Leading from equity: Changing and organizing for deeper learning

Taeyeon Kim

Minseok Yang

Yujin Oh

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Taeyeon Kim

Department of Educational Administration,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA

Minseok Yang

Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis,
University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA, and

Yujin Oh

College of Education, K-12 Educational Administration,
Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore how educational leaders in South Korea adopted equity mindsets and how they organized changes to support students' deeper learning during COVID-19.

Design/methodology/approach – The developed a comprehensive framework of Equity Leadership for Deeper Learning, by revising the existing model of Darling-Hammond and Darling-Hammond (2022) and synthesizing equity leadership literature. Drawing upon this framework, this study analyzed data collected from individual interviews and a focus group with school and district administrators in the K-12 Korean education system.

Findings – The participants prioritized an equity stance of their leadership by critically understanding sociopolitical conditions, challenging unjust policies, and envisioning the big picture of equity-centered education. This led them to operationalize equity leadership in practice and create a more inclusive and supportive environment for student-centered deeper learning. District leaders established well-resourced systems by creating/developing instructional resources and making policies more useful. School leaders promoted quality teaching by strengthening access, developing student-centered curricula, and establishing individualized programs for more equitable deeper learning.

Research limitations/implications – This study builds on scholarship of deeper learning and equity leadership by adding evidence from Korean educational leaders during COVID-19. First, the findings highlight the significance of leaders' equity mindsets in creating a safe and inclusive environment for deeper learning. This study further suggests that sharing an equity stance as a collective norm at the system level, spanning across districts and schools is important, which is instrumental to scale up innovation and reform initiatives. Second, this research also extends comparative, culturally informed perspectives to understand educational leadership. Most contemporary leadership theories originated from and are informed by Western and English-speaking contexts despite being widely applied to other contexts across the culture. This study's analysis underscores the importance of contextualizing leadership practices within the socio-historical contexts that influence how education systems are established and operate.

Practical implications – Leaders' adopting equity mindsets, utilizing bureaucratic resources in creative ways and implementing a school-wide quality curriculum are crucial to supporting students' deeper learning. District leaders can leverage existing vertical and horizontal networks to effectively communicate with teachers and local communities to establish well-resourced systems. As deeper learning is timeless and requires high levels of student engagement, school leaders' efforts to establish school-wide curricula is critical to facilitate deeper learning for students.

Originality/value – The study provides a nuanced understanding of how equity focused leaders responded to difficulties caused by the pandemic and strategized to support students' deeper learning. Existing studies tend to prioritize teacher effects on student learning, positing leadership effects as secondary or indirect. Alternatively, the authors argue that, without leadership supporting an inclusive environment, resourceful systems and student-centered school culture, deeper learning cannot be fully achieved in equitable ways.

Keywords: Equity, Equity leadership, Deeper learning, South Korea, COVID-19

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the existing educational inequities and the prevailing uncertainty, placing immense pressure on educational leaders to be innovative in their efforts to support student learning (Zhao, 2020). Educational leaders worldwide have been compelled to (re)invent and establish different routines and organizational structures for online learning to cater to the diverse needs of students (Fotheringham *et al.*, 2022). Numerous studies have reported that crisis-informed schooling has catalyzed educational leaders to reimagine the conventional school practices. For instance, Kim *et al.*'s (2021a) study with policy actors in South Korea (hereafter Korea) suggested that the pandemic forced policy elites and school administrators to think creatively to replace the old grammar of Korean schools—bureaucratic, competition-oriented and adult-centered—with a new grammar of schooling, focused on professional and democratic culture, equity-minded teaching and student-centered personalized learning. Similarly, McLeod and Dulsky's (2021) study on leaders in the United States and China during the early stages of the pandemic highlighted "unexpected positive outcomes," such as challenging the status quo, leveraging technology to enhance teaching and recognizing the power of community (p. 10). This inclination to reinvent mindsets and practices for leading deeper learning is widely observed across schools in various countries during/post pandemic (Reimers, 2022; Zhao and Watterston, 2021).

Scholars have discussed deeper learning as a way of supporting students to develop mastery, ownership and high order thinking skills to gain in-depth knowledge and solve relevant problems (Hernández *et al.*, 2019; Socol *et al.*, 2018). While deeper learning is often reduced to concepts such as project-based, student-centered and competency-based, the actual implementation of these modalities sometimes lacks depth (Watkins *et al.*, 2018). Echoing this concern, we define key aspects of deeper learning as timeless (Socol *et al.*, 2018) and engaged (Cooper, 2014). By employing organized instruction with academic rigor, connective teaching and lively practices, educators can foster a depth of knowledge among students, ensuring that the learning experience is intellectually stimulating and meaningful (Cooper, 2014).

Educational leaders play a pivotal role in creating conditions for deeper learning. The leadership literature has shown that district and school leaders are key actors in establishing structures, allocating resources and implementing routinized practices that promote student' engagement in deeper learning (Hallinger, 2011; Hatch *et al.*, 2016; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020). Research has underscored how successful leaders strategically promote a learning-centered culture and develop teachers, thus ensuring that all students have access to high quality instruction and equitable learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond and Darling-Hammond, 2022; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020; Richardson *et al.*, 2021). Research has consistently demonstrated that equity-oriented leadership lies at the core of schools' endeavors to foster in-depth knowledge acquisition and meaningful learning experiences for students. This type of leadership involves the intentional development of teachers, cultivation of inclusive cultures and active engagement with the broader community (Ishimaru and Galloway, 2021; Rigby *et al.*, 2019).

This study explores how educational leaders' equity-centered mindset and practices facilitated deeper learning during the pandemic. The unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19 have further highlighted the pressing need for equity-driven leadership. However, limited research exists on the direct connections between equity leadership and deeper learning, with the exception of notable works by Darling-Hammond and Darling-Hammond (2022) and Richardson *et al.* (2021). More importantly, empirical evidence from non-Western contexts, such as Korea, is scarcer and not widely shared internationally, while many Asian countries revealed organized and systemic leadership during the pandemic (Kim *et al.*, 2021b). To fill these gaps, this study addresses the following research questions using interviews conducted with equity-minded educational leaders in Korea:

(1) How did educational leaders in Korea adopt equity mindsets informed by social and policy narratives during the pandemic?

(2) How did they organize and implement changes to support deeper learning and achieve equitable outcomes in schools?

Background literature on deeper learning

The attention to deeper learning stems from the concerns that knowledge and skills currently taught in schools are insufficient to navigate a variety of complex issues (Huberman *et al.*, 2014). While scholarly thought diverges on aspects of deeper learning, they tend to agree deeper learning is a core aspect of teaching and learning practices that helps students master essential academic content and apply their knowledge to solve complex problems (Hernández *et al.*, 2019). Huberman *et al.* (2014) presented the core assets of deeper learning as mastery of core academic content, critical thinking and problem solving, effective communication, ability to collaborate, learning how to learn and academic mindsets. Deeper learning is often understood as synonymous with different learning modalities (e.g. project-based, student-centered), yet Watkins *et al.* (2018) contented that the implementation of these forms can be either shallow or deep in practice. In this sense, Socol *et al.* (2018) argues for its timeless, suggesting that deeper learning requires fully immersed learning experiences that are continuous and not time-bound. This view aligns with the notion that deeper learning should extend beyond the completion of projects or assignments, fostering a lasting impact on students' mastery of knowledge and skills.

In classroom settings, research emphasizes the significance of teachers' sophisticated skills and pedagogical guidance on addressing students' individual needs and unlocking their potential, thereby facilitating deeper learning (Hernández *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, student engagement is a crucial element as engaged learning experiences enhance students' motivation, involvement and active participation, contributing to a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Cooper, 2014). To enhance student engagement, Cooper (2014) suggested three types of teaching practices—connective instruction, academic rigor and lively learning, all of which eventually lead to students' deeper learning. Connective instruction enables students to make close connections with learning contents, teachers and instructions (Martin and Dowson, 2009). By employing academic rigor within adequately supportive learning environments, teachers can enhance students' engagement in intellectually stimulating and challenging activities (Wolf *et al.*, 2005). These strategies can foster deeper learning as a timeless

and engaged by increasing students' mastery of academic knowledge, making close connections between students themselves and the subject matter and facilitating students' ability to apply their knowledge and skills effectively in solving real-world problems.

To establish a connection between the aim of deeper learning and the promotion of equitable learning experiences, scholars have turned to sociocultural learning theories, which posit that learning is socially constructed and culturally embedded (e.g. Carol Lee, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Darling-Hammond and Darling-Hammond (2022) argued that deeper learning has been predominantly accessible to privileged individuals who could afford to send their children to advantaged schools. They assert that access to deeper learning should be considered a civil right and propose several conditions: (1) safe and healthy communities, (2) well-resourced school systems, (3) inclusive school environments, (4) well-prepared teachers and (5) quality curriculum. Similarly, Hernández *et al.* (2019) suggested that personalized, collaborative, interdisciplinary and inquiry-based learning are essential practices for facilitating deeper learning, particularly for marginalized students. These findings highlight the importance of leadership roles in establishing the necessary conditions and resources for students to experience deeper learning through timeless and engaged activities. In school settings, students' deeper learning is facilitated through organized curricula, pedagogies and teaching practice. This process necessitates successful leadership, which we present as *equity leadership for deeper learning* in the following section, forming the framework of this study.

Framework: equity leadership for deeper learning

We have developed a comprehensive framework called Equity Leadership for Deeper Learning, which builds upon Darling-Hammond and Darling-Hammond's (2022) five conditions for equitable access to deeper learning at the district and school levels. We expanded this framework by incorporating leadership elements derived from the literature on leadership for equity and instructional quality (City *et al.*, 2009; Cohen and Ball, 1999; Hallinger, 2011; Honig and Honsa, 2020; Ishimaru and Galloway, 2021; Marshall and Khalifa, 2018).

Equity leadership necessitates that leaders challenge unjust and discriminatory policies, use data to assess inequities present in students' academic and social development, engage in critical self-reflection on their leadership, address teachers' and their own (un)conscious biases and promote culturally responsive teaching (Honig and Honsa, 2020; Ishimaru and Galloway, 2021; Marshall and Khalifa, 2018). This type of leadership is characterized by openness and shared decision-making with colleagues, empowering teachers to leverage their individual expertise and involving them in leadership and instructional decisions—all of which harness the synergistic power of professional collaboration through networks (Azorín *et al.*, 2020; Hallinger, 2011). Leaders' equity-oriented mindsets thus set fundamental norms, resources and practices that shape the instructional core—what teachers and students do and say in classrooms through meaningful interactions with appropriate learning materials (City *et al.*, 2009; Cohen and Ball, 1999). For instance, leaders can facilitate teachers to advance their skills and capacity through collaboration with other experts on instructional task–what students are actually asked to do (City *et al.*, 2009; Tekkumru-Kisa *et al.*, 2020). Equity minded leaders establish a district- and school-wide culture and initiatives that shape student-centered, asset-driven and culturally responsive classroom interactions (Ishimaru and Galloway, 2021; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020; Marshall and Khalifa, 2018).

Given this, we define *Equity Leadership for Deeper Learning* as leadership shared among educators to promote equitable conditions and outcomes for deeper learning. This form of leadership fosters equity-mindedness among various stakeholders by questioning teachers' assumptions, recognizing biases that hinder students' deeper learning and reducing disparities in educational access, processes and outcomes (Dowd and Bensimon, 2015). With this leadership approach, educators have high yet reasonable expectations for each student, moving beyond superficial goals, which leads students to master the content and apply it to real-world issues (Huberman *et al.*, 2014). These strategies can be implemented at both the district and school levels, ensuring a systemic and holistic approach to promoting equity and deeper learning.

District leadership plays a critical role in establishing safe and healthy communities and well-resourced systems that support

school-level leadership and foster deeper learning (Darling-Hammond and Darling-Hammond, 2022). To address disparities in learning opportunities and outcomes, district leaders are expected to critically analyze gaps in historically underserved communities, identify relevant resources and create an equity-driven healthy environment founded on mutual respect, collaboration with multi-stakeholders and asset-driven mindsets (Myende *et al.*, 2022). District leaders need to support teachers and school administrators to deepen their understanding of deeper learning and its effective facilitation (Watkins *et al.*, 2018). District leadership can offer collaborative learning opportunities focusing on quality instruction with an equity mindset while promoting the personalization of school cultures with a high level of trust, respect and collective responsibility (Huberman *et al.*, 2014; Watkins *et al.*, 2018). Under such conditions, teachers are empowered as professionals who value students' personalized needs and goals and lead students towards deeper learning in more equitable ways.

With district-level efforts to establish equity-driven learning environments, schools can foster an inclusive learning through quality teaching and curricula. School leaders affect the quality of teaching and learning by cultivating and retaining effective teachers, offering professional development programs and establishing a learning centered school climate (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood *et al.,* 2020). Through these efforts, teachers are provided with opportunities to develop extensive repertoires of sophisticated teaching practices that meet the diverse needs of students. Since a culturally connected quality curriculum is essential for each student's holistic growth, collaboration among teachers and their engagement with local communities are crucial for creating and implementing school-level curricula. Effective leaders build networks where teachers can collaboratively produce and draw upon a shared body of knowledge, skills and experiences (Richardson *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2023). Through exposure to timeless and engaging learning experiences, students can attain a depth of knowledge. This integrated model, developed by revising the existing model of Darling- Hammond and Darling-Hammond (2022) and synthesizing equity leadership literature, contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between equity leadership and deeper learning. Figure 1 shows the interconnectedness of each element described in the equity leadership practices for deeper learning.
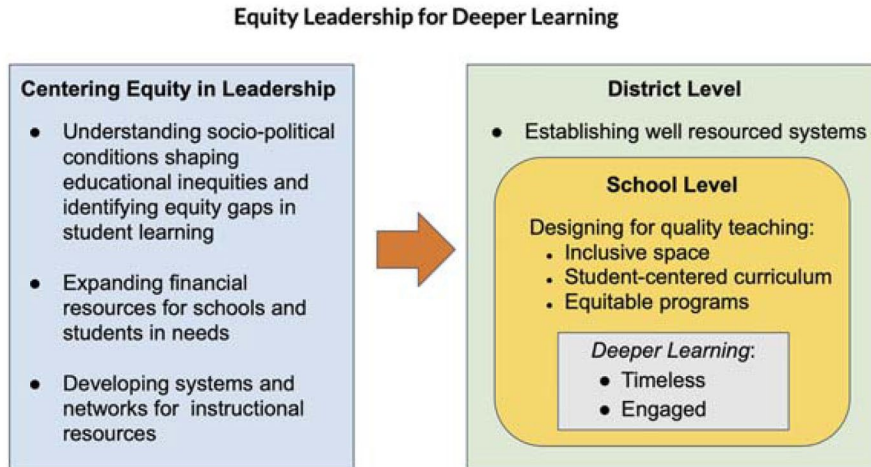
Figure 1. Framework of equity leadership for deeper learning. Model adapted from Darling-Hammond & Darling-Hammond (2022, p.3) and revised based on our analysis.

Contexts of Korean education

Strong teaching culture and system

The Korean education system provides a unique context for exploring equity leadership for deeper learning. Influenced by Confucian perspectives rooted in the country's long history of public schooling, teaching and learning have been regarded as essential for personality cultivation, social mobility and holistic human development (Kwak *et al.*, 2016). Teaching in Korea emphasizes the mastery of knowledge and its embodied practices as integral to individuals' moral and intellectual development, aligning closely with the core tenets of deeper learning.

Korea maintains a professionally developed bureaucratic education system in which the central government primarily establishes a broader nationwide educational agenda and a system of human resource management, while schools and teachers exercise discretionary power over school operations. This system aims to ensure equal access to quality curriculum and teachers across the nation. For instance, principals and teachers in public schools are required to regularly rotate schools, ensuring overall educator quality for all student

populations and providing educators with diverse skills gained from different contexts throughout their careers, which typically span more than 30 years (Kim *et al.*, 2021b). Moreover, as experienced teachers advance to become administrators, leaders focus more on creating a climate and conditions that support teacher and student learning, rather than directly intervening in instructional improvement. This unique school system has paved the way for leadership practices that prioritize more equitable and deeper learning, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Equity discourses during COVID-19

While educational equity issues in Korean schools have been discussed over decades, equity discourses gained increased attention and prominence during the pandemic. To minimize learning loss and prevent the spread of the virus, the Ministry of Education (MOE) provided guidance to schools on implementing in-person, hybrid and online classes, considering factors such as student grade level and school size. The MOE allocated substantial funds to support student learning, including tutoring and counseling services. However, studies also have revealed a concerning increase in learning loss and disparities, such as digital divides and lower academic and behavioral performance, which had to be addressed by school leaders and teachers (Kim *et al.*, 2021b).

The pandemic has brought heightened attention to the concept of equity, recognizing students' different starting points and justifying the allocation of additional school resources for underserved students. Equity issues in Korea have focused on enhancing social mobility and reducing the link between students' educational outcomes and their family's socioeconomic background through public policy and educational interventions. One example is the Priority Region of Educational Welfare Investment program, which provides various resources to students and schools from socioeconomically disadvantaged families. Additionally, with the increasing number of students from multicultural backgrounds, including North Korean refugees and immigrant students, equity discussions have been expanded to support the diverse needs of individual students based on their language and cultural backgrounds (Lee *et al.*, 2020).

Methods

This study draws on qualitative data collected from a broader research project exploring Korean educators' understanding of educational inequity during the pandemic. The original study involved conducting more than 50 individual interviews and five focus groups with teachers and administrators from the Korean K-12 education system across the country between 2020 and 2022. For this study, we analyze interview data obtained from school and district leaders as they highlighted how they made meaning of equity and organized changes to promote deeper learning in schools.

Participants

The study included 16 participants who were administrators working in either K-12 public schools or district offices at the time of data collection. We used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) as we intended to recruit information-rich participants willing to share their insights and experiences related to equity and program implementation aimed at supporting student learning. Participants were solicited through nationwide professional learning communities dedicated to learning about policy and issues of equity. We sought to maximize variations of participants' characteristics (Patton, 2015) to explore a broadly shared phenomenon across the nation. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants, consisting of eight self-identified male and eight female school/district administrators. Their years of experience in education ranged from 17 to 39. The schools or districts they represented served various groups of students from socioeconomically, culturally and linguistically diverse families, as well as students with athletic or technical education focused. There were two elementary, two middle and four high school principals, one high school vice principal and seven district administrators working in six regional/municipal Offices of Education. We had participants from metropolitan urban provincial districts (e.g. Daejeon) through rural provincial districts (e.g. Chungbuk), providing diverse regional narratives on educational equity.

Table 1. Background of participants

Participants	Gender	School level	Years of exp	School (district) backgrounds	Region (municipal level)
Principal Seop	Male	Elem	33	PREWI school, Mix of rural and industrial area within a metropolitan city	Daegu
Principal Hyung	Male	High	30	High SES school, metropolitan city	Daejeon
Principal Hong	Male	Mid	25	School in the old town, metropolitan city	Daejeon
Principal Suk	Female	Mid	27	School in the new town, metropolitan city	Daegu
Principal Bok	Male	High	39	Girls' school, medium city	Chungbuk
Principal Hongil	Male	High	26	Comprehensive (athletic and technical) high school, small rural	Gangwon
Principal Roh	Male	High	35	Innovation school, mix of rural and urban	Gyeonggi
Principal Kwon	Male	Elem	29	Multicultural, PREWI school, metropolitan city	Daejeon
Asst. Prin. Jeong	Female	High	31	Low SES girls' school, medium city	Gyeonggi
Dis. Dir. Gyung	Female		25	The newest municipal district, urban cluster	Sejong
Dis. Dir. Cheong	Female		24	Metropolitan area	Daejeon
Dis. Dir. Mi	Female		19	Multicultural region, mix of rural and urban schools	Gyeonggi
Dis. Dir. Sook	Female		20	Innovative school model	Gyeonggi
Dis. Dir. Hyun	Female		17	Edu tech and info system covering all schools in the district	Gyeonggi
Dis. Dir. Yeon	Female		19	Gentrification region	Gyeonggi
Dis. Dir. Gil	Male		30	Mix of rural and urban schools	Gyeonggi

Note(s): Elementary, middle, and high school in Korea correspond to US grades 1–6, 7–9 and 10–12, respectively.
There are 17 municipal-level districts in Korea.
PREWI: The Priority Region of Educational Welfare Investment program

Data collection and analysis

The data were collected from 2020 through 2022 by using Zoom-based individual interviews and focus groups with various stakeholders. The first round of data collection was done in the summer of 2020, after the first semester (March to August) of the 2020 school year, to explore their initial responses to COVID-19. The second round of data collection was conducted in early 2021 (January to February), after the first school year of the pandemic, to explore how their perceptions and practices had been sustained or changed over the academic year. The third round of data collection took place in early 2022, at the end of the 2021 school year, to examine changes as well as continuing practices. We used data collected from one focus group with district administrators in 2020 and 16 individual interviews conducted with school- and district-level administrators between 2020 and 2022.

During the interviews, we asked a series of questions related to their perceptions of and reflection on educational equity, national and local policies and school programs for student learning during COVID-19. Our questions included participants' strategies used to foster meaningful learning to attain in-depth knowledge, as well as their utilization of an equity stance to enhance these efforts. All interviews were semi-structured, ranged from 60 to 90 min and were video recorded and transcribed in Korean.

We used thematic analysis to explore meaning and patterns across the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2021). We initially read transcripts and memos line-by-line with a particular focus on participants' ideas of equity and their interpretation of "support for student learning." We then adopted multiple cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2015) to identify participants' experiences with students' deeper learning. Through the initial stage of inductive coding, we found our participants highlighted equity-minded leadership and their commitment to promoting meaningful learning experiences for students. This led us to develop our conceptual framework (Figure 1) informed by the existing studies. The latter stages of analysis were more deductive and focused on linking data to the framework we developed. Coding was conducted individually and collectively, with discussion and analysis conducted through weekly Zoom group meetings. After a series of collective team discussions and engagement with analytic notes on deeper learning

for equity, we generated three themes: (1) *centering equity as a stance,* (2) *district leadership for establishing well-resourced systems* and (3) *school leadership for quality teaching and learning.*

Centering equity as a stance: critical understanding of policy narratives and socio-political conditions

This section illuminates how the participants embraced an equity stance as a core aspect of their leadership by (1) critically understanding socio-political conditions, (2) challenging unjust policies and (3) envisioning the big picture of equity-centered schooling. Darling Hammond and Darling Hammond (2022) emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing systemic inequities in living conditions to create a safe and inclusive learning environment. Consistent with this perspective, our participants acknowledged the significance of establishing systems that foster equitable learning. They demonstrated a critical analysis of the inequitable conditions embedded in sociopolitical contexts and policy initiatives. Their responses align with the insights of Ishimaru and Galloway (2021), in emphasizing the role of an equity-driven mindset for individual educators which is critical for implementing and realizing student-centered learning.

Understanding socio-political conditions shaping educational inequities

During the pandemic, media coverage and policy discourses generated extensive narratives on equity, focusing on how policies can better address "gaps" in various aspects of social life. As these conditions shaped students' educational experiences, our participants included these social and political narratives into their analysis of inequity. They contextualized problems of educational access, learning loss and gaps, students' socio-emotional well-being and career pathways, within the larger social ecology beyond school education.

For example, District Director Yeon, who had worked at both wealthy and economically disadvantaged school districts during the pandemic, commented on inequality, saying "I would define them as

unfair/uneven future." She observed how "mother curricula" were created and implemented by affluent families who utilized their economic, social and cultural capital to support their children, including academics, social development and character building. Yeon said, "The mother curricula have been less impacted by the pandemic but just strengthened" through the well-coordinated afternoon school programs and private tutoring.

Several participants serving multicultural and multilingual students highlighted social issues from non-dominant backgrounds. Director Gil, working in a rural district with numerous multicultural migrant students, expressed concerns about deficit thinking around migrant families, saying, "Many of my multicultural students just stayed at home during COVID.. . . because there are not many spaces where multicultural students feel safe and welcome in our town." Our participants were well aware of the impact of disparities in students' living conditions on their learning experiences in schools, although specific areas of focus varied across different communities.

Critically analyzing policy initiatives

The awareness of structural inequities led our participants to critically examine policy initiatives and existing systems intended to address educational recovery after the pandemic. While appreciating resources available through MOE's multiple COVID-19 recovery policies, many of them also expressed dissatisfaction and skepticism regarding their "effectiveness for realizing substantial equity." District Director Mi offered her critical thoughts on the MOE's budget distribution for COVID-19 recovery, which required spending a large amount of money in a short-term, saying:

> We got so many recovery policies and budgets urgently created. . . . In schools, these multiple policies must go deeply to the bottom for students step by step, but there was such large spending in a short time . . .. I felt like the budget was set to be just spent [not considering how to make meaningful impacts]. These policies should be glued to students who are really in need, with sustainability, not just like a 1–2 year-massive spending.

Several participants echoed Mi's statement, commenting that such "urgently created," "short-term" and "large spending" policies serve the "interests of populist policymakers," not necessarily addressing the actual needs of students and schools. Similarly, Gil criticized "showy policies" in serving multicultural communities:

> We have s many showy policies going on with large spending and they sometimes overlap. But these policies cannot address something really needed for multicultural students. So, from the eyes of one student, it's not meaningful. Not practical. We need pinpointed policies that can pick specific resources tailored to each student's needs.

These comments show how leaders can apply *critical policy literacy* to challenge existing policy initiatives through the lens of equity, focusing on the needs of individual students. In this vein, our participants argued that school education has to be "student-centered," not "adult-centered."

Envisioning equity-centered schooling and leadership

Our analysis highlighted that the participants centered a stance of equity in (re)envisioning school education. Most participants agreed that one of the significant roles of public education is narrowing educational gaps resulting from family background and systemic inequities. Our participants believed that achieving this goal requires personalized support for students. High school assistant principal Jeong shared, "I always contemplate to what extent, in what ways, public education does its best for educational gaps." The participants proposed a coordinated approach involving various resources, policies and services from different providers to offer targeted interventions based on students' needs. District Director Hyun remarked, "While some teachers feel overwhelmed by the expanded responsibilities of schools, including environmental aspects and broader support for student learning, not just focusing on teaching, I think school is *the closest* and *most familiar space for students* (emphasized by participant), unlike city offices or private education. So, we have to." These comments suggest that addressing equity must begin with recognizing students' needs before coordinating resources and policies.

Several participants, those who actively supported teacher professional development programs, highlighted the importance of teachers' mindset of centering equity in their own teaching and learning. High school principal Hongil said, "Teaching content knowledge is important but the equity-oriented mind itself is very critical. The level of teachers' sensitivity to addressing equity varies. I think we should level up [teachers' equity sensitivity]." Similarly, Director Mi highlighted the importance of "educators' self-consciousness about realizing how social inequities are serious and asking how I [they] can contribute to enhancing equity."

District leadership for establishing well-resourced systems

Mobilizing resources through networks

With the equity-centered mindset described earlier, our participants shared school districts' strategies supporting deeper learning. Municipal and local level districts mobilized and coordinated resources through horizontal and vertical networks. These efforts focused on (1) creating and developing instructional resources and (2) forming policies that promote quality teaching and learning in schools. As highlighted by the existing literature on the role of district leadership in supporting student learning (Hatch *et al.*, 2016; Honig, 2012) and networks mobilizing resources at the system level (Yang *et al.*, 2023), our data suggest district leadership is critical to establishing well-resourced systems that facilitate deeper learning in school settings.

Creating and developing instructional resources: bridging outward and inward

School districts in Korea demonstrated a proactive approach by leveraging existing bureaucratic systems to create and coordinate resources for supporting student learning during the pandemic. Districts established new programs specifically designed to address students' academic and socio-emotional needs. Notably, all district leaders in our study displayed a strong commitment to sustaining these programs by actively seeking additional local and external resources. District

Director Sook shared an example by explaining the Learning Clinic Center in her local district:

> We recruit mentor teachers who can assist lower achieving students individually. They would visit local schools wanting to be part of this program two or three times a week to offer 1:1 tutoring . . ..The municipal district provided us with a budget, but I also secured additional funds from other entities.

Similarly, multiple programs focused on "educational gaps" were created by local districts to offer individualized support for students with additional needs. Assistant Principal Jeong appreciated her district's coordinated social relationship recovery programs, saying: "We were able to offer socio-emotional learning programs for all students at each grade and Teacher-Student 1:1 Mentoring for students with additional needs. The district's support enabled my school to provide extra support and care to all of our students." The diligent pursuit of additional financial and human resources by districts greatly enhanced schools' capacity to foster meaningful and engaged learning experiences for students, encompassing both academic and social development.

In addition, districts supported teacher development by mobilizing existing professional learning networks. Given the country's educator rotation policy and long-term investment in teacher development, various types of teacher-learning communities, such as teacher-initiated inquiry groups and district-led professional learning communities, already existed across districts. Most district leaders in our study utilized online platforms established during the pandemic to facilitate timely communication. District Director Cheong said, "I have several Kakao [a smartphone messaging app widely used in Korea] group chat rooms and online groups with teachers and other leaders where we would share teaching materials and district policy drafts to receive feedback from teachers." She added that her district offered support for existing teacher networks to develop and share online content, saying that "Our professional learning communities became more meaningful and practical. I witnessed schools offering more quality lessons." These examples highlight the significance of districts in creating conducive conditions, including spaces, time, opportunities

and financial support, to facilitate deeper learning among teachers. Equally important, however, was mobilizing teacher-led initiatives for forming and norming change efforts.

Making policies resourceful for deeper learning: managing up and down

As evident in the first finding section, our participants well recognized the need to modify the MOE's initiatives with fidelity for effective implementation in school settings. School districts actively mobilized vertical networks, connecting the MOE with local schools, to increase policy fidelity through timely and collaborative communication. This role was critical for district leadership as school districts are in the middle of the chain of command within the extensive bureaucratic system of Korean education. These endeavors resulted in significant changes initiated by the MOE, such as waiving the teacher evaluation policy and developing online teaching materials. District Director Gyung explained how the network of municipal and provincial districts played a critical role in sharing feedback from teachers and addressing the specific needs of local schools to inform the policy decisions at the top:

> We shared our opinions [with the MOE], saying it would be better to waive teacher evaluation this year because online teaching presents limitations (for evaluating teachers) and schools are currently facing more pressing challenges . . .. So teachers now know that their voices are heard when they share feedback with us [district leaders].

Moreover, our participants working at the municipal level noted that districts took responsibility for resolving possible issues arising from online teaching. Many districts facilitated teacher networks to develop online lessons that could be shared with other teachers. District Director Cheong noticed teachers' concerns about copyright issues when making lesson videos and let her district communicate with the MOE:

> Teachers would have to ensure their online materials abide by the copyright law, but in case, if there are any legal issues, we assured teachers that we [the district] are in charge

of that. We explicitly stated it in our Kakao group chatroom with teachers . . . It's better to have teachers understand they are protected, not just left alone regarding any consequence when they initiate something good.

These examples illustrate how districts creatively utilized the existing networks among districts, schools and the MOE, vertically and horizontally, to enhance policy fidelity in accordance with the needs of educators who implement policies. Several participants also shared that the districts increased flexibility and granted more authority to school principals in making school-level decisions, including human resource policies (e.g. teacher leave, sick day policies) and budget allocation, to better serve the needs of local schools and conditions for engaged learning.

School leadership for quality teaching and learning

Designing space, curricula and programs for deeper learning

As existing studies suggested (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020), our participants addressed the significance of school leadership in driving improvement efforts. Our analysis highlighted school leaders' strategies to foster deeper learning among students, by enhancing access to inclusive learning spaces, supporting quality instruction and school-level curricula and implementing programs that promote equitable learning.

Enhancing access and inclusive learning space

Since the onset of COVID-19, school leaders quickly responded to the imperative of ensuring students' access to online learning by preparing technology, learning materials and spaces, especially for students in need. Despite a nationwide infrastructure that provides Wi-Fi access to lower-income families, many principals in our study noted that during the initial stage of online schooling in 2020, students from lower-income families still faced difficulties in accessing devices. Principal Kwon said, "Students' access to online classes posed the greatest concern. We would lend tablets to students who needed them and

purchased additional devices for students covered by the Education Welfare Program, using the program budget." In addition to improving technology access, elementary school leaders offered "learning bundles" via Drive-Thru, delivering a set of hard copy worksheets to each student, facilitating independent learning at home. This initiative received positive feedback from families during the period of school closure in early 2020.

The provision of learning devices and materials served as an initial step to enable students' access to education. Beyond this, leaders in our study took additional steps to establish dedicated learning spaces for students who lacked an independent and focused learning environment at home. Assistant Principal Jeong said,

> My school wanted to offer a dedicated space and schedule for students' independent learning . . .. So, we opened an already established project learning lab to students who desired to study early in the morning, at lunchtime, or evening. I hoped this space facilitated self-directed learning and foster peer support, ultimately generating synergetic effects.

High school leaders in particular shared notable examples of how they secured certain spaces for students to study during the initial school closure, despite heavy restrictions due to infection. Principal Hyung emphasized "space innovation as potential curricula" and described how his school intentionally "increased the temperature of learning space [Korean expression meaning that making the place more interactive and welcoming]" by redesigning classrooms and other spaces. This redesign aimed to foster increased interactions between students and teachers.

Our participants designated and rearranged certain spaces for students while also creating schedules for students' self-directed learning, which increased access and inclusiveness for student learning. These responses underscore the significance of leadership in creating an environment conducive to deeper learning, wherein students can demonstrate persistence and engagement by having access to appropriate spaces and resources.

Supporting quality instruction and student-centered curriculum

As the pandemic has lasted longer than expected, school leaders focused more on teaching quality. All school leaders in our study advocated for interactive synchronous instruction (e.g. Zoom live) than asynchronous lessons as they knew that live interactions could increase check-ins and student engagement, both critical to deeper learning. Our principal participants used school-based professional development to push their teachers to increase video live sessions, as principal Kwon did:

> In the first semester of 2020, we would have school-based professional development for Zoom lessons . . .. Then we gradually increased live lessons . . .. You know, students just staying at home, learning with the link to the learning materials without someone who watches and supports them, it is not easy . . . I said, let's level up our teaching, the overall quality of lessons across the school. Teachers actively shared know-how and collaboratively invented innovative approaches for online teaching. Teacher learning and quality lessons via live sessions naturally became a norm.

With the vaccination and loosened restrictions, the participating principals also maximized in-person learning sessions and their impacts on student learning experiences. Alongside academic support, they placed a strong emphasis on school-based curricula that fostered students' socio-emotional development as well as inquiry-driven learning, which had often been overlooked during online schooling. For instance, principal Hongil implemented grade-level Sports Days as part of the school curriculum, adhering to the MOE's guidelines on school-wide activity-driven programs. These Sports Days were designed to facilitate students' social skills and promote their mental and physical well-being. He commented, "These outdoor social activities really helped reduce students' emotional anxiety . . . as COVID curriculum lacked socioemotional aspects."

Moreover, such a school-level curriculum well embraced student voice. Secondary school leaders in our study created and facilitated school curricula that were informed by the perspectives and input of students. High school principal Roh, for instance, shared how a student-initiated project facilitated inquiry among students, teachers

and leaders. In his school, a monthly forum was organized, during which all students read a book centered around a specific topic and engaged in discussions with invited speakers. Principal Roh reflected on the final session of 2021 and its impact on student learning and development:

> . . . This was not originally planned, but a student said, "We should offer an Academy for teachers, not just for us." I said, "sure, let's do it." Then another student said, "I know you [the principal] recently published a book on education. Let's read your book and engage in discussions. We don't need another external speaker." . . . We read the book, and each individual shared thoughts on what education should look like. One senior student said, "Why do we place every student in the same line? This presupposes that we use the same measure for competition. Can we just respect where each individual is and encourage students to progress at their own place?" I was really amazed by the students' ideas.

Establishing programs for more equitable and deeper learning

Building on conditions for access and quality teaching and curriculum, school leaders in our study were attuned to establishing programs that provided individualized learning support. Our participants utilized policy resources to offer extra assistance to individual students. Some secondary school leaders implemented in-school intervention programs during winter vacations or outside regular school hours, specifically catering to students from lower-income families. High school vice principal Jeong believed that "keeping the links between school and students throughout a year" is critical, saying:

> Over vacation, my school regularly offers additional programs for underachieving students. I think these programs can help students who are in the blind spot of welfare, ensuring they come to school to learn regularly . . .. I believe that cultivating high-ordered thinking and creativity requires basic academic skills. School education has to guarantee fundamental, basic academic competencies at least so that students graduating from any high school in Korea can succeed.

As Jeong highlighted, additional school-based programs were intended to promote more equitable learning with a belief that "schools are responsible for teaching every student to achieve a certain level." These programs established consistency and routines that enable students to gain and master in-depth knowledge.

School leaders in our study widely shared efforts to support deeper learning tailored to students' personalized needs. Several participants commented that most schools across the country would utilize online and offline assessment programs to evaluate students' basic skills followed by individualized worksheets and instructional recommendations focusing on the areas of improvement for each student. As a representative example, the director Sook shared the district-wide TETRIS project that tracks each student's strengths and weaknesses in holistic dimensions of learning beyond academic development.

> I initiated the TETRIS project, thinking of each individual student having different areas of strength and weakness. I wanted to support additional needs for weakness but also bolster their existing strengths. This approach would boost their self-esteem. Based on the assessment and profiling of a student, we figure out how to support them. We also let a student design their own program upon their preference about what to learn. So, we would pair a student and a teacher who can offer what the student wants to learn while offering additional compensation to these teachers [for their specialized instruction].

Interestingly, the TETRIS program not only provided additional support for areas of weaknesses but also offered opportunities for students to enhance their existing strengths through student-designed learning steps, with the guidance and support of teachers. Since individual students were at different stages of progress and received varying levels of support at home, leaders in our study actively sought to bridge resource gaps and support student-initiated programs. This approach aimed to foster deeper learning in school settings with a greater emphasis on equity.

Discussion

This study analyzed how educational leaders made meaning of equity informed by social and policy narratives and how they organized changes to foster deeper learning in Korean schools during COVID-19. Since the pandemic furthered disparities in students' academic and socioemotional development, leaders in our study adopted an equity stance to support deeper learning for students. They challenged the status quo, which perpetuates inequalities, by critically analyzing the sociopolitical conditions and policy initiatives that shape students' lives and the education system. This led them to operationalize equity leadership in practice and create a more inclusive and supportive environment for student-centered deeper learning. To achieve this, our participants focused on enhancing access and creating inclusive learning space, supporting quality instruction with student-centered curriculum and establishing programs that promote equitable and deeper learning within well-resourced systems.

Based on the findings, we suggest several remarks that extend the scholarship and practice of educational leadership. First, as learning is a socially and culturally constructed process (Cole *et al.*, 1978), we highlight the significance of leaders' equity mindsets in creating a safe and inclusive environment for deeper learning. Adopting an equity stance has been highlighted by research on successful leadership (Ishimaru and Galloway, 2021) as it recognizes the diverse needs of students, identifies systemic inequities and gaps in opportunities and addresses these issues through a wide range of school practices. Our findings further confirm that sharing an equity stance as a collective norm at the system level, spanning across districts and schools is important. This collective commitment to prioritizing safe and inclusive environments for deeper learning is instrumental to scale up innovation and reform initiatives (Yang *et al.*, 2023). Equity approaches in our findings reflect concerted efforts to 1) improve access to instructional resources and student learning at the system level (e.g. messengers for teacher networking, open-access instructional and learning materials, digital device and learning space) and 2) to actively intervene students' deeper learning within the instructional core (e.g. prioritizing synchronous sessions, supports for school-wide self-directed programs, inquiry learning). The findings demonstrate that

equity-focused leadership, when intervening in the instructional core, can directly influence and enhance students' deeper learning experiences (City *et al.*, 2009; Cohen and Ball, 1999; Cooper, 2014). Simultaneously, it is crucial to ensure *equalized access to high quality* resources and environments at the system level as this establishes a benchmark for high expectations and guarantees that all students have an opportunity to thrive in deeper learning (see Darling-Hammond and Darling-Hammond, 2022).

Second, our findings suggest district leaders' creative use of bureaucratic resources was significant. Leveraging the established vertical and horizontal networks, the Korean district leaders in our study used app-based timely communication and established new networks with teachers and local communities. This approach can be understood as a hybrid form of bureaucracy that facilitates fast and innovative changes in school systems through bridging and brokering (Honig, 2012). At the same time, districts' advocacy for local needs by amplifying the voices of teachers who closely work with students brought policy changes at the national level (e.g. solving copyright issues for teacher-created materials). These examples demonstrate the importance of district leadership in promoting policy fidelity and buffering external factors that undermine teaching and learning in schools (Honig, 2009). Thus, our findings show how flexibility and creativity can transform the bureaucratic system that is often mired in sanctions, rigid rules, or the old grammar of schooling, toward a well-resourced, efficient and supportive system.

Third, our participants exemplified how school leaders can contribute to a school wide curriculum that reflects student voices and their needs. These curricular leadership efforts include rearranging space, time schedule and "hidden curriculum" activities that fostered meaningful interactions and engaged learning for students. The participants also highlighted how they promoted non-academic activities (e.g. Sports Days, student-led field trips), schoolwide book forums and learning fairs as part of regular curricular arrangement, going beyond subject specific, academic driven curricula. Our findings present a striking contrast to evidence suggested in many schools across the countries that teachers and school leaders did not make sufficient efforts to improve teacher-centered instructional routines in response to the pandemic, which led students passively participating in online classes and filling out worksheets for the purposes of accountability

(Haderlein *et al.*, 2021; Reynolds *et al.*, 2022). This contrasting result makes the Korean case interesting, suggesting that the pandemic can be a catalyst for positive change as it forced schools to rethink their "old grammar of schooling" and embrace more flexible, equitable, and responsive ways of teaching and learning. As deeper learning is timeless and requires high levels of student engagement, school leaders' efforts to establish such school-wide curricula is critical to facilitate deeper learning for students (Cooper, 2014; Socol *et al.*, 2018). Lastly, we want to bring comparative, culturally informed perspectives to understand educational leadership. Most contemporary leadership theories originated from and are informed by Western and English-speaking contexts despite being widely applied to other contexts across the culture. However, leadership practices are shaped by the socio-historical and cultural backgrounds of each society including the way education systems are established. Hallinger and Walker (2017) found school leadership in Asian contexts is often guided by national policies and curricula and leaders often shared instructional leadership responsibilities. Our findings also support Hallinger and Walker (2017) as teacher development is often guided by the national policies and district systems in Korea. Moreover, teachers in Korea are considered leaders, because many teachers lead school curricula, teacher learning and key decisions for school operation, as part of the systemic arrangement. This larger ecosystem, rooted in the professional teaching culture in Korea (Kim *et al.*, 2021b) influenced educational leaders in this study to focus more on establishing learning conditions, coordinating resources and utilizing school wide curricula for students' holistic growth.

We also acknowledge limitations of this study that can be further examined by future studies. As this study relied on self-reported interviews during COVID-19, future research can benefit from exploring how these leadership strategies can be linked to teachers' instructional shifts and students' deeper learning outcomes. It is also important to note that our data is collected during the pandemic. The crisis management literature suggests that, after strategic responses to manage crisis events, organizations can take steps to *back to the normal* and use crisis informed experiences to improve future strategies (Mitroff, 2005). As schools pursue "normalcy," it is worthy to explore to what extent the (re)invented leadership strategies depicted in our study become *normal* in non-crisis schooling.

Together, our study extends the existing scholarship of equity leadership and deeper learning. By investigating how Korean leaders made sense of equity during COVID-19 and how it manifested in their leadership strategies, our study provides a nuanced understanding of how equity focused leaders responded to difficulties caused by the pandemic. As policymakers and educational leaders around the globe seek to be more agile and learn from strategies and innovations necessitated by lingering impacts of the pandemic, our study adds empirical evidence highlighting the power of equity leadership in organizing schools for deeper learning. Existing studies tend to prioritize teacher effects on student learning, positing leadership effects as secondary or indirect (Sebastion *et al.*, 2017). Alternatively, this study suggests that, without leadership supporting an inclusive environment, resourceful systems and student-centered culture, deeper learning cannot be fully achieved in equitable ways. We hope our paper generates valuable conversations and imagination about what leadership should look like for schools to foster equitable and deeper learning.

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The authors

Taeyeon Kim is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. Her research examines the intersections of policy and leadership practices, with particular focus on how educational leaders challenge unjust systems and humanize policies to empower minoritized students and communities. Drawing on policy enactment, equity-oriented leadership and transnational/comparative perspectives, her research re-visits and re-imagines concepts around policy and leadership by centering the voices of educational leaders who advocate for equity and social justice. Her work uses a wide range of research methods and has been published in *Educational Administration Quarterly, Journal of Education Policy, AERA Open, Comparative Education Review*, *Teaching and Teacher Education* and others. Prior to higher education, she spent more than seven years in K-12 education, serving as a school teacher and consultant for educational leaders in South Korea. She earned her Ph.D. in K-12 Educational Administration from Michigan State University.

Minseok Yang is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri. Under the umbrella of K-12 education policy and leadership, Dr. Yang's research interests include educator labor markets, school reforms and teachers' unions, with a special focus on marginalized populations and communities. To generate insights and understanding into challenges faced by students, teachers and school leaders, he employs advanced quantitative methods, including quasiexperimental designs and machine learning techniques, into various types of large-scale data. His research has been published in a variety of peer-reviewed journals, including *AERA Open, Teaching and Teacher Education, Comparative Education Review* and *Journal of Education Human Resources*.

Yujin Oh earned her Ph.D. in K-12 Educational Administration from Michigan State University in 2022 Aug. Her research focuses on leadership development, educational policy implementation, and marginalized students' learning experiences. Prior to the doctoral program, she worked as a public elementary school teacher for over ten years in Seoul, South Korea and earned her M.A. in Educational Administration at Seoul National University. Yujin Oh is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: ohyujin2@msu.edu