work to create partnerships with groups outside the school district	Partnering with local cultural groups
	servant leader	Leader responding to the needs of constituents	Diversity initiative in hiring practices
	overlapping spaces	Merging of schools and community	Family Resource center's listing of services

	Community social activist	Working toward the greater good/taking on community issues	Superintendent Serving on the city homeless commission
	community as an informative space	Listening to learn about families served	Family “coffee” nights
	Resists deficit images	High expectations, attacking stereotypes	Calling staff out for talking about “these kids”
	Nurturing/caring for others	Addressing the non-academic needs of students, families	Handing out diapers at the family night
	Connecting with students	Actions and or responses by schools, families, and community that fill a stated need of students	Creating a Tae Kwon Do program

