

EQUITY WORK TAKES COURAGE:  
A CASE STUDY OF AN ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL'S PRAXIS

By

DANIEL C. LOUGHRAN

A dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School of Education

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Education

written under the direction of

---

Cheryl McLean, Ph.D.  
Dissertation Chair

---

Beth Rubin, Ph.D.  
Dissertation Committee Member

---

Lisa Antunes, Ed.D.  
Dissertation Committee Member

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May 2021

© 2021

Daniel C. Loughran

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

### **Abstract**

American K-12 teachers, approximately 80% of whom are White, typically arrive to their first professional teaching position with little experience interacting with students of color and even less training in asset-based pedagogical models. In response, some school leaders that have come to understand the promise of asset-based models, including culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), have taken it upon themselves to promote equity-gearred instructional practices found in these models. This bounded case study depicts an equity-focused elementary school principal's *praxis* – his reflexive thinking and actions centered on equity – in five leadership dimensions: personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological. It also examines the ways in which his praxis interacts with the beliefs and actions of five teacher participants. Thematic analysis is used to answer the study's overarching research question: How does an equity-focused leader develop a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally sustaining practices in his/her teaching staff? Findings include the role courage plays in addressing tensions surrounding ambiguity about equity; development of an "ethic of care"; and the role of system-wide support for equity work. Implications include the importance for school districts to develop a system-wide equity approach, including processes for administrators, teachers, and families. Courage itself is the most important ingredient for district staff development in terms of equity consciousness, equity-gearred instructional practices, and curriculum.

*Keywords:* courage, culturally sustaining pedagogy, equity consciousness, praxis, equity, case study, leadership, equity-focused

### Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to the support of many people, not only for the achievement of this study but also for the privileged life I have been blessed to live. Thank you...

To my amazing professors, dissertation committee, dissertation group, and doctoral cohort at Rutgers University for teaching me so much, especially about how to use my own position as a school leader to leverage resources for our students and families.

To my colleagues and mentors in the Franklin Township Public Schools, a richly diverse school community dedicated to the mission of helping all students reach their potential. Led by its courageous and committed superintendent, Dr. John A. Ravally, and so many other equity-focused leaders, the district is truly in the midst of removing its own learning barriers so that our students receive the education they need and deserve.

To my biggest champions, my family, who always believed that I could accomplish anything I committed to doing. Thank you, especially, to Mom, Butch, Bill, Kim, Uncle Tommy, and Aunt Rusty: *I love you all so much*. Thank you, Bruce Springsteen, my hero and constant source of inspiration. For nearly 50 years The Boss has modeled his own version of equity-focused leadership with anti-racist messages and continual reminders to his fans about what matters most: “Nobody wins unless everybody wins.”

Most importantly, to Michele, for finding me in the nick of time at Allegheny College. Because of you, a whole universe of possibility became available to me. In so many ways your love truly has blessed my life and sustained our beautiful children, Emma and Sean. Thank you for being on this journey with me and taking me to places I never could have imagined: *Big wheels roll through fields where sunlight streams / Oh, meet me in a land of hope and dreams*.

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this study to its teacher participants, all of whom spoke to me honestly and bravely about their very challenging work. The world was upside down at the time of this study, and learning how to deliver lessons via video conferencing software was difficult enough; that even a single teacher could make time to speak with me during this impossible school year was nothing short of a miracle. I am truly grateful to the teacher participants, as their insights made this study possible and will surely help other schools benefit from its meaning and implications.

I also wish to dedicate this study to Dr. Smith, the principal whose equity-focused praxis constituted the unit of study under consideration. I cannot thank him enough for opening up his school to me at perhaps the most inconvenient and unsettling time in both of our professional lives. Being a school leader in the midst of a once-in-a-century global pandemic was challenging enough. Doing so while navigating his school community through the upheaval of a long overdue national reckoning over racial justice was almost unfathomable. It would have been completely understandable had Dr. Smith declined to participate in this study. Nevertheless, he embraced it as an opportunity for professional growth and bravely put himself and his school under a microscope in the hopes that this work would help historically marginalized children derive the same benefits from public education as their culturally dominant peers. Dr. Smith is one of the most thoughtful and self-reflective principals I have met, and his students are fortunate to have him standing up for them. His courage to confront systems of inequity is not only inspiring – it is also life-changing for the students who benefit from the opportunities Dr. Smith creates.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	i
Acknowledgments .....	ii
Dedication .....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	viii
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	3
Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) .....	8
Equity .....	9
Praxis .....	12
Adult Learning Theory (ALT) .....	13
Conceptual Framework .....	15
Equity-Focused Praxis .....	15
Personal Dimension .....	16
Interpersonal Dimension .....	17
Communal Dimension .....	18
Systemic Dimension .....	18
Ecological Dimension .....	18
Leadership .....	19
Adult Learning .....	20
Organizational Change .....	20
Synthesis of Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks .....	22
Summary and Overview of Chapters .....	23
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	26
Advocacy for Change in Pedagogy and Leadership .....	26
Teacher Beliefs about Equity in K-12 Education .....	27
School Leader Beliefs about Equity in K-12 Education .....	29
Teacher beliefs about K-12 teaching and learning .....	29
School leader beliefs about adult teaching and learning .....	33
Enactment of School Leader Beliefs and Practices .....	35

## EQUITY WORK TAKES COURAGE

Equity Praxis .....	36
Critical Examination of Privileges and Positionality .....	36
Clear Understanding of Asset-Based Pedagogy for Students .....	36
Consistent Practice of Thoughtful Relationship-Building with School Community .....	37
Adult Learning / Organizational Change Leadership .....	37
Summary .....	41
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....	44
Setting .....	47
Participant Recruitment and Selection Criteria .....	48
Combination Sampling and Gatekeeper Identification .....	49
Recruitment Questionnaire .....	50
Site Selection .....	51
Recruitment of Additional Participants .....	51
Data Collection .....	52
Project Period .....	53
Semi-Structured Interviews .....	53
Teacher Participant Interviews .....	54
Principal Participant Interviews .....	55
Observations .....	56
Documents .....	57
Field Notes .....	58
Data Analysis .....	59
Data Organization and Process Memos .....	60
Thematic Analysis .....	60
Become Familiar with the Data .....	61
Generate Initial Codes .....	61
Search for Themes .....	62
Review Themes .....	62
Define Themes .....	63
Write Up: Analytic Memos and Case Report .....	63
Validity .....	63

Positionality .....	64
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS .....	66
Study Site Profile: Glendale Elementary School .....	69
School Demographics .....	69
Glendale's Student Performance Outcomes .....	70
Participants.....	73
Dr. Charles Smith.....	74
Patricia .....	76
Tracey.....	77
Reugenia.....	78
Alicia .....	79
Jonathan .....	80
Furman's (2012) Leadership Dimensions.....	81
Positionality as Power: Personal Dimension .....	85
Dr. Smith.....	86
Teachers .....	89
Positionality as Power: Interpersonal Dimension .....	91
Dr. Smith.....	92
Teachers .....	95
Creation of Communities: Communal Dimension .....	98
Dr. Smith.....	98
Teachers .....	100
Risk and Reward: Systemic Dimension.....	103
Dr. Smith.....	104
Teachers .....	108
Transparency as Teacher: Ecological Dimension.....	111
Dr. Smith.....	111
Teachers .....	116
Equity-Focus Praxis Across All Five Dimensions .....	117
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	121
Ambiguity About Equity .....	121



## EQUITY WORK TAKES COURAGE

Ethic of Care .....	126
System-Wide Support .....	129
Equity Work Takes Courage.....	130
Showing Courage is “Not an Easy Road” .....	132
Courage Requires “Chipping Away” .....	133
Recommendations .....	135
Invite Objective Voices to Frame and Implement Equity Work.....	135
Build System-Wide Support for Equity Work .....	136
Create Conditions for Student and Family Engagement in the Work .....	137
Hire and Develop Equity-Focused <i>Leaders</i> .....	138
Implications .....	138
State Departments of Education .....	139
University Teacher Education Programs .....	139
Future Research .....	140
Conclusion .....	142
References.....	144
Appendix A: Case Study Code Book .....	153
Appendix B: Final Themes .....	157
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form .....	158
Appendix D: Interview Protocol (Leader – Pre Observation) .....	161
Appendix E: Interview Protocol (Leader – Post-Observation).....	163
Appendix F: Interview Protocol (Teacher – Pre-Observation).....	165
Appendix G: Interview Protocol (Teacher – Post-Observation) .....	167
Appendix H: Study Recruitment Questionnaire .....	169

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Conceptual Map of The Study.....	23
Figure 2. Furman’s (2012) Dimensions of Praxis.....	83

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Research Questions and Data Collection Methods.....	46
Table 2. Participant Descriptions.....	74

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Standards-based school reform measures in American K-12 public schools over the past 50 years have not produced academic achievement levels for students in poverty, students of color, English learners, and other marginalized populations equal to those of White, wealthy, and other culturally dominant students (National Center, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). As these historically marginalized populations grow in size and proportion, school districts can no longer tolerate poor, Black, Brown, or English-learning students' achieving at lower academic levels. Whereas in the past schools justified unequal student academic achievement levels as being somehow symptomatic of a particular ethnic group's home life or culture, such deficit thinking has been debunked and condemned. Now, not only does the nation's economic viability depend on a paradigm shift in educating these students, but the moral imperative for change is also clear to a diverse tax-paying public unwilling to accept the status quo.

An element of this imperative for change is seen in the way America's student population continues to grow increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, but the workforce in K-12 American public schools has remained largely homogenous, consisting primarily of middle-class, White female teachers (Swanson & Welton, 2019). Unfortunately, White teachers often arrive to their first professional teaching positions with little experience interacting with students from racial or cultural backgrounds different from their own. Compounding this problem, pre-service teacher preparation programs typically provide little to no experience for White teachers to work with diverse student populations, leaving teachers inadequately prepared to help students from nondominant cultural groups acquire these higher levels of achievement (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013).

In response, some principals and other school leaders have taken it upon themselves to conduct in-service training to promote instructional practices that may lead to equitable achievement levels for marginalized students. Principals engaged in the pursuit of bringing about these achievement levels are often described as creating “culturally responsive” environments (Khalifa et al., 2016); or as being engaged in “social justice” practices (Furman, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016); or, increasingly, as doing “equity-conscious” (Wright, 2015) or “equity-focused” work (Roegman et al., 2019). One common thread across all of these terms is the idea that school leaders must be *intentional* in raising the academic levels of performance for *all* students within the context of a world that marginalizes and minoritizes students of color and the poor. Such work is therefore accurately described as “equity-focused” leadership (Roegman et al., 2019).

The goal of equity-focused leadership is to improve achievement outcomes for underserved students in the American K-12 school system. Effective, equity-focused school leaders think reflexively and act decisively to promote equity in their schools (Furman, 2012). This includes producing thoughtful responses to race-related issues that may arise; requiring well-planned learning experiences for teachers, in order to help them develop a shared understanding about the sort of curricula, instruction, and assessments an equity-conscious teacher ought to use; and calling for decisive action steps to address structural barriers, including placement procedures for advanced courses, discipline practices and policies, and access to resources the school can provide to help socioeconomically disadvantaged students compete with privileged students (Fergus, 2017). In short, a principal who adopts the habits of mind and habits of action that support *all students* in their learning journey is an equity-focused leader (Roegman et al., 2019).

### Statement of the Problem

American K-12 public education scholars and research practitioners hold two views about instructional practices and teacher preparation that are thought to contribute to inequitable achievement outcomes for students. The first view is that schools that practice a standards-based instructional approach, devoid of sociohistorical and sociocultural considerations about structural racism or cultural competence, will continue to reproduce these inequitable outcomes (Patrick, 2008; Zoch, 2017). The second view is that White teachers who comprise approximately 84% of the national teaching force (Swanson & Welton, 2019) are typically not given the kinds of experiences they need to prepare them to deliver instruction that embraces diversity and acknowledges the sociohistorical need for a social justice approach to teaching and learning (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013). In other words, since sociohistorical and sociocultural perspectives are needed, and since White teachers – the majority of teachers – are not given the kinds of experiences in preservice training to understand or embrace such perspectives, the majority of teachers arriving to their new teaching positions are woefully ill-prepared to help *all* students achieve their academic potential.

As a result of the two views identified above – a sociocultural-deficit adherence to standards-based instruction and structurally racist teacher preparation programs – the majority of teachers currently holding positions are lacking in “equity consciousness” (Wright, 2015). Equity-focused school leaders are consequently left with the task of helping teachers develop such a consciousness. Equity-focused *principals* take steps to develop a shared understanding of what equity needs to look like in their schools. Two approaches that have served students well in equity-focused schools and classrooms are culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and Funds of Knowledge (Gay, 2002; Moll et al., 1992). Because these approaches acknowledge cultural

difference, teachers are able to connect course content more easily with students by using their own understandings of a student's background and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992).

The CRP approach works by “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them effectively” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Essentially, the approach asks teachers to center students' backgrounds and “lived experiences” when teaching lessons, as doing so will invite students to engage more readily with the content (p.106). In the Funds of Knowledge approach, rather than relying solely on her own ability to connect a curriculum to a student's culture broadly, a teacher instead succeeds if she takes a “whole child” approach, in which she collaborates with students' families to integrate the various learning assets available to the child in the home, including family members who serve as “teachers” of cultural and family-based skills and experiences. These learning assets, “funds of knowledge,” are then available to the student and the classroom teacher as crucial assets in the child's learning experience (Moll et al, 1992, pp. 133-134).

Despite the promise of the Funds of Knowledge and CRP approaches, both asset models are used exceptionally rather than routinely (Gay, 2013). It has also been documented that some teachers reject CRP on its face and often respond to it in ways that serve to resist its implementation (Gay, 2013; Picower & Carothers, 2007). For example, Picower and Carothers (2007) delineate the “Tools of Whiteness” dominant culture uses to protect its hegemonic ideology by resisting efforts to incorporate asset-based practices. Such responses are not surprising, given the way hegemony works to socially reproduce existing structures of dominance. Gay (2013) underscores the need for educators to “resist resistance” to CRP due to

“doubts about its validity and...anxieties about anticipated difficulties with implementation” (p. 56).

Building on asset-based instructional models that seek to integrate students fully into formalized school district curricula, as CRP and Funds of Knowledge seek to do, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) takes asset-based models to another level. As CSP is intended to add value to the learning experiences of all students in the classroom, including culturally dominant students, “interest convergence” is surely at play in this model, providing something for all learners (Bell, 1980; Paris & Alim, 2014). However, CSP requires changes in practice that are not easily achieved by most teachers, as these practices require instructional delivery informed by race consciousness, bias awareness, and cultural competence that many adults have yet to develop within themselves (Fergus 2017). Equally problematic, school leaders who are not yet “equity-focused” often express discomfort and lack confidence in their ability to promote the sort of equity-focused learning that teachers require in order to integrate a CSP approach into their practice. These leaders fear the backlash, misunderstanding, or racial discomfort that is often expressed among their staff members who are asked to engage in equity work (Diangelo, 2018; Picower & Carothers, 2007; Swanson & Welton, 2019).

Two additional challenges confront equity-focused leaders. One is the simple fact that, generally, these leaders were likely promoted to their current positions without necessarily having developed their own equity-conscious teaching philosophy as they gained experience. While these equity-focused leaders may earnestly desire incorporation of equity consciousness within their schools, they often have their own self-learning to do simultaneously. A second challenge for equity-focused leaders is the fact that most of them have become school leaders as a result of their success with pedagogy, teaching younger, *non-adult students*. In leading their



own staff members to develop equity consciousness, these school leaders must teach *adults*, not children, and doing so requires different skillsets.

The principles of adult learning theory (ALT), also called “andragogy,” hold that adults learn differently from younger learners, based on having a lifetime of experience from which they can draw (McCauley et al., 2017). While ALT theorists frame such experience as an asset to adult learning, it is not difficult to conceive of a lifetime of experience as a potential barrier to learning as well, given that a lifetime of biased-based belief can also be understood as an “experience” that resists race consciousness or training in antiracism. Given these facts, the equity-focused leader must take into consideration her own learning about equity as well as the differences between adult and youth learners.

Adult learning theory also holds that adults, through a lifetime of experiences, have developed learner identities that compel them to be self-directed learners (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). The implication coming from this ALT tenet is that an equity-focused leader must account for this need when planning learning experiences for his or her staff. Any significant new learning for adults – such as the need to replace biased-based beliefs with new beliefs – must come from the *adult learner’s motivation* to replace these beliefs. In other words, if a principal were to compel teachers to attend training to confront their own biases, with little personal investment on the part of these adult learners, the principal can easily be met with resistance and possibly outright defiance (Picower, 2009; Swanson & Welton, 2019).

This is not to say that an adult *cannot learn* when she is called upon to do so, but if she is not able to find something intrinsically valuable about the activity, she will struggle to learn even more so than would a younger student, who has far less lived experience (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). In contrast to pedagogy, in which content and craft of *teaching* are at the center,

andragogy centers the learner and has been called the “art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles et al., cited in McCauley et al., 2017, p. 315). Andragogy holds that if an adult *wants to learn* how to be equity conscious, she will do well as an adult learner. But if she is *not interested in learning* about equity, the equity-focused leader’s task becomes much more difficult, as the leader must be able to help experienced, adult staff members overcome deficit-based beliefs that have become part of the learner’s concept of self (Fergus, 2017; Forrest & Peterson, 2006). These foundational elements of ALT, then, present a problem for equity-focused leaders who work to enact a shared understanding with teachers about equity and the value of using CSP in the classroom to support historically underserved students: namely, that they must help adults see the inherent value in developing equity-consciousness so that they want to do so of their own accord.

Given the issues raised by ALT and CSP, this study examined several important questions to better understand the problem of *helping teaching staff members develop equity consciousness and classroom practices that promote positive academic outcomes for historically underserved students*. To arrive at such an understanding, the most important, overarching question this study asked was, “How does an equity-focused leader develop a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally sustaining practices in his/her teaching staff?” To support the overarching question, several sub-questions were also asked, including

1. What are this leader’s beliefs about equity?
2. What are this leader’s beliefs about teaching and learning for K-12 learners?
3. What are this leader’s beliefs about teaching and learning for adults?
4. How does this leader help his/her teaching staff develop the shared understandings and skills needed for equity-gear instruction?

Answering the research questions requires an understanding of the theoretical models that frame them, and this study is framed by culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) and adult learning theory (ALT). To understand how CSP frames this study from a theoretical perspective, it is useful to consider the ways in which theoretical notions of “equity” and “praxis” inform CSP. Similarly, while ALT also frames this study, it is helpful to think of it in terms of its connection to the principles of andragogy specifically and to educational psychology more generally.

### **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP)**

Scholars have increasingly pointed towards asset-based models, such as culturally responsive instruction, as a means to addressing unequal achievement levels between culturally dominant and marginalized students (Gay, 2002, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Milner, 2011; Paris, 2012). Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) builds on these models but insists that teachers be more than merely “responsive” to the needs of their culturally non-dominant students and, instead, asks teachers to facilitate instruction that values, embraces, and “sustains” all cultural backgrounds of students in the classroom (Paris, 2012). In contrast to other asset-based models, CSP does not position White, Northern European history, culture, or curricula as the default viewpoint for teaching and learning. In other words, CSP is a form of pedagogy that seeks to integrate learners into a classroom environment that leverages knowledge of multiple cultures, learning styles, and languages, as adopting such a stance can help any student – including culturally dominant students – more effectively engage in 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning processes (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Culturally sustaining pedagogy offers a contrast to traditional K-12 American public school instruction that tends to support individualistic, teacher-directed approaches, delivered almost entirely in American Dominant English and utilizing a curriculum dominated by White,

Eurocentric perspectives (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). The term “sustaining” intentionally suggests that CSP relies on a collective, student-centered approach that encourages socialization and collective efficacy for students from any racial, ethnic, or cultural background – so that cultural norms, beliefs, and languages are not only valued but *sustained*. It also incorporates modern notions of literacy, texts, and curricula (Paris & Alim, 2014). The CSP approach works to remove traditional notions of cultural power, represented in the form of “White, middle-class linguistic, literate, and cultural skills and ways of being that were considered the sole gatekeepers to the opportunity structure in the past” (Alim & Paris, 2014, p. 89). In other words, CSP may help students from non-dominant cultures acquire cultural capital in the classroom, such as sharing their bilingualism as an asset to English-speaking students in the midst of acquiring second language skills in Spanish. As these culturally sustaining practices allow students’ assets to be valued more in the classroom, these historically marginalized students are then more likely to access the higher levels of achievement realized by White students and students from other dominant cultural groups.

**Equity.** Supporting the centrality of assets in CSP are notions of *equity*. Not to be confused with *equality*, equity signifies an intentional action or policy that is taken or created to address unequal or unfair conditions under which students are expected to learn. In other words, schools have limited resources, but if schools are truly looking to create a “level playing field” for all students, then these resources need to be directed more towards students who need them, rather than giving everyone the same thing. A district that prioritizes equity ensures that a student living in poverty is provided with additional access to nutrition, via a free/reduced lunch program. Similarly, the district ensures equity for another student who might have security in terms of nutrition, but cannot afford a laptop computer. An equity-conscious school district pays

attention to these needs and acts accordingly: in the latter case, it might not charge the rental or insurance fee to the student whose family cannot afford to do so, so that this student has access to what his peers, with more resources, have at their disposal.

More broadly, equity can be seen in terms of access – to higher quality teachers, advanced coursework, or enriching learning experiences. Equity can also be described as a state of being (e.g., “Our school has achieved equity in terms of its demographic enrollment in AP classes”) and a goal (“We want equity in the way we distribute costs for insuring our Chromebooks”). Equity is used to describe how schools work towards helping all students reach their potential. It speaks to the urgency of addressing disproportionate levels of various measures, including academic underachievement, suspension rates, graduation rates, college acceptances, etc.

Equity is also understood as a central feature of leadership concepts such as “Social Justice Leadership” (Furman, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016; Zoch, 2017) or “Culturally Responsive Leadership” (Khalifa et al., 2016). Specifically, these leadership models promote equity by maximizing opportunity for historically underserved students. The idea is to uplift students who have been marginalized by curricula that fails to reflect their backgrounds and/or by instruction that fails to acknowledge cultural or linguistic difference. For example, Social Justice and Culturally Responsive Leadership models identify curricula as sites to be audited and modified so that students see themselves reflected in it, validating their own life experiences and cultural assets. Equally important, these leadership models bring equity to the learning environment by simply acknowledging the sociohistorical and sociocultural forces that have contributed to the contemporaneous learning environment.

As equity has been understood and defined in different ways, for the purposes of this study, I found the following definition of equity most applicable:

Equity is achieved by raising the performance of all students and eliminating the predictability and disproportionality of student outcomes based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, housing patterns, gender, home language, nation of origin, special needs, and other student characteristics. It requires the school system's provision of resources, supports, skills, and abilities essential to guarantee the preparation of all students for college without the need for remediation—ALL MEANS ALL. (Roegman et al., 2019, p. 7)

Circling back to a theoretical frame, equity informs CSP in that the goal of CSP *is* equity (Zoch, 2017). In a CSP-infused classroom, the cultural assets of a bilingual student are elevated when a teacher allows for authentic connections between English and non-English languages. That is to say that CSP does not ask students to orient themselves into a learning environment that holds White, Northern European history, culture, or languages as paramount or as “the norms” against which all other histories, cultures, and languages are secondary. Instead, CSP is an approach that values all cultures and encourages all students to value and learn about cultural difference. In this way, students who traditionally have not been able to do so can now acquire cultural capital; they would now find a significant stake in their own learning, helping them to engage with their teacher and curricula more authentically and meaningfully. This, then, would theoretically lead students to meet their teacher's rigorous expectations, including for academic assessments, and put them on an equitable footing with their classmates (Zoch, 2017). In this way, CSP achieves the goal of equity by valuing students' cultural and linguistic assets in a way that now gives them cultural capital.

**Praxis.** Friere's (1970) use of Critical Literacy has been widely accessed by scholars and practitioners looking to improve social and educational outcomes for culturally nondominant students (Furman, 2012). In Friere's (1970) theory, a dialectic between teachers and students emerges in which schools are understood as much more than merely sites for learning. Instead, schools are to be understood as sites for resistance to structures of power that cause some students to become marginalized. According to Friere (1970), to disrupt social reproduction of society's existing race and class-based outcomes, teachers must help students achieve critical consciousness about existing social conditions and take action against such conditions. To do so, teachers must use *praxis* – reflexive thinking about their positionality and intentional actions that help students become engaged, active participants in their own social mobility (Friere, 1970).

To help students achieve comparable academic achievement outcomes, then, teachers must be reflective in their planning and delivery of instruction and also must take actions, such as directing additional resources to students who need them most, that will intentionally serve those who have been historically underserved. Such actions are necessary to achieve equity and successful enactment of CSP in the classroom; for these and other reasons, praxis has become a central theoretical construct in contemporary education scholarship about leadership as well (Friere, 1970; Furman, 2012). For teachers to enact equity-based practices in the classroom, they must first develop their own equity consciousness. As principals have the most direct impact on training possibilities for teachers, development of a teacher's equity consciousness will therefore depend on the principal's praxis. In this case study, an equity-focused principal's praxis, in terms of his beliefs and interactions with his school community, was examined and analyzed.

**Adult Learning Theory (ALT)**

While CSP is an appropriate theoretical lens through which to consider how an equity-focused leader develops culturally sustaining practices in his/her teaching staff, Adult Learning Theory (ALT) reminds us that doing so can prove challenging if an adult learner is not interested in the topic. Principles of ALT include recognizing the differences between young and adult learners, including the inherent benefit to adult learning of intrinsic motivation. Adult learners generate motivation easily when they recognize a need to learn new concepts or skills. Conversely, ALT principles also point towards the challenges adults experience when they do not readily understand or value new ideas they are asked to learn. Nevertheless, the six principles of andragogy, a term that is synonymous with ALT, emphasize the keys to success for adult learning and need to be considered by the equity-focused leader who seeks to develop equity consciousness in her staff:

1. The adult learner's need to know
2. The adult learner's self-concept
3. The adult learner's experience
4. The adult learner's readiness to learn
5. The adult learner's orientation to learning
6. The adult learner's motivation to learn (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 141)

Critics of ALT have pointed towards its focus on individualism rather than on the relationship between adult learning and larger society (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 142), and this critique, as well as the other principles of ALT, informed and were confirmed in this study. For example, teacher participants reported, on one hand, resistance from some of their colleagues who *were not* oriented to learn or motivated to learn about CSP or equity. On the other hand,



participants reported that some of their colleagues *were very* motivated to learn more about equity and CSP. Both of these points of view underscore the benefits and barriers of ALT: yes, adults can learn a great deal when they are motivated to do so; however, adults can also be extremely resistant to learning when it threatens their self-concept, as discussions about inequity and antiracism often do (Picower, 2009; Swanson & Welton, 2019).

Given the role that an adult's concept of self plays in adult learning, ALT helps address another aspect of the overarching research question: *How does an equity-focused leader develop a shared understanding of equity consciousness?* Since pre-service teacher preparation programs have offered little in the way of training about or experience in using asset-based pedagogies, including experience with racial or cultural difference, principals and other school leaders often are called upon to provide such training while teachers are in-service (Furman, 2012; Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013). This means that the challenge of helping teachers enact the equity-focused leader's beliefs about CSP, which are a set of beliefs about how teachers should teach so that students can learn, is complicated by ALT, as it theorizes that adults' learning patterns do not align with those of students (Forrest & Peterson, 2006).

Creating learning experiences that will have adult teachers embrace notions of equity or to make CSP part of their practice needs to be thoughtful, as such work is often fraught with strong resistance (DiAngelo, 2018; Picower, 2009; Swanson & Welton, 2019). Principles of ALT need to be considered and factored into adult learning experiences in order to find successful ways to disrupt belief systems and practices complicated by racial biases on behalf of teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Nieto & Turner, 2012; Swanson & Welton, 2019).

Andragogy is identified in ALT as a category separate from pedagogy, for the very reason that experience is a double-edged sword: it can help a learner conceptualize complex

ideas more readily, due to prior learning experiences, but it can also make it extremely difficult to replace biases that have become embedded in consciousness. Adults, like children, learn from experiences inside and outside of formal school environments, and negative media images and other cultural forms inform adult learning, often negatively (Sandlin et al., 2011). By the time teachers leave the pre-service environment, it is challenging to ask them to change their belief systems during in-service training opportunities, as these often fail to adequately engage adult learners (McKee et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the six principles of andragogy (Knowles et al., 2005) emphasize the keys to success for adult learning and need to be considered by equity-focused leaders who seek to develop equity consciousness in their staff.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The questions investigated in this study center on a principal's thinking and actions in helping teachers to enact equity-based beliefs and practices in the school, especially via CSP in the classroom. This research draws on two conceptual frames – equity-focused praxis and leadership – to examine how equity-focused leaders think about teaching and learning as well as the actions that leaders engage in to help staff develop shared understandings.

### **Equity-Focused Praxis**

In Furman (2012) we see the consolidation of some of the most durable elements of scholarship that centers on social justice leadership. Building on the work of Friere (1970), Theoharis and Theoharis (2008), and others, Furman (2012) identifies the overarching problem of practice facing school leaders who seek to promote equity in their schools: namely, *how to do it*. Furman (2012) discusses the need for equity-focused leaders to go beyond merely developing “critical consciousness” within their in-service teachers and instead to develop capacity for learning the skills “to make equity-based changes in schools” (p. 192). Here, praxis is

conceptualized in terms of social justice leadership practice, as the concept has previously mostly been applied to the context of teaching, rather than school leaders' teaching teachers.

While Furman's (2012) model is intended for *pre-service* school leaders, especially principals, it is also a useful one to apply to *in-service* leaders in the midst of fostering equity-based beliefs and practices within schools. In other words, if a principal is an "equity-focused" leader, he or she is likely to utilize the sort of praxis Furman (2012) describes in the pre-service program, given that the pre-service program for school leaders is intended to be foundational for the school leader's work when they become school leaders officially. While others have developed models for school leaders interested in developing equity-based practices (Brown, 2004; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Khalifa et al, 2016), Furman (2012) provides an accessible conceptual model that helps a school leader develop *equity-focused praxis* across five "dimensions," each of which requires different capacities for reflection and action on behalf of the leader (pp. 193, 202). The five dimensions are personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological (Furman, 2012). With praxis as her model's main construct, including its attendant implications for reflexive thinking and action, Furman describes what an equity-focused school leader ought to do, as well as the ways in which leaders can develop skillsets within each of these dimensions in order effectively to enact the sort of praxis required in each dimension. The five dimensions are described in depth below and comprise Furman's model; these dimensions informed the design and methodology used in this study, as the equity-focused leader was observed in the same five dimensions.

**Personal Dimension.** In this dimension, leaders must engage in honest self-reflection about their own values and biases related to race, class, etc., and think critically about how these values can impact their thinking and decision-making processes. Praxis in this dimension needs

to be ongoing, especially while the leader is in the midst of asking her teachers to engage in similar self-development or transformation (Furman, 2012). Examples of the kind of reflection activity an equity-focused leader can do and ask her staff to do include the following: writing and sharing cultural autobiographies; structured self-reflection; guided reflection and journaling (Furman, 2012). Most importantly, the leader and teachers in the school engaged in such work will need to use these activities to inform actions they can take later on so that, in the Frierean (1970) sense, they are truly engaged in praxis. Equity-focused leaders develop the skills that support praxis in this dimension by simply engaging staff members in the activities listed above, and by offering these personal, structured activities in meaningful and careful ways so that they are understood and received well by adult learners.

**Interpersonal Dimension.** In this dimension, the equity-focused leader concentrates on relationship-building not only with teachers, but all stakeholders in the school community. To engage in praxis in the interpersonal dimension requires an equity-focused leader's critical understanding about his own communication style and behaviors, and how these might serve to marginalize others. Knowledge of self, others, and relationships inform praxis in this dimension and requires "proactive practice of interpersonal relationships based in respect and caring, active listening, and clear communication" (Furman, 2012, pp. 207-208). To develop "capacities," or skills, for reflection in this dimension, the activities listed in the personal dimension are useful, as are cross-cultural interviews, diversity panels, familiarity with student voice, ethic of care topics, and others. Capacities for reflection in this dimension "means putting into practice a philosophy of caring relationships and knowledge of relationship theories and models" (p. 208). This includes role-playing and related activities that allow for developing understanding about relationship building (Furman, 2012).

**Communal Dimension.** In this dimension, equity-focused leaders work to build a community “across cultural groups through inclusive, democratic practices” (Furman, 2012, p. 209). In doing so, school leaders emphasize inclusion, an important part of equity or social justice work. Capacity for thinking is developed in this dimension via learning about communities and cultural groups serviced by the school, as well as democratic principles that ought to govern communities. Opportunities for communal forums and dialogues provided by the equity-focused leader are examples of capacities for action in this dimension (Furman, 2012).

**Systemic Dimension.** Here, leadership praxis is characterized by a leader’s evaluating and taking actions to change the learning system, at the school and district levels, as much as the leader can so that equity can be achieved. Capacity for thinking in this dimension is characterized by critical consciousness surrounding the “structures, policies, and practices for injustices and barriers to learning” (Furman, 2012, p. 210). A priority for evaluation or critique of the system must be “the curriculum and classroom teaching practices” (p. 210). Action in this dimension includes making changes “incrementally...in the face of resistance and barriers” (Theoharis, 2007, as cited in Furman, 2012, p. 210). An equity-focused leader would focus her praxis on elucidating the merits and then demonstrating how to implement CSP principles into teachers’ classrooms, and then would take action steps to evaluate how well and whether CSP principles are being implemented. Similarly, she would develop her skills in engaging in curriculum audits to determine whether curricula are culturally relevant and then take actions to incorporate texts and learning activities that are relevant to and sustain multiple cultures, especially by cultures represented in the school’s population.

**Ecological Dimension.** In this arena, an equity-focused leader would develop thinking and actions that are aware of “school-related social justice issues...situated within broader

sociopolitical, economic, and environmental contexts” (Furman, 2012, p. 211). Capacity for reflection in this dimension would include learning more about domination of oppressed groups and of environmental resources as well as the school’s responsibility in addressing such issues. Capacity for action in this dimension ought to include curriculum development that helps students engage in learning activities that help them learn more about their community. Similarly, staff development workshops ought to be designed by equity-focused leaders to help facilitate such understandings so that teachers can assist children in learning more about their communities (Furman, 2012).

Furman (2012) emphasizes the point that school leaders will develop equity-focused leadership capacities in each of these dimensions *over time*, even during the in-service portion of their career. In this study, the equity-focused leader continually reflected on improving his approach to equity-based discussions and initiatives. Such critical self-reflection and actions taken in the service of equity, his praxis, enabled him to formulate plans to engage his staff members in developing their own equity consciousness, so that they could connect and engage authentically and effectively with their students and families. Successfully executing his own praxis required him to be ever conscious of his role and effectiveness as the school’s instructional leader.

## **Leadership**

When an equity-focused leader offers professional learning experiences for her staff, it cannot be assumed that participants arrive to the learning environment ready to learn. Whether a formalized workshop, department meeting, small group data review session, or an informal discussion with a single teacher, the equity-focused leader is continually observed by her staff, and therefore continually “teaches” them. Given the dimensions outlined by Furman (2012)

above, such leadership will be crucial in helping staff members not only conceptualize the ways in which inequities have developed over time as a result of structural racism and the biases that affect all teachers and learners, but it will also help them begin to formulate their own ideas about what actions they can take to promote equity in their classrooms and in their school.

**Adult Learning.** Foregrounding adult learning for an equity-focused leader requires creating learning experiences grounded in data that speak to the need to address inequitable outcomes for students. In other words, adult learning *leadership* is required. Such leadership must support learning contexts that allow teachers to feel safe during learning activities as well as autonomy in pursuing their learning on equity-related topics. Providing such conditions for learning is consistent with educational psychology and the principles of ALT (Knowles et al., 2005). Understanding how the most significant participant of this case study – the principal – used the principles of adult learning in his leadership repertoire helped me answer my research questions regarding development of equity consciousness among staff members.

**Organizational Change.** Informing the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of this study at its most fundamental level is the concept of organizational change. Organizational change, in this study, refers to proactive changes in policies and systems that impact teaching and learning at the bounded site, Glendale Elementary School, a school within a larger district organization. As K-12 American schools, from the outset of their existence, have been conceptualized as efficiency systems, akin to factories and businesses subject to the same vagaries as capitalism itself, it makes sense to think of school reform measures in these terms as well (Anyon, 1997; Callahan, 1962; Labaree, 1997). Effective organizational change leadership in schools, especially in the context of equity-focused leadership, needs to be informed by the best thinking available on change and systems theory.

In Bolman and Deal (2017), effective leadership for organizational change is conceptualized as a series of frames – mental models or “maps” – that help us understand the forces at work in organizations (p. 12). To effectuate change successfully, an equity-focused principal will need to attend to the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames that will be understood and impacted by stakeholders in the school (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Similar to Furman’s (2012) dimensions, these frames are akin to the arenas that require a leader’s praxis in order to develop equity-focused capacity within herself as well as in her teachers. For example, when a district considers making improvement efforts, it must consider each change from a particular vantage point, or “frame” (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

In this study, to improve his students’ access to high quality learning experiences, the principal had to consider his actions from a structural frame, including the systems and practices that tended to produce familiar patterns that impacted students in different ways. Similarly, before making changes to teachers’ programs or routines, he needed to consider how the programs would affect teachers personally and individually, which is to say he needed to consider a human resource frame. At the same time, when the principal needed to allocate scarce resources to benefit only targeted groups of students or parents, including the use of his time, he would regard these decisions from a political frame. The principal in this study needed to keep in mind the symbolic frame as well. If, for example, he contemplated changing something that he found distasteful, such as a school mascot, he would first have to consider the fallout that could occur if he were to change or remove the mascot – a symbol – that held importance to his students. By contemplating the symbolic frame, the principal would work to involve students and other stakeholders in the process of changing the mascot, so that he would not be perceived as unfairly eliminating something of symbolic importance to his school community. An equity-



focused leader must attend to these different frames to engage the school community successfully in organizational change, underscoring the complexity of equity-focused school leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Brown, 2004; Furman, 2012; Khalifa et al, 2016).

### **Synthesis of Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks**

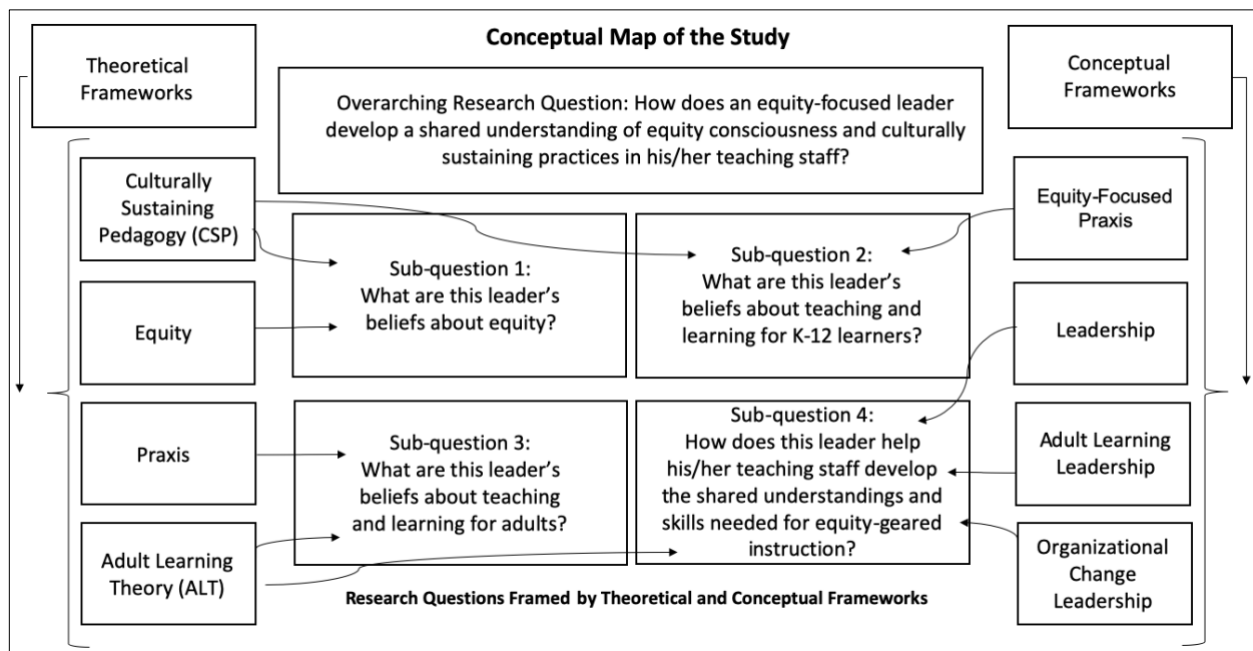
It is through the theoretical frames of CSP and ALT that I have come to understand the deeper issues facing equity-focused leaders, who have two contending tensions at play simultaneously: the needs of their diverse student population, most of whom are still developing their own learner identities and who need to be well understood and engaged by teachers who have not historically served these students well; and the needs of teaching staff members who have already established not only their own learner identities but also whose lifetime of experiences dictate their levels of understanding and motivate their desire about how and when learning can take place. While these adult and youth-centered needs sometimes are in alignment, they often are not, especially when a principal interacts with a very experienced teacher who may have strongly developed opinions about young learners as well as potential biases to overcome. It is through the equity-focused leader's *praxis* that these tensions can be addressed and resolved, in a variety of contexts and in as consistent a manner as possible, if the school leader, her teachers, and her school's students, are to be successful.

Keeping these theoretical frames in mind, I am able to conceptualize what I believe equity-focused leaders must do in order to facilitate teaching and learning for adults and students in their schools. The conceptual frames most relevant here are both *leadership frames*: organizational change leadership and adult learning leadership. These frames are crucial to the successful enactment of the equity-focused leader's praxis, as she must negotiate shared understandings of the compelling reasons for change, and she must also have a deep

understanding of how adults learn, specifically the conditions that must be met in order for adults to learn. As these two conceptual frames suggest, it is no simple task bringing about equity consciousness or CSP in teachers; coupled with the theoretical underpinnings of said work, it is easy to understand why a case study might confirm as well as reveal much about the thinking and actions equity-focused leaders must take. Fig. 1 below portrays the concept map illustrating the theoretical and conceptual frames through which I approached this bounded, single-site case study of a particular equity leader's – a principal's – praxis. The over-arching research question is presented at the center-top of the map, with arrows pointing towards the sub-questions. Theoretical and conceptual frames are located on the margins, framing the questions.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Map of the Study: Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks*



### Summary and Overview of Chapters

The context of this study establishes that academic performance outcomes for marginalized students of color have not been equal to those of their White and culturally

dominant students. As the racial and ethnic composition of families in the United States grows increasingly non-White, K-12 public school districts are beginning to explore approaches to instructional practice based on the linguistic and cultural assets students bring to the classroom. One promising approach is CSP, but delivering such instruction requires equity-consciousness that schools need to develop in their faculty, given that few teachers have had pre-service training in equity-gearred instructional models like CSP. Compounding this challenge is that most school leaders have been promoted to their current positions for being effective at instructing students, not necessarily adults. Principles of ALT suggest differences between adult and youth learning and appear to complicate the development of equity-consciousness in adults who may not perceive the inherent value in learning about equity or equity-gearred instruction. Equity-focused school leaders, then, must find ways to develop their own equity-oriented thinking and actions – their praxis – in various dimensions of school leadership, from the personal to the ecological. When school leaders develop their praxis effectively, they are able to help teachers develop equity consciousness and infuse CSP into their instructional practices.

In this dissertation's first chapter I have laid out the context of the study via a statement of the problem as well as through theoretical and conceptual frames. In Chapter 2, I situate this study within the broader context of relevant research that informs it, including conceptual and empirical research surrounding *advocacy for change in pedagogy and leadership* and *enactment of school leader beliefs and practices*. In Chapter 3, I present the research methodology for this study, a single-site, bounded case study in which a principal's praxis (n=1) and its interaction with staff were analyzed using thematic analysis. In Chapter 4, I present findings, based on four themes that emerged – positionality, community, risk, and transparency. In Chapter 5, I discuss the meaning of these findings and propose recommendations for school districts who wish to

embrace courageous, equity-focused leadership, before discussing implications for policy, practice, and future research.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study is situated among other studies about schools helping culturally non-dominant students succeed academically and the role that school leaders play in helping create and sustain conditions that will support these traditionally underserved students. Empirical and conceptual studies that speak to the foundational elements of this study are discussed in two sections:

*advocacy for change in pedagogy and leadership* and *enactment of school leader beliefs and practices*. Although I discuss research broadly below, it would be an understatement to mention that they merely “informed” my research – every study below, in some way, spoke directly to the questions I asked in semi-structured interviews and they also resonated as I analyzed and came to conclusions about my data, which I discuss in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

### **Advocacy for Change in Pedagogy and Leadership**

A corpus of literature informs my first research sub-question: *What are an equity-focused leader's beliefs about equity?* This research centers on beliefs about academic achievement outcomes and the role schools may play in disrupting predictable patterns of inequitable achievement, as well as beliefs about the many factors that are thought to contribute to these patterns. Researchers have theorized that teachers' beliefs and actions, as well as those of school administrators, contribute not only to what students can learn and achieve, but even to what they can *imagine* for themselves as learners (Holland et al., 1998; Rubin, 2007; Rubin & Hayes, 2010). Similarly, other equity-related studies demonstrate that inequitable achievement outcomes are not due solely to cultural or social capital; instead, *racism itself* also contributes to these outcomes. This can be seen in the disproportional identification of Black students in special education courses; inequitable administration of disciplinary consequences; or under-

representation of English learners placed in gifted and talented education (Collins et al., 2016; Crenshaw, 1988; Fergus, 2017; Hammond, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nasir & Hand, 2006).

**Teacher Beliefs About Equity in K-12 Education.** Socially reproduced achievement levels for students of color are not simply the result of the intersection of poverty and race. For example, it has been widely demonstrated that middle class and wealthy school systems led by White administrations perpetually produce “achievement gaps” between White students and their classmates of color on various local, statewide, and national assessments (Anyon, 1997). Critical Race Theory (CRT) supports the idea that these so-called “achievement gaps” are the result of endemic racism that transcends mere differences of class. This truth was understood by those in the trenches of legal battles taking place during and subsequent to the Civil Rights Era that, for all its good, did not adequately address the fundamental problem that racism had permeated virtually all social interactions in American society. Consequently, CRT holds that until this truth is understood, surfaced, discussed, and reckoned with, Americans will continue to see an unjust, inequitable society (Crenshaw, 1988; Delgado, 1995).

Helping teachers better understand the way racism permeates social interaction in American society as well as to value the assets their underserved students bring to school are two major concerns equity-focused leaders must address. Empirical research that supports these conceptualized notions about equity include studies that take up issues of access and opportunity for students. For example, one quantitative study using mixed effects modeling demonstrated that students from low income and culturally diverse families that were given access to additional learning opportunities during the summer performed better than their peers on academic achievement tests (Hodges et al., 2017). Similarly, in Wiggan (2008) a mixed-methods phenomenological study of high performing African American students demonstrated that Black

students who are given access to engaging, *caring* instruction, extracurricular activities, and scholarship incentives were likely to perform better than their similarly situated peers in school.

In contrast to Wiggan (2008), other studies regarding equity in schools portray the lack of feelings of belonging that some students face as a result of their race and class (Duncan, 2002; Quijada Cerecer, 2013). Duncan's (2002) ethnographic study of City High School offers a dramatic portrayal of the effects of a *lack of caring* among teachers, in which White teachers are seen as practitioners who are unwilling to differentiate instruction or even communicate warmth or patience for Black and Brown students. Students of color in this school, especially males, are appreciated only for their ability to contribute to the athletic accomplishments of the school and little else (2002). In daily interactions with teachers, Black males perceive White teachers as, at best, going through the motions and, at worst, sharing microaggressions and even outward disrespect towards minoritized students (Duncan, 2002). Such enactment of deficit beliefs and hostility towards these students contribute to students' limited learner identities.

Similarly, in Quijada Cerecer (2013), a five-year qualitative study examined the relationships indigenous students had with their teachers in a diverse school environment. Throughout the study, teachers' deficit beliefs, frequent microaggressions, and open hostility towards Native American students characterized daily life for these students. Equally problematic, the school was subjected to removal of Native American history from its textbooks, costing students the ability to recognize their own heritage in what they were learning (2013). How could students in these schools – and many others like them across the country – reasonably imagine careers that require academic success? Discussions of equity-focused work on behalf of school leaders must account not only for teachers' deficit beliefs but also the degree to which curricula are suitably responsive to or sustaining of the cultures represented in each school.

**School Leader Beliefs About Equity in K-12 Education.** Another compelling concept explored in equity research focuses on the role school leaders might play in removing opportunity barriers for students of color and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. The topic of removing barriers was a central feature of my study's site as well, as the principal at the center of the study worked tirelessly to remove similar barriers. In one longitudinal quantitative study that examined the relationship between participation in organized activities outside of school and student achievement, it was shown that impoverished students and students of color benefitted from school or community-based opportunities (Morris, 2015). In contrast, one famous qualitative ethnographic study portrayed child-rearing practices that were thought to contribute to the assets students do (or do not) bring to school (Laureau, 2002). While some critics have rejected this and similar studies as being guilty of "essentializing" the underserved students portrayed in them, it is helpful to regard such research as underscoring the problem equity-focused school leaders face when it comes to the pervasiveness of deficit views of students as being inherently related to their backgrounds (Moll et al., 1992; Collins et al., 2016).

**Teacher Beliefs About K-12 Teaching and Learning.** As White and mostly female teachers dominate public K-12 education in America (Warren, 2014), the majority of the nation's students do not have the same racial or cultural background as their teachers, and many students are still learning English (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). Empirical evidence suggests that, if given the choice, the majority of American students prefer to learn from teachers of color (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). One possibility for this finding relates to another empirically demonstrated finding that White teachers typically hold "deficit" beliefs about students of color, which contribute to low expectations for them and low levels of student engagement with them (Kumar



& Hamer, 2012; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Warren, 2014). Although a random sample of teachers was invited to participate in my study, three of the five teacher participants were White.

While it has been a goal to attract more bilingual and teachers of color to the profession (Cherng & Halpin, 2016), theorists also tell us that White teachers need to develop culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998). Despite well-documented complications in understanding and implementing equity-gearred instruction like CRP, which this study addresses by studying the equity-focused leader's praxis, proponents for equity in public schools agree about its promise (Gay, 2002, 2013; Hammond, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998; Young, 2010). For example, researchers have pointed out that most teachers have a flawed understanding of the structural effects of schools and pedagogy itself on the achievement of students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds (Sleeter, 2012). Despite in-service training about diversity, equity, and inclusion, too many teachers still embrace "deficit models" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 19) that essentialize student achievement by linking test scores to a student's cultural background or family rather than the extent to which teachers and schools successfully serve these students. Sleeter (2012) quotes Milner et al. (2013) to illustrate the point that such beliefs prove that "race is grossly under-theorized in teacher education" (p. 157).

Unfortunately, racial bias itself may contribute to K-12 teachers' denial about the need for culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). Interestingly, even though social justice educators agree that CRP is a welcomed approach to confronting structural racial barriers in K-12 teaching and learning, more recent research has begun to identify limitations to CRP. According to these researchers, CRP essentially holds that teachers need to be more resourceful in responding to the various cultural groups in their classroom so that these students can access and master *the*

*dominant culture's curriculum* more readily. These researchers point out that if teaching and learning are practiced in such a way, social reproduction is maintained as CRP can inadvertently “erase” non-dominant cultures and languages over time (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014; Spring, 2001; Warren, 2014).

In contrast to the limitations found in CRP, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) holds that K-12 educators should consider how to “sustain” cultures and teach *all* students to become oriented toward other cultures and languages (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014; Warren, 2014). Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy is a model that attempts to address inequitable learning outcomes – academic, social, or economic – between White, English-speaking, middle-class American students and their culturally nondominant peers (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Paris, 2012; Warren, 2014). The CSP model resists a monocultural or monolingual understanding of knowledge production and promotes equity, as CSP prepares *all* learners for an impending future in which Western, American-English is no longer the dominant culture or language. In doing so, all perspectives in the classroom are honored, valued, and better understood; as a result, students are better prepared to engage in a modern, ever-changing global landscape. The benefit of this approach is that *all* learners become curious and functionally literate about *many* cultures and languages (Nieto & Turner, 2012; Paris, 2012, Paris & Alim, 2014).

Overlapping CRP and CSP tenets promoted by empirical researchers for K-12 classrooms include the importance of building rich relationships with students within learning communities (Boaler, 2000; Zoch, 2017); emphasis of collective learning over individual achievement; and awareness about social forces that contribute to history, curriculum materials, language acquisition, and power relations among students and with the teacher (Antrop-González et al.,

2008; Lopez, 2016). For example, Boaler's (2000) four-year qualitative study depicts these principles vividly. In her empirical study, learner identity in the United Kingdom is shown to be an important function of success in mathematics. Central to the study's claims is the notion that students should not have to turn themselves into individual "robots" in order to learn, and that learning communities are important for successful mastery of mathematics, but especially for "people of color, women, and working class students" (p. 391).

Beliefs about K-12 teaching and learning are seen vividly through a CSP lens in Zoch (2017). Here, the competing tensions of public accountability versus K-12 instruction designed for engagement and personal relevance are dissolved when the researcher illustrates how mindful educators in Texas supplement curricula to maintain high student interest while simultaneously teaching the requisite skills that help students succeed on the state assessments. Similarly, Antrop-González et al.'s (2008) phenomenological study identifies positive outcomes from K-12 teaching and learning aligned with CSP principles; in the study, a teacher's invitation to students to consider cultural self-knowledge as well as "teacher care" (p. 157) provided during instruction were seen as critical factors in students' successes. Such emphasis on identity allowed students to resist "marginalization" (p. 154) and was a source of motivation that contributed to student achievement.

Outcomes similar to those seen in the Antrop-González et al. (2008) study were also demonstrated in Lopez (2016), who examined the positive academic outcomes that resulted from culturally responsive teaching. The study attributed these outcomes to high expectations teachers held for students as well as their ability to understand and incorporate students' cultural knowledge into instruction; use and respect for students' home language in instruction; and critical awareness about hegemonic forces that have "traditionally marginalized students" (2016,

p. 10). In this bounded case study it was theorized that the equity-focused leader's praxis would include addressing his or her teachers' aforementioned beliefs about K-12 teaching and learning as well as the necessary actions to support them (Antrop-González et al., 2008; Boaler, 2000; Cone, 2006; Lopez, 2016; Zoch, 2017).

**School Leader Beliefs About Adult Teaching and Learning.** A primary objective of this study was to describe the ways in which an equity-focused school leader created *adult* learning experiences – andragogy – to help teachers better understand how to create culturally sustaining pedagogy in their classrooms and schools. Constructivist approaches to adult learning that are often seen in schools, including Communities of Practice, Professional Learning Communities, Content Area Departments, Grade-Level Teams, etc., rely on prior adult learning experiences and adults' willingness for collaboration among learning partners. Constructivist approaches have been found to work for most adults in most learning situations (Knowles et al., 2005; Pappas et al., 2015). However, adults are not always interested in collaborating to learn, especially when their self-concept is challenged by the content, including asking adults to recognize and begin to replace their own bias-based beliefs (Fergus, 2017).

Complicating the equity-focused school leader's agenda is the notion that adults learn differently from children. That is to say that adults are contending with the advantages and disadvantages that come along with a lifetime of experience as they approach learning experiences in adulthood. Conceptual and empirical studies regarding adult learning theory (ALT) underscore the central role experience plays in facilitating learning for its own sake and the primacy of intrinsic motivation (Knowles et al., 2005; Pappas et. al., 2015). Such constructivist approaches involve “facilitating adults to draw on their own experiences and so create new learning based on previous understandings” (Pappas et. al., 2015, p. 29).

A less-examined feature of ALT speaks to the potential hurdles an experienced learner undergoes during professional development scenarios when acquiring new learning that does not align to prior learning experiences. In ALT it is assumed that “adults can be the active investigators in their own learning and that all are self-directing” (Pappas et al., 2015, p. 32). Yet, researchers have pointed to problems with this principle when adult learners are *asked by the organization* to learn rather than for intrinsic reasons. In these scenarios, “the apparent lack of confidence and direction in new situations is common...and needs careful management” (pp. 31-32). Given the idea that adult teachers will be asked by an equity-focused leader to unlearn biases that have formed over a lifetime, it is critical for the equity-focused leader to remain conscious of the need to maintain a stance that is more like that of a coach (Pappas et al., 2015; Swanson & Welton, 2019; Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013) than that of a superior, as in this way she may be able to enlist “relational trust,” (Roegman et al., 2019, p. 69) understanding, and eventual buy-in from reluctant teachers whose instincts are to disengage from antiracist or social justice pedagogy.

This case study reflected a willingness of some adult learners to be vulnerable and open to learning, similar to what has been reported in prior research. However, as my findings in Chapter 4 will show, some teachers were anxious about engaging in new learning about equity or antiracism. Some researchers have discussed that anxiety and the ways in which they addressed it in professional development activities; for example, Gooden and O’Doherty (2015) used critical self-reflection and intentionality that can bring about effective social justice / equity leadership (Brown, 2004; Furman, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016). For the purposes of this study, equity-focused instruction included formal professional development experiences, grade-level and department meetings, intimate exchanges in communities of practice, and informal, one-on-

one dialogues that took place during the course of the day between the school leader and a teacher.

Since there is currently little emphasis on developing culturally sustaining teachers in preservice preparation programs (Paris & Alim, 2014), training on culturally responsive or sustaining pedagogy more commonly falls on equity-focused school leaders. And this brings us to the crux of the problem: school leaders do not automatically know how to provide effective adult learning experiences that help teachers develop the “equity consciousness” needed for successful enactment of CSP (Furman, 2012; Fergus, 2017; Roegman et al., 2019). Therefore, an equity-focused leader must be knowledgeable on the ways in which she sets conditions for her adult teachers to learn. To enact an equity-focused vision in her school, especially to enlist teachers’ support for embracing culturally sustaining practices, a principal needs to bring to life her understanding of how adults learn and maintain a stance that allows her to propel these beliefs into practice. Literature on this topic is explored in depth in the following section.

### **Enactment of School Leader Beliefs and Practices**

This section considers conceptual and empirical literature focusing on the challenges faced by equity-focused school leaders when attempting to influence staff to embrace equity in the classroom and across the wider context of the school community. This research includes studies about organizational change and research on the role that culture and climate play in students’ learning. These studies inform my fourth research sub-question, *What actions does an equity-focused leader take to develop the understandings and skills that teachers need for equity-gearred instruction?* Principles that inform the equity-focused leader’s actions emerge from this literature and are organized in two sections: equity-focused praxis and adult learning / organizational change leadership.

**Equity Praxis.** Using Forman's (2012) conceptualization of praxis as the combination of highly reflexive practices about beliefs and actions a leader can take to bring equitable learning outcomes to the students in her school, the following characteristics of thoughts and actions – praxis – the equity focused leader must believe or take include the following elements:

***Critical Examination of Privileges and Positionality.*** Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) famously conceptualize the problem of colorblind racism in their influential article “I am not a racist but...,” and similar empirical studies also speak to the value of an educator's critical examination of his or her own privileges and positionality. In Milner (2011) we see a particularly relevant bounded case study in which a White teacher uses his positionality as a bridge to his students, demonstrating the very powerful impacts on the teacher-student relationship that occur when a teacher acknowledges his positionality.

***Clear Understanding of Asset-Based Pedagogy for Students.*** Studies that affirm power that school leaders and teachers have when they develop a clear appreciation for students' backgrounds and cultures as assets in the classroom also abound (Patrick, 2008; Rubin & Hayes, 2010; Wright, 2015). For example, Patrick (2008) explored the deleterious impacts of standards-based instruction on indigenous students' cultural backgrounds; while teachers were faced with sanctions due to underperformance on state assessments, they sacrificed connection of instruction to students' cultures. Even though achievement on the standardized tests improved, hostilities between the local American Indian community and the school's White teachers persisted (2008). As a result of this qualitative analysis of survey data, the author of the study proposed a balance between asset-based pedagogy and content-based instruction that would help students acquire academic success.

***Consistent Practice of Thoughtful Relationship-Building with School Community.***

Rubin and Hayes (2010) used design-based research to explore how civic action research empowers students to develop stronger connections with their school communities, so that students experience a sense of “congruence” or “disjuncture” when engaging with their community (p. 253). The interactions students had with their teachers, one another, and their school community in this study reinforced the sort of relationship-building an equity-focused school leader must model for her teachers so that they, in turn, engage similarly with their students in the classroom. Similarly, Brown (2004) and Fergus (2017) conceptualize the school leader’s need to build relationships with adults who also must navigate the terrain of new ideas in attempting to replace biased beliefs in favor of asset-based approaches to teaching and learning.

**Adult Learning / Organizational Change Leadership.** Informing the thoughts and actions an equity-focused leader must take is the subject of *how teachers can acquire* appropriate learning experiences, strategies, and materials to transform their thinking. Such research is lacking. For example, for teachers to build rich relationships with students and families to help students learn, scant studies offer satisfying recommendations. The complexities of even attempting such work can be found readily in the research (Ngounou & Gutierrez, 2017; Picower & Carothers, 2007; Warren, 2015). For example, Warren (2015) examines the concept of empathy in developing “informed social and cultural perspectives of students and families” (p. 572). In Warren’s (2015) study, data was gathered from interviews, observations, and teacher responses to Mark H. Davis’s Interpersonal Reactivity Index to understand the dimensions of four White female teachers’ conceptions of empathy about their racially diverse students. The study showed that White teachers often have the best intentions and may express feelings of empathetic connection to and understanding of their students, but the actions they take in the



classroom often prove otherwise, often leading to conflict and disconnection from students and their families. The author of the study tells us “...these young White teachers set out to teach without ever being truly primed or prepared for the experiences they will encounter” (2015). The study argues for more pre-service professional development that addresses empathy and perspective taking before White teachers enter the profession in settings in which they are the racial minority.

Much of the research depicts overly simplistic approaches, such as handling subject matter sensitively or merely providing “one and done” approaches or simple book studies to bring about CRP/CSP. These approaches are not likely to yield results, as they do not significantly change teachers’ mindsets or practices (Ngounou & Gutierrez, 2017; Picower & Carothers, 2007; Warren, 2015). Keeping this in mind, as well as the contextual issues raised in the literature surrounding ambiguity over a clear definition of CSP or its empirical value, I carefully examined the role of the school leader in this study, as well as how he was able to achieve adult learning that produced shifts in teachers’ beliefs and classroom practices.

Fewer studies illuminate successful practices for adult learning in CRP/CSP-related endeavors, and this study adds to this body of literature. That said, one promising approach integrates concepts of mindfulness to bring about culturally responsive-oriented teachers (Dray & Wisniewski, 2011). Another concept worthy of further investigation is “Instructional Conversation” (IC) that enables teachers to connect with students informally, but with an intentional purpose. An overarching goal of IC was to produce an “ideological shift” for teachers, away from cultural deficit models (Mellom et al., 2018). Using a randomized, controlled trial, researchers were able to demonstrate how 147 teachers working with English Learners (ELs) in the American South changed their beliefs about Latino EL students.

Over the course of two years, these teachers eventually came to see their students' home language and cultural background as assets rather than deficits (Mellom et al., 2018).

Professional development provided to the treatment group involved in-person, extensive training in IC and ongoing support throughout the first year. In year two, the treatment group also had monthly check-ins with IC coaches. Instructional Conversation is a pedagogical practice that is essentially a "regularly scheduled teacher-led communication between small groups of students with a clear instructional goal" (p. 100). The conversations address five standards: joint productivity activity (teacher and students producing together); language development; contextualization (connecting school to students' lives); challenging activities; and instructional conversation (p. 100). This federally funded study involved many hours of ongoing and direct support to teachers, showing the necessity of sustained andragogy if adults are expected to acquire enduring understanding that allows for transformation of beliefs and practices to achieve CSP in their classrooms.

The most directly relevant literature to this study centers on the role that *belief itself* plays in any district initiative, including the belief in the value of creating a culturally responsive learning environment (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Madsen & Mabokela, 2014; Nelson & Guerra, 2014). Is there something about a leader's "belief" in CRP/CSP that makes it succeed or fail? Are there "exercises" adult professionals can engage in to bring about such belief, such as writing "racial autobiographies" to come to terms with teachers' "colorblindness," so that a more culturally aware approach is understood and embraced by school leaders and their staffs?

One study determined that such exercises can, indeed, bring about transformative understanding to orient staff members towards CRP/CSP (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015). Specifically, a convenience sample of twelve aspiring school administrators (graduate students)

engaged intentionally in reflective inquiry surrounding race and antiracism, eight of whom were White. The students participated in various journaling activities that centered on their beliefs about race and in the ways their beliefs might influence their work as school leaders. The most important activity was a “racial autobiography” which asked the students to “recount one or more significant events in your life that involved you asking really serious questions about your racial identity or your reaction to the racial identity of someone else” (p. 234).

The main conclusion of the study was that while these were aspiring school leaders, the thinking and writing that took place in the class afforded these adult learners an opportunity to take a significant (thinking) action prior to being confronted with the realities of school leadership for which their responses to scenarios contextualized by race would eventually face them, including presumably in the ways in which they would interact with teachers on the job and in professional development situations. Another conclusion from this study found that, while there had been an awareness of race and racial identity prior to taking the class, students at the end of the course were able to think about race in the context of their leadership positions (Gooden & O’Doherty, 2015). Thus, the decision to focus school leaders on their work in the context of race was shown to bring about beneficial awareness about the concept of white privilege and the ways in which their actions would impact the achievement potential of students of color.

One major implication for school leaders is that bringing about the kind of equity-focused praxis in their schools that can support teachers’ enactment of CSP in their classrooms is fraught with the potential for sowing the seeds of mistrust among staff members who misunderstand the school leader’s intentions (Swanson & Welton, 2019). Indeed, well-intentioned school leaders have tried and failed to inject their understanding of the need for equity-minded instruction to

take place in their schools, making future attempts at this enterprise virtually impossible (Swanson & Welton, 2019). To avoid these traps, school leaders seeking to enact equity-focused praxis to support CSP need to develop a shared understanding of the rationale for this work, so that teachers and other school stakeholders come to see the value in pursuing equitable outcomes for all students. Shared understanding could be developed by taking existing leadership models and incorporating equity principles in pursuing the goals of such models. For example, the Inter-State School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) speak about use of resources, etc., that a school leader could conceptualize in terms of equity (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Swanson & Welton, 2019).

Even more crucially, school leaders must be intentional in their actions and in their thinking about equity-focused praxis (Furman 2012). Scholars who advocate for social justice school leadership practices emphasize the importance of the multidimensional nature of such work, that it cannot simply or solely happen during one-and-done professional development experiences, nor can it happen casually or organically (Swanson & Welton, 2019; Roegman et al., 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016; Furman, 2012; Brown, 2004). Instead, this sort of work must be clearly presented and executed across various leadership contexts in order for such transformative adult learning to take place, and it must happen with “critical self-awareness” (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1272).

## **Summary**

This section reviewed current empirical and conceptual studies that speak directly to this study’s overarching research question: *How does an equity-focused leader enact a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally sustaining practices?* The research discussed in three subsections – Equity, Teaching and Learning, and Enactment of School

Leader Beliefs and Practices – shows that while much of the territory that conceptualizes this study has been visited, gaps in the research persist. For example, while scholars largely agree that notions of equity need to inform the thinking and planning done by equity-focused leaders and the districts that employ them, a universally-shared definition of equity does not exist, and even the pursuit of equity is itself contested by some school leaders and many teachers. This study adds new knowledge about the value of pursuing equity in K-12 American public schools.

Similarly, equity-focused leaders must contend with the forces that make adult learning simultaneously harmonious, as it is typically conducted as a constructive pursuit and, at the same time, potentially discordant, as discomfort is also typically experienced by adults whose cognitive journeys have potentially embedded biased-based beliefs that are difficult to replace. Compounding such a concern is the simple fact that school leaders have been promoted often because they have successfully educated children who learn differently from adults, and despite potentially not having an equity focus in their own background, all of which makes equity-focused praxis largely a learning experience as much for the school leader as it is for the classroom teacher. This study adds to the body of literature that depicts the equity-focused leader as a public learner in this manner.

Finally, enactment of the equity-focused school leader's praxis is where the rubber meets the road, and this section of the review identified the complexities of such an undertaking. As detailed above, studies that relate to equity praxis and adult learning/organizational change illustrate the difficult nature of developing, cultivating, and ultimately enacting the kinds of thoughts and actions that can help school leaders succeed in this pursuit. As a unit of analysis, this case study adds to collective understandings surrounding the manner in which an equity-

focused leader – here, an elementary principal – successfully enacts equity-focused praxis for the benefit of his school and the learning community that contextualizes his school.

In the next chapter, I lay out the study's design and research methodology. To gain a full understanding of the equity-focused leader's praxis as a unit of analysis, I chose to do a single site, bounded case study of an elementary school principal (n=1). I chose a single site because I saw value in amassing thick, rich data from a variety of perspectives about a single principal's praxis, including the principal's perspective as well as the perspectives of a sample of his teachers. While there is value in the *breadth* of collecting similar data across multiple sights with more participants, I aimed for more *depth*, so that this unit of analysis provided value of its own accord. Some of the most compelling research I had read concerning asset-based teaching was conducted in single-sight studies (Milner, 2011; Patrick, 2008; Zoch, 2017) and the format appealed to me.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Although the research questions I answer in this qualitative case study can easily be understood as having relevance to all K-12 public school leaders and the cultures they help create in their schools, this would be a mistake. Indeed, the problem of practice presented here applies to a *particular kind of school leader* with a *particular goal*: How does an *equity-focused leader* develop a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally sustaining practices in his/her teaching staff? Therefore, this qualitative research is a single, within-site case study, focused on one equity-focused school leader – a principal – faced with the issue that is intrinsic to *virtually all* equity-focused school leaders: how to engage in thoughts and actions that help teaching staff enact culturally sustaining practices. In other words, this within-site case study fittingly examines a single unit of analysis – a case – to *illustrate a problem* that an equity-focused leader faces (Creswell, 2007). In this instance, the unit of analysis (*this case*) is one equity-focused leader's praxis, observed in various contexts within his school and with his teachers.

As a unit of analysis, an equity-focused leader's praxis is complex, providing a multifaceted terrain for critical examination within the various contexts in which we find a leader thinking and acting within the bounded system of his school. Therefore, data that was gathered to understand this principal's thinking and actions – his praxis – that establish him as “an equity-focused leader” comes in a variety of forms, including enrollment data in Honors Program courses; artifacts that show communication to staff on equity-related topics; interview transcripts; field notes taken during small and large-group meetings; and notes taken informally on site. Discussed in detail below, these data contribute to a case record and a case narrative (Patton, 2002) that provide insight into the equity-focused leader's praxis. In other words, by

gathering and analyzing data via this within-site case study, I am able to acquire a fuller understanding of the main research question and its relevant sub-questions: *How does an equity-focused leader develop a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally sustaining practices in his/her teaching staff?* I ask the following sub-questions to support understanding of the overarching question:

1. What are this leader's beliefs about equity?
2. What are this leader's beliefs about teaching and learning for K-12 learners?
3. What are this leader's beliefs about teaching and learning for adults?
4. How does this leader help his/her teaching staff develop the shared understandings and skills needed for equity-gearred instruction?

The equity-focused leader's praxis is understood and evaluated from multiple perspectives, including the metacognitive reflections of the leader himself in the midst of this work as well as the immediate feedback of the adult learners who experience it as well. Therefore, essential data that were collected included semi-structured participant interviews, observations of interactions among participants in various meetings and learning experiences, and documentary evidence that illustrated the school leader's praxis through his emails, memos, and public presentation transcripts. More will be said about these data forms below.

The intent of gathering these data was to understand the school leader's praxis across the five dimensions outlined by Furman (2012). In Table 1, the method for data gathering is identified and aligned to each research question as well as to Furman's (2012) five dimensions. In collecting data this way, this case study underscores the complexity of an equity-focused leader's praxis as something that cannot be reduced merely to a professional development exercise or even a few meetings. Instead, the leader's praxis was studied across personal,



interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological “dimensions” or “arenas” in which we would expect a school leader to think reflexively and act intentionally regarding equity-centered work (p. 205).

**Table 1**

*Research Questions and Data Collection Methods*

Research Questions	Collection Methods	Data Focus Areas
Overarching question: How does an equity-focused leader develop a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally sustaining practices in his/her teaching staff?	Questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, observation field notes, documents	Personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological dimensions
Sub-question 1: What are this leader’s beliefs about equity?	Questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, observation field notes, documents	Personal, interpersonal, and communal dimensions
Sub-question 2: What are this leader’s beliefs about teaching and learning for K-12 learners?	Questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, observation field notes, documents	Personal, interpersonal, communal, and systemic dimensions
Sub-question 3: What are this leader’s beliefs about teaching and learning for adults?	Questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, observation field notes, documents	Personal, interpersonal, and communal dimensions
Sub-question 4: How does this leader help his/her teaching staff develop the shared understandings and skills needed for equity-gearred instruction?	Questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, observation field notes, documents	Interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological dimensions

*Note.* This table illustrates the specific data collection methods relevant to each research question aligned with Furman’s (2012) five dimensions of praxis.

**Setting**

In order to derive maximum benefit from this study, the site chosen is a richly diverse learning community with an identified need for culturally sustaining pedagogy CSP. The site was an intermediate grade level elementary school located in a fairly well-resourced suburban community in the American Northeast. Based on internal documents, the racial and ethnic composition of the school's student population is as follows: 38% Asian; 22% Black or African American; 19% White; 16% Hispanic or Latino; 5% two or more races, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaskan Native. It's teaching staff populations was largely homogenized, but after a recent period of intentional staff hiring on the part of the school's principal, the staff has become slightly less homogenized, with 74% of teachers being White.

This setting was ideal for this case study, as its focus is placed squarely on the principal's work of bringing about culturally sustaining practices in diverse classrooms. Potential sites that were originally considered for the study included diverse student populations, in terms of race, class, or language origins that experience disproportionality in regard to discipline referrals; underrepresentation of nondominant groups in upper-level courses; or inequitable achievement levels on state and national assessments. Before confirming the data listed above via internal documents, I first used publicly available student enrollment and achievement data from the district's state department of education to determine whether the student population was sufficiently diverse or represented significantly by culturally non-dominant ethnic/racial groups of students.

Prior to final determination of the case study site, I also reviewed publicly available student academic performance data to determine whether the school's data trends demonstrated

at least one recognizably positive outcome for its students; in this case, students had fared relatively well overall in its state assessment data, although part of this may be attributed to the disproportionate representation of student ethnic and racial populations – Asian and White – that have largely succeeded historically in the American K-12 public education system. While these subsets of the student population succeeded academically on state and national assessments, minoritized student populations – Black or African-American and Hispanic or Latino students – did not fare as well on the same assessments. These data, therefore, presented this school as an ideal site for studying the praxis of an equity-focused leader, as clearly work was still needed to be done in order for equitable academic outcomes to be realized by historically marginalized students in the school.

Gaining access to the site also allowed me to determine the extent to which teachers were able to learn from and utilize their knowledge of observing their school leader's efforts to address the personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological forces that impact student outcomes. These outcomes included not only student academic achievement but also the proportionality of disciplinary referrals for culturally non-dominant students; proportional student enrollment in Gifted and Talented, Honors, or Advanced Placement courses; as well as proportional success in improvement for culturally non-dominant students on state/national assessments. These became important data points to engage participants in discussion within this bounded site, as they provided relevant context to analyze this case of a school and its leader, who believed himself to possess and took actions to support an equity-focused stance.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection Criteria**

The participants in this study included an elementary school principal and five teachers in his school; in addition, various roles, such as a vice principal, other teachers, and clerical support

staff members, were also observed interacting with the principal tangentially, but these were not participants in the study. Only the participants' actions were the focus of field notes gathered during the study, and the data collection section below illustrates the majority of data collection opportunities, which centered almost exclusively on participants themselves.

**Combination Sampling and Gatekeeper Identification.** It was important to utilize “purposeful sampling” to identify potential participants for my study, but especially in identifying a “gatekeeper” for this single, bounded site (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). Determining a gatekeeper in this study was truly a critical factor, as this person served not only as the initial contact but also provided me with access to the other potential participants at the site itself. As this elementary school principal secured permission for the study from his superintendent and forwarded recruitment materials to his staff for participation consideration, in that sense he was the most critical participant in the study. As both the equity-focused leader whose praxis was studied *and as the gatekeeper* (p. 125) to additional participants at this site, he was therefore the most critical participant *recruited* for this within-site case study. In addition, the data collected for this case centered on *this participant's* praxis.

To determine my gatekeeper – and ultimately the bounded site of this case study – I used “Combination Sampling” of three sampling methods: Convenience Sampling, Snowball Sampling, and Criterion Sampling (Creswell, 2007, p. 127). First, I used Convenience Sampling of colleagues within my networks, many of whom I consider to be equity-focused leaders, and asked them to take a questionnaire that identified their suitability and potential for the study. This step generated approximately 10 responses from which to interview potential candidates to agree to serve as my equity-focused leader and gatekeeper.

Next, I used Snowball Sampling by asking my networks to forward the questionnaire to additional, potential gatekeeper candidates who are not within my networks but who are likely viable candidates based on my colleagues' perspectives. This method yielded an additional 16 gatekeeper candidates, for a total of 26.

Finally, the questionnaire itself served as a form of Criterion Sampling, as it identified demographic criteria that would need to be met for the case study site to be considered a valid one (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). Adding to this layer of Criterion Sampling allowed me to winnow down the number of viable gatekeeper candidates from 26 to approximately six, prior to conducting pre-study interviews with potential gatekeepers before making my final selection of the principal that served as my equity-focused leader participant – my gatekeeper for this bounded, within-site case study.

**Recruitment Questionnaire.** The gatekeeper was the most critically recruited participant, as outlined above, and my combination sampling process put me in a position to select a school leader who embraced equity-focused praxis and promoted CSP practices and principles, but one who, as an authority at the site, could also provide access to it as a “gatekeeper” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). To recruit the gatekeeper, I used a non-threatening, non-binding platform. Specifically, I used a simple electronic survey that allowed these potential participants to respond honestly to questions about their school's demographics, equity, CSP, and whether equity-focused leaders could help teachers learn more about CSP. The questionnaire concluded with the option of allowing a qualitative study to take place in which the school leader would be observed doing equity-focused praxis. This then provided the respondent the option of adding his or her name and contact information (see Appendix H).

**Site Selection.** After receiving a sufficient number of responses to the questionnaire, I selected what appeared to be the most suitable candidates and ranked them, interviewing them one-by-one until I found the candidate who met the criteria and would be willing to participate as the gatekeeper in the case study. The interview was a brief, informal phone call to explain the study a bit more and to invite the gatekeeper to consider allowing me to observe his/her praxis and to interview his/her teachers for data collection. One potential candidate had exchanged emails with me and shared a promising interview, but she ultimately concluded that she was too new in her district as a superintendent to recommend to her principals that they invite me into the study. Fortunately, although I had a number of potential candidates for the study, the second person, a principal of an intermediate elementary school, was enthusiastic in our interview and saw mutual benefit in hearing feedback about his work as an equity-focused leader. Not only did this pre-study interview help me establish shared understanding about the case study, but it also allowed me to gauge the school leader's ability to provide access to me to recruit additional participants from his school, which would be the only site of the study. Again, on my second pre-study interview, I found my gatekeeper.

**Recruitment of Additional Participants.** Having now gained formal site approval to conduct the study and with the principal (our gatekeeper) fully on board, it was critical to assist the principal in making it easy to recruit additional participants – teachers from his school. I accomplished this by offering to these potential additional recruits a questionnaire that is similar to the one offered to the gatekeeper recruits. Similar to the gatekeeper questionnaire, this participant questionnaire was also succinct and gave the option of checking a box to participate with in the study. The questionnaire showed respect for teachers who engage in this difficult work as well as their time by providing token rewards for the time they indicated they'd be

willing to give for the purpose of interviews. The principal forwarded the questionnaire to teachers in his school and reminded them that all interviews would be kept confidential from him so that teacher participants could speak honestly without concern that their principal would have knowledge of their participation.

The overarching message of the recruitment questionnaire underscored the centrality of equity work for underserved students. Teachers who agreed to participate knew that they would be contributing to new understandings about how this work can benefit students whose teachers and principals use culturally sustaining pedagogy. A range of participants agreed to take part in the study, and I had a bit more volunteers for it than I needed. To help me make final selections, I asked these potential candidates to complete an informal Google form to let me know what their specific role was in the school; how many years of experience they had had in K-12 public education; whether they had ever participated in pre-service training at the undergraduate or graduate level on topics related to diversity, inclusion, culturally responsive teaching, equity, or antiracism; whether they had participated in in-service training at the undergraduate or graduate level on topics related to diversity, inclusion, culturally responsive teaching, equity, or antiracism. Individual details about the participants will appear in the fourth and fifth chapters of this study, but it is worth noting here that two of the five teacher participants were relatively less experienced teachers, and two of the four were teachers of color. The gatekeeper, this school's equity-focused principal, identified as an African American male.

### **Data Collection**

To produce a meaningful unit of analysis that is credible and therefore useful in this study, I collected data very carefully and intentionally. As this single, within-site case study describes a principal's equity-focused praxis across five arenas – personal, interpersonal,

communal, systemic, and ecological (Furman, 2012) – that comprise his school leadership, the data gathered was necessarily multi-layered and comprehensive. In the following sections I lay out the data collection elements I used to help construct a meaningful case-study analysis: the project period; semi-structured interviews, for the principal and other participants; observations; documents; and field notes. Each of these data collection elements was crucial to this study.

**Project Period.** The project period was established clearly so that the approving district had a clear sense of the amount of time I would be in the schools. Having a finite beginning and ending helped me secure site approval more readily. The project was formally approved early in September 2020 and lasted until December of 2020. During the time of the project period, I was a fairly regular visitor to the school faculty, grade-level, and PLC meetings via electronic teleconferencing software, as well as an in-person event that allowed me to meet some of the participants while handing out materials for full virtual learning during the time of COVID-19 pandemic school closures.

**Semi-Structured Interviews.** The interviews for all participants were “semi-structured,” rather than *structured*, since such a restrictive approach to an interview would have caused me to miss otherwise valuable data. That is not to say that the interviews were entirely *unstructured*, as this would have led to sloppy, disorganized data that resists repetition and patterns, key elements to the data analysis process I describe later in this study. Based on a pilot study I conducted in Spring 2019, in which a similar problem of practice was investigated, I observed how semi-structured interviews enabled me to gather rich data about my participants, including a principal and her teachers. As a result, semi-structured interviews were employed to ascertain this principal’s praxis as well as his beliefs about teaching and learning for adults and K-12 learners.



Using my experience in creating interview protocols and questions that probe participants' equity-based understandings (see Appendix D) about equity-focused school leadership, I allowed 45 minutes to one hour for each interview, consisting of approximately 15 questions on topics such as anti-racism; culturally sustaining pedagogy; student achievement patterns for students of color; the principal's leadership choices to foster an equity mindset and equity-based practices among staff members, as well as impromptu questions that emerged during the interviews. With participants' formal consent (see Appendix C), I recorded the interviews via Rutgers University's video conferencing platform. This enabled me to review participants' responses to my question after each interview as a backup measure to ensure the accuracy of the notes I took.

***Teacher Participant Interviews.*** In this study, "teachers" refers to staff members that impact instruction and who possess certificated credentials authorized by the site's state department of education to be involved with direct instruction of students. So, in addition to teachers, school counselors, instructional coaches, instructional supervisors, vice principals, principals, assistant superintendents, superintendents, etc., also qualified as potential participants. Staff members who did not qualify were non-certificated (non-instructional) staff members, including clerical staff, paraprofessionals, school psychologists, etc. That said, I was fortunate to have seven potential teacher participants, one of whom was an instructional coach. The final five that were selected for the study, however, were classroom teachers.

Teacher participants in the study agreed to be interviewed two times each, with the potential for a third interview if circumstances arose during the project period that would have warranted a third interview. All five teacher participants were interviewed in September and November, allowing enough time in between for me to process what I learned the first time in

order to ask similar, but probing questions, the second time. In the end, no teachers were interviewed a third time. Participants were reminded that I was not allowed to share information with the principal regarding which teachers would be participating in the study, and so our equity-focused leader would not know who was interviewed.

The purpose of two interviews was to first get a sense of teacher beliefs prior to pre-arranged learning “events,” such as staff meetings, department meetings, small-group discussions, or if circumstances allowed, one-on-one conversations with the principal. The plan was to gather data about their thoughts surrounding the extent to which their principal’s praxis encouraged use of CSP in their classroom or in other contexts that support student learning. Having “before and after” interviews that were semi-structured, yet flexible, allowed me to use deductive and inductive analyses simultaneously, a common stance when conducting qualitative research. In other words, while I held expectations about what I might hear participants tell me in these interviews, based on expert knowledge I have learned via research literature, I was open to responses that challenged my understandings, potentially bringing disfluency to the work. According to Charmaz (2006), researchers often gather their richest data by starting with “certain research interests and a set of general concepts...to sensitize (them) to ask particular kinds of questions about (their) topic(s)” (p. 16).

***Principal Participant Interviews.*** The principal, as the “equity-focused leader,” was the most critical participant, and three interviews were conducted with the principal. For example, two interviews were scheduled initially. The first took place in the beginning of the study, in which we discussed prior learning that has taken place for staff members in the school surrounding equity generally and CSP specifically. In this interview we discussed upcoming opportunities for learning (see Appendix D). Most importantly, the first interview allowed me to

ask questions that situated the case study in terms of the principal's beliefs; that identified barriers to equity within the district; and determined some of the perceived supports, barriers, and/or "threats" to equity that confronted the district externally. These questions helped me establish a sense of the principal's equity-focused praxis within the personal, systemic, and ecological dimensions.

A second interview took place midway through the study; here, I asked the leader to look back over the course of the project period's learning events to that point, as well as to consider the longer journey he had been on with his staff in terms of helping teachers acquire equity-consciousness and a repertoire of skills for CSP. This interview allowed me to notice whether any changes in the principal's beliefs and practices over the course of the study took place and whether these beliefs were aligned with those of his staff. This second interview also allowed me to collect data about the leader's beliefs about his praxis within the *interpersonal* and *communal dimensions* prior to the final interview at the end of the project period

**Observations.** As equity-focused praxis was observed in five dimensions in a variety of contexts at the site, all participants agreed to be observed. In this single site, the field consisted of a variety of contexts, including informal training meetings, grade-level content area meetings, school staff meetings, and an event in which the principal worked with teachers who volunteered their time to hand out learning materials to families for remote learning activities. This last occasion allowed me to witness one-on-one conversations between the school leader and individual teachers. It also enabled me to get a better sense of the school leader's praxis within the *ecological dimension*, as the COVID-19 pandemic and/or the racial unrest/social justice protests that were re-ignited the previous spring in the wake of the George Floyd killing

permeated virtually every conversation and interaction among participants throughout the project period.

In all observation settings, I entered the space and interacted primarily as a non-participant, although some interactions with participants took place organically, and I sometimes participated briefly by commenting or laughing at a shared joke so as to avoid awkwardness and possible mistrust. For the most part, I let it be known that I was primarily interested in observing rather than participating. My goal in observing meetings discussions, etc., primarily over teleconferencing software as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, was to see the principal's praxis firsthand: the words he used; the tone he set; the decision-making and leadership-sharing he did with his vice principal and teachers in the space. While observing, I focused on not only the content of his words, but also how he said them. I also noticed how his teachers, most of whom were not participants in the study, responded to the principal. Whenever possible, I did notice how a teacher participant was responding to various equity-related ideas the principal shared with them, especially when topics arose that we had discussed in an interview. At the conclusion of each meeting or teleconference call, I immediately reviewed my notes to make sure I understood what I was reading and then prepared them for the coding aggregation software I had chosen.

**Documents.** In the first semi-structured interview, I asked the principal about prior learning events for the faculty that have taken place and the forms in which these events have taken place. Evidence of such learning came in the form of his recollections but also in the form of documents, including prepared handouts, emails, memos, etc., that shone a light on the principal's thinking and actions surrounding equity and/or how the principal promoted culturally sustaining practices among his teachers. All documents shared with me, including emails and

agendas, were kept within the time frame of twelve months, with the exception of one, which the principal wanted me to see regarding the previous election cycle. His point in sharing this was to show how his public statements regarding the current year's election cycle were in keeping with the prior year's. Other than this, all documents shared were contemporaneous within the year. Having these documents from the principal provided another data point for determining his praxis within each of Furman's (2012) dimensions. For example, a memo to staff describing the purpose for an upcoming staff training could shed insight not only on the ways in which he demonstrated praxis in the personal and interpersonal dimensions, but also provided evidence of praxis that he has enacted in the systemic or ecological dimensions prior to my arrival at the site. These data were obviously helpful in building a case study.

**Field Notes.** I kept a record of all observations, interviews, reflections about documents, and notes about my methods in a memo book that includes all field notes. Field notes were hand recorded as I conducted observations during learning events, including staff meetings, department meetings, etc., that take place at the site, and my observational gaze was trained primarily on the principal and the teachers with whom he interacted. In order to collect data that can be used to understand the principal's equity-focused praxis – his reflections and actions in bringing about equity, especially via promotion of CSP – I needed to see the principal interact with his teachers.

In recording these interactions I hoped to be “sensitized” (Charmaz, 2006) towards words and actions of participants that possibly reflect the enactment of the principal's praxis. In other words, I needed to get a sense of the tone in the room; of shared purpose, if it existed; of the vulnerability that often accompanies discussions of a sensitive nature, as race-centered discussions can be; and, most importantly, of a sense of trust that needed to be engendered by the

principal so that conditions could exist for authentic adult learning. In other words, regardless of the individual opportunities available to me as I composed field notes, I needed to remain open to the possibility of each dimension while doing so, so that I did not inadvertently concentrate too much on one dimension at the expense of others.

In collecting field note observation data I used my notebook and then went back immediately following meetings to review and clarify them. My goal was to be as unobtrusive as possible in the midst of attempting to observe authentic exchanges between the school leader and his participants. Notes were typically handwritten during these observations, but sometimes they were added after the event, as it is more important to attend to the subtle participant exchanges, verbal and nonverbal, as they happen. This happened during my first field observation, in which I observed the principal interact with staff, students, and parents while handing out computer equipment and supplies to families to help them be prepared for virtual, remote learning. Had I buried my face in a notebook during that event, I likely would have missed something and potentially could have alienated others from volunteering to participate in the study later on. Also, circling back to the semi-structured interviews, even though a recording device was used for this form of data collection, I also simultaneously jotted notes during the interviews by hand, as this allowed me to make observations about facial reactions, descriptions of the classroom facilities I was in, etc., that could not otherwise be captured by an electronic device.

### **Data Analysis**

I used a systematic process, moving from simple pattern recognition to fully-vetted themes, questioning whether themes held up to my own scrutiny along the way so that the themes would be credible and trustworthy. A review of my codebook (see Appendix A) shows I initially identified 29 potential themes. As grounded research, this case study offers a meaningful

unit of analysis. Before approaching this bounded site, I theorized and acknowledged potential understandings to guide data analysis, but at the same time I did restrict the analysis to the confines of the theories that contextualize it. In other words, I conducted data analysis in this grounded study both deductively and inductively (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2002). Throughout the project period, I was open to new understandings that had not been theorized previously and I also confirmed understandings deductively that had been theorized. Thematic analysis allowed me to accomplish both goals, but to do so, I had to first begin to systematically review and organize my data.

**Data Organization and Process Memos.** At this stage of the research, after having concluded data gathering within the project period, I reviewed process memos that were written in the midst of the work to date and then wrote another one at this point in time – at the outset of data analysis – to reacquaint myself with my own intended process for the thematic analysis to follow. One goal of this process memo was to help me initiate Braun and Clarke’s (2006) clear and concise, six-step method of thematic analysis by becoming “thoroughly familiar with the data” (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3355). At first I did this globally and then I examined the data more granularly, as described below.

**Thematic Analysis.** As mentioned, thematic analysis involves an interplay between inductive analysis, in which understandings are derived from the data independent of a theoretical or conceptual frame or even a research question, and deductive analysis, in which meaning is derived by confirming conceptual or theoretical ideas aligned to research questions. In thematic analysis, both inductive and deductive processes are typically used, with initial analysis conducted more inductively via open coding and more deductively towards the end

when confirming themes that have been identified (Patton, 2002, p. 453). To accomplish this, I used Braun and Clarke's six-step method described below (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

**Become Familiar with the Data.** I began by "reading...and re-reading" transcripts and any other data before considering possible ideas for codes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3355). Here, I simply jotted initial notes and recorded initial impressions before moving on to coding. The goal was simply to become very familiar with the data I had put in front of me. I accomplished this while reviewing transcript software that allowed me to re-listen to the interview while checking for accuracy of the words on the page. As I was doing this I had already begun to "notice" some interesting patterns about equity-focused efforts taking place in the school, such as a sense of fear that teachers had when considering adopting a proactive anti-racism stance or in utilizing other equity-gearred practices.

**Generate Initial Codes.** Braun and Clarke's (2006) next step is to generate initial codes. Field note observations and interview transcripts were saved in qualitative data analysis software, Quirkos, where I informally coded at first, simply by pasting digitally "sticky notes" on the phrases that seemed significant without too much intentionality at first. I used terms such as, "Providing CSP," "Resists Deficit Thinking," or "Doesn't hear discussion of equity or CSP at the district level." Even though I was interested in determining how these data would align with my theoretical and conceptual frames via the research questions, I resisted early theoretical thematic analysis in lieu of inductive thematic analysis, which required line-by-line coding (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3355). This line-by-line coding amounted to 1,073 codes spanning 29 transcripts of interviews and other documents. By carefully reviewing these thick, rich data in this manner, I remained open and attuned not only to what had been said or recorded on the surface, but also to what might have been suggested beneath the surface. In other words, by



keeping codes simple and numerous, I was able eventually to recognize more recurring and enduring patterns that eventually “emerged” as themes. Throughout this coding process, I also listened for In Vivo terms that I also coded, to capture some of the recurring jargon that was central to equity-focused praxis and to what appeared to be meaningful concepts that were emerging (Charmaz, 2006).

***Search for Themes.*** Next, I searched for themes. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) define a theme as “a pattern that captures something significant or interesting about the data and/or research question” (p. 3356). Although I had a sense of possible themes that were likely to emerge in relation to my research questions, I wanted to remain open to the possibility of alternative themes that I had not predicted. This is why the earlier line-by-line coding was useful, as some of these codes were “interesting,” but in retrospect, not as relevant to the recurring ideas that eventually emerged as themes. I was therefore able to see themes emerge that did align with my research questions, and I was able to identify these patterns as well. In both cases, I looked for patterns in the codes to determine whether anything “significant” or “interesting” about the data emerged, and this often required some recoding. Some of the early ideas to emerge as potential themes were “Admiration of Dr. Smith,” “Risk/Discomfort,” and “Communities,” and “COVID-19 Pandemic.”

***Review Themes.*** In this fourth step of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step process, I reviewed the themes by considering them within the context of other themes and considered the significance of each theme. I ensured whether themes were distinct from one another, and I also reflected on whether a theme “ma(de) sense” (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3358) before settling on including it in the case record. In total, I found 25 potential themes before combining some of them into logical chunks that began to emerge as full-fledged themes.

***Define Themes.*** In this step I critically examined each of the themes that had been decided upon in the fourth step to make sure I understood the significance of each theme. For example, if I settled on a theme that made sense while reviewing codes and searching for themes but it then became unclear as to why a theme was important, I needed to think more deeply about how the theme was actually a subset of some other, more recognizably significant, theme. I was then able to bring the number of themes down from 25 to, eventually, four: positionality, community, transparency, and risk (see Appendix B).

***Write Up: Analytic Memos and Case Report.*** I constructed analytic memos throughout this six-step process to clarify my thinking about what I believed the data might be suggesting. This is an important part of qualitative research as “Memo-writing is a pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72). After composing my final analytical memo, I composed a case report that identified themes as well as my broad, initial impressions on the case. Writing a case report helped me absorb the contours of what had been gleaned and pointed the way to potential limitations of the study that have been acknowledged in the final case study narrative.

## **Validity**

To ensure my data was credible and valid, I attempted to use “prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field,” (Creswell, 2007, p. 207). Specifically, this means I did not appear sporadically on the site, but consistently appeared on screen during videoconference calls at regular intervals over a period of three-to-four months to establish trust with participants. In addition, I utilized member checking after interviews and observations, by asking those I have interviewed to read my notes and clarify any ideas that felt ambiguous to me. It was important for me to give myself enough time to conduct such member checking, and I factored this into my

scheduling. Such a practice has come to be expected for qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006, p. 111) similar to this study. It also allowed me to triangulate the forms of data I had collected in other interviews, observations, and publicly available school performance data. Using triangulation was another important step in establishing the credibility of this case study (Patton, 2002). Finally, careful peer review helped keep me, as the researcher, “honest” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). In following all of these steps, I gathered and analyzed data before understanding and then presenting it in a narrative format in chapter four of this study.

### **Positionality**

As a cisgender, White male who helps lead a large, ethnically, racially, socioeconomically, and linguistically diverse school district, I have found the concept of CSP to be promising for our underserved students, even if there has not been universal agreement on how to implement it or precisely what it needs to look like. My positive attitude towards CSP introduces potential bias in this study, as it urges me to be inclined to focus on the shortcomings of a leader’s equity-focused praxis, rather than identify shortcomings to CSP itself as a valid, reliable approach for instruction. As far as conflicts of interest or power dynamics associated with my position, there was limited potential for harm to participants, as I excluded my own district from participation in the study, which removed the ability for me to have evaluative authority over any individuals agreeing to participate in it. Similarly, I emphasized the confidentiality for the site and all participants in my site approval and participant consent protocols. Finally, I have no financial interest in any particular outcome of this study, so this limited potential bias throughout the project period as well.

In following a deliberate, systematic plan for site visits and data-gathering, I was able to amass the thick, descriptive data I had set out to do when choosing a single site case study.

Afterwards, I followed a six-step thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that helped me surface meaningful themes around the ideas of positionality, community, risk, and transparency. In the next chapter, these findings are explained and vivid depictions of the principal's praxis and participants' interactions with his praxis are presented in all five of Furman's (2012) dimensions: personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Using a rigorous thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to surface recurring deductive codes associated with culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) and adult learning theory (ALT), as well as inductive, in vivo codes (Creswell, 2007) that label participants' particular experiences, I was able to identify four themes that begin to answer this study's overarching question: *How does an equity-focused leader develop a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally sustaining practices in his/her teaching staff?* The themes surround notions of positionality, community, risk, and transparency. I explain these four themes in detail below and then show how they emerged in the five leadership dimensions Furman (2012) established: personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic and ecological.

The first theme, *positionality as power*, shows how one's positionality in advancing equity consciousness and developing culturally sustaining practices is relevant and can be, in and of itself, powerful. Using my understanding of equity-gear frameworks, such as CSP, I easily deduced patterns of codes that reinforced my understanding that a principal's positionality – in this case, an African American male – is often a significant factor in his or her abilities and limits in developing shared understandings about equity and culturally sustaining practices (Milner, 2011). As researchers have established positionality as a factor in developing equity-gear contexts in schools (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Picower, 2009), it was not surprising to observe, read about, and hear participants express notions of positionality as a factor in developing equity consciousness or culturally sustaining practices. Additionally, participants used language that was particular to this study's bounded site that reinforced the idea that one's positionality, whether racial, ethnic, or even membership in a leadership group within the organization,

contributed to this equity-focused principal's praxis. This in vivo language is shown in detail below.

The second theme, *creation of communities*, emerged after I recognized codes deductively *and* inductively. Researchers have long established the vital role that equity-focused school leaders play in developing communities that foster cultures and climates in schools that allow students – especially students of color, English learners, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students – to experience feelings of belonging, inclusion, cultural understanding, and warmth required for them to learn (Zoch, 2017). I therefore deductively labeled codes that spoke to the principal's role in promoting and participating in community-building practices. On top of this, participants also used particular in vivo language, such as “family,” or “transparency,” that reinforced the importance of building and sustaining communities with their students in the classroom; colleagues in the school; colleagues across the school district; and families in town. This is further described in the next section.

The third theme, *risk and reward*, is based on the pushback school leaders often experience when they endeavor to confront student performance inequities believed to be due to bias or racial exclusion (Gooden & O' Doherty, 2015; Milner, 2011; Swanson & Welton, 2019). Because such equity-focused leadership often requires strength in the face of resistance and criticism arising from cognitive, ideological, or political misunderstanding (Theoharis, 2007), I anticipated hearing about the need for school leaders and teachers to show courage, but I did not expect to hear about such palpable, and sometimes intense, *fear* expressed by participants, including from one participant who told me, “Charles could lose his job” over his latest plan to reinvigorate his school's commitment to increasing its level of cultural competence and family engagement. I therefore identified deductive codes such as “Equity-Focused Leadership” and

inductive codes such as “fear” that helped me identify *risk* as a theme, and these expressions were typically uttered in the context of what could be gained by taking the risks that Dr. Smith and CSP-minded teachers took – the “rewards” that could be realized for the students and the school if teachers and school leaders would only show courage. At Glendale, examples of rewards included access to after-school clubs; placement in the Honors Program; exposure to anti-racism instruction; and stronger school-family relationships. These codes, then, were most aptly organized under the third theme, *risk and reward*.

The fourth theme, *transparency as teacher*, emerged inductively. Consistently, participants emphasized that their life experiences and teaching practices, in and of themselves, were “instructive” for their students, their colleagues, and their school community. In other words, although there were ideas surrounding equity-focused leadership and culturally sustaining pedagogy upon which participants disagreed, they consistently expressed the idea that one’s authentic life experiences and teaching practices needed to be well known before others could learn from them. In other words, *their experiences and practices needed to be transparent*, as only then could a participant be instructive to his or her colleagues or students.

Although this theme has echoes in adult learning theory (ALT), in which adults must feel a connection to their trainer and understand trainers as ethical, caring coaches before effective learning can take place (Knowles et al., 2005), this fourth theme was identified after examining inductive coding as a result of the principal’s use of the term “transparency” and whenever the principal’s teachers expressed very similar ideas but with slightly different terms about biography or career background, none of which could have necessarily been anticipated by knowledge of ALT or other equity-related conceptual models.

In the case of the principal, he emphasized the vital role that his life experiences as an African American male, as well as his background in school counseling, played in having others learn about equity or culturally sustaining teaching practices from him. Similarly, the teacher participants consistently expressed the importance of having their colleagues and their students know about their own life experiences or career experiences before they could effectively “teach” them. This was shown most vividly when teacher participants talked about their roles on the Equity Committee and how they believed their life experiences ought to be understood by their colleagues on the committee and by their colleagues who were not on the committee, but who would be expected to participate in professional development experiences delivered by the Equity Committee.

#### **Study Site Profile: Glendale Elementary School**

At the time of the study, using the most recent publicly available data, Glendale Elementary School (pseudonym) is a suburban school located in the Northeast region of the United States that comprised an average student population hovering around 500 students in the previous three years.

**School Demographics.** In terms of race and ethnicity, 38% of these students were Asian; 22% were Black or African American; 19% were White; 16% were Hispanic or Latino; 4% were two or more races; and almost 1% were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and American Indian or Alaskan Native. Nearly 27% of Glendale students were Economically Disadvantaged; 17% had learning disabilities; 5% were English Learners; and less than 1% were Homeless. In terms of home language, approximately 73% of students’ families identified English as a primary language at home, followed by Gujarati (6%), Spanish (4%), and other languages combining for approximately 17%. These data are based on internal documents.



Because participants occasionally contrasted their work with that of their colleagues in the district's other schools, it is helpful to note Glendale Elementary School's demographic composition and student academic performance outcomes in contrast to those of the district's other schools. The district comprises similar demographics – approximately 34% of the district's students were Asian, slightly lower than Glendale's percentage; 28% of students were Black or African American, approximately six percentage points higher than Glendale's percentage; 21% of students were Hispanic or Latino, approximately 5% higher than Glendale's rate; 14% of students were White, a slightly lower percentage than Glendale's (19%); and approximately 3.3% of district students were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and American Indian or Alaskan Native, similar to Glendale's low percentage. In addition, 34% of students across the district were Economically Disadvantaged, about seven percentage points higher than Glendale's percentage; 12% were students with disabilities, five percent lower than Glendale's population; 7% were English Learners, similar to Glendale's five percent; and less than 1% were Homeless, also similar to Glendale's rate. In terms of home language, 70% of students' families in the district spoke English as a primary language at home, slightly lower than Glendale's percentage (73%), followed by Spanish (8%), Gujarati (7%), and other languages, combining for approximately 15%.

**Glendale's Student Performance Outcomes.** In terms of student academic performance outcomes, Glendale enjoyed a positive academic reputation overall, including its contribution to its district's rating as a "High Performing District," based on its state's Department of Education district accountability system, which factors overall student proficiency and academic growth scores in math and English language arts into its evaluation. To that end, Glendale met its state DOE's "growth" targets in math and ELA, in terms of its total population as well as in every one

of its subgroup population subcategories. This could not also be said of the district, which *did* meet its overall targets in English language arts, including for every subgroup population, as well as its overall growth targets for math, but the district *did not* meet its growth targets for two of its demographic subgroup populations: Black or African American Students and Students with Disabilities.

In other words, despite having similar percentages of Students with Disabilities and Black or African American Students when compared to the district, Glendale's student performance outcomes were stronger in these two populations. To provide additional context regarding Glendale in relation to the district overall, it is helpful to note that Glendale provides an effective program overall to students whose demographics are diverse, in terms of race, ethnicity, home language, socioeconomic status, and disability, and its diversity is consistent with that of the district's 10 public schools, comprising approximately 7,000 students in preschool to Grade 12.

On a related note, it is worth noting that the district's most recent publicly available data indicates that 82% of the district's teachers were White, slightly higher than the national average (Swanson & Welton, 2019), and 84% of Glendale's teaching staff were White. Again, although these statistics were culled from the district's most recent publicly available data, it is important to understand that Glendale's principal hired four teachers of color in the 2019-2020 school year, *after* those statistics were calculated. As a result, 28 of the school's 38 teachers in the 2020-2021 school year were White, which brings the current percentage of White teachers in Glendale's racially diverse school down to 74%, lower than the national average and this, according to equity-minded reformers, represents a significant systemic change that can reduce systemic inequities in a racially diverse school due to "whiteness" (Swanson & Welton, 2019).

Before considering the study's participants and themes in the next two sections, two additional entities are worth noting: the *Honors Program* and the *Equity Committee* (pseudonym). The Honors Program was a math and English language arts enrichment program available to students in Grades 4 and 5 across the district who showed a history of achievement (standardized test scores and grades) in either of the subjects. Five out of the six participants, including the principal, often discussed Glendale's Honors Program in their responses to my questions, often as an example of intentionality on the part of the principal to raise consciousness about teacher bias, as the predominantly White, female teaching staff historically and consistently recommended Asian and White students to the program while virtually ignoring Black and Hispanic students who had assessment scores in the "advanced proficient" range but might not have demonstrated academic expertise in the classroom. As a consequence, when the school's principal first arrived to Glendale, he quickly identified a disproportionate over-enrollment of Asian and White students and disproportionate under-enrollment of Black and Hispanic students in the Honors Program. His praxis, developed over seven years, prompted him to work very intentionally with his teaching staff so that they could better understand and solve this disproportionality problem.

The *Equity Committee* is a pseudonym I use for a professional learning community (PLC) Glendale's principal created in the 2019-2020 school year to assist his staff in learning more about race, ethnicity, culture, and the ways in which these things can influence how teachers teach and students learn. The actual name of this PLC is unique and so I have chosen to use the pseudonym to maintain school site confidentiality. Glendale's principal, the equity-focused leader at the center of this study, told me this PLC was one of the ways in which he could call attention to potential biases staff members might have towards their students and families, so that

he could help them develop routines that would enable them to form stronger relationships with their students and families. In the sections below I identify the specific language the principal used to describe his intentions for the Equity Committee and how he saw it as a vehicle to help teachers not only learn how to build better relationships with each other, their students, and their families, but also to overcome the biases that had led to the disproportional placements of students in the Honors Program.

### **Participants**

Before presenting the ways in which these themes emerged, it is important first to learn more about the study's focal point, the equity-focused leader who served as the Glendale Elementary School Principal, as well as the five teacher participants who related to and interacted with the principal's praxis. Table 2 describes the six participants in the study, including each participant's gender, race, level of experience, and familiarity with equity or antiracism training. Please note: for "Level of experience in K-12" I categorize each participant's level of experience as Novice, Intermediate, or Veteran based on the following ranges: "Novice" is equal to 1-5 years' experience; "Intermediate" is 6-10 years' experience; and "Veteran" is more than 10 years' experience.

**Table 2***Participant Descriptions*

Descriptor	Dr. Charles Smith	Patricia	Tracey	Reugenia	Alicia	Jonathan
Role	Principal	Teacher	Teacher	Teacher	Teacher	Teacher
Self-identified gender	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male
Self-identified race/ethnicity	Black or African American	White	White	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latino	White
Level of experience, K-12	Veteran	Veteran	Veteran	Veteran	Intermediate	Novice
Participated in PRE-SERVICE training <sup>a</sup>	No	No	Yes	Not Sure / Don't Remember	No	No
Participated in IN-SERVICE training <sup>b</sup>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Not Sure / Don't Remember	Not Sure / Don't Remember

*Note.* All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>a</sup>Participated in pre-service training on topics related to diversity, inclusion, culturally-responsive teaching, equity, or antiracism. <sup>b</sup>Participated in in-service training on topics related to diversity, inclusion, culturally-responsive teaching, equity, or antiracism.

**Dr. Charles Smith.** Dr. Smith, the principal, was the most critical participant in this study, as it was his praxis – his *equity-centered thoughts and actions* – and the effect of his praxis on his school community that constituted *this particular case*. Dr. Smith, an African American man, had been Principal of Glendale Elementary School for seven years, after having spent the prior 14 years as a school counselor at the middle school and elementary levels. He told me he saw himself as a “leader that has to lead by example...so that I feel like I have to be

transparent with my life; I feel like that's part of my success.” He emphasized the importance of maintaining “transparency” in the actions he took as an equity-focused leader. Transparency was especially important to him when he first arrived to the school and began to examine disproportionate under placement of Black and Hispanic students in his school’s Honors Program, that the same analyses he used to identify capable and deserving Black and Hispanic students that teachers failed to notice also could conceivably identify White and Asian students who were also missed:

I didn't want it, in my first impression with the staff, for them to feel like I was going to do things with the sole premise of something I thought would help (only) Black or Hispanic populations. I didn't want to make it about that in particular; I wanted to make it about just all students who were still in that advanced range, and were not given the opportunity. (Dr. Smith)

Dr. Smith recognized that, despite all the work he had been putting into raising awareness about various equity topics – student performance scores; disproportional placement in the Honors Program; access to afterschool programs; helping raise cultural awareness and cross-racial learning opportunities, etc. – he knew there was much more work to be done to create a learning environment in which all students would thrive: “...I still need to keep going. And I can't take things for granted that everyone understands why we're doing things a certain way.” He emphasized the point that it was only because he was in a position to challenge the routines for Honors Program placements that students were given the opportunity:

And I realized there were (Black and Hispanic) students with like strong A's, that had not been given to me. But yet, when I asked the teacher, they said, ‘Oh, yeah, that student could do the work.’ But it wasn't, but they weren't brought to my – I had to *find them*.

And that was disappointing as well. So I realized that, after those first two years, I realized that I had to be more proactive and help change the focus of how people view a gifted and talented student, because I realized they just didn't view students – Black and Hispanic students – unless they were just glaring, they just didn't even, I think, *notice to even look at them* as potentially being worthy of that opportunity. (Dr. Smith)

**Patricia.** As a veteran, White, female teacher, Patricia's demographic profile is aligned to that which describes the majority of teachers in the United States (Swanson & Welton, 2019). As an upper elementary grade teacher, Patricia was familiar with CSP, telling me she thought it was important to give her students "multiple perspectives," including curricular choices that challenged "Eurocentric" narratives that standard-issue textbooks tended to offer. She expressed dismay over her colleagues' biases, telling me, "They say very negative things like 'my kids can't do that.'" As a member of the Equity Committee, she pointed out that the committee's purpose was to "...help make sure that teachers are kind of asking themselves some tough questions to...get them to realize that maybe, you know, that cultural bias exists. And what's your role in that? You know, are you basically perpetuating it?"

Patricia expressed empathy for her students of color and was concerned about the racism and cultural bias the media presents about students of color, telling me about a "little experiment" she had conducted in class about foreshadowing in which students in her class were asked to predict what a narrative was about based solely on an illustration depicting the story's main character, in this case a Black girl running on a track or, alternately, the same Black girl peering at math problems. In the first example, Patricia's students told her "She's gonna win the race. She's been working on it for so long." In the second example, students told her, "She's gonna fail the math test." She told me she was "so flabbergasted" that she went to Dr. Smith to

point out this “example of cultural bias” which caused students to learn “that a little girl...whether it was African American or not...she’s bad at math.” She clearly was bothered by this: “Why was she gonna win the race, but she's not gonna pass the test?”

As one who had experienced a difficult childhood growing up in a single-parent home, Patricia was also cognizant of the devastating effects economic insecurity can have on students’ chances of success, but she also understood that racism could be even more impactful. She told me, “I’m very aware of white privilege,” noting that

...in the (Equity) Committee we talked about (the idea that) this is uncomfortable, you know, you're gonna ...feel uncomfortable at times. And that's okay, this is uncomfortable work. If you’re not willing to get uncomfortable, you're never going to grow in this, you know, this spectrum. (Patricia)

Patricia also acknowledged the problem of over-reliance on standardized testing for placement in the Honors Program, saying, “If you look at just standardized assessments, which we already know are also biased, it would never work.” She pointed out that multiple measures, including teacher recommendations, are needed, because sometimes these additional measures help identify students who might not have high grades or test scores, but “you throw anything at them and they’re, like, ready to go at it.”

**Tracey.** A White female, Tracey was also a veteran teacher and a member of the Equity Committee. Like Patricia, Tracey admired the work Dr. Smith conducted to promote cultural competency with his teachers and in the way he reached out to families of students of color. She told me, “I think bringing awareness to (families about equity)...just talking about it – and having an open dialogue with the teachers – is important, because it can be uncomfortable.” Similar to Patricia, Tracey explained that it was her ability to connect with her students and



establish relationships with them and their families that enabled her to center their needs and engage with them as learners: “I think the first thing that you need to do is get to know them. So whether that's through like a survey or just conversation, we need to know...where they come from, their interests, their family background.” About CSP, Tracey told me, “...it's so, so important, not just for your students, but to educate...other teachers who maybe aren't as culturally responsive as you are.” Similarly, not implementing a culturally responsive curriculum district-wide was also a concern for Tracey:

...kids need to see themselves...in a book, and see that there's people out there, whether it's fictional characters or...heroes in history where they can relate and identify...I read a statistic, I think it's like, 90% of protagonists in children's literature are like White, you know? (Tracey)

Tracey added that it would be important to educate “teachers who maybe aren't as culturally responsive” and told a story about a realistic fiction piece she asked her students to write. She went on to say that almost every student depicted a character that had the same race or ethnicity as themselves, but one of her Black students created a character with blond hair, blue eyes. She told me that it “kind of caught (her) off guard a little bit” but then said, “Maybe it's because she hasn't seen a character like that. And that, you know, all the books she's read had little blond hair, blue-eyed girls, but I just found that to be interesting.”

**Reugenia.** Like Patricia and Tracey, Reugenia was an upper elementary grade teacher, also a member of the Equity Committee, and she identified herself as a Black woman whose experiences growing up inspired her to become a teacher. Specifically, as a child Reugenia found it challenging to pursue a STEM career because she was discouraged by not having any students of color in the advanced classes she had taken: “I saw it as a lonely road, that I would always be

by myself. And so I remember making the conscious decision in high school not to be lonely anymore” and she stopped pursuing upper-level math and science courses. Reugenia told me it was from remembering this specific experience of being the sole person of color in an advanced class that prompted her to have a conversation with Dr. Smith about how she might contribute to his efforts in bringing racial/ethnic proportionality to the school’s Honors Program.

Additionally, Reugenia was critical of the district’s inconsistent efforts to promote equity-related professional development, and she pointed to district curriculum writing as an example of the need for such PD:

(There was) no diversity. I would probably be the only person of color in the room, and we would...take the textbook, and we would write it into district paperwork. So...it's (currently) up to the classroom teacher to create (content). So that classroom teacher is often a White female, so the (content) often reflect(s) the experiences of a White female. (Reugenia)

In other words, if the district would take a more consistent approach to examining equity, curriculum writing is one example in which the racial and ethnic backgrounds of curriculum writers could be considered when formulating curriculum-writing teams.

**Alicia.** An Hispanic woman who joined the district in the year prior to the study, Alicia had less teaching experience than all but one of the participants in this study, but she had a wealth of experience with curriculum revision:

I feel that it's not hard...for us to create a (revised) curriculum. And for us to even create ... components that we can introduce...not only based on race (but also) our socio economics...and our backgrounds, where we come from, but we all have something to offer. (Alicia)

Alicia, too, was a member of the Equity Committee and, like Patricia, had a traumatic childhood that framed her teaching and learning. Alicia told me she used some of her adverse - childhood experiences to connect with her students, so that they too could overcome adversity: “They're just like, wow, like, you went through what I went through, and you're here, you're teaching me.”

Alicia was one of Dr. Smith's hires that he expressed enthusiasm about, as she had prior teaching experience and would contribute to students' seeing a more racially/ethnically diverse faculty. Dr. Smith said, “So last year is when I made three major hires...an Hispanic woman, African American woman and an Asian woman. All in one swoop, you know? And I really instantly changed my (staff) demographics...in one year.”

**Jonathan.** A White male teacher in the early stages of his career, Jonathan described a childhood in which he had a wide variety of friends in a fairly diverse environment, but when he attended college he began to think more critically about diversity in curriculum and how important it is to use culturally relevant texts: “And then my...sophomore, junior year at (college)...I developed my (understanding of) ‘othering’: anything that's not from, geographically, a third of the world. It's not fair to ‘other’...(content) into another category.” At Glendale Elementary, Jonathan had recently revised his curricula, as it had been “very dead-White-guy-centric.” Jonathan made it clear to me that he was raised to respect differences and diversity, and that is how he approached classroom pedagogy. He emphasized that it is not easy for adults to become culturally sustaining teachers: “I don't think many of those things can come from a PD, where it's, ‘Here's a PowerPoint presentation on how to do this,’” but did value CSP as an approach: “Oh, absolutely. Yes. One hundred percent.” He points out that the most effective way for adults to teach students is to avoid controlling or shielding them: “I find it very

frustrating when other teachers and admin try to pretend that school exists in a bubble, and that our kids don't know what's going on in the world...” Jonathan was the only teacher participant of the five who was not a member of the Equity Committee at the time of this study.

### **Furman’s (2012) Leadership Dimensions**

Furman (2012) identifies an overarching problem of practice facing school leaders who seek to promote equity in their schools: namely, *how to do it successfully* (Furman, 2012). In other words, how do leaders prevail in the contested arenas of their work in making changes in their schools that can disrupt socially-reproduced, predictive academic outcomes facing racially and economically marginalized students? In studying the case of Dr. Smith’s praxis at Glendale Elementary School, I have asked this overarching question: *How does an equity-focused leader develop a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally sustaining practices in his/her teaching staff?* The question aligns closely with Furman’s (2012), as it essentially asks the same thing: *How does Dr. Smith do it?*

Furman (2012) discusses the need for equity-focused leaders to go beyond merely developing “critical consciousness” within their in-service teachers and instead help them to develop capacity for learning the skills “to make equity-based changes in schools” (2012, p. 192). In the following section, I show Dr. Smith’s praxis as well as the various ways in which it interacts with or has impacted his teachers’ ability to begin making equity-based changes in their school.

Furman (2012) conceptualizes praxis in terms of social justice leadership practice; while her model is intended for *pre-service* school leaders, especially principals, it was applied to Dr. Smith in this case as an *in-service* leader in the midst of fostering equity-based beliefs and practices within his school. As an equity-focused leader with years of experience under his belt,

Dr. Smith's actions and thinking aligned very closely to the sort of praxis Furman (2012) describes as central to the work aspiring school leaders need to do in the pre-service program model she has conceptualized. Below, I have framed my findings in terms of Dr. Smith's praxis, which aligns with Furman's (2012) model, as she acknowledges that school leaders need to develop praxis not only prior to taking a position of school leadership, but they must also continue the praxis during the in-service portion of their career (Furman, 2012).

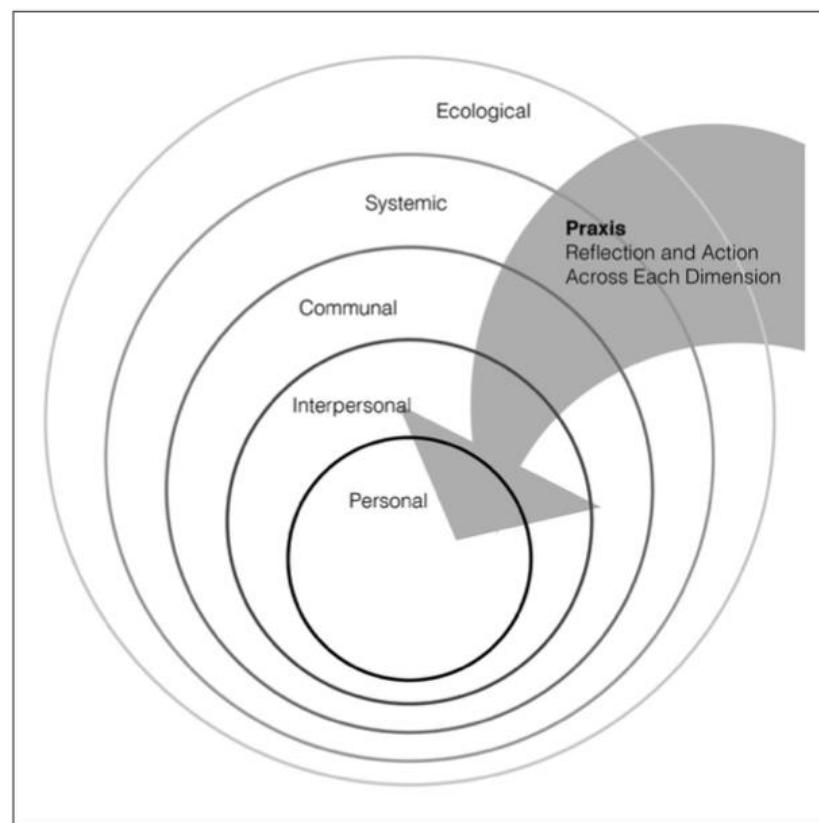
Furman (2012) provides a training model that helps aspiring school leaders develop *praxis* across five "dimensions," each of which requires different capacities for reflection and action on behalf of the would-be leader (p. 193). The five dimensions are personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological (2012). With *praxis* as her model's main construct, including its attendant implications for reflexive thinking and action, Furman describes what an equity-focused school leader ought to learn how to do, as well as the ways in which leaders can develop skillsets within each of these dimensions to enact the sort of praxis required in each dimension. Again, in this study, her *pre-service* model was applied to *in-service* thinking and actions Dr. Smith used to develop his own praxis.

Furman (2012) describes the five dimensions as "arenas for social justice leadership as praxis...as a nested model, with the first dimension – the personal – in the center and the other dimensions expanding out to reflect the broadening arenas or contexts for the praxis of social justice leadership" (2012, p. 204). As these five dimensions aligned with my understanding of the essence of a school leader's work, I saw the model as a useful lens through which to examine my data, as I wanted to be sure that Dr. Smith's praxis, as well as the ways in which his praxis interacted with the teacher participants' understandings and practices, was comprehensive. Therefore, I show his praxis as well as the teacher participants' understandings and practices

below in terms of theme and dimension, as the four themes I identified were aligned to certain dimensions more than others. Figure 2 shows Furman's (2012) model, including the idea that a particular praxis is required within each dimension, independently from the other dimensions but also interdependently across all five dimensions (p. 204).

**Figure 2**

*Furman's (2012) Dimensions of Social Justice Leadership Praxis*



*Note.* Each dimension, or “arena,” represents an element of leadership praxis that needs to be developed independently, while an interdependent praxis is needed across all five dimensions simultaneously for the successful social justice leader. Source: Furman, G. (2012). Social justice leadership as praxis: Developing capacities through preparation programs. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(2), 191–229.

Using a rigorous thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to read, review, code, recode, and then ask questions of my transcript data to surface recurring deductive codes associated with culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) and adult learning theory (ALT), as well as inductive, in vivo codes (Creswell, 2007) that labeled participants' *particular* experiences, I was able to develop four themes that I describe below that speak to Dr. Smith's praxis as well as the ways in which the teachers who participated in this bounded case at Glendale Elementary School interacted with his praxis.

Each theme was most easily observed in a particular dimension but I also demonstrate how each theme – like Dr. Smith's praxis itself – transcended the five dimensions. In other words, even though I align the following themes as predominantly residing within any particular dimension, Table 3 shows how all themes are in some way represented in the other dimensions as well. The following themes, then, comprise this case and underscore the multi-dimensional nature of an effective, equity-focused leader's praxis: *Positionality as Power*, *Creation of Communities*, *Risk and Reward*, and *Transparency as Teacher*.

**Table 3***Theme-Dimension Alignment in the Leadership-as-Praxis Model*

Themes	Personal	Interpersonal	Communal	Systemic	Ecological	All
Positionality as Power	Yes	Yes	---	---	---	Yes
Creation of Communities	---	---	Yes	---	---	Yes
Risk and Reward	---	---	---	Yes	---	Yes
Transparency as Teacher	---	---	---	---	Yes	Yes

*Note.* “Yes” indicates the dimension in which a theme was most directly aligned. Each theme was also observed in all five of Furman’s (2012) dimensions.

**Positionality as Power: Personal Dimension**

The personal dimension is at the center of Furman’s (2012) model, and it is the place in which a leader’s praxis is most deliberately considered. Defined as a leader’s beliefs about and actions taken for social justice, praxis must be developed internally before a leader can hope to enact these beliefs successfully in the other dimensions (Furman, 2012). In the personal dimension, an equity-focused leader will “explore their values, assumptions, and biases about race, class, language, sexual orientation...and how these affect their leadership practice (2012, p. 206). Furman points out that “it is not enough to develop self-knowledge through critical reflection,” that action must also be taken (p. 206). She offers the following examples of reflection and action for praxis in the personal dimension: engaging in writing and sharing their cultural autobiographies; structured self-reflection; and guided reflection and journaling (Furman, 2012).



At Glendale Elementary School, Dr. Smith clearly took advantage of reflection opportunities in the personal dimension. These included his own opportunities to think and reflect as well as the opportunities he structured for his teachers. His personal equity views and actions to see these views realized were exchanged with me during interviews and with his teachers in the normal course of a day. I was also able to observe the personal dimension at staff meetings, in small-group professional learning community (PLC) meetings, in staff emails, but most vividly and comprehensively in the interviews we had. I also was able to learn about Dr. Smith's participation in the Equity Committee that took place prior to the project period of this study, which would often begin with teachers' sharing a bit about their backgrounds, an important reflection activity according to Furman, who says school leaders, and in this sense members of the Equity Committee are school leaders, must engage in "deeper analysis of the effects of their cultural backgrounds (e.g., white privilege) on their thinking and their work" (Furman, 2012, p. 206). Evidence of the Equity Committee's reflexive practices was consistently provided by Dr. Smith and the four teacher participants that were members of the Equity Committee.

**Dr. Smith.** Dr. Smith's praxis conveyed the idea that *positionality itself* signified a currency of credibility and therefore of *power*. In the personal dimension, it was easy to see how the very role that Dr. Smith held in the organization, as well as the life experiences he brought to the position as an African American male, helped him to develop a vision and take strategic risks to advance equity for the students in his school community: "And so I feel like...being in a position to be able to make the changes that need to be made...I was very careful being an African American male, or just African American period, in this role."

Although *Positionality as Power* emerged thematically after I analyzed data collected during the study's project period, Dr. Smith's personal thoughts about equity came to the surface immediately when I met him for the pre-study interview. Here he told me he had been working to dismantle disproportionate underrepresentation of Black and Latino students in his Honors Program; met with parents of Black students to discuss historical achievement patterns in his school; created an Equity Committee to help bring shared understanding about the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity represented in his school, so that teachers could connect better with each other and their students to develop culturally responsive teaching practices, and more. During the study I would learn more about Dr. Smith's reflexive thoughts and strategic actions in the personal dimension, but it was also noteworthy that Dr. Smith, in contrast to the other school leaders I had spoken to, immediately recognized the potential value of this case study, as he told me it could provide him feedback about his own practices. This, in and of itself, was a manifestation of praxis in the personal dimension, as he had clearly kept self-reflection and thoughtful action-taking towards equity practices – essentially the very definition of Furman's (2012) conceptualization of praxis – at the front of his mind. Instead of telling me he would have to mull over the cost/benefit of agreeing to the study, instead he told me – on the spot – that he was “looking forward to it” and believed the study would be approved by his superintendent.

It was during the study's project period that I had a chance to become more fully acquainted with Dr. Smith's work in the personal dimension. During our first interview, he spoke about the need for school leaders to help teachers confront their own assumptions about students of color, and how that could impact their approach to holding high expectations for all students:

(Some White teachers) lump (inequitable student achievement patterns) into a low socioeconomic category. So that's what frustrates me...they kind of make it hand in hand.

So Black and Hispanic equals low socio economic and not realizing that those are all separate groups. Yes, some of the Black and Hispanic population may fall into that category, but it's not all...So they immediately go to some of these stereotypical categories or assumptions that we make about Blacks and Hispanics, to justify that (student performance outcomes are) out of their control, and not looking at, well, how many of your Black and Hispanic populations are middle class or upper middle class, and they're still struggling? So what (is your) response to that? (Dr. Smith)

Dr. Smith invited his teachers to think about these stereotypes and challenged his teachers to be more reflective about such short-sighted thinking by using what he calls “transparency,” a theme I associate most closely with the *ecological dimension*, but which Dr. Smith sees as a tool in the *personal dimension* to help teachers confront their biases:

I try to first model it, by being a Black person that, I'm educated, my wife is educated...we're not poor...to say that I'm not unique...as a Black person...So they understand that my life is no different than the lives of many of our Black students, our Hispanic students, our families, you know? ...(Teachers) immediately go to “single parent”; they go to these stereotypical things that justify why those students might not be performing well, as opposed to things that are within (their own) control. (Dr. Smith)

In addition to being charged with identifying and implementing teacher professional development to support student learning outcomes, Dr. Smith uses his positionality as a Black principal to implement a vision for his school and to shape its culture. This was most notable in the way Dr. Smith openly discussed his belief that his largely White, female teaching staff was under-identifying Black and Latino students for enrichment and honors activities, due to their own biases and unfamiliarity with families whose racial, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds were

different from their own. He also openly shared his belief in the value of connecting more closely with families of marginalized students, which led to his decision to schedule parent nights with Black and Hispanic families to discuss student assessment scores, a rare choice for a principal to make in this district, according to several participants, in which seven out of the district's ten schools were led by White principals. In addition, his personal belief in the value of equity and cultural competency training led him not only *to create* an Equity Committee, but also *to participate* in all of its meetings.

**Teachers.** The teacher participants in this study also appeared to derive power as a result of their respective positionalities. This was seen in the ways they responded to Dr. Smith's praxis in the personal dimension. For example, while each of the five teacher participants openly agreed with Dr. Smith's efforts to build cultural competency through the Equity Committee or to create more culturally responsive curricula, they did not always see eye-to-eye with him. Based on participants' positions in the organization or their own identities – that is, each one's *positionality* – participants did not always share or equally participate in Dr. Smith's praxis. Each had different ideas about how best to accomplish equity-gear practices, and each had a different degree of leverage to apply in their own sphere of influence to support his praxis.

Alicia felt strongly about not “sugarcoating” conversations about race and wanted to see Dr. Smith push harder to have staff members confront their own biases, while Patricia knew the staff for many years and agreed it was important to have conversations centering on race but advocated for a more conservative approach. Jonathan expressed support for Dr. Smith's praxis in general but was critical of the communication from central office as well as the attitudes some of his colleagues held about antiracism:

We got an email in March when everything with George Floyd kind of exploded and hit the fan. And we got (an) email from the superintendent talking about you know, “These are crazy times”...And someone wrote back to him...(asking) why can't you just say black lives matter? (Jonathan)

It was not surprising when Jonathan told me he participated with a small number of colleagues across the district in an antiracism book study, or that he was “concerned” when a teacher colleague mentioned in a department meeting, “Well, you know, I don't want to offend anyone talking about race.” Jonathan confronted the teacher publicly at the meeting, saying, “If you're worried about offending people for calling out racism, I don't know if you should be teaching.”

Tracey also expressed support for Dr. Smith’s work in the personal realm, especially what he was doing with the Equity Committee, opening up meetings by inviting teachers to engage in self-reflection about race and culture, and she was also supportive of his goal of raising cultural and community awareness. She believed that the district needed to help teachers, even White teachers like herself, learn more about how to connect with Black and Hispanic students more effectively so that equitable achievement outcomes could be realized.

Reugenia’s interviews conveyed almost word-for-word agreement with the praxis Dr. Smith used in the personal dimension, even using some of Dr. Smith’s language. Both would use the phrase “chipping away at” when talking about confronting and solving equity issues incrementally in their school. Reugenia told me “there's a very resistant population to...changing their way of teaching. You know, so that's gonna take some work. And we've been chipping away at that, little by little.” Reugenia’s positionality and experiences as a Black woman, as well as her experience in the district, enabled her to fully appreciate the need for equity-aligned practices. She told me she had numerous conversations with Dr. Smith about racial and ethnic

identity, and she believed these factored into social relations among staff members as well as in their own teaching practices. Reugenia told me:

Charles and I had a conversation about ...(the importance of) learning about each other's cultures. Just really, you know, breaking down the walls of "we think we know so-and-so because we've worked with them for 20 years," you know? And understanding there's so many layers to people. And so the goal is to hopefully (get to know each other better) as a staff. So then hopefully it'll start to trickle over into students. (Reugenia)

In addition to supporting Dr. Smith's praxis entirely, Reugenia, as a veteran staff member who had worked in the district a long time, pointed out that the sort of praxis Dr. Smith uses at Glendale is not found in other schools in the district. She told me "I can't expand enough upon how thankful I am to be in a building with Charles and to be able to have someone to go and say, let's try this. Let's see how it works out."

One point of divergence from Dr. Smith's praxis was found in his efforts to dismantle disproportionality in Honors Program placements. One participant did not understand or agree with Dr. Smith's rationale for going beyond state test performance outcomes for placement in the program: "(The placement process) wasn't even properly explained to us...(and) classroom teachers...were confused, like, how did this kid get in? And not this kid?" The participant acknowledged that "Dr. Smith is starting to maybe change my way of thinking about this," but still felt adamantly that only quantitative measures like test scores should be used to determine who gains entry into the Honors Program.

### **Positionality as Power: Interpersonal Dimension**

In the interpersonal dimension, an equity-focused leader's praxis focuses on the "central role of relationships in social justice work" (Furman, 2012, p. 207). In this dimension an equity-

focused leader must “proactively build trusting relationships with colleagues, parents, and students in their schools, across cultural groups” (p. 207). Here, the equity-focused leader must build on her praxis from the first dimension as she considers “communication / interaction style and behaviors and how these affect and possibly contribute to silencing and marginalizing others” (p. 207). In this dimension “knowledge of others—especially students from diverse cultural backgrounds—is important as a basis for authentic relationships” (p. 207). According to Furman (2012) “praxis at the interpersonal level requires both a philosophy of respectful, caring interpersonal relationships and the practice of interpersonal skills that bring that philosophy to life” (p. 208). Development of praxis in the interpersonal dimension includes centering the voices of students and developing an “ethic of care” (p. 208).

There is a great deal of overlap between the first two dimensions, as both center on thinking critically about equity beliefs and practices, but whereas the *personal dimension* centers on knowing *one’s self and one’s beliefs* about equity, in the *interpersonal dimension*, it is the leader’s ability to *translate these beliefs into relationship-building* that matters most. At Glendale, Dr. Smith invested considerable energy to build strong relationships in the interpersonal dimension, and this was most clearly seen in his interactions with parents, in staff meetings, in PLC meetings, during Equity Committee meetings, and in the way he worked one-on-one with staff members.

**Dr. Smith.** The power of one’s positionality emerged as a theme in the interpersonal dimension as well, as positionality was a powerful force in the relationships that were built at Glendale. For example, Dr. Smith’s experiences with racism informed his praxis in the interpersonal dimension, most notably in the way in which he fostered an ethic of care. For example he told me how he and his vice principal were committed to an open-door policy –

almost literally – with parents, as he demonstrates respect for parents who are often treated disrespectfully in other places when they show up unannounced or at an inconvenient time:

“Sometimes that’s the only time they can be there; so either my vice principal or I will drop everything for a parent who drops in for a visit.” Dr. Smith added the following:

I’m looking at what is going to serve the least of our population, what is going to meet their needs and make them feel like when they come to my building, they’re going to be heard, that they’re going to be cared about, they’re going to be listened to. And many times people just want to be listened to, you know, and so many people, because they’re poor, people don’t take them seriously, people don’t listen to them, because they’re not wearing a suit or impeccably groomed, people don’t take him seriously or think they care about their kids. And that’s, that’s hurtful, you know, and so we never want anyone to feel like they were ever turned away or ever made to feel less than important because of how they look, or how they dress, or their skin color...that’s how we operate as a school. (Dr. Smith)

In operating this way, Dr. Smith builds relationships with parents, especially the parents who need his attention most. As schools historically have operated like factories in terms of bell schedules and meeting calendars, Dr. Smith’s practice is atypical; that Dr. Smith would literally interrupt a tightly-scheduled day to listen to a parent that has arrived unexpectedly shows exceptional care.

In addition to scheduling night time discussion meetings with Black and Hispanic families, which allowed him to hear the voices of his school’s marginalized communities directly and expand his cultural knowledge, both important aspects of the *interpersonal dimension*, Dr. Smith also used occasions such as staff meetings to help teachers practice their listening skills



and develop an “ethic of care” (Furman, 2012, p. 208) for their students and families. I observed Dr. Smith’s praxis in helping his staff develop an ethic of care in at least two meetings in which he prepared his staff for the kinds of things they could expect to see or hear from parents visiting on Zoom links. Here, he showed them how to respond appropriately (caringly) to unexpected parent behaviors. For example, in a preparation meeting for Back to School Night, he urged teachers to offer support to families without expressing judgment about them. He then described how a teacher might see a parent with an unexpected “spicy” screen name and urged them not to over-react to it, and he reminded teachers about how to use the mute functions strategically to help keep the sessions on track. In effect, Dr. Smith was role-playing these scenarios ahead of time so that his teachers would be ready to offer a caring, culturally responsive experience to their students’ families.

Similarly, Dr. Smith shared with me a series of videos he had created throughout the spring of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, as an example of how he did his best to sustain his connection with students who were forced to learn at home remotely and asynchronously. Here, he posted weekly videos in which he exhorted them and urged them to do their best to maintain normal routines, and he did so in a playful manner, uplifting spirits. This was an attempt for him to maintain his positive relationships with families, and it demonstrated his use of praxis in the interpersonal dimension.

Dr. Smith’s ethic of care also extended to his staff members. Specifically, ALT holds that adult learners cannot easily learn from other adults with whom they have not established a respectful, trusting relationship (Pappas et al., 2015). In the interpersonal realm, Dr. Smith chose smaller group settings to engage teachers in direct questions about the issues they were having

with students. Dr. Smith believed firmly that it was only in this context that a teacher could confront his or her assumptions, biases, and ineffective teaching practices:

I like smaller meetings...it's more pure, and it's more authentic, that the things that come out, people tend to be more open and share more....And so that those are moments where we can share, you know, "No, this student belongs, there." Or, "No, this parent: Did you try to call the parents instead of sending emails?"... You know, "Did you think about what that parent is dealing with,?" Or... "She's a professional, she's working this high-powered job," you know, not because she's, you know, working two or three jobs, menial jobs and is not educated, you know, so we can reframe people's thinking, in those smaller settings, where those things will not come up in a big team meeting...So we're finding that we can chip away at people's thinking in these smaller settings, because more of their person, their own personalities, and...biases come out in those more intimate meetings...so, that's how we're beginning to chip away at some of these things.

**Teachers.** Positionality was also powerful in the interpersonal dimension for teacher participants, all of whom relied on their unique perspective and level of experience in commenting on the impact COVID-19 was having on relationship-building in the classroom. Whereas Patricia initially expressed ambiguity about the pandemic's negative impact on student learning, saying, "...we're all in the same boat together, I guess...I think about my own children. And I try and like to think they're not falling behind, because there's nobody to fall behind – everybody is in the same boat," she acknowledged later on in the interview the stark reality for students who did not have the same supports at home and how this could have a disproportionate impact on some students more than others: "Now think about the kids that (receive special services) that maybe don't have that support at home...(they) are definitely suffering."

Teachers shared views that supported culturally sustaining pedagogy, including similar strategies for demonstrating an ethic of care or centering the voices of learners. For example, all five teacher participants mentioned at least one strategy simply to check in emotionally with their students rather than becoming too anxious about their progress through the typical scope and sequence. Tracey, for example, included a question on her daily check-in survey that invited students to “teach the class” about something that was important to them, and this led to a lesson about a student’s cultural and religious celebrations; Jonathan was more concerned about his students’ well-being than in accomplishing particular lessons by a particular timeframe, and this led to his discovery that a student of his was “sad” because her mother had been in the hospital, and Jonathan was not sure whether his colleagues had this information. Only by centering his students’ voices was Jonathan able to find out what was going on at home and to be an emotional support to them.

Reugenia was concerned about the severity of learning loss that occurred for students who did not have the same supports at home:

(Some of) our students...are sitting in their really nice bedrooms with...every gadget around...(others are in) basements...and little brothers and sisters in the background doing gym...screaming and yelling, so he can't answer the question. And so I saw some of that inequity ...And then I kind of started to wonder about...(families') financial abilities to reinforce what (students are) learning in school, and parents to provide extra support and tutoring and things like that...you can clearly see through the lens of the camera that there are some financial struggles. (Reugenia)

The topic of whether to insist that students turn their video cameras on during remote instruction provided a point of departure from one teacher participant to another in the interpersonal

dimension. National trauma-informed experts had begun to recommend inclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic as an official Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), meaning that the pandemic was being considered as a discreet element of childhood trauma that could impact students' long-term health and life expectancy prospects (Felitti et al., 1998; McManus & Ball, 2020). One topic discussed within the trauma-informed teaching community was the question about whether students ought to be required to turn their computer video cameras on during live, synchronous instruction (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021) and whether this was causing a potential source of added stress for students. Despite this, most districts (Will, 2020), including Glendale's, required students to have their video cameras turned on during remote instruction, regardless of students' voices regarding emotionally safe spaces for learning.

Alicia agreed with the district's stance on requiring cameras to be turned on, but she remained flexible when students had valid excuses for needing the camera to be off. She pointed out that she noticed the vice principal's dropping into one of her Zoom classes to check up on a student's use of the camera in her virtual classroom. Jonathan told me it was not important whether cameras were on, while Patricia also centered her students' agency on the matter:

It sounds like a lot of teachers...require it, and I feel bad for those kids. But I can see why the teacher would want to do that – you can connect more when you're seeing their face. ...but...there's teachers out there that are just so hell bent on...certain things. And I mean, I get, you want to make that connection, one, make sure they're paying attention. But I almost feel like it's an elitist thing. Like, "What I have is way more important than whatever you could possibly be doing on the side," which, in this environment, that can't be true...you don't know, that kid might be taking care of his two-year-old sister. That's way more important than you explaining two plus four is six or whatever. (Patricia)

**Creation of Communities: Communal Dimension**

In the communal dimension, an equity-focused leader works to build a community “across cultural groups through inclusive, democratic practices” (Furman, 2012, p. 209). In doing so, school leaders emphasize inclusion, an important part of equity or social justice work. Capacity for thinking is developed in this dimension via learning about communities and cultural groups serviced by the school, as well as democratic principles that ought to govern communities. Equity-focused leaders provide opportunities for communal forums and dialogues to build capacities for action in this dimension.

**Dr. Smith.** At Glendale, Dr. Smith created a feeling of community within his school in various ways, including via professional learning community (PLC) groups and staff meetings, and he also reached out to his larger school community via traditional methods, such as information nights and PTO meetings, but also in atypical vehicles for the district, such as inviting Black and Hispanic parents to meet with him to talk about student assessment scores. In these ways, Dr. Smith was not only *creating communities*, but he was also *modeling* creation of communities for his staff.

In the communal dimension, Dr. Smith adhered to “democratic processes” that Furman identifies as important elements in this dimension (2012, p. 209). For example, with very few exceptions, Dr. Smith allowed teachers to select the PLCs they would join, according to several participants. In cases in which he directed a teacher to participate in a particular PLC, he spoke directly to the teacher and explained why the teacher’s expertise was needed for that particular committee’s work. For example, Patricia told me, “I think that he asked me to be on (the Equity Committee) because...I did a little experiment (about race and culture) in my room.” For the most part, however, Dr. Smith allowed teachers the freedom to select their PLCs. Still, not every

participant saw the inherent value in Dr. Smith's allowing teachers to choose their own PLC.

One participant told me "I think sometimes people have to be selected, (but) Charles has always been the 'opportunity for all' kind of person."

I observed for myself the various measures Dr. Smith took to provide inclusivity and egalitarian processes to foster community building in the communal dimension, including celebration rituals and providing time for all teachers' voices to be heard during meetings, all of which contributed to a feeling of community. I also noticed friendly banter when teachers spoke with each other informally before meetings started, as well as when Dr. Smith would read a letter from a parent or share some other positive news with his teachers. On top of this, whenever he spoke to staff, Dr. Smith would use self-effacing humor to keep the tone as light as possible. As I observed more than a dozen meetings firsthand, it was easy to note the consistent positivity afforded by these meetings, and all reinforced what one participant told me about Dr. Smith: "You know, everybody loves Charles...everybody loves him. You don't meet a person that doesn't love him." Creating a community for Dr. Smith was made possible by his constituents' admiration for him.

Prior to the COVID-19 school closures in March 2020, Dr. Smith scheduled two meetings with parents, one with African American parents and another with Hispanic parents. While the Hispanic parent meeting was postponed due to the closures, Dr. Smith told me the African American parent meeting was successful, as he had a chance to hear parents' concerns and think more critically about how he could serve their families more effectively. Prior to the meeting, some staff members had questioned Dr. Smith on its purpose, perhaps fearful of whatever criticism he might hear from parents, and according to participants in this study who witnessed his being questioned (I had not), Dr. Smith became curt. One participant told me Dr.

Smith said something to the effect of, “I am the principal of this school, and I believe this will be a helpful experience, and I am holding this meeting, and that’s the end of this discussion.” His response to teachers at that moment was not an easy choice to make, and it may not have fostered civil discourse with his Glendale staff community, but it was clear that Dr. Smith’s larger concern centered on marginalized communities, not on teachers’ discomfort about potential criticism he might receive about their teaching practices, especially practices that were not so culturally sustaining.

**Teachers.** Participants also told me how they created their own communities, in addition to their contributions to communities that Dr. Smith created as a result of his praxis. Participants took their cues from Dr. Smith and invested time and intentional energy in creating responsive communities to the best of their ability. For example, Tracey invited students to “teach the class” about something that was important to them, and in one instance a student put together an impressive lesson on the meaning of Diwali that allowed others in the classroom to learn about cultural traditions they did not necessarily share with their classmate. Other examples of culturally sustaining practices included intentional choices on behalf of teachers to deviate from the written curricula to incorporate Hispanic Heritage Month activities, non-canonical music and theatre, and one teacher’s generous contribution of time to cover colleagues’ classes in which an antiracism story was shared with students.

Participants also told me about the primacy of social/emotional learning (SEL) opportunities they provided to students, including “check-in” activities in which the goal of advancing the scope and sequence of the curriculum was secondary to simply connecting emotionally with students in their virtual classrooms. For example, Jonathan spoke about the value of simply allowing students the opportunity to check in with him and their classmates:

“Instead of worrying about accounting for every waking moment of how (students) spend their days, we ought to look to build flexibility into our daily schedule,” so that students can check in more informally with teachers or their peers during the day. Such an expression informed Jonathan’s understanding about the importance of centering his students’ needs over a prescribed schedule-driven regiment, a demonstration of his ethic of care that offers possibilities to students for agency and emotional well-being (Noddings, 2005).

There were also divergent views regarding CSP and other equity-related work in the classroom. One participant pointed out that when a district supervisor visited the participant’s classroom to read a social justice-themed poem in the context of the social justice/Black Lives Matter protests, the students did not immediately make the connection between the poem and the cultural moment. The participant told me, “And it just wasn’t naturally happening. But then he kind of just flat out asked like, ‘Hey, has anyone seen the riots on TV?’ I almost like, I was like, Oh, my. Oh, my goodness.” This participant told me many of this teacher’s students were not familiar with the unrest associated with the racial justice protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd and so questioned the appropriateness of the supervisor’s approach. The participant also shared an anecdote in which the participant hesitated to discuss a statement a fictional character made about race in a story this participant was reading to students, feeling ill-equipped to manage parents who might be participating in the background during the lesson.

In contrast, when another participant told me she offered to teach an anti-racism text to students in her colleagues’ classes as a guest reader, only some of her colleagues took her up on the offer: “I read to (students) the book, and we talked a little about how, you know, they want the world to see them beyond just you know, the color of their skin.” However, some of her colleagues wanted the free period without this participant’s reading the antiracism story. This



participant told me her colleagues did not want or were ill-prepared to address follow-up questions from their own students. Both of the guest-reader examples above suggested a lack of shared understanding about whether and how to engage directly with students on antiracism topics or culturally sustaining practices, a point that is explored in Chapter 5 of this study.

Interestingly, participants told me about a time prior to the COVID-19 shutdowns in the winter of 2020, prior to my collecting data, in which the Equity Committee itself sometimes experienced periods of dissonance in the communal realm when there was disagreement over which strategies to pursue. This was most evident as the committee prepared a presentation to the staff at large for one of the school's first collective conversations about race, culture, and the ways in which teachers can learn more about how their own positionality impacts the ways in which they connect with students. Specifically, the committee considered using a "Privilege Walk" activity to introduce the concept of the advantages and/or disadvantages teachers experienced in their respective childhoods that served as barriers and/or assets to what they were able to achieve in their adulthood. Videos of this exercise are easily found on the internet, in which participants take a giant step forward if their parents remained married, or two steps backward if three square meals a day were not guaranteed, etc. Doing such an activity with the larger staff would have been a concrete communal dimension experience, as staff members would have literally taken steps forward or backward to indicate their own privilege, or lack thereof, but conducting this experience would have required a great deal of trust and vulnerability from all who participated. According to four out of the five teacher participants – all Equity Committee members – there was much debate about whether such an activity ought to take place.

The committee members debated whether they should actually *do the activity*, as it could put teachers in too vulnerable a position, potentially undermining their goal of inaugurating a journey of collective staff learning opportunities that would help elevate equity-focused consciousness. The committee ultimately settled on showing the video instead of doing the exercise, but much of the discussion leading up to the decision was heated and, although the presentation to the staff at large was described by the principal and the four Equity Committee teacher participants as successful, teacher participants also shared concerns about lingering discomfort in the process as well as how best to proceed in collective learning exercises such as this one. All teacher participants in the study who were on the Equity Committee told virtually the same story about this experience. Keeping in mind that Dr. Smith also participated in Equity Committee meetings and believed teachers learned best in smaller settings, it was not surprising that a follow-up to the Equity Walk activity in a large group setting had not taken place since the original event, nearly nine months previously.

### **Risk and Reward: Systemic Dimension**

In the systemic dimension leadership praxis is characterized by a leader's evaluating and taking actions to change the learning system, at the school and district levels, as much as the leader can so that equity can be achieved. Capacity for thinking in this dimension is characterized by critical consciousness surrounding the "structures, policies, and practices for injustices and barriers to learning" (Furman, 2012, p. 210). A priority for evaluation or critique of the system must be "the curriculum and classroom teaching practices" (p. 210). Action in this dimension includes making changes "incrementally...in the face of resistance and barriers" (Theoharis, as cited in Furman, 2012, p. 210). An equity-focused leader would focus her praxis on elucidating the merits and then demonstrating how to implement CSP principles into teachers'

classrooms, and then would take action steps to evaluate how well and whether CSP principles are being implemented. Similarly, she would develop her skills in engaging in curriculum audits to determine whether curricula are culturally relevant and then take actions to incorporate texts and learning activities that are relevant to and sustain multiple cultures, especially the cultures represented in the school's population.

**Dr. Smith.** The theme of *risk and reward* emerged in this study, especially in the systemic dimension. As the description of the systemic dimension above illustrates, learning systems need to be changed “incrementally” and “in the face of resistance and barriers” (Theoharis, quoted by Furman, p. 210). This is because organizations do not change easily (Bolman & Deal, 2017), and leaders who attempt to change organizations without careful intentionality will be met with resistance, putting their own reputation on the line.

In Dr. Smith's case, his praxis in the systemic dimension would continue to be challenging, given the difficulty even in raising awareness about White privilege and class privilege, as the discussion in the communal dimension revealed. One participant openly shared that she was genuinely concerned that Dr. Smith could risk losing his job simply by promoting equity consciousness among his staff and school community. However, because Dr. Smith had a very strong sense of his moral obligation and duty to serve *all of his students*, he continued to pursue opportunities to “chip away,” as he said, at systems of inequality, and this was most visible in his work to reduce disproportionality in the Honors Program.

Dr. Smith encouraged his Honors teachers to use pre-established district placement measures, including multiple measures such as state assessment scores, local benchmark scores, teacher recommendations, etc. Typically, elementary school districts will take the first month or so of the school year to establish special placements in Academic Support/Intervention and

Enrichment/Gifted and Talented (G&T), and Dr. Smith encouraged teachers in these areas to take their time ensuring that students were not “missed” by the primary data. In other words, sometimes a student’s state assessment scores or benchmark scores might be very high, perhaps in the advanced proficient range, but the students family could have been going through a divorce during the previous spring, and his grades may have slipped. In Dr. Smith’s case, these students, who show extraordinary promise, are often “missed” by the primary identification. Oftentimes, but not always, Black and Hispanic students are missed due to similar circumstances.

Dr. Smith was therefore able to reduce disproportionate over-representation of some groups of students and under-representation of other groups by, after the dust had settled and students are assigned to their groups, asking teachers if they had seen a spark in a student, based on that student’s response to an activity or a newfound enthusiasm in a project, etc. If the teacher noticed this, one of the Honors teachers, either the math or English language arts Honors Program teachers, would invite the student to participate in additional enrichment activities. If the student did exceptionally well there, one of the Honors Program teachers would sometimes recommend this student, whose test scores may have been fairly high but whose academic track record may have been inconsistent, to enroll in the Honors Program. Many of these students, but not all, were Black and Hispanic students, and Dr. Smith insisted that these students would have been doing better academic work in the classroom consistently in the first place, but because their teachers did not always recognize all of her students’ abilities, or if they did not actively create lessons that connected well with students from different racial or cultural backgrounds, their students languished in mediocrity. Dr. Smith told me about a team meeting with Honors teachers in which he heard a teacher say, “Well, you know, this kid is in Honors, and he has a B-

minus...he doesn't even deserve the B-minus; he doesn't really do the work, he doesn't always pay attention.” Dr. Smith told me he responded in this way:

He has a B-minus because he earned a B minus, you know...imagine if he was actually paying attention and he was actually doing all of his work; he probably half pays attention and does well on the test and does well on certain things. (Dr. Smith)

*The reward* in this scenario is obvious: students from historically marginalized groups are offered access to a program that would otherwise have been denied to them; *the risk* comes in the form of criticism he receives by some who do not understand the rationale for the process and in the form of those who *do understand* the process and the rationale but disagree with the premise on which it is built, that factors beyond “objective” test measures and grades, both of which are subject to bias (Fergus, 2017), should not be considered. The current systems that lead to inequitable outcomes are often fiercely protected by those whose interests these systems serve (Fergus, 2017). For example, school staff members and parents often misunderstood such intentionality as “watering down” a program or somehow fundamentally changing it, even though that was exactly not the case. “Nobody is watering down anything; we are simply removing barriers that don’t make sense,” Dr. Smith told me.

The ultimate risk, though, is in allowing placement procedures to adhere solely to test scores, socially reproducing the outcomes that historically have disadvantaged students of color (Swanson & Welton, 2019). And why would Dr. Smith choose that system? Using only standardized test scores with built-in biases that favor culturally dominant students is an unfair practice, especially given the role that race and culture play in social relations in the classroom (Quijada Cerecer, 2013). If a teacher is not using CSP, he or she may not be engaging students well, which obviously affects a child’s ability to learn (Gay, 2013; Paris & Alim, 2014; Swanson

& Welton, 2019; Zoch, 2017). Additional measures for finding talent, motivation, or giftedness is a reasonable accommodation for Dr. Smith and his teachers to make to give students a chance to experience a level of challenge in the classroom that they might not normally experience and of which they are worthy.

When I first interviewed him, Dr. Smith told me there were very few Black or Hispanic students in his Honors Program when he arrived to Glendale seven years ago. Currently, there are more, but still not nearly enough to erase the disproportional enrollment in the district's Honors Program. In other words, in terms of most recent publicly available data, 22% of Glendale's students are Black or African American and 16% are Hispanic or Latino. Dr. Smith said that when he first started seven years ago, only five percent of Honors Program students were Black or Hispanic, whereas, in the past three years, the percentage has hovered between ten and 15%. In other words, Dr. Smith is and should be proud of having identified more Black and Hispanic students for the Honors Program, but at its current level it is still excessively disproportionate, not quite halfway to the percentage it should be in order for Honors Program placement to be proportionate, 38%. Clearly, more work is needed in the systemic dimension, and Dr. Smith would be the first to agree with this statement.

While he finds the work rewarding, Dr. Smith will need to continue working on the curricular and classroom systems of teaching and learning that Furman (2012) enumerates above, which is difficult work unto itself, including supporting curriculum revision, to the extent he could in his role. Similarly, his intentionality to offer teaching positions to teachers of color so that students would have opportunity to experiencing learning from a more diverse population of teachers was an important change he could make to his students' learning environment (Swanson & Welton, 2019 ). Dr. Smith also used his praxis to remove barriers from after-school academic

programs that, like the Honors Program, relied almost entirely on test scores for inclusion. He did this by having a sit-down conversation with a STEM club advisor to review the criteria for inclusion in the STEM club. Here, he convinced the advisor to remove the essay, as it was a barrier to some students who otherwise would have excelled in the club but were turned off by the essay.

Effectively, prior to Dr. Smith's intervention, students who already had access to similarly enriching experiences on the weekends and during breaks from school were also the same students given the opportunity in the after-school club, while other students who were *not* exposed to the STEM activities anywhere else were discouraged from joining because they needed to write an onerous essay that did not even guarantee inclusion. Since that time, several years prior to this study, the club advisor increased participation of Hispanic and African American students by removing the essay component, and he had also created additional course electives available during the school day so that more students could be exposed to STEM and possibly join his club afterschool.

**Teachers.** Participants in the study observing Dr. Smith's praxis regarding the Honors Program were by and large supportive, despite the lone participant's concern about ambiguity surrounding the selection and placement process. The participant maintained that, instead of identifying students beyond assessment data, the school ought to help teachers learn how to do a better job instructing Black and Hispanic students, so that they can be placed into Honors via test scores. The participant pointed out that this ambiguity was a source of tension among some staff members.

Similarly, when another participant who strongly supported Dr. Smith's efforts at reducing disproportionality had a conversation with a colleague about Honors Placements, the

colleague asked her to please refrain from bringing up the topic in PLC meetings, the implication being that it was not an appropriate area of concern for teachers. This, again, is where *risk and reward* emerged as a theme. The supportive participant noted above saw the value in bringing teachers' attention to students who might have been under-identified by test scores but who showed a "spark" and could do the upper-level work, but when she felt such strong pushback she also acutely felt *the risks* in having such conversations. In this case, her risks were felt in the rejection and push-back she received from colleagues merely for encouraging them to be open-minded, cognizant of potential blind spots in noticing students' academic potential.

Despite this teacher participant's experiencing pushback privately for encouraging open-mindedness, I observed more than one public PLC meeting in which Dr. Smith openly encouraged district coaches, supervisors, and classroom teachers to discuss the goal of reducing disproportionality. Specifically, he himself mentioned the process of reviewing student work and participation in the classroom in the opening weeks of school to see whether students would benefit from joining an enrichment activity. When I brought up the topic, Dr. Smith reminded me that a student's academic capability is not necessarily measured by test scores, when a vast body of research speaks to the inherent bias of supposed "objective" tests and an equally compelling body of knowledge supports the notion that teachers' classroom practices often serve as barriers to students' in the classroom, making it even more unlikely for them to do well on the "objective tests."

Other participants consistently brought up the topic of "risk" when considering addressing racial justice in the classroom. For example, one participant taught a lesson in the week following the racial unrest stemming from the George Floyd killing, and was heartened by Dr. Smith's support of the decision, but disheartened by the lack of a clear message from central



office leadership on how best to approach the trauma students were undeniably facing in such a tumultuous time. The participant also shared the lesson plan with another colleague in the district who declined the offer out of fear that she would have acted without the consent of the district and find herself *disciplined for doing so*. The participant's colleague said, "Well, I didn't get any information from Central and I don't want to go ahead and do that...you've been there...much longer than I have, you can take that risk, I can't."

The participant who told me this story insisted there was widespread fear of incorporating CSP or antiracism instruction into classrooms, especially since the participant also believed that very little professional development, if any, was being done at the district leadership level to learn more about supporting culturally sustaining pedagogy or antiracism training: "I don't necessarily think, you know, the work is being done on that level with supervisors and administrators. And so if they're not required, then they're not seeing the need to push (equity training) for the teachers." This participant later on expressed concern for Dr. Smith's intentionality with regard to taking active steps to promote equity in the district: "...As an employee in the district, I perceive it as an astronomical risk that he's taking in pushing (staff members)."

Similar to the previous participant's concerns, another participant was disgusted by the district's "cowardly" response to the George Floyd moment. This participant believed the district administration was overly concerned about public perception to the detriment of the students and families that needed consistent, well-articulated support. Participants consistently expressed dismay about their colleagues' fears of criticism or of being disciplined for taking on matters of equity. These perceived risks were an overwhelming consideration to teachers across the district. The personal rewards to teachers who took risks, in this regard, were few and far between.

However, teacher participants also saw rewards when they knew they were helping their students by using CSP or teaching an anti-racism lesson. These rewards came in a variety of forms, including the systemic changes in placements in Honors courses or increased access to after-school academic clubs for students of color; thank you notes from students and families when teachers delivered a culturally-sustaining lesson; or when an antiracist learning activity prompted positive responses from kids, as one participant shared, after offering an explicitly anti-racist learning activity: “And I did get a lot of submissions from kids: poetry, I got videos, I got cartoons that they made.”

### **Transparency as Teacher: Ecological Dimension**

In the ecological dimension, an equity-focused leader develops thinking and actions that are aware of “school-related social justice issues...situated within broader sociopolitical, economic, and environmental contexts” (Furman, 2012, p. 211). Capacity for reflection in this dimension would include learning more about domination of oppressed groups and of environmental resources, as well as the school’s responsibility in addressing such issues. Capacity for action in this dimension ought to include curriculum development that helps students engage in learning activities that help them learn more about their community. Similarly, staff development workshops ought to be designed by equity-focused leaders to help facilitate such understandings so that teachers can assist children in learning more about their local communities (Furman, 2012).

**Dr. Smith.** As noted earlier in the study, Dr. Smith told me it was his “transparency” that enabled him to be successful and to communicate his ideas successfully. As he would often refer to his “transparency,” I came to understand his use of the term to mean his authenticity, professionalism, and ethical leadership, all of which supported his efforts to help staff begin to

develop an equity consciousness. In other words, he used his *transparency* in the service of teaching his staff. Although much work still needed to be done in terms of achieving equity goals, it was easy to see that his staff members *were beginning to learn about equity from him*. Even the teacher participant who shared misgivings about his Honors Program placement process conceded, “Dr. Smith is starting to maybe change my way of thinking about this.”

Teacher participants also consistently reported that Dr. Smith’s authenticity and his ethics contributed to their level of understanding about equity, bias, community-building, and developing culturally sustaining classroom practices, even if the school and the district still had a long way to go on all of these fronts. The theme *transparency as teacher* emerged as a result of the frequency of participants’ sharing how they were learning about equity from Dr. Smith and also how they themselves would often cite their own backgrounds and experiences when looking to “teach” others. While Dr. Smith would use the term “transparency” when discussing his efforts to teach his staff about equity, his teacher participants did not, but they often did recount a very similar process of emphasizing their own background or their life as being, in some ways, a site in which others could learn about equity. *Transparency as teacher*, then, encapsulates Dr. Smith’s praxis and his interactions with teachers in the ecological dimension.

I observed Dr. Smith’s praxis in one of the most trying ecological dimensions known in my lifetime, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice movement accelerated by a string of police killings of Black citizens, most notably George Floyd, which occurred at a time in which Americans were confined to their homes, seeing the graphic violence of Floyd’s killing on television screens across the nation. Even in “normal” times, a public school principal faces challenges navigating the sociopolitical forces that impact students’ lives and conditions for learning, but in the context of the pandemic and the righteous racial justice

protests occurring in 2020, Dr. Smith's praxis could not have been more central to the well-being of his school community.

On top of these two cataclysms was the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, which added fuel to the pandemic and racial protest fires, as the incumbent appeared to thrive on controversies about both, and families from Dr. Smith's racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse school population, many of them Muslim or immigrants, were understandably anxious in 2016 when the president ascended to the position using anti-immigrant, racist language and policies. After witnessing policies and rhetoric from President Trump that did little to dispel the anxieties voters experienced in 2016, now many district families were *worried*. To lead effectively for social justice in this context, Dr. Smith told me he makes a point of emphasizing his "transparency":

In this school, in this place, in this time, because it helps my staff understand that...as they see other families of color, just like they're comfortable with me, I want them to be equally as comfortable with other families; instead of them looking at when they see a Black family thinking, "Okay, are they a single parent, are they poor, are the students low performing," I want them to think of me and my family. And knowing that, you know, I'm educated, my wife's educated, we're not poor, my kids, you know, I talk often about the success of my children... and so purposefully, because I want them to see it become more common to them, that when they see Black, or they see Hispanic, there's a whole other narrative that they can have than what they have typically known or typically seen on TV. And so I'm trying to emulate that with my staff, so that hopefully my life and *my transparency* can translate into them seeing another Black dad as well. (Dr. Smith)

Again, related to his positionality, Dr. Smith's "transparency" would be able to counter stereotypes about Black people. Dr. Smith knew the words he used to discuss his life experiences

had a powerful effect on his audience. It was this “transparency” that Dr. Smith relied on to address the ecological threats facing his school and his students, and he strived to ensure that he remained committed to social justice and equity without also over-reacting to any of the larger forces over which he had little control; instead, he chose a steady, calming path for his students and families. This, of course, made sense, given that Dr. Smith’s experience prior to becoming principal at Glendale was in school counseling. As a counselor, Dr. Smith had helped thousands of students navigate very difficult childhood and middle-school aged terrain, and he spoke proudly of how these experiences kept his students from giving up on themselves. As principal, Dr. Smith took an incremental approach and knew that his very positionality as a Black man lent credibility to his convictions on matters of discrimination, prejudice, and racism, as he had experienced these injuries firsthand; he told me he therefore did not need to over-emphasize his concerns for social justice or be “a social justice guy,” despite his commitment to being an equity-focused leader.

Dr. Smith met the George Floyd moment by taking a series of actions that span all five dimension but especially resonate in the ecological dimension. That is to say that he chose a course of action that helped educate his colleagues, his teachers, his students, and his families about his own experiences with racism and the importance for all citizens to learn more and actively combat racial prejudice. Specifically, when he heard the news about Floyd and the ensuing protests, some of which at the time were violent and destructive, he called Black staff members and White staff members who were married to Black spouses and may have had biracial children. He mostly called to see how they were doing and to hear their concerns, all of which helped him think about how he wanted to respond as a school leader. He also fielded

phone calls from teachers who wanted to know if there was anything they could do in their virtual classrooms, as students were learning remotely at this time.

While there did not appear to be any official curriculum or set of learning activities being disseminated from the district level, Dr. Smith was supportive of choices teachers made to talk to students and families about racism, but he wanted to be mindful of the ways in which families would be having conversations with their elementary-aged students, and he did not want to usurp the role of parents, exposing students to ideas about violence, rioting, police brutality, without first making sure parents had their opportunity to do so in a way that made sense for them. But he knew he needed to address the situation so that all stakeholders could feel heard, safe, and respected in his school, and so he sent this weekly communication to families in his school community, another example of using his transparency to teach school community members:

Please know that as principal of Glendale Elementary School, I am committed to ensuring that my entire staff and I continue to embrace and put into action the very ideals ...that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. fought and died to uphold. His goal was to achieve acceptance and equal rights for the disenfranchised, notably for Blacks who at that time, and unfortunately today in 2020 continue to be among the most mistreated and marginalized groups in our country...(Dr. Smith)

Dr. Smith sent a similar email to his school staff that echoed many of the ideas he laid out in his first email, but in the staff email he emphasized his connection to staff that “(knew) him well,” before sharing beliefs that many of his staff members *may not actually have known* about him, including his recitation of what he and his wife endure each year when they feel obligated to visit every teacher to make sure they don’t hold stereotypical beliefs about and expectations for his

children in class. He then goes on to reinforce his own calling as an equity-focused leader and urges his colleagues to do the following:

...treat our Black students and families with the same dignity of other groups, help to provide real opportunities for our Black students to access our honors program and...be willing to provide our Black families with targeted resources and information to help them meaningfully engage in the educational growth of their children, we will be in the position to not only decrease some of the barriers our Black students and families face, but I truly believe our actions would actually benefit all of our students and families of Glendale School, regardless of their racial identity. (Dr. Smith)

Dr. Smith told me he gave a similar address to students on the public address system in 2016, acknowledging the fears that some students had about the new President, reminding students that they would be okay, that they would support one another, and that the country “is great and will continue to be great,” regardless of who served as their president.

Regarding the very real health inequities revealed by the pandemic’s catastrophic toll on communities of color in 2020, Dr. Smith did not address this head on, but primarily focused on what he could control; that is, he would ensure access to resources his families would need for school, including driving iPads to families who could not otherwise come to the school to retrieve them. He also, throughout the fall, urged staff members to be kind to their students and one another, and to be flexible in the virtual learning spaces.

**Teachers.** Participants appreciated the strides Dr. Smith was taking to address equity issues in their school, including his overt communication in the ecological dimension about the George Floyd murder, and they appreciated Dr. Smith’s praxis that had led him to create and support an Equity Committee, prior to the outrageous killing of George Floyd, to help facilitate

staff understanding about social forces of oppression and privilege, and how these things contribute to teaching and learning in their school. That said, some participants' views about Dr. Smith's praxis diverged when it came to evaluating his intentionality overall as a Black school leader. Specifically, at least two participants wished Dr. Smith would be more overt about antiracism throughout the year, and not only when a major crisis was at hand. Another participant believed Dr. Smith, as part of the district's leadership, was acting too conservatively, even while acknowledging that a principal has to navigate political waters that are very different from a teacher's. While all of the study's participants respected Dr. Smith's equity-based work and appreciated his enthusiasm for it, it was clear that he still had work to do even with those inclined to participate in and master it, to say nothing of those who resisted or rejected it. More of this will be explored in Chapter 5.

### **Equity-Focus Praxis Across All Five Dimensions**

On December 1, 2020, Charles Smith appeared on the upper left-hand side of my Zoom screen, where I saw my own image directly next to his, as he addressed his entire staff at a staff meeting he had told me he had been anticipating. Perhaps he saw it as an opportunity to re-center his staff's focus, now that the district had recently made the decision to forego in-person learning in response to the positivity rates that were increasing in the area. Although the participants on the call may have thought this would be a typical Zoom staff meeting, I knew what Dr. Smith was about to roll out, based on our final interview that had taken place just a few days' prior to this meeting. As Dr. Smith's was also the final interview I conducted for this study, I had absorbed the five teacher participants' and Dr. Smith's points of view, tensions, concerns, and anxieties, many of which were shared by their colleagues, according to the teacher participants.



It occurred to me that, despite having seen more than a dozen staff meetings this fall, this was the first time in which all five teacher participants – Patricia, Tracey, Reugenia, Alicia, and Jonathan – were visible on my screen simultaneously, next to their colleagues, approximately 40 more staff members in all. There appeared to be a feeling of optimism in the group, with lots of banter and smiles, more so than usual on these calls, when Dr. Smith used his typical interpersonal / communal approach – he began by uplifting the work of others in his community, in this case his teachers – by reading an email from a parent that specifically and enthusiastically thanked staff members for their work to uplift their child’s spirits, calling themselves “blessed” to have teachers such as these. Here we were, Dr. Smith, the study’s participants, and all the teachers that interacted with this equity-focused leader’s praxis, a bounded site, for sure, but in this case, literally bounded together digitally on my computer monitor, evoking perhaps a greater sense of unity than might otherwise have been expected after such an exhausting, traumatizing experience of teaching and learning for so many.

As Dr. Smith worked his way through his agenda’s standard fare – meetings, deadlines, other plans for students and parents – he paused before diving into what I am certain were not easy waters: the collective learning about racial, cultural, and linguistic barriers that his staff needed. That is to say, it was clear from the hundreds of pages of transcripts I had read, annotated, categorized, and asked countless questions about, that this equity-focused leader clearly preferred the friendly confines of a smaller PLC meeting in which to effectuate change via adult learning, but he also knew at some level that the change process could not occur entirely this way, with staff members in isolation from one another, and so he *must* jump back into this pond.

The last time Dr. Smith conducted collective equity learning in this manner, the waters were tumultuous, with even the Equity Committee leaders not sharing the same sense of how best to proceed, and even though the outcome then was generally a positive one, the legacy of discomfort raised in that training was palpable, and several of the participants I interviewed prior to this meeting feared that teachers in the midst of remote instruction would have little appetite to resume the equity learning that had been started, even though it was the necessary work students and their families in this community needed. I was not even sure what to expect from the *study's participants themselves*, much less the other staff members on this call. Dr. Smith, 25 minutes into his meeting, said the following words:

I want to continue to make sure that we are not losing sight of our committee work. More particularly our work when it comes to equity and cultural competency. And you can easily kind of let that fall by the wayside during this time. And so, you know, I have personally put that work into my principal goals, you know, for (the superintendent)...And I put cultural competency and being consistent with that in my personal principal goals. And I want to make sure that we're continuing to address that, even during these remote times. And so one way I want to make sure we're doing that is through work that we're doing with our families, work that we're doing with our students, but also work that we're doing as a staff, and we've hit on some of those, occasionally...but we haven't consistently hit upon all three of those areas. (Dr. Smith)

What followed was a plan Dr. Smith had put in place to re-engage virtually with the aforementioned groups with various opportunities for sharing personal experiences (teachers), different family needs (from parents), and hearing from students within the school. After taking about ten minutes to explain these monthly-themed experiences, he then asked for input.

Teachers could have chosen to remain silent, especially the Equity Committee members who had expressed disappointment about some aspects of their previous work together, but also teachers who might not have derived the benefits of the Equity Committee's "Privilege Walk" video experience many months earlier. However, after a short pause, teachers began to chime in, even teacher participants who had expressed reservations about some of the work Dr. Smith had done. A few teachers could be seen nodding at those who chimed in, including one teacher who was also a parent in the community who appreciated some of the cultural awareness work one of her colleagues had offered to her child's class. It was easy to see that even though there still was an air of uncertainty about the specifics of his plan, there was recognizable support for it.

Dr. Smith's communication style about matters of race was not confrontational or perhaps even satisfying to those who wished he would be more overt in the moment, but it was *his way*, and it was effective. This might not have been akin to the "Why can't they just say black lives matter?" approach that a district colleague had emailed the superintendent, or a rousing call for action, but it was a message about the importance of recognizing and valuing cultural and racial difference, and how these differences need to be represented in *what is taught* and in *how it is taught*. And it supported the truth behind the fact that Dr. Smith's school simply did not have time to waste waiting for this work to be "comfortable" for everyone. In that moment, Dr. Smith's praxis truly exuded critical discourse and social justice action simultaneously, and it was a message that spoke to the work he would continue to do with his staff in the future in the personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological arenas, where observers could reasonably expect to find Dr. Smith "chipping away" at a system of inequity that had taken more than 400 years to produce and would take considerable effort and time from all stakeholders eventually to dismantle.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this bounded case study, a school leader's praxis across Furman's (2012) five dimensions underscores the exceptional nature of equity-focused leadership (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). Even so, constituting this case are various issues – core threads woven into a larger tapestry of equity research – showing that equity-focused leadership does not *have to be so exceptional*. Three kinds of intertwining tensions – ambiguity about equity, ethic of care, and system-wide support – largely confirm earlier research exploring the difficulty of bringing about equitable practices (Antrop-González et al., 2008; Furman, 2012; Gay, 2013; Gooden & O' Doherty, 2015). Although these variegated and multi-textured threads derive from familiar skeins of equity research, in combination they uniquely complicate the conceptual model framing this study. The tapestry of this case vividly renders a key element of equity-focused leadership that is critically under-examined in Furman's (2012) praxis model: *Equity work takes courage*.

### **Ambiguity About Equity**

Even though my findings in this case illustrated an equity-focused leader courageously advancing access and opportunity for his students, he was still not able to establish a consistent understanding among his teacher participants or their colleagues about the meaning of equity or how teachers can go about applying equity-gear instruction to their classroom practices. In the findings section, teacher participants expressed concern over pushback they received from their colleagues when participants recommended equity-gear practices; this pushback confirmed prior research regarding the importance of school leader intentionality in fostering shared understandings regarding the need for such practices (Gooden & O' Doherty, 2015; Mellom et al., 2018; Picower, 2009; Swanson & Welton, 2019); adult learner resistance to

topics not of the adults' own choosing (Knowles et al., 2005), and concepts centering on "color blind" racism (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Ambiguity about equity permeated participant interactions and schoolwide practice, without a clear picture emerging in this case of what teachers were expected to know or do in their classrooms to achieve equity.

Ambiguity about the meaning and importance of equity was observed across several dimensions at Glendale, including the personal and interpersonal dimensions, in which each participant's positionality was often cited as influencing his or her own views about equity. This ambiguity occurred in several stances: ambiguity about the primacy of racism over other forms of harm, including animal abuse or age discrimination; trepidation over whether anti-racist conversations ought to take place in the classroom; or even personal conflict about whether Grade 4 students ought to be exposed to children's literature that included same-sex marriage partners. Similarly, in the systemic dimension, participants took risks they believed were vital, depending on their differing conclusions about the inequitable access students had to the most rigorous curricula and after-school academic programs. Such risks supported prior studies on asset-based pedagogies that advocate for teacher risk-taking in support of advancing the cause of equity (Sleeter, 2012; Zoch, 2017). However, ambiguity in the systemic realm diminished participants' ability to take risks, as they did not have a shared understanding about the systemic nature of racial inequity. Similarly, in the personal and interpersonal realms, participants' capacity to address equity was diminished, since they needed to rely entirely on their own positionality, rather than on a set of agreed to approaches developed by stakeholders and school leaders across the district.

There was also a degree of ambiguity about equity that permeated the ecological dimension, revealing itself in the theme of *transparency*, in which participants used their life

experiences as a means of “teaching” others or to communicate ideas about equity issues.

Transparency, in this sense, emerged in professional conversation about pandemic-impacted instructional choices; reflection on the nation-wide racial protests occurring at the time; and when sharing ideas about how best to facilitate classroom discussion surrounding the U.S.

Presidential campaign. On these and other occasions, participants consistently reported looking toward their own biographies when communicating information. While doing so may have helped the principal clarify his values and build support for equity-geared instruction, it did not facilitate a consistent understanding among teacher participants about the importance of a purposeful pursuit of equity in the school or their classrooms.

These tensions arising from the ambiguity about equity surfaced when participants recommended using anti-racist texts to their colleagues or when they reminded colleagues to be cognizant of their own potential biases when it came to recognizing academic talents of Black and Brown students who were typically overlooked for Honors consideration. Similarly, teacher participants had specific and inconsistent ideas regarding the degree to which their principal ought to vocalize anti-racist messages, regardless of the particular social/political context facing the principal. These tensions in the ecological realm were directly aligned with research that speaks to the difficulties of achieving shared understandings around topics of equity (Brown, 2004; Sleeter, 2012; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008).

Prior research on the problem of achieving shared understandings about equity-geared instruction were also reflected in this case (Gooden & O’Doherty, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Paris & Alim, 2014). The ambiguity seen among teacher participants and their colleagues speaks directly to the overarching research question asked in this study: *How does an equity-focused leader develop a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally*

*sustaining practices in his/her teaching staff?* In a broad sense, the principal in this case brought attention to equity among his staff members in various ways, including asking teachers to think intentionally about African American and Latino students whose talents might not have been identified via objective test measures so that they might be considered for the Honors Program. Teachers responded to the principal's approach, recommending students to participate in enrichment activities that sometimes led to a new placement in the Honors Program for them. Over time, the disproportionate under-enrollment of African American and Latino students in the Honors Program improved. However, in terms of equity-gear instruction, teacher participants reported inconsistent delivery of culturally sustaining practices in their classrooms, including one teacher's hesitance even to discuss a statement a fictional character made about race in a story she was reading to students. Other examples of inconsistency with CSP mentioned in Chapter 4 underscore remaining work that is needed to help teachers develop equity consciousness and equity-gear instruction, including CSP.

Participants' ambiguity about equity aligned with prior research that identified problems surrounding a lack of cross-cultural or cross-racial training in teacher pre-service programs. Without such training, teachers typically must rely on personal experience or in-service professional development to learn how to incorporate equity-gear instruction in their classrooms (Swanson & Welton, 2019). In this case, teachers and their school leader relied on their own life experiences or independent learning to determine how best to approach issues tied to systemic racism. These outcomes speak directly to a research sub-question raised at the outset of the study: *How does this leader help his teaching staff develop the shared understandings and skills needed for equity-gear instruction?* Here, Dr. Smith's preference for offering targeted, small-group professional learning to his teachers in grade-level meetings

is aligned to best practices established by ALT research (McKee et al., 2013). These small-group settings, as built-in, everyday routines, offer authentic learning scenarios for teachers in which to address equity issues more readily in a “coaching” relationship between the principal and teachers (Pappas et al., 2015). However, relying almost entirely on this mode for teacher learning has limitations. Training teachers primarily in isolation from one another on equity topics that arise organically may indeed be authentic, but too much reliance on this mode can unintentionally *foster ambiguity*. Relying almost entirely on grade-level or PLC meetings to address equity topics organically limits the principal’s ability to offer a prescribed set of intentional reflection activities to raise collective equity consciousness. Similarly, it also limits possibilities for collective discussion and professional development surrounding equitable classroom practices.

Findings from this study confirmed that schools contribute to social reproduction of beliefs that deny racism (Boaler, 2000; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Coll et. al, 1995). Teachers who have not engaged in high-quality equity training often do not know how to help their students acquire agency to combat racism and other forces of oppression in their daily lives (Coll et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rubin & Hayes, 2010). At Glendale, participants used a “kitchen sink” classroom approach, in which different aspects of building cultural understanding and community buy-in were treated as equally important, depending on their individual beliefs and experiences. Relying primarily on their own understandings diminished teachers’ effectiveness in helping their students overcome everyday experiences of racism, poverty shaming, ethnic othering, homophobia, or religious bigotry. This is because teachers needed to make instructional decisions about how to approach these topics without a shared training experience that included CSP protocols, curricula, instructional practices, etc.



Despite having to rely almost entirely on their individual approaches, all six participants acknowledged at the outset of the study that *school leaders can help teachers learn* to use equity-gearred instruction. In other words, the teachers were open to a shared training experience. Despite this, explicit training on how to achieve CSP was not observed, and this was most likely due to a lack of system-wide support for such training, an issue I unpack later in this section. Fortunately, teacher participants at Glendale appeared to be open to unlearning their own biases (Fergus, 2017; Picower, 2009; Swanson & Welton, 2019), a stance that points to the potential value of collective anti-racism and CSP training for Glendale's staff members. If the attitude held by teacher participants is shared widely by their colleagues, ALT research suggests the school will benefit tremendously from anti-racism and CSP training, since adults will develop new understandings and practices only when seeing inherent value in doing so (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013).

### **Ethic of Care**

Another type of thread woven into the fabric of this case concerned the demonstration of care for students and families. Participants' beliefs and practices confirmed research regarding the complexity of creating feelings of belonging for students (Coll et. al, 1995; Hammond, 2014; Valenzuela, 1999) as well as developing teachers' cross-racial conceptions of empathy (Warren, 2015). Furman (2012) underscores the need for aspiring school leaders to learn how to build relationships "across cultural groups" (p. 207) by developing an "ethic of care" (Furman, 2012, p. 208; Noddings, 2005). An ethic of care is a stance that values not only the idea of caring *as virtuous*, but also *as relational* (Noddings, 2005). In this way, an ethic of care regards a teacher or principal's ability to demonstrate care for students as inherently relational, in which students must actively collaborate with their teachers in

constructing their own care. Without the involvement of students in their own care – their own agency – whether in the classroom or the school, then there is no ethic of care.

Ethic of care involves centering the voices of marginalized students and their families, a key component to asset-based instructional approaches (Paris & Alim, 2014; Furman, 2012). The attempt to center marginalized voices in this case was noted in the communal dimension in various ways, including monthly staff meetings and on special occasions when the Equity Committee attempted to facilitate discussion around equity topics. Despite these attempts, a clear, consistent message was lacking from the district and the school regarding expectations for equity-gearred processes and practices in the classroom. Teachers therefore relied on their own instincts and judgments to decide how their own ethic of care should be manifested among themselves and especially in their classrooms. Contributing to this issue was a lack of explicit equity training that could have helped promote a consistent message about equity-based classroom expectations and guidance in which to implement or apply these expectations in practical ways.

Tensions regarding ethic of care were demonstrated in community-building activities at Glendale. Whether in staff meetings, PLCs, grade-level meetings, or parent information meetings, Dr. Smith attempted to center the concerns of his marginalized students and families in the actions he took. He also took great care to empower his staff by giving them a voice in his decision-making processes, an added layer of ethic of care for which researchers advocate (Noddings, 2005). However, despite his efforts with staff members and families, students' *actual voices* never appeared to factor into the school's decision-making processes, a critical blind spot that can undermine schoolwide equity efforts. The paradox of an equity-focused leader that emphasized an ethic of care with his staff but not as much with his students

confirms research regarding the importance of having school leaders continue developing equity-focused capacities during their in-service work (Furman, 2012; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008).

In this case the principal's praxis often centered on ethic of care concerns, as he continually sought to create opportunities for cross-racial and cross-cultural learning among his staff to help teachers foster an ethic of care for their marginalized students and families. However, teacher participants did not have a clear sense about how they could best support students cross-culturally. Although teacher participants sometimes attempted instructional practices that honored the cultural assets of their students, when opportunities emerged for students to be exposed to topics concerning racial justice, cultural difference, or even heteronormativity, teachers acknowledged avoiding these topics out of fear of parental pushback. Some of the fear was related to the possibility that a teacher might handle a topic imperfectly *in front of a parent*, a concern heightened by learning conditions stemming from the global pandemic, in which the primary mode of learning occurred in virtual classrooms that often had parents listening to or even participating in students' lessons.

Because staff members were not given more specific guidance on how to support their students through CSP, whether through teaching anti-racism or using cultural difference as an asset, teachers often held back out of concern about parent or colleague pushback. Teacher participants and their colleagues sometimes appeared to want to do more in terms of ethic of care for their students, even including routines in daily check-in activities that provide a forum for students in which they could discuss cultural or religious celebrations happening in their homes, for example, but there was not a consistent, endorsed approach to involving students in their own care in this way. Ambiguity about expectations for classroom ethic of care and

offering more explicitly asset-based or culturally sustaining pedagogy invited worry for some staff members, as doing so could “put a target” on their backs, as one participant mentioned.

Equity-focused leadership requires opportunities for students to develop agency (Rubin & Hayes, 2010). An ethic of care, if consistently understood and practiced within a school and a district, allows marginalized students to have input on decisions that affect not only their current learning environment but also as a means of developing learning habits they can carry forward into civic engagement as adults (Rubin & Hayes, 2010). As CSP itself is ultimately designed to elevate the cultural and linguistic knowledges of students from communities whose voices tend to be marginalized by dominant culture (Paris & Alim, 2014), equity-focused leaders must therefore routinely create conditions that allow for students’ input. Such an ethic of care moves marginalized voices closer to the center.

### **System-Wide Support**

The previous two sites of tension threading this case’s tapestry – ambiguity about equity and ethic of care – are byproducts of the most compelling source of tension complicating the principal’s praxis: lack of support from the school system. On the surface, some support was provided, but because much of Glendale’s work was done in isolation from the other district schools, an enduring doubt or fear accompanied teacher-participants and their colleagues’ practices. Equity-focused work is *change* work, and organizations that manage change processes well are more likely to succeed with them (Bolman & Deal, 2017). All six participants, in different ways, described how their school’s approach to equity was either singular in the district or, when it was in keeping with the district, tepid. This was especially observed in the systemic and ecological dimensions, in which *risks* were identified that could only be confronted via a participant’s personal convictions or life experiences – his or her

*transparency* – as a result of minimal or no district support to confront racist structures.

System-wide support gives district and school leaders the ability to communicate consistently and clearly about their intentions (Gooden & O' Doherty, 2015). Conversely, when school leaders work on equity independently, mixed messages and confusion about teacher expectations typically abound (Theoharis, 2007). This was true in Glendale's case, as a lack of message clarity across the district fueled anxiety and disenchantment among teacher participants who then needed to rely almost entirely on their own experiences and understandings about racism and equity, instead of policies or programs emanating from the district's central office. Having equity-based policies or programs communicated intentionally to the school community would point the way forward for equity-based schoolwide and classroom-level practices. In this regard, research supporting the vital nature of a coherent approach to equity-based leadership was confirmed (Fergus, 2017; Roegman et al., 2019; Theoharis, 2007). Teacher participants would not likely have experienced fear if the district as a whole embraced an equity-focus similar to that of Dr. Smith's praxis.

### **Equity Work Takes Courage**

Tensions arising from three areas of concern – ambiguity about equity, ethic of care, and system-wide support – are the textured and colored threads woven into a vividly rendered image showing the meaning of this case: *equity work takes courage*. In all three of these areas, there was an underlying tension of *fear*, growing out of ambiguity, inconsistency, lack of clarity, or lack of support. Although Furman (2012) provides a compelling conceptual framework for leadership development and practice in support of equity, her prescriptive praxis model is delivered almost as a manual, in step-by-step fashion, presented as though praxis were largely uncomplicated, without the sort of tensions or complexities that require courage.

Furman's (2012) five-dimensional model in which equity-focused leaders must do their work barely alludes to a sense of courage required by these leaders to enact praxis. Yes, Furman (2012) briefly mentions the relationship of courage to a leader's "commitment and persistence" in her introduction; she cites two articles in her model's appendix that mention the role of courage in social justice leadership; she briefly mentions "courageous conversations" (p. 211); and a reader could infer that courage plays a role in the praxis she describes, but she fails to recognize *the centrality of courage* in her model. This is problematic, as courage itself offers much of the solution needed for Glendale's district as well as countless others looking to create equitable access, opportunity, and outcomes for students coming from historically marginalized communities.

Although a formalized model for equity-based courage has yet to be developed, a useful starting point can be found in Fullan's (2011) work: "Effective change leaders combine resolute moral purpose with impressive empathy" (p. 29). Moral purpose and impressive empathy require leaders to stand firm in the face of resistance, but respectfully to all stakeholders as they work through their own biases, lack of experience, or outright ignorance about the needs of others. *Moral purpose with impressive empathy* – my working definition for equity-focused courage, based on Fullan's (2011) recommendation – is precisely what Glendale's district needed. Dr. Smith demonstrated this kind of courage, modeling moral purpose and impressive empathy in his praxis, but without the benefit of a district-based, articulated vision for equity, the study's teacher-participants expressed a lack of confidence and clarity about equity as well as in what they should do in their classrooms to maximize their own effectiveness with marginalized students.

Fear, uncertainty, ambiguity, and doubt permeated the tensions shared by teacher

participants in this study, and although Dr. Smith did not express similar concerns, some of his choices were aligned with his teachers' concerns about pushback, including his stated intentions about holding equity training only in-house or by taking a conservative approach with some of his school's cultural events. Furman's (2012) conceptualization of praxis requires *thinking* and *actions* that raise critical consciousness and support change processes in the personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological dimensions of school leadership, but Furman does not adequately explore the role that *courage* plays in a leader's thoughts or actions. Such an omission limits her praxis model, relegating it to a context-neutral concept; instead, I contend that praxis is political, as an equity-focused leader must possess courage to face interactions contextualized by social, cultural, and historical forces that easily lead to conflict, misunderstanding, and fear. Without explicitly acknowledging the centrality of courage in equity-focused leadership, Furman (2012) reduces her model to a sort of "technical leadership" (p. 198) approach that she ironically cautions against (Theoharis, 2007).

### **Showing Courage is "Not an Easy Road"**

This case confirms scholarship around the complexity of developing understandings about equity, inside and outside of the classroom (Furman, 2012; Gay, 2013; Paris & Alim, 2014). In Furman's (2012) five dimensions, the equity-focused leader's praxis is never simple, nor is it ever "done." It is a recursive practice that requires tending to and continual support (Furman, 2012). Yet, it also requires a school leader's willingness to share ownership of equity learning. Dr. Smith's praxis allowed for a certain degree of teacher agency and shared leadership, but he also was not inclined to invite outside trainers to support his work, as he believed it could bring more harm than help. This belief directly addressed one of this study's sub-questions: *What are this leader's beliefs about teaching and learning for adults?*

According to ALT models, Dr. Smith was wise to prefer smaller settings to take advantage of coachable moments in which to instruct staff members about equity topics (McKee et al., 2013; Pappas et al., 2015). However, his reluctance to consider working with a consultant or other “critical friends” may be a limitation he has placed on himself and his faculty, making the transmission of his vision for equity-gear instruction roll out a bit more slowly, inconsistently, and narrowly – based primarily on his own experiences, making his school’s equity journey “not an easy road,” as one participant mentioned, but a road traveled in isolation.

### **Courage Requires “Chipping Away”**

There is ongoing difficulty in changing student performance outcomes for historically marginalized students in any American public school setting (Roegman et al., 2019; Sleeter, 2012). Higher performance on standardized tests, graduation rates, and college enrollment outcomes are possible, but empirical research connecting equity-gear instruction to these outcomes, including CSP, is lacking. In the few empirical cases in which academic progress was connected to equity-gear instruction, an inescapable fact is that it takes a lot of time to achieve (Mellom et al., 2018; Sleeter, 2012; Zoch, 2017). In this case, over the period of seven years, Dr. Smith was able to celebrate modest achievements in reducing disproportional enrollments in the Honors Program and increased access to after-school clubs that historically did not attract Black and Hispanic students. Dr. Smith and those he successfully enlisted in the work truly were “chipping away” at systems of inequity, doing their modest bit to begin dismantling systemic racism. Over time, these modest gains can become more significant, especially if a courageous, districtwide approach is taken.

By “chipping away” intentionally and consistently at systemic inequities, Dr. Smith addresses another research question: *What are this leader’s beliefs about equity?* He believed



that some students were doing well within the system that exists, including many of his White and Asian students. But he also believed many of his Latino and African American students were not benefitting from his school's learning context, and he attributed some of this to a lack of intentionality embedded in his district's traditional practices, such as relying almost entirely on test scores and grades for placement into his Honors Program. Dr. Smith believed he could "chip away" at systemic barriers, as he had with the Honors Program and after school clubs, but he was also interested in showing his teachers how to utilize their own talents and resources to support students who might otherwise not succeed in the current teaching and learning context at Glendale. By modeling his own equity beliefs for his teachers, what Dr. Smith calls "being transparent," he was able to set expectations for them regarding recruitment of students into his Honors Program; that said, modeling expectations for equity in terms of curriculum and instruction, as well as in developing a consistent ethic of care, will be much more effective if similar expectations are communicated by personnel across the district.

My findings showed that this equity-focused leader believed it was in his own power, as well as that of his teachers, to "chip away" at inequitable student learning outcomes. He believed that all children can learn, and that some students were sometimes under-served when teachers were not paying careful attention to students' cultural assets or learning potential. In this way, Dr. Smith's praxis addresses a related research question in this study: *What are this leader's beliefs about teaching and learning for K-12 learners?* Dr. Smith encouraged teachers to provide culturally relevant resources and texts, as well as culturally-sustaining practices and effective differentiation in the classroom. He repeatedly expressed a belief that all students could achieve high levels of academic success, as long as a teacher challenged the student and promoted engagement with the lessons. He often emphasized differentiation, that no two

students were the same, and if teachers spend enough time getting to know their students, they would connect with students and find out what motivates them to learn.

### **Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to better understand how an equity-focused leader helps his staff develop equity consciousness and classroom practices that promote positive academic outcomes for historically underserved students. Findings in this bounded case study showed an equity-focused leader's praxis supporting a level of understanding in his staff about equity and equity-gearred practices by investing time and resources, centering marginalized community voices, and especially by demonstrating courage. Public school leaders who prioritize equity would do well to incorporate Furman's (2012) prescription for praxis in the personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological dimensions. However, *courage* across these dimensions is needed for equity-focused leadership to become the rule, rather than the exception. Even further, courage, by showing "resolute moral purpose with impressive empathy" (Fullan, 2011, p. 29) can be realized when school districts take the following actions.

#### **Invite Objective Voices to Frame and Implement Equity Work**

American K-12 public school districts need to decide on effective methods for bringing objective, shared understanding to the particular context of their own district. This can be accomplished by inviting independent "critical friends" or an equity consultant to help district personnel lower their guard to be self-reflective and open to critical examination of policies and practices. Although school leaders, especially principals (Theoharis, 2007), will play the most significant role in teachers' understandings about the need for equity-informed practices, an *objective* resource is needed to help districts hold themselves accountable to

consider options in the decision-making process they normally had not considered. This is because principals, superintendents, and school boards, despite committing publicly to promoting equity for all, are key participants in an American K-12 system that currently fosters the very inequitable outcomes these participants wish to change.

Inviting a neutral equity consultant or trainer can support districts by offering a disinterested, “objective” voice to guide district leaders through exercises that help them recognize the various hallmarks of inequity – such as student achievement patterns, disproportionality of enrollment practices, or student suspension rates. Doing so allows the district to formulate a clear-eyed goal-setting process grounded in empirical data (Roegman et al, 2019). Properly framing and implementing long-term, system-wide learning that can support equitable student outcomes begins with an intensive district needs assessment and a root-cause analysis of the district’s patterns and practice (Fergus, 2017). Using all available quantitative student learning data, as well as qualitative focus group and interview data with school community stakeholders, an objective third party can help the district formulate understandings about the nature of equity work that needs to happen, which can then provide valuable information and approaches to underpin an appropriate, consistent plan of action.

### **Build System-Wide Support for Equity Work**

Bringing shared understandings to equity-focused practice in a school’s faculty is made much more difficult, perhaps ultimately impossible, without a system-wide focus on such work. When school districts engage in critical self-reflection, they are able to better understand existing forces that “give permission” for inequitable outcomes to persist (Fergus, 2017). When districts *choose not to engage collectively* on its inequitable student outcomes, it compounds problems facing individual schools and school leaders in this work. Even though an objective,

independent partner is necessary, the ultimate “critical friends” of the district must be the collection of district leaders themselves. By embracing self-examination and unvarnished critique, a district can honestly measure its shortcomings and begin to address them. When a district embraces a system-wide focus on equity, it makes it easier to work with independent entities, foster critical self-examination, and reduce some of the anxiety of teachers who are trying to do right by their students but who are confused about what they should or should not do (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). It is virtually impossible for a principal to accomplish high levels of shared understanding about equity in her school when she is effectively working alone or perhaps with only a few other colleagues. By having a whole-of-district approach, individual school principals and district administrators can then work together with teacher, student, and family leaders to lean on each other while they learn how to detect their own blind spots and work to undo practices that serve as barriers to the school community.

### **Create Conditions for Student and Family Engagement in the Work**

Although it will still take time to achieve equity by “chipping away” at various iterations of inequity, doing so can be accelerated by involving all stakeholders in the project. Facilitating student and family engagement opportunities with school can help accelerate student agency (Rubin & Hayes, 2010) and feelings of belonging (Coll et al., 1995), both of which are necessary elements of student academic performance. Improving student and family engagement can help a district better gauge the most appropriate culturally sustaining practices and curricular enhancements to implement for their students, so that students see themselves reflected in their own coursework (Zoch, 2017). Involving families in this process helps school community members feel heard and valued, which serves as a self-reinforcing entity in the district’s work (Moll et al., 1992; Warren, 2015).

**Hire and Develop Equity-Focused *Leaders***

Schools and districts cannot simply rely on “an” equity-focused leader to develop an equity-focused environment or equity-gearred classroom practices. Findings in this case showed how an equity-focused leader’s operating in a vacuum fosters ambiguity and sometimes fear. Teachers need to hear clear, equity-based messages from all district leaders, not just from their own principal. In addition to developing strong equity-focused praxes among school leaders within a district, it is also prudent for districts to hire candidates who show a propensity for courageous praxis. Before central office leadership in any district promotes or hires new leaders for open positions, they must keep in mind that many, if not most, of the candidates in their pool of applicants have likely come up through the ranks of inequitable public school systems. Principals and other district administrators, most of whom are White and male (Swanson & Welton, 2019), for instance, have benefited from a system that has been biased in their favor. These school leaders need to develop an equity consciousness if they are to contribute to their district’s collective approach. For equity-focused work to succeed, districts must invest in equity-gearred professional development for its entire staff, but especially for its school leaders. Districts must also hire and promote candidates into leadership positions who are ready to show courage in confronting inequities that exist in their schools.

**Implications**

Equity-focused leadership points to broader implications for state departments of education, university teacher preparation programs, and for future research. Just as it is virtually impossible for a principal to realize her full potential as an equity-focused leader by working in relative isolation from the rest of her district in terms of equity initiatives, so too will school

districts struggle to produce equitable outcomes for students when they operate in isolation from their neighbors.

### **State Departments of Education**

There has been a renewed policy focus on foregrounding equity in advancing student outcomes in the past decade (Sleeter, 2012; Zoch, 2017). These efforts seek to reinforce promotion of equity-focused teaching leadership practices (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008) so that local boards of education can better understand what equity-focused work should look like in their communities. Fortunately, this emphasis on equity is beginning to shape school leadership training programs (Furman, 2012; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008) and even the updated Professional Standards for School Leaders (National Policy, 2015), formerly known as the Inter-state School Leadership Licensure Consortium standards, have been revised to include equity-centered strands (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). As a whole, the American public education system, K-12, must change in order to serve all of its students fairly. A consistent national message about the central role that equity-focused leadership – a principal’s praxis – must play in students’ success needs to be communicated publicly and universally.

### **University Teacher Education Programs**

This study supports prior research identifying practitioner needs, including university education programs that provide cross-racial, cross-cultural, and cross-linguistic experiences for pre-service teachers (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013). Rather than reserving such experiences for a short period of time before students graduate and take full-time teaching positions, universities would do well to take advantage of the entirety of the undergraduate experience to situate teachers in various mentoring roles during earlier field experiences. Marginalized students need

teachers who have an understanding of how best to connect with them and their families, and universities need to help equip teachers in this way. On top of this, a collective conversation must be had about attracting bilingual and teachers of color to the profession, as these teachers roughly comprise only 20% of the workforce (Swanson & Welton, 2019). If the federal and state governments are serious about creating equitable classroom learning environments, students need to see more diverse faculties in and leading their schools.

### **Future Research**

The principal's praxis is the unit of study constituting this case. Yes, teacher participants told me about their own understandings regarding equity and culturally sustaining pedagogy, but all of our conversations were framed by the equity-focused leader's praxis. The choice of a single leader in this case was deliberate, not only for the practical reasons outlined in Chapter 3, but also because a case study with multiple sites may have offered different and contrasting outcomes, but they may not have offered the same *depth of understanding* I was able to achieve by focusing the research on one principal's praxis. I also confess to having been inspired by a broadly similar case study in which an African American scholar studied a White teacher's cultural responsiveness (Milner, 2011). The depth of understanding in the study was compelling, especially in the way the researcher resisted imposing his own beliefs on his subject, and this ultimately informed my design choices.

An African American man and former school counselor working now as a principal in a diverse environment, in which Asian and White students constituted the racial and ethnic majority in his school, Dr. Smith had a positionality in this case that was quite unique. Change any of Dr. Smith's descriptors mentioned in the previous sentence – race, gender, work experience, school demographics – and the findings of this case may likely be quite different.

One manifestation of this was seen in Dr. Smith's use of the word "transparency" as a leadership tool. Here, Dr. Smith used the term frequently to describe to me how he "shows up" as an equity-focused leader, including his ability to teach others by using an openness about his life experiences, professional judgments, and decision-making processes. He saw tremendous value in sharing his life's journey with colleagues, including about the way he fully embraces his roles both as an equity-focused leader who is driven to maximize academic achievement outcomes for his students, but also simply as an everyday family man looking to provide support for his own children's educations. In talking about these experiences to me and to others, Dr. Smith, in his own words, was being "transparent," and perhaps teaching us about life experiences that we could not fully comprehend as privileged White educators.

The value in studying this particular case reinforces the notion that there is no single way to pursue equity. Moreover, since we do not yet have "praxis benchmarks" to determine whether a school leader's praxis is successful, it was important in this unity of analysis to capture the depth and breadth of the principal's praxis *accurately*, so that subsequent case studies of praxes used by other principals or other school leaders could be studied in relation to this case. Gathering, coding, and doing thematic analysis of the thick, descriptive data captured at this bounded site has produced a useful starting point for future research. Future studies could include several school leaders over multiple sites to determine whether their praxes led to similar findings. For example, does "courage" in the service of equity-focused leadership look different for more experienced versus less experienced principals? How do different school leadership roles, say those of supervisors, curriculum directors, or even other principals who enjoy strong district support foster different kinds of praxes? How does gender or racial identity factor into a school leader's praxis? By studying multiple sites in a single



study, such questions could be asked and answered.

Another factor worth considering in future research is the nature of self-identification for the principal participant. My recruitment survey and subsequent interview allowed the gatekeeper to self-identify as an equity-focused leader, but it would be informative to study a principal who has been identified as an equity-focused leader *by her own faculty*, for example. Finally, given this study's take away that equity-focused leadership ultimately depends on a district's commitment to courageous, system-wide practices and processes, then future research would do well to explore a "courage model" that districts could use to support collaboration with all stakeholders around virtuous notions of moral purpose and empathy.

### **Conclusion**

Courage is at the heart of praxis. Yes, the five dimensions examined here do well to describe the "how" and the "what" of equity-focused praxis, but central to these questions is the notion of courage. Rather than taking away a checklist of how a school leader used praxis to raise equity consciousness to foster CSP practices in teachers' classrooms, readers of this study ought to instead realize that school district leaders and teachers will make mistakes, but they will ultimately succeed if they are supported by their districts, to empower them to take courage and take action, even when the outcome is uncertain. An equity-focused leader cannot "play it safe" and avoid the various risks, missteps, and occasional humiliations that can occur when one sticks one's neck out. The leader must understand that these discomforts come with the territory, and our marginalized students are counting on decisive, moral action, regardless of the leader's potential for pitfalls. These students deserve coherent, equity-focused leadership practices that enable them to enjoy the fullness of a culturally-sustaining classroom environment, nurtured by district and school-level administrators, like Dr. Smith, who show up

for them by showing courage.

## References

- Antrop-González, R., Vélez, W., & Garrett, T. (2008). Examining familial-based academic success factors in urban high school students: The case of Puerto Rican female high achievers. *Marriage & Family Review*, 43(1-2), 140–163.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01494920802013003>
- Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto schooling: A political economy of urban educational reform*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bell, D. (1980). Brown v. board of education and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review*, 93(3), 518–533.
- Boaler, J. (2000). Mathematics from another world: Traditional communities and the alienation of learners. *Journal of Mathematical Behavior*, 18(4), 379–397.  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0732-3123\(00\)00026-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0732-3123(00)00026-2)
- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2017). *Reframing organizations : Artistry, choice, and leadership*. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Bonilla-Silva, E., & Forman, T. A. (2000). “I am not a racist but...”: Mapping White college students’ racial ideology in the USA. *Discourse & Society*, 11(1), 50–85.
- Bowles, S. and Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Brown, K. (2004). Leadership for social justice and equity: Weaving a transformative framework and pedagogy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(1), 77–108.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X03259147>

Callahan, R. (1962). *Education and the cult of efficiency*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Castelli, F. & Sarvary, M. (2021). Why students do not turn on their video cameras during online classes and an equitable and inclusive plan to encourage them to do so. *Ecology and Evolution*, 2021; 00: 1– 12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.7123>

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.

Coll, C., Lamberty, G., Jenkins, R., McAdoo, H., Crnic, K., Wasik, B., & García, H. (1996). An Integrative Model for the Study of Developmental Competencies in Minority Children. *Child Development*, 67(5), 1891-1914. doi:10.2307/1131600

Collins, K., Connor, D., Ferri, B., Gallagher, D., & Samson, J. (2016). Dangerous assumptions and unspoken limitations: A disability studies in education response to Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, Mattison, Maczuga, Li, and Cook (2015). *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners*, 16(1), 4–16. <https://doi.org/10.5555/2158-396X.16.1.4>

Crenshaw, K. (1988). Race, reform, and retrenchment: Transformation and legitimization in anti-discrimination law. *Harvard Law Review*, 101 (7), 1331±1387.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches, Second edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Delgado, R. (Ed.). (1995). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for White people to talk about racism* . Boston: Beacon Press.

- Dray, B., & Wisneski, D. (2011). Mindful reflection as a process for developing culturally responsive practices. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 44(1), 28–36.
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245–258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8)
- Fergus, E. (2017). *Solving disproportionality and achieving equity: A leader's guide to using data to change hearts and minds*. Thousand Oakes, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Forrest, S., & Peterson, T. (2006). It's called andragogy. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 5(1), 113-122.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Fullan, M. (2011). *Change leader: Learning to do what matters most*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Furman, G. (2012). Social justice leadership as praxis: Developing capacities through preparation programs. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(2), 191–229.
- Galloway, M., & Ishimaru, A. (2015). Radical recentering: Equity in educational leadership standards. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 51(3).
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106-116.
- Gay, G. (2013). Teaching to and through cultural diversity. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(1), 48-70.
- Gooden, M.A., & O' Doherty, A. (2015). Do you see what I see? Fostering aspiring leaders' racial awareness. *Urban Education*, 50(2), 225-255.

- Hammond, Z. (2014). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*: SAGE Publications.
- Hodges, J., McIntosh, J., & Gentry, M. (2017). The effect of an out-of-school enrichment program on the academic achievement of high-potential students from low-income families. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 28(3), 204–224.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202X17715304>
- Holland D., Lachicotte W., Skinner D., & Cain C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jackson, A.Y., & Mazzei L. (2012). *Thinking with theory in qualitative research*. New York: Routledge.
- Khalifa, M. A., Gooden, M. A., & Davis, J. E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 1272–1311.
- Kirkpatrick, J. (2007). The hidden power of Kirkpatrick's four levels. *ProQuest: Social Science Premium Collection*, 61(4), 34-38.
- Knowles, M., Holton, E., & Swanson, R. (2005). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*. 6. ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Labaree, D. F. (1997). Public good, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34, 39-81.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). "Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal* 32(3): 465-491.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field

- like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7-24.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the remix. *Harvard Educational Review* 84(1): 74-84.
- Lareau, A. (2002). Invisible inequality: Social class and childrearing in black families and White families. *American Sociological Review*, 67(5), 747–776.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3088916>
- Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, 9(3).
- McCauley, K. D., Hammer, E., & Hinojosa, A. S. (2017). An andragogical approach to teaching leadership. *Management Teaching Review*, 2(4), 312–324.
- McKee, C. W., Johnson, M., Ritchie, W. F., & Tew, W. M. (2013). Professional development of the faculty: Past and present. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2013(133), 15-20.
- McManus, M. A., & Ball, E. (2020). COVID-19 should be considered an adverse childhood experience (ACE). *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 5(4), 164-167.  
<https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.166>
- Mellom, P., Straubhaar, R., Balderas, C., Ariail, M., & Portes, P. (2018). They come with nothing: How professional development in a culturally responsive pedagogy shapes teacher attitudes towards Latino/a English language learners. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 71, 98–107.
- Merriam, S.B., & Bierma, L. L. (2014). *Adult learning: Linking theory and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Milner, H. (2011). Culturally relevant pedagogy in a diverse urban classroom. *Urban Review*,

43(1), 66-89.

Milner, H. R., IV., Pearman, F. A., III, & McGee, E. O. (2013). Critical race theory, interest convergence, and teacher education. In M. Lynn & A. D. Dixson (Eds.), *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education* (pp. 339-354). New York, NY: Routledge.

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.

Morgan, P., Farkas, G., Hillemeier, M., Mattison, R., Maczuga, S., Li, H., & Cook, M. (2015). Minorities are disproportionately underrepresented in special education: Longitudinal evidence across five disability conditions. *Educational Researcher*, 44(5), 278–292.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X15591157>.

Morris, D. (2015). Actively closing the gap? Social class, organized activities, and academic achievement in high school. *Youth & Society*, 47(2), 267–290.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X12461159>

Nasir, N. i. S., & Hand, V. M. (2006). Exploring sociocultural perspectives on race, culture, and learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(4), 449-475.

National Center for Educational Statistics. Accessed on September 20, 2019:

<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=805>

National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015). Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015. Reston, VA: Author.

Ngounou, G., & Gutierrez, N. (2017). Learning to lead for racial equity. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 99(3), 37–41.

Nieto, S., & Turner, K. C. N. (2012). Learning local and global literacies from students and



- families (conversation currents). *Language Arts*, 90(1), 66-69.
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teacher College Press.
- Pappas, J., Jerman, J., Imel, S., & Ross-Gordon, J. (2015). *Transforming adults through coaching*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93-97.
- Paris, D. & H. S. Alim (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review* 84(1): 85-100.
- Patrick, R. (2008). Perspectives on change: A continued struggle for academic success and cultural relevancy at an American Indian school in the midst of no child left behind. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 47(1), 65–81.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods, Third edition*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Picower, B. (2009). The unexamined Whiteness of teaching: How White teachers maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 12(2), 197-215.
- Picower, B., & Carothers, S. (2007). The unexamined Whiteness of teaching: Will the cycle be unbroken? *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304829346/>
- Quijada Cerecer, P. (2013). The Policing of Native Bodies and Minds: Perspectives on Schooling from American Indian Youth. *American Journal of Education*, 119(4), 591–616.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/670967>
- Roegman, R., Allen, D., Leverett, L., Thompson, S. & Hatch T. (2019). *Equity visits: A new approach to supporting equity-focused school and district leadership*. Thousand Oaks,

CA: SAGE Publications.

- Rubin, B. (2007). Learner identity amid figured worlds: Constructing (in)competence at an urban high school. *The Urban Review*, 39(2), 217–249. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-007-0044-z>
- Rubin, B., & Hayes, B. (2010). “No backpacks” versus “drugs and murder”: The promise and complexity of youth civic action research. (Report). *Harvard Educational Review*, 80(3).
- Sandlin, J. A., Wright, R. R., & Clark, C. (2011). Reexamining theories of adult learning and adult development through the lenses of public pedagogy. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 63(1), 3–23.
- Silberman, M. & Auerbach, C. (2006). *Active training: A handbook of techniques, designs, case examples, and tips* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition). San Francisco: Pfeiffer.
- Sleeter, C. (2012). Confronting the marginalization of culturally responsive pedagogy. *Urban Education*, 47(3), 562–584.
- Spring, J. (2001). *Deculturalization and the struggle for equality: A brief history of the education of dominated cultures in the United States* (3rd ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Swanson, J., & Welton, A. (2019). When good intentions only go so far: White principals leading discussions about race. *Urban Education*, 54(5), 732–759.
- Theoharis, G. (2007). Navigating rough waters: A synthesis of the countervailing pressures against leading for social justice. *Journal of School Leadership*, 17, 4–27.
- Theoharis, G., & Causton-Theoharis, J. N. (2008). Oppressors or emancipators: Critical dispositions for preparing inclusive school leaders. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 41, 230–246.
- Tinkler, B., & Tinkler, A. (2013). Experiencing the other: The impact of service-learning on

- preservice teachers' perceptions of diversity. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 40(4), 41-62.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2019, March 5). *Educational attainment of women by race*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Warren, C. A. (2015). Conflicts and contradictions: Conceptions of empathy and the work of good-intentioned early career White female teachers. *Urban Education*, 50(5), 572– 600.
- Wiggin, G. (2008). From opposition to engagement: Lessons from high achieving African American students. *The Urban Review*, 40(4), 317–349. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-007-0067-5>
- Will, M. (2020, October 20). Most educators require kids to turn cameras on in virtual class, despite equity concerns. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/most-educators-require-kids-to-turn-cameras-on-in-virtual-class-despite-equity-concerns/2020/10>
- Wright, E. (2015). *Equity conscious instruction in problem-based multilingual science classrooms* (Order No. 3725154). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1732375787).
- Young, E. (2010). Challenges to conceptualizing and actualizing culturally relevant pedagogy: How viable is the theory in classroom practice? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(3), 248.
- Zoch, M. (2017). “It’s important for them to know who they are”: Teachers’ efforts to sustain students’ cultural competence in an age of high-stakes testing. *Urban Education*, 52(5), 610–63.

**Appendix A: Case Study Code Book**

Codes	Quotes	Description
CSP/Equity Understanding	122	Participant establishes the importance of altering or supplementing curricula to make it culturally relevant or reflective of critical social discourse, or understands the nature of various inequities for marginalized students.
Need for CSP/Equity Training	95	Participant either advocates for more equity training or shares an idea/issue that can be addressed via sustained, consistent equity training.
Racial/Cultural Bias	70	When participants make statements about racial or cultural bias.
Risk/Discomfort (In Vivo)	68	Discussion about potential costs of confronting racism or inequity facing marginalized populations, or how such discussion can make people feel "uncomfortable"
Communal Dimension	62	when equity-focused leaders emphasize inclusion, learning about communities and cultural groups serviced by the school, as well as democratic principles that ought to govern communities. Opportunities for communal forums and dialogues provided by the equity-focused leader are examples of capacities for action in this dimension.
Systemic Dimension	55	characterized by a leader's evaluating and taking actions to change the learning system, at the school and district levels, as much as the leader can so that equity can be achieved; critical consciousness surrounding the ,Ástructures, policies, and practices for injustices and barriers to learning; critical evaluaion of the curriculum and classroom teaching practices; leader would develop skills in engaging in curriculum audits to incorporate texts and learning activities that are relevant to and

Codes	Quotes	Description
		sustain multiple cultures, especially by cultures represented in the school's population
District's Support for Equity	52	A recurring question that became a theme concerned the district's commitment to equity-based beliefs and practices. By and large, despite some evidence that contradicts this, participants did not believe the district leaders were supportive of equity-based initiatives or change.
CSP/Equity Ambiguity	48	An expression about CSP that doesn't align clearly with the purposes or intentions of CSP
Efficacy of CSP	46	Statements about or actions taken that indicate a belief in the value of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy.
COVID/Pandemic (In Vivo)	46	statements about or actions taken in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced school closures nationally in the Spring of 2020 and lasted well into 2021.
Admiration of Dr. Smith's Praxis	42	Statements from participants praising Dr. Smith's equity work.
Cultural Competency Committee (In Vivo)	40	Several members who volunteered to participate were also members of the CCC, a newly formed PLC that led staff in an equity training prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic
CSP Curricula / Resources	40	Any discussion from a participant about curriculum-related topics for CSP
Honors Program / Disproportionality	40	Honors, Enrichment, Disproportionality, Placement
Asset-Based Pedagogy	36	beliefs and practices that acknowledge students' and families' cultural assets as important to a student's learning context.
Demonstrating Care, Love, Support	34	Statements about or actions taken that indicate care, love, or support on behalf of a participant towards a colleague, student, or family. --

Codes	Quotes	Description
		feelings of belonging and staff members' expressions of belonging towards marginalized groups are critical components of CSP.
Ecological Dimension	33	would develop thinking and actions that are aware of „Äschool-related social justice issues,Ä”situated within broader sociopolitical, economic, and environmental contexts,Ä” (Furman, 2012, p. 211); Capacity for action in this dimension ought to include curriculum development that helps students engage in learning
Student Achievement Outcomes	31	Participant expresses an idea about student achievement outcomes.
Identity/Positionality	31	Participants identified themselves in relation to the study.
Criticism of Dr. Smith's Praxis	23	Statements that were critical of Dr. Smith's praxis (his thoughts and actions)
George Floyd (In Vivo)	14	Participants in the study reflected on their own, the district's, and the school's actions in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder.
Transparency (In Vivo)	13	Statements related to Dr. Smith's belief in the value of transparency, or his willingness to speak honestly and transparently about various issues and topics.
Personal Dimension	11	leader engages in honest self-reflection about their own values and biases related to race, class, etc., and think critically about how these values can impact their thinking and decision-making processes. by offering these personal, structured activities in meaningful and careful ways so that they are understood and received well by adult learners.
Color Blind / Deficit Based Pedagogy	9	Participant either espouses a "color blind" racist idea or points out such an idea that was observed.

Codes	Quotes	Description
Classroom Management/Discipline	7	Participant comments on classroom management or disciplinary practices.
Interpersonal Dimension	5	In this dimension, the equity-focused leader concentrates on relationship-building not only with teachers, but all stakeholders in the school community. To engage in praxis in the interpersonal dimension requires an equity-focused leader's critical understanding about his own communication style and behaviors, and how these might serve to marginalize others.
<b>Total Number of Codes</b>	<b>1073</b>	
<b>Total Number of Initial Themes</b>	<b>25</b>	

**Appendix B: Final Themes**

<b>Case Study Themes</b>
Positionality -- It's impact on equity-focused leader's effectiveness as well as on perceptions of participants
Risk and Discomfort -- Perceived risk but REAL discomfort
Transparency -- Modeling Expectations equity-focused leader has for staff
Communities -- As a model for adult learning through trust and in engaging families



**Appendix C: Informed Consent Form****CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Equity-Focused Praxis: A Case Study

**Principal Investigator:** Daniel Loughran, Doctoral Candidate

This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. It is your choice to take part or not. After all of your questions have been answered and you wish to take part in the research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. You will be given a copy of the signed form to keep. Your alternative to taking part in the research is not to take part in it.

**Who is conducting this research study and what is it about?**

You are being asked to take part in research being conducted by Daniel Loughran, a doctoral candidate in the Education, Culture, and Society program of the Graduate School of Education. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the ways in which school leaders help create and support equitable learning contexts for students that have historically been underserved in American Public School, K-12 settings.

**What will I be asked to do if I take part?**

The interview will take about 45 minutes to one hour to complete it. We anticipate up to six subjects will take part in the study. These confidential interviews will take place via a password-protected Zoom video call between only the interviewee and the Primary Investigator, Daniel Loughran, and it will be recorded for accuracy. As detailed below, these recordings will not be shared with anyone, and the recording and all notes taken during the interview will be destroyed upon the conclusion of the study.

**What are the risks and/or discomforts I might experience if I take part in the study?**

Risks and discomforts for the study are minimal. One potential risk of harm is breach of confidentiality, but a data security plan is in place to minimize such a risk. Also, some questions may make you feel uncomfortable. If that happens, you can skip those questions or withdraw from the study altogether. If you decide to quit the interview your responses will NOT be saved.

**Are there any benefits to me if I choose to take part in this study?**

There are no direct benefits to you for taking part in this research. However, should you choose to participate, you will be contributing to knowledge about how school leaders work with adult learners to create equitable learning contexts and outcomes. It is my hope that this study will enable public school districts to identify a set of skills that school leaders need to master in order to lead adult learning about equity topics that impact student learning.

**Will I be paid to take part in this study?**

Yes. As a token of appreciation, for each completed interview (there will be two and possibly three) you will receive the choice of a \$10 gift card to either Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks, delivered electronically at the conclusion of the interview.

### Appendix C: Informed Consent Form (Continued)

#### How will information about me be kept private or confidential?

All efforts will be made to keep your responses confidential, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. We will not collect any information that can identify you or other subjects. Interview notes will be stored in a locked cabinet controlled by the investigator, Daniel Loughran. Responses may be converted to digital format and stored on a password-protected computer that can only be accessed by Daniel Loughran. Paper copies will then be destroyed. Daniel Loughran plans to delete the data upon the completion of the study, which should occur no later than May 2021. No information that can identify you will appear in any professional presentation or publication, and none of your information will be shared with other subjects participating in the study.

#### What will happen to information I provide in the research after the study is over?

The information collected about you for this research will not be used by or distributed to investigators for other research.

#### What will happen if I do not want to take part or decide later not to stay in the study?

Your participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part now, you may change your mind and withdraw later. In addition, you can choose to skip interview questions that you are not comfortable answering or stop the interview at any time. You may also withdraw your consent for use of responses you provided during the interview, but you must do this in writing to the Primary Investigator, Daniel Loughran.

#### Who can I call if I have questions?

If you have questions about taking part in this study, you can contact the Principal Investigator: Daniel Loughran, Education, Culture, and Society Student – [dcl113@scarletmail.rutgers.edu](mailto:dcl113@scarletmail.rutgers.edu). You can also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Cheryl McLean: [cheryl.mclean@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:cheryl.mclean@gse.rutgers.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you can contact the IRB Director at: Arts and Sciences IRB (732) 235-2866.

Please keep this consent form if you would like a copy of it for your files.

### AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

#### 1. Subject consent:

I have read this entire consent form, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed. All of my questions about this form and this study have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Subject Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

#### 2. Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed all the important details about the study including all of the information contained in this consent form.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C: Informed Consent Form (Continued)****ADDENDUM: CONSENT TO AUDIO-/VISUALLY  
RECORD OR PHOTOGRAPH SUBJECTS**

You have already agreed to take part in a research study entitled: Equity-Focused Praxis: A Case Study, conducted by Daniel Loughran. We are asking your consent to allow us to videotape you as part of the research. You do not have to consent to be recorded in order to take part in the main research.

The video recordings will be used to allow for more accurate analysis by the Primary Investigator, Daniel Loughran.

The recordings may include the following information that can identify you: voice, appearance. This is why recordings will only be made and secured by the Primary Investigator and identifying information will not be shared with others when analyzing data.

The recordings will be stored in a password protected computer drive that can only be accessed by the primary investigator and will be and will be destroyed upon publication of study results, by May 2021.

The video recordings will not be used by us or distributed to investigators for other research

Your signature on this form permits the investigator named above to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written consent.

**AGREEMENT TO BE RECORDED**

Subject Name (Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent Name (Printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D: Interview Protocol (Leader – Pre Observation)**

Daniel Loughran

Interview Protocol: School Leader (Pre-Observation Interview)

**Equity-Focused Praxis: A Case Study**

Opening Statement: Thank you for agreeing to this interview today. Your work as a school administrator entails creating conditions that support equitable access to high quality curriculum and instruction for all of your students. Because you do this sort of work, your responses to my questions can help me better understand the ways in which school administrators create and support culturally sustaining pedagogy or CSP. The purpose of this case study is to describe how an “equity-focused” school leader enacts a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally sustaining practices among her faculty. By studying a school leader’s reflexive thinking and actions centered on equity – her *praxis* – new understandings can be learned for school districts that wish to promote equitable practices, especially through CSP. These new understandings will enable school districts to recruit leaders who possess these skills and dispositions and/or to identify appropriate professional development for school leaders to strengthen their equity-focused praxis in various contexts. If you are not familiar with the term CSP, it is essentially an approach to classroom instruction that “...seeks to integrate learners into a classroom environment that leverages knowledge of multiple cultures, learning styles, and languages, as adopting such a stance can help any student – including culturally dominant students – more effectively engage in 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning processes (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

I will ask you about a dozen questions related to your work and your beliefs about your work. If it is okay with you, I’d like to record our conversation so that I can accurately review my handwritten notes afterward. Will that be okay?

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

1. District leaders such as yourself are expected to address the learning needs of all students equitably. What is your approach to meeting the learning needs of your students?
2. Can you recall a time in which any member of your school community – a parent, a school board member, another administrator, a teacher – let you know about their dissatisfaction with student achievement outcomes? Like someone looked at test scores and thought, “That’s so disappointing.” Have you ever had that kind of conversation?

**Appendix D: Interview Protocol (Leader – Pre Observation, Continued)**

3. Tell me your story about one of the first times you asked teachers to think about issues of equity you were noticing? What was the setting, who were the characters, and how did your story conclude?
4. Could you also tell me about a conversation you've had with another administrator or even a school board member about your concerns regarding equitable student learning outcomes?
5. Can you tell me how curriculum is monitored, revised and created in your schools, and what does culture, socioeconomic status, English proficiency status, ethnicity, race, gender expression or heteronormativity play in curriculum revision at your schools?
6. Have you asked questions of your staff about patterns or "gaps" you may have noticed in your student achievement data among racial/ethnic/socioeconomic groups?
7. What might I expect to hear your teachers say in response to the questions/learning activities you've prepared for them? Are they generally supportive of your equity-focused work?
8. How would you describe yourself in relation to questions of equity, such as your ethnicity, cultural background, family history or anything else you might deem relevant to your position as a school leader?
9. How would you describe the ethnographic composition of students in your school?
10. How would you describe the ethnographic compositions of teachers in your department or school?
11. What else should I know about your leadership with culturally sustaining pedagogy?
12. When I observe you interact with your teachers, what might I expect to see you emphasize in your attempt to bring consciousness to your staff about equitable outcomes for all students in your school?
13. Beyond your direct interactions with teachers, in what ways might I see you reinforce the same messages you give them, but with your colleagues, the school community at large, and with entities beyond the school community that can impact or even threaten your work?
14. What are the most significant actions you have taken to support equity-consciousness or culturally responsive learning experiences for your district's students?



IRB ID:  
Approval Date:  
Expiration Date:

Pro2019003015 7/14/2020

12/31/69

**Appendix E: Interview Protocol (Leader – Post-Observation)**

Daniel Loughran

Interview Protocol: School Leader (Post-Observation Interview)

**Equity-Focused Praxis: A Case Study**

Opening Statement: Thank you for agreeing to this follow-up interview today. Your work as a school administrator entails creating conditions that support equitable access to high quality curriculum and instruction for all of your students. Because you do this sort of work, your responses to my questions can help me better understand the ways in which school administrators create and support culturally sustaining pedagogy or CSP. The purpose of this case study is to describe how an “equity-focused” school leader enacts a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally sustaining practices among her faculty. By studying a school leader’s reflexive thinking and actions centered on equity – her *praxis* – new understandings can be learned for school districts that wish to promote equitable practices, especially through CSP. These new understandings will enable school districts to recruit leaders who possess these skills and dispositions and/or to identify appropriate professional development for school leaders to strengthen their equity-focused praxis in various contexts. If you are not familiar with the term CSP, it is essentially an approach to classroom instruction that “...seeks to integrate learners into a classroom environment that leverages knowledge of multiple cultures, learning styles, and languages, as adopting such a stance can help any student – including culturally dominant students – more effectively engage in 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning processes (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

I will ask you about a dozen questions related to your work and your beliefs about your work. If it is okay with you, I’d like to record our conversation so that I can accurately review my handwritten notes afterward. Will that be okay?

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

1. Tell me how you thought the recent meeting (or training) went?
2. Do you feel the meeting (or training) allowed you to address inequitable outcomes for students? In what ways?
3. In what ways did your meeting (or training) allow you to address the role of curriculum in your teachers’ work in bringing about CSP?
4. Do you believe your teachers share your understanding about CSP and what they can do to optimize learning conditions for all students in the classroom?
5. How might your teachers approach student learning differently, given your work with them today in light of learning patterns or “gaps” you may have noticed in your student achievement data among racial/ethnic/socioeconomic groups?

**Appendix E: Interview Protocol (Leader – Post-Observation, Continued)**

6. What might I expect to hear your teachers say in response to the session I observed?
7. How actively do you believe your teachers will confront inequity and possibly influence their colleagues to be more conscious of cultural difference and possibly act on that knowledge in a positive way?
8. What other take-aways ought I notice about the work that took place in the meeting? In other words, what understandings do you think came about as a result of the session?
9. What work still remains for you and your teachers regarding equity and CSP?
10. Do you believe your teachers will adopt CSP practices easily and quickly, or do you think the work will be slow and challenging?
11. Do you believe CSP will make a meaningful difference in your students' lives?
12. In addition to the work I observed, what other work has occurred beyond this meeting (or training), perhaps with the larger school community, board of education, or with people or entities beyond the school district that can impact positively or even threaten the positive work in which you are engaged?
13. Is there anything else you'd like me to know about your school or district's effort moving forward?



IRB ID:  
Approval Date:  
Expiration Date:

Pro2019003015 7/14/2020

12/31/69

**Appendix F: Interview Protocol (Teacher – Pre-Observation)**

Daniel Loughran

Interview Protocol: Teacher Participant (Pre-Observation Interview)

**Equity-Focused Praxis: A Case Study**

Opening Statement: Thank you for agreeing to this interview today. Your work as a public school teacher entails creating conditions that support equitable access to high quality curriculum and instruction for all of your students. Because you do this sort of work, your responses to my questions can help me better understand the ways in which school administrators create and support culturally sustaining pedagogy or CSP. The purpose of this case study is to describe how an “equity-focused” school leader enacts a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally sustaining practices among her faculty. By studying a school leader’s reflexive thinking and actions centered on equity – her *praxis* – new understandings can be learned for school districts that wish to promote equitable practices, especially through CSP. These new understandings will enable school districts to recruit leaders who possess these skills and dispositions and/or to identify appropriate professional development for school leaders to strengthen their equity-focused praxis in various contexts. If you are not familiar with the term CSP, it is essentially an approach to classroom instruction that “...seeks to integrate learners into a classroom environment that leverages knowledge of multiple cultures, learning styles, and languages, as adopting such a stance can help any student – including culturally dominant students – more effectively engage in 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning processes (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

I will ask you about a dozen questions related to your work and your beliefs about your work. If it is okay with you, I’d like to record our conversation so that I can accurately review my handwritten notes afterward. Will that be okay?

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

1. Teachers such as yourself are expected to address the learning needs of all students equitably. What is your approach to meeting the learning needs of your students?
2. Can you recall a time in which any member of your school community – a parent, a school board member, an administrator, a teacher – let you know about their
3. dissatisfaction with student achievement outcomes? Like someone looked at test scores and thought, “That’s so disappointing.” Have you ever had that kind of conversation?



**Appendix F: Interview Protocol (Teacher – Pre-Observation, Continued)**

4. Tell me your story about one of the first times you were asked to think about issues of equity in your school? What was the setting, who were the characters, and how did your story conclude?
5. Could you also tell me about a conversation you've had with teacher or school administrator about your concerns regarding equitable student learning outcomes?
6. Can you tell me how curriculum is monitored, revised and created in your school, and what does culture or socioeconomic status or ethnicity or race or gender expression or heteronormativity play in curriculum revision at your school?
7. Have you ever been asked to consider patterns or "gaps" in your school's student achievement data among racial/ethnic/socioeconomic groups?
8. What do you expect to happen in the upcoming meeting (or training)?
9. How would you describe yourself in relation to questions of equity, such as your ethnicity or cultural background or family history or anything else you might deem relevant to your position as a public school?
10. How would you describe the ethnographic composition of students in your school?
11. How would you describe the ethnographic compositions of teachers in your department or school?
12. What should I know about your belief in the efficacy of culturally sustaining pedagogy?
13. When I observe you interact with your colleagues and your school leader, what might I expect to see your leader emphasize in an attempt to bring consciousness to your colleagues regarding equitable outcomes for all students in your school?
14. Beyond your leader's direct interactions with teachers in this meeting (or training), in what ways might I see your school leader reinforce the same messages with your colleagues, the school community at large, and with entities beyond the school community that can impact or even threaten such work?
15. What are the most significant actions your school leader has taken to support equity-consciousness or culturally responsive learning experiences for your district's students?



IRB ID:  
Approval Date:  
Expiration Date:

Pro2019003015 7/14/2020

12/31/69

**Appendix G: Interview Protocol (Teacher – Post-Observation)**

Daniel Loughran

Interview Protocol: Teacher Participant (Post-Observation Interview)

**Equity-Focused Praxis: A Case Study**

Opening Statement: Thank you for agreeing to this follow-up interview today. Your work as a public school teacher entails creating conditions that support equitable access to high quality curriculum and instruction for all of your students. Because you do this sort of work, your responses to my questions can help me better understand the ways in which school administrators create and support culturally sustaining pedagogy or CSP. The purpose of this case study is to describe how an “equity-focused” school leader enacts a shared understanding of equity consciousness and culturally sustaining practices among her faculty. By studying a school leader’s reflexive thinking and actions centered on equity – her *praxis* – new understandings can be learned for school districts that wish to promote equitable practices, especially through CSP. These new understandings will enable school districts to recruit leaders who possess these skills and dispositions and/or to identify appropriate professional development for school leaders to strengthen their equity-focused praxis in various contexts. If you are not familiar with the term CSP, it is essentially an approach to classroom instruction that “...seeks to integrate learners into a classroom environment that leverages knowledge of multiple cultures, learning styles, and languages, as adopting such a stance can help any student – including culturally dominant students – more effectively engage in 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning processes (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

I will ask you about a dozen questions related to your work and your beliefs about your work. If it is okay with you, I’d like to record our conversation so that I can accurately review my handwritten notes afterward. Will that be okay?

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

1. Do you feel the meeting (or training) allowed your school leader or your colleagues to address inequitable outcomes for students? In what ways?
2. In what ways did your meeting (or training) allow you to address the role of curriculum in bringing about CSP?
3. Do you believe your colleagues share your understanding about CSP and what they can do to optimize learning conditions for all students in the classroom?
4. How might your colleagues approach student learning differently, given your work with them today in light of learning patterns or “gaps” you may have noticed in your student achievement data among racial/ethnic/socioeconomic groups?
5. What might I expect to hear your colleagues say in response to the session I observed?

**Appendix G: Interview Protocol (Teacher – Post-Observation, Continued)**

6. How actively do you believe your colleagues will confront inequity and possibly influence their colleagues to be more conscious of cultural difference and possibly act on that knowledge in a positive way?
7. What other take-aways ought I to have noticed about the work that took place in the meeting (or training)? In other words, what understandings do you think came about as a result of the session?
8. What was the most important concept your school leader (or the trainer) emphasized in an attempt to bring consciousness to your colleagues regarding equitable outcomes for all students in your school?
9. Beyond your leader's (or the trainer's) direct interactions with teachers in this meeting (or training), in what ways might I see your school leader reinforce the same messages with your colleagues, the school community at large, and with entities beyond the school community that can impact or even threaten such work?
10. What are the most significant actions your school leader has taken to support equity-consciousness or culturally responsive learning experiences for your district's students?
11. Do you believe your colleagues will adopt CSP practices easily and quickly, or do you think the work will be slow and challenging?
12. What work still remains for you and your colleagues regarding equity and CSP?
13. Is there anything else you'd like me to know about your school's effort moving forward?



IRB ID:  
Approval Date:  
Expiration Date:

Pro2019003015 7/14/2020

12/31/69

## Appendix H: Study Recruitment Questionnaire



**To:** Rutgers eIRB  
**From:** Daniel C. Loughran  
**Re:** Questionnaire  
**Date:** June 22, 2020

Thank you for taking a few minutes to share your thoughts about equity-focused leadership. This questionnaire can be taken anonymously, but if you wish to share your name at the end, there is an option to do so.

1. Which term best describes your current school district's student population:
  1. Diverse
  2. Somewhat diverse
  3. Not very diverse
  4. Homogenized
2. Which role best describes your work in a K-12 public school district:
  1. Central office administrator or superintendent
  2. District supervisor, director, or other leader
  3. School-based leader (principal, vice-principal, etc.)
  4. Teacher (including dean, speech therapist, etc.)
  5. Counselor or SAC
  6. Other (please briefly describe here...)
3. Given your understanding about how students – especially students of color or emergent bilinguals – learn, to what extent is culturally responsive instruction important to diverse student populations:
  1. Extremely important
  2. Fairly important
  3. Not too important
  4. Not sure
4. Given your understanding about how adults learn, especially teachers who may have had limited experience learning about culturally responsive instruction, to what extent can a school leader help adult learners embrace culturally responsive instruction:
  1. School leaders can do a lot to help teachers embrace culturally responsive practices.
  2. School leaders can make a small difference in whether teachers embrace culturally responsive practices.
  3. School leaders can do very little or nothing to help teachers embrace culturally responsive practices.
  4. Not sure.

**Appendix H: Study Recruitment Questionnaire, Continued**

5. Do you consider yourself a school leader or teacher who embraces or fosters culturally responsive instructional practices?
  1. Yes – I try to remain conscious of this approach and its value to students in my class/school/district.
  2. Yes, but I often fall short of my own expectations and want to learn how to approach this work more consistently.
  3. No, I question the value of a culturally responsive approach and wonder about whether this approach is good for students.
  4. Not sure
6. Besides yourself, do you know a school leader in your district or another district who embraces or fosters culturally responsive instructional practices?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
7. Would you be willing to participate in a study about how school leaders foster equity- focused practices?
  1. Yes – My name is \_\_\_\_\_; please contact me at the following email address or phone number:  
\_\_\_\_\_
  2. Not sure – My name is \_\_\_\_\_; please contact me at the following email address or phone number so that I can learn more:  
\_\_\_\_\_
  3. I'm sorry, but I am not willing at this time to participate in the study.

Thank you for answering these questions. Your input will contribute to new knowledges about how school leaders successfully pursue practices that can bring about equitable learning experiences and outcomes for historically underserved student populations.

If you know of another school leader or teacher whose ideas about school leadership and culturally responsive instruction might be helpful to this study, please forward the email you received that includes a link to this questionnaire. Thanks again!



IRB ID:  
Approval Date:  
Expiration Date:

Pro2019003015 7/14/2020

12/31/69

ProQuest Number: 28411699

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality and completeness of this reproduction is dependent on the quality and completeness of the copy made available to ProQuest.



Distributed by ProQuest LLC (2021).

Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author unless otherwise noted.

This work may be used in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons license or other rights statement, as indicated in the copyright statement or in the metadata associated with this work. Unless otherwise specified in the copyright statement or the metadata, all rights are reserved by the copyright holder.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17,  
United States Code and other applicable copyright laws.

Microform Edition where available © ProQuest LLC. No reproduction or digitization of the Microform Edition is authorized without permission of ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346 USA