Equity And A Quality Education: Perceptions Of Suburban And Urban High School Graduates

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Abstract

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This phenomenological study utilized grounded theory analysis through a critical lens and within a qualitative paradigm to research how students define the quality of their education and its connections to equity. The study focused on a small sample of students, all of whom graduated from one suburban and one urban high school in a Midwestern, metropolitan area. Focus groups, elite interviews, and document analysis were all used to collect data.

The theoretical concepts that emerged from the data illustrated the negative impact of white supremacy with regard to the achievement of an equitable, quality education by all students. The data also indicate structures supporting educational justice, such as access to caring and qualified teachers, can interrupt white supremacy to create an inclusive environment where all students can access an equitable and quality education.
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Chapter 1

“It is our continuing comfort with profound inequality that is the Achilles heel of American education” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 8). As I read these words, I was transported back to a sunny summer afternoon on the University of Minnesota campus. That day, in June, 2000, I was reading Savage Inequalities by Jonathan Kozol (1991) for a class in my Master’s degree program. My blood boiled as I read a similar sentiment: “What they prescribe, is something that resembles equity but never reaches it: something close enough to equity to silence criticism by approximating justice, but far enough from equity to guarantee the benefits enjoyed by privilege” (Kozol, 1991, p. 175). In both instances, my passion for equity was ignited as I thought of students across our country who experience such vastly different versions of education. Indeed, my own educational experiences, from the time I entered Kindergarten until I arrived at the University of Minnesota, provide a personal example of Kozol’s (1991) claim.

I grew up in rural South Dakota on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, and spent my K-8 years attending a three-room school house. Long Valley Elementary was a public school, running under the auspices of the Jackson County School District, and educating 42 students the year I finished 8th grade. When I was in 6th grade, my mother began work as a high school English teacher at Crazy Horse School, a K-12 school operated by contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, located about six miles from our home. Although children of teachers could attend Crazy Horse, regardless of Native ancestry, there was never a discussion of myself or my sisters transferring to the school. Though not said in so many words, it was clear to me that my parents felt the education at Crazy Horse was of lesser quality than what we could receive at our public school.
I followed my K-8 experience by enrolling at Bennett County High School, a public school located approximately one hour from Pine Ridge, South Dakota, in one of the poorest regions of the United States. My family did not have much, as my parents struggled to keep our family ranch afloat while raising four daughters. As a result, it did not occur to me to be bothered by a lack of options in my school, whether regarding choice of world language or sports teams. I remember thinking that my mother’s students at Crazy Horse were very lucky, as their school had a swimming pool.

Following high school, I spent five years in Aberdeen, South Dakota, attending Northern State University (NSU) on a full-academic scholarship. Aberdeen was decidedly more White than the areas I had lived in for the first 17 years of my life, and I remember immediately noticing that difference. That was not the only difference I observed, as most students had cars (unlike me) and ample money to spend on various social outings. When I spent a week at Aberdeen Central High School for my first educational field experience, I also noted the difference between the facilities there and those of the high school from which I had graduated. In all instances, my educational experiences were significantly less advantaged.

I spent the first three years of my teaching career working at Wagner Community School, located on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in Wagner, South Dakota. The students and families I encountered there were very similar to the people with whom I had shared my childhood. While equity issues have always been at the forefront of my experience and thoughts since recognizing the discrepancy between student experiences, it wasn’t until my day in June reading Kozol that I realized how perfect my first teaching experience was for me.
My exposure to Kozol was facilitated via a class on 20th century education, which I took as an elective while obtaining my Master’s degree at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. On my first day on campus, as I walked from building to building attempting to take care of various enrollment requirements, I realized how far away from that three-room school house I had come. I was awed by how big the world truly was, how much more I still had to discover.

Following my exposure to Kozol, I spent 14 years teaching in a suburban school district that contrasts sharply with my recent work as an assistant principal at an urban high school. These differing landscapes also confirm Kozol’s reality. Combined with my own educational experiences, my work as an educator provides deep personal awareness of the sweeping range of educational opportunities offered to students throughout our nation.

Through my research and discussion with students and educational leaders, I aspire to illuminate these differences with personal stories. As an educational leader, I know that we cannot rely only on the perspectives of educational professionals, for we are limited in our scope. We need to engage the student voice, both for the humanity it brings to the narrative, as well as to ensure our understanding reflects the way education has changed since our own K-12 experience. I believe such testimony must continue until a majority of those with privilege are willing to acknowledge the inequities upon which our country, and our educational systems, were built. Only then can we truly engage in efforts to reform the institution of education itself. My primary research question is Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity? The secondary
question I address is: *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?*

As I finish my 20th year in education, I continue to experience great fulfillment as an educator. What started as a desire to provide music education to every student has evolved into a passion for ensuring all children have access to educational experiences that provide the skills needed to both produce personal happiness and challenge the status quo. Having spent the last several years working on my Ed.D. and reflecting on the history of education in the United States, I know we are not meeting that goal. Such a perspective is relatively new for me, as I am also very aware of the multitude of skills the students of today possess that I never dreamed of when I was in their shoes. In essence, my learning as a doctoral student and an urban educator illuminated a different problem with our educational system, one that is far more significant than a simple focus on the “achievement gap.” In reality, we are continuing to sharpen the same saw, as students who enter school ahead of those who come from less advantaged backgrounds continue to maintain their advantage, and then increase it significantly throughout a 13-year span of education. At the same time, the same groups of children consistently perform at lower levels, on average, than those we hold up as the standard.

While there are many factors contributing to the current state of education, I believe an enormous part of our failure as a system can be traced to the lack of student voice in the numerous forces shaping our work. My research incorporates three perspectives to gain clarity on differential understandings of equity across environments and roles: first, student perspectives of equity and quality education; second,
administrator perspectives on equity and funding between urban and suburban settings; and third, the alignment of school leadership’s vision with student desires.

**Background of Problem**

The debate about what constitutes a quality education is not a new concept. Many educational theorists write passionately about what American education *purports* to provide for its students. An emphasis on contribution to our society and an improved quality of life resides at the forefront of the discussion (Braslavsky, 2001; Ravitch, 2010; & Scherer, 1996). As students proceed through their educational experience, many educators and researchers support a curriculum that emphasizes deep thinking and construction of knowledge (Fullan, 2003 & *Lessons of a Century*, 2000). In a nod to our country’s diverse population, the value of an interdependent society (*Lessons of a Century*, 2000) and opportunity to elevate one’s social status cannot be forgotten (Howard, 2010 & Rury, 2013).

In addition to the many researchers who write in more general terms regarding markers of a quality education, many others describe quality education via specific lenses, including those of 21st century education, culturally responsive education, critical/transformative education, and democratic education. Donovan, Green and Mason (2014), Riordan (2005), and Trybus (2013) highlight the ability to problem solve, both independently and collaboratively, as a necessary 21st century skill. In addition, 21st century problem solvers must do so using creativity (Posner, 2002) and innovative application of technology (Donovan et. al, 2014).

Tyrone C. Howard, a strong proponent of culturally responsive education, places high value on incorporation of multiple perspectives and a commitment to equity (2010).
Additionally, the utmost commitment to the success of every child marks Howard’s (2010) definition of a quality education via culturally responsive pedagogy.

Advocates for critical or transformative education certainly desire culturally responsive pedagogy, but strongly believe the inequities of our society must be confronted head-on, while teaching students to work against such social injustice (Leonardo, 2004). Critical theorists point to the writings of John Dewey and Paulo Freire as their inspiration, as they push students and teachers to challenge the status quo and imagine a very different educational experience (Leonardo, 2004).

Finally, supporters of a democratic education model push back on the critical ideology, supporting a complete approach which ensures youth are aware of the inequities in our world, prepared to confront them, and still able to function within the current reality (Knight & Pearl, 2000). Above all, democratic educators seek to create healthy humans through a holistic approach, centered on the creation of knowledge and responsibility within our society (Knight & Pearl, 2000).

**Inequitable education.** The concept of inequity within our society as a whole, as well as across our educational system, has also been the focus of significant research. Ever since the 1960s, when our nation “‘discovered’ poverty” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 285), the United States has turned to the schools as a way to equalize access to American freedoms. However, even the Civil Rights movement, punctuated by the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, failed to produce truly desegregated schools (*Lessons of a Century*, 2000). Regardless of whether an individual school houses a diverse population, we continue to see gaps between the achievement of children who identify as White as compared to those who identify as Black and Brown, which critics have used as evidence
of school failure for more than 20 years (Howard, 2010). Ravitch (2010) points out the disparity between students who are challenged by poverty versus those who are not, as well as the lack of accounting for this disparity in educational measures of achievement. Howard (2010) challenges the incompleteness and structural embeddedness of this criticism by arguing that how we define achievement is as much the issue as the inequity of resources our children access beyond the school’s doors. Indeed, cultural capital plays an important role in school success, and the lack of alignment between how our schools function and our diverse society must be acknowledged in any discussion of achievement (Rury, 2013). Unfortunately, members of dominant society frequently demonstrate a lack of concern about this misalignment because they lack a personal understanding of its impact (Lessons of a Century, 2000). Schools that continue to reflect the inequities of our society cannot truly demonstrate a commitment to equity until we see a change in allocation of resources, both inside schools and out (Lessons of a Century, 2000).

Ultimately, “social justice can only be achieved if the state makes more funds available for learners to access education and reduces or abolishes structural forms of oppression that restrict access to resources and opportunities” (Mestry, 2014, p. 863).

**School finance.** Research on school finance must also be addressed. The provision of a quality education comes down to simple economics; “inputs (factors of production) are related to outputs” (Mestry, 2014, p. 862). Since the 1800s, we have relied on property taxes as our inputs (Rury, 2013). Property values are directly tied to issues of social inequity, therefore, reliance on property taxes to fund education cannot resolve issues of inequity (DeBlois, 2008). As a result, “educational resources are unevenly distributed throughout the population...inner-city schools are generally
underfunded when compared to suburban schools” (Brown, 1997, p.212). Therefore, it is no surprise that achievement in schools can be directly correlated to the socioeconomic background of the school population (Rury, 2013). In schools where many students are living in poverty, standards of quality education are much less likely to receive attention because funds are spent on meeting basic needs (Clune, 1997). Darling-Hammond (2010) suggests the establishment of a dollar amount needed in each state to facilitate educational experiences aligned with state and national standards, with the addition of pupil weights to address differentiated needs of students based on socioeconomic status.

My study seeks to address three gaps in the current literature. First, student voice regarding the attributes of a quality education is visibly absent. Second, I hope to further illuminate the resource inequities between urban and suburban schools. And finally, I want to connect the intentions of school leaders with the impact on student educational experiences. I believe the debate about educational reform has been misguided for decades, markedly so after the publishing of *A Nation At Risk* (1983). As an educator, I feel a responsibility to shed light on the effect of three decades focused on standardized testing, accompanied by a complete failure to challenge or even acknowledge the social structures that maintain a social caste-system in the United States, as realized by our children.

**Purpose of the Study**

There is no doubt that we have a variety of gaps in the United States. Whether one wants to label the gap in education as an achievement gap or an opportunity gap, the ability to predict student achievement based on socioeconomic status and race is a problem that we must address. Although an incredible amount of time, money, and
energy have been poured into education reform, we have yet to identify an effective way to resolve the issue. In my research, I hope to provide deeper clarity about the issue of inequity of achievement and resource in education, via the engagement of graduates and educational leaders from an urban and a suburban high school. As I seek to uncover themes in the data I gather from participants, I will conduct a qualitative study, using focus groups, elite interviews, and document analysis as my data sources (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). While I hold many of my own ideas about why the opportunity gap exists in education, I will work to remain open to learn more about facets of a quality education and inequity of resources from the lived experience of my participants (Van Manen, 2014). Through my own experiences of attending a rural school, teaching in suburban schools, as well as working as both a teacher and an administrator in schools of high poverty, I recognize my questions are generated by my phenomenological lens (Van Manen, 2014). Following data collection, grounded theory will provide the framework for my analysis, allowing comparison of data from graduates with principal perspectives, as well as with the budgetary and demographic data from each of the schools, resulting in the identification of relationships and connections between emerging categories (Charmaz, 2014).

I hope to generate both new information and compelling connections through my research process. As such, I believe I am engaging in what Boyer (1990) defines as “scholarship of discovery” (p. 17). According to Boyer (1990), discovery is the most common type of research performed at academic institutions, typically resulting in an addition to the body of information available on the given topic. Given the phenomenological aspect of my research, I cannot guarantee that I will find anything
new. However, I believe the involvement of student voice and the connection of those perspectives to the intentions of school principals will provide a basis for continued study, while also prioritizing the voices of the marginalized in an academic paper. By challenging the dominance of elitist and formalized discourse, I hope the shape of educational reform might be impacted as well.

**Research Questions**

In pursuit of greater understanding of how students view the quality of their education in light of their own socioeconomic and racial status, I will pose the following questions:

1. Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?
2. Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?

**Conceptual Framework**

My interest in this topic arises from my belief that all children deserve a quality education. I have spent 20 years educating young people, years that have shaped my beliefs about learning and education. I look for joy and true engagement as markers of understanding that stick with children, indicators also common to culturally responsive teaching, an important component of a quality education (Howard, 2010). I believe a quality education broadens horizons, provokes thought, brings humans together and betters our world (Fullan, 2003; *Lessons of a Century*, 2000; Ravitch, 2010; Rury, 2013).
Many elements must be present in an educational environment for quality education to develop. Children need education to be relevant and personally engaging. The range of human experiences and interests dictates a need for educators to recognize the value of multiple perspectives and student-led learning (Block, 2009; Lessons of a Century, 2000). Within such a framework, I believe quality education provides exposure to fundamental content, while challenging students to think deeply about what they are learning. As Ravitch (2010) writes, “they go to school to learn to read, write, study great literature, do mathematics, understand science, learn about history and civics, acquire a second language, and engage in the arts, while learning to work together, play together, and think for themselves” (p. 245).

As a former choir teacher, I spent years fostering teamwork among my students, but it was reading Senge’s (2006) ideas about team learning that helped me crystallize my thinking regarding the importance of collaboration in a learning environment. Quality education fosters teamwork, resulting in participants who value collaboration with others. Such philosophy can be traced all the way back to John Dewey, who spoke of the need to ensure an educated citizenry, one possessing not only basic skills but also the ability to function as a true democracy, placing value on its ability to thrive as a united nation made up of individuals from all the corners of the world (Lessons of a Century, 2000). My work as a music educator centered on the value of interdependence, as we worked together daily, utilizing every voice to create something beautiful. Unfortunately, much of education does not function this way, as American education typically focuses on competition and individual achievement. I have also come to realize that not all educators view true collaboration as an essential part of learning. Authentic collaboration must
involve all parties; students must have influence over outcomes throughout the process. However, throughout educational settings, teachers are seen as the leader and students as the followers. When students choose not to follow, we fail to question ourselves regarding these roles, and instead focus on how we can get them to fall in line. I believe this is one of our shortfalls, and it is a significant reason I am interested in hearing from students regarding their beliefs regarding the characteristics of a quality education.

My time as a school administrator has provided me with a broader view of the educational landscape, both in terms of content and the inequities that exist between various schools and districts. This understanding has broadened my ideas about the type of change needed in education. Where I once focused on equity of access to music education, I now clearly see the need for equity in all areas of education. And I recognize the importance of engaging students in the crusade to effect such change. Thus, I believe another aspect present in quality education is the development of personal agency for all people. Such agency is indicative of an authentic learning organization, as described by Senge (2006). The concept of personal agency also draws upon Dewey’s thoughts about how we teach children to be active members of their schools and society (Leonardo, 2004). Ultimately, quality education challenges us all to look critically at the institution and our own beliefs about education. “Quality education encourages students to become aware of, if not actively work against, social injustice” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 13). The author continues, “Confronting social inequality also means that students must have access to discourses that pose critical questions about the new world order, a process assisted by theory-informed perspectives on students’ social experiences” (p. 13). Not only must we teach our children to question what is, but we also must help them to
envision what can be, “an alternative reality for education” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 15). As I seek to answer the question, How do high school graduates connect the quality of their education to issues of equity in an urban and suburban high school, I am eager to compare the responses of students from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds.

The wide range of access to resources in the United States, directly tied to issues of socioeconomic and racial inequality, has a significant impact on educational resources, specifically financial resources. Over the course of my career, I have observed that access to more financial resources more frequently facilitates a quality education, as defined above. Unfortunately, the resources available to students inside of schools are often reflective of the resources they are able to obtain outside of schools. I believe Rury (2013) accurately assesses the situation here: “it may be the case that one way to realize better equality in educational outcomes, would be to grant children from less advantaged backgrounds greater funding than their more affluent counterparts” (p. 238). I want to know more about how financial resources allocated to schools have direct impact on students, from the perspective of the students themselves, as well as from the perspective of building leaders.

Finally, I believe our educational system reflects our unjust society, and as such, educators hold a responsibility to pursue educational justice. For many of us, this means pushing back against a system in which we found academic success. We must recognize the fallacy of the systems through which we have progressed and excelled, and resist a belief in the “accuracy of [their] measure for the use by others” (Eva L. Baker, as cited in Lessons of a Century, 2000, p. 159). The ways in which we combat our own narrative will be varied, and must include both a critical examination of the educational system as
well as a transformation of urban political systems (Anyon, p. 13). Upon recognition of the many injustices that fuel American schooling, it is imperative that those with influence use it to create space where all student voices can be heard, to ensure that perspectives typically marginalized are brought to the center (Lessons of a Century, 2000). We cannot accept that “families at the lower end of the social-class system, who have less reason to be happy about the social consequences of schooling, are not in a powerful position to push for reform” (Lessons of a Century, 2000, p. 149).

While Ravitch’s (2010) assessment regarding the many disadvantages faced by children living in poverty and their impact on achievement may be accurate, we also cannot accept her assessment that “schools by themselves - no matter how excellent - cannot cure the ills created by extreme social and economic inequality” (p. 286). To do so undermines the fight for educational equity. However, for many years I held these same views. My recent entry into the area of urban education has caused me to examine the premise at a more immediate level. If I am intensely aware that “the opportunities students have to learn, and how well they are expected to do so, vary significantly based on where they live, what their parents earn, and the color of their skin” (Lessons of a Century, 2000, p. 4), then how are my students impacted by constant assessment in a system that measures their progress against a set of standards that arise from such a reality? That realization, that our nation sustains social structures designed to keep the negative life conditions created by poverty firmly in place, necessitates a re-evaluation of my own responsibilities as an educator (Leonardo, 2004). Since schools certainly “reflect the inequalities in the larger society” (Lessons of a Century, 2000, p. 10), I feel compelled to interrupt those inequalities. I see my research as a first step, an opportunity
to examine the constructs of quality education, as viewed by students and educators, as well as a chance to analyze the relationship between what students view as quality and the resources needed to create those conditions. Educational justice is key to interruption of the social inequities that exist in our society (Howard, 2010). We must, with clean conscience, answer Rury’s (2013) question, “Did schooling help to change the prevailing social structure, or did it simply reinforce existing patterns of inequality?” (p. 91).

Definitions

Throughout my research I will refer to educational terms that may be interpreted differently by readers based upon their personal experiences with education. I use the following definitions for these terms throughout my study to maintain consistency and clarity:

*Quality education* refers to an educational experience in which the learner finds value, relevancy, and passion. How value, relevancy, and passion are defined depends upon the individual. In the words of Sylvia L. Peters,

> We should be educating people to sustain life. We should be educating people to become creative thinkers, to become wonderful citizens, wonderful mothers and fathers. We should be educating people so that they can find their way through the world. We should be educating people for global interdependence (Scherer, 1996, p. 52).

*Educational justice* refers to the pursuit of equity in education, via the creation of circumstances that allow all learners to access a quality education. A just society must provide a quality education for all members. Such a society does not currently exist, and it is up to all of us to create it by being accountable. “Accountability is the willingness to
care for the whole, and it flows out of the kind of conversations we have about the new story we want to take our identity from” (Block, 2009, p. 48).

*Resources* refer to anything required to facilitate a desirable quality of life or a quality education. Monetary resources are the primary focus of this category. My personal experiences validate Howard’s (2010) assertion regarding conditions of urban schools, particularly as compared to their suburban counterparts. I have witnessed a lack of financial resources, as well as lesser facilities and a greater struggle to ensure quality, culturally responsive instruction.

*Equity* refers to a situation in which every individual can access what he or she needs to be successful. As individuals come to the table with varying levels of access, equity requires differentiation of resources. In an equitable society, we would all want the best for everyone, while recognizing that such a belief requires us to truly consider every individual, not only ourselves. “What’s best for US? - all of each of us and all of all of us” (Zander & Zander, 2002, p. 184).

**Summary**

As a nation, we have to come to terms with the widely disparate educational experiences our children encounter, based primarily upon their zip code. My own passion to see this situation change arises both from personal experience growing up in a rural area, as well as my experiences as an educator, working in rural, suburban, and urban school districts. This pathway clearly illustrated a range of inequities within our educational system. I intend to advance my understanding of how to effect change by answering my primary research question, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education*
and its connections to equity? I will also address a secondary question: Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?

My concern regarding how a quality education is defined, as well as how schools are resourced to provide such education, frames my investigation. As I attempt to answer my research questions, I will examine student and building principal perspectives through a phenomenological lens, using a process of grounded theory analysis. I will contrast the perception data with budgetary and demographic information, seeking to understand the impact of financial resources on leadership decision-making and student experience, as well as how monetary resources intersect with the demographic makeup of each school. The scope of my study, including assumptions, limitations, and delimitations will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. Following the acquisition of the data and subsequent analysis, Chapter 4 will address limitations from that specific perspective. The results of my study will frame its significance, to be discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2 provides a thorough summary of the literature, including background on quality education, school finance, and educational justice.
Chapter 2

My study sought to answer the question, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?* By engaging with graduates of both urban and suburban high schools, as well as their school leaders, I endeavored to answer my secondary question as well: *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?*

True accountability lies at the heart of the problem I want to address via my research. Accountability, as defined by Block (2009), and referenced in Chapter 1, requires commitment beyond merely providing data and citing research. All students served by education must be considered in the determination of both how to provide a quality education, as well as establishing its definition. Chapter 2 provides thorough research on the topic from an adult point of view, as well as student perspectives. However, it is an incomplete picture, requiring more information to truly paint a portrait of the current reality. In particular, I believe a greater emphasis on student perspective is warranted. Senge’s (2006) words lend precise meaning here: “Collectively, we can be more insightful, more intelligent than we can possibly be individually” (p. 221). Initially, such insight can be found in the literature. Chapter 3 details methodology employed to gather data used to answer my research questions. Chapters 4 and 5 will round out this representation, through reporting of findings and my conclusions.

Several areas of literature can be examined to provide a complete background regarding the intersection of educational quality, resources, and educational justice. As a
result, this chapter details a wide variety of interpretations of the term “quality education.” Descriptions of a number of perspectives on educational quality will be followed by a similar examination of school finance. Although the evolution of education in the United States has broadened to include multiple definitions of educational quality, standards of school finance have been more intractable over the years. Many theorists support my own belief that our unyielding use of a somewhat customary school funding formula produces tremendous inequities within the school system. Such inequities, as well as the myriad societal injustices that impact educational achievement, comprise the final section of the literature review.

**Theoretical Foundations**

An abundance of research exists describing quality education, and the concept can be approached from a variety of vantage points. Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) listed numerous elements needed to produce a quality educational system, including “meaningful learning goals…intelligent, reciprocal accountability systems…equitable and adequate resources…strong professional standards and supports…and schools organized for student and teacher learning” (pp. 279-280). Darling-Hammond’s (2010) list may be utopian in scope, considering the vastly different representations of her categories found within the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area, let alone the entire United States. Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin, and Roberts (2015) conducted a study of four high schools in Florida, and identified several systems within individual schools that support strong student outcomes. Among those tactics are looping, consistent systems of behavior management, use of data for both academic and culture-based goals, an emphasis on college attendance, high numbers of students enrolled in advanced
coursework, guidance counselors as central school figures, direct instruction of academic and social emotional skills, and strongly personalized relationships between adults and students, supported by both formal and informal connections. Goldring and Smrekar’s (2000) study of magnet schools narrowed the vision even further, to the perspective of an individual educator. Third grade teacher Sarah Grant was interviewed about her image of a quality education:

I believe in integrated schools. I believe in as many kids together from as many different backgrounds as possible. I think that is the richest education the kids are getting when they are going to school with so many different cultures. I think that is a very important thing for all kids, kids from different socio-economic backgrounds, too (p. 28).

While varied in terms of scope, all of the previously cited authors described facets of quality education that the various schools I have worked in have aspired to create. Certainly, any parent would read the descriptions above and be happy to find a school with such standards.

Unfortunately, many children do not have access to quality education due to the inequitable distribution of educational resources in the United States, which serve as one tool to maintain the status quo of our society. “Chronic overcrowding in urban schools, inadequate funding, and an overall acceptance of widespread failure in urban and rural schools raise serious questions about the commitment that the United States has to educating all of its students” (Howard, 2010, p. 34). This unfortunate truth contradicts a belief held by most Americans, wherein education provides the foundation for a better
life (Rury, 2013). The idea that adequate funding can create greater opportunity and more equitable outcomes is not without merit. A study of school finance in post-apartheid South Africa found “the relationship between the resources used to provide education and the resulting outcomes for learners is treated as analogous to a general production function in economics, in which inputs (factors of production) are related to outputs” (Mestry, 2014, p. 862). However, just as that nation has not come to terms with its racially charged history and the resulting economic inequalities lived by its citizens, the United States also maintains a class system within its schools that mirrors our larger society. Despite such disparities, “the mantra of education as the proverbial ‘equalizer’ is promoted more in the United States than perhaps in any other nation in the world” (Howard, 2010, p. 9).

Perhaps because of this idiosyncrasy, a growing number of activists spend their days in pursuit of educational justice. As Rury (2013) identified, “differences in social and cultural capital appear to have accounted for great disparities in the school performance of children from different backgrounds” (p. 226). Further, cultural and social capital directly impact both educational achievement and societal success (Rury, 2013). Howard (2010) agreed, citing the importance of creating a “cultural democracy” (p. 115). Within such a democracy, the influence of cultural capital cannot be underestimated, defined by Bourdieu as “the knowledge, skills, education, experiences and/or connections one has had through the course of his or her life that do or do not enable success” (as cited in Howard, 2010, p. 55). Unfortunately, cultural capital in the United States has been tied to Eurocentric traditions and white skin for hundreds of years, thereby perpetuating “patterns of social inequality” (Rury, 2013, p. 10). Promoters of
educational justice seek to solve this by turning the system on its end, creating a place where all perspectives are equally valued, perhaps an echo of Horace Mann’s belief that “education could thus serve as the ‘balance wheels’ of society, preventing inequality from leading to destructive conflict and helping all social groups contribute to national progress” (as cited in Rury, 2013, pp. 78-79). The key to this disruption of the status quo may lie in both changing how we teach (Howard, 2010), as well as significantly change in the way schools are funded (Mestry, 2014).

**Literature Search Strategy**

In an effort to locate information pertaining to the specified research questions, a literature search was conducted using both Education Full Text (EBSCO) and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Full Text. Literature reviewed was generated using the following terms: quality education (including 21st century education, critical and resistance education, and culturally responsive education); school finance; and educational justice (including urban education and school choice).

Additionally, my research process was guided by my 20 years as an educator, influencing both the insights gained through my work, and providing exposure to the writings and thoughts of many great philosophers and teachers. These experiences have yielded my firm belief that we, the United States, are compelled to provide a free, public, quality education to all children. The lens through which I view any information I encounter is certainly influenced by this framework.
As previously stated, my own career as an educator has shaped my beliefs about education, particularly how I define a quality education. The following section highlights research from various sources that supports my own definition of a quality education.

**Quality Education: An Amorphous Ideal**

An investigation into the characteristics of a quality education produces numerous examples. Historically, our nation sought to educate its citizens as a way to ensure a proliferation of national values and identity via participation in a democracy (Ravitch, 2013; Rury, 2013). The fundamental criteria of early education also included the provision of skill sets to support growth of industry and the economy as young people transitioned into the workforce (Ravitch, 2013). Finally, education sought to “endow every individual with the intellectual and ethical power to pursue his or her own interests and to develop the judgment and character to survive life’s vicissitudes” (Ravitch, 2013, p. 237).

In 1991, when Joe Nathan interviewed Herbert Kohl, many of Kohl’s goals for the year 2000 still reflected these early ideals. In addition, Kohl spoke of social issues, such as elimination of child poverty, school safety, and free higher education (Nathan, 1991). As the 1990s progressed, and inequities of educational opportunity continued to be exposed, a national conversation about the standards of an adequate education developed. A number of the items listed on Clune’s (1997) list of minimum requirements mirrored the goals set forth by Kohl at the beginning of the decade, including appropriate financing for schools serving students of low economic status and examination of student mobility and its impact on achievement. However, Clune also wrote of school choice,
site-based management, and improved teaching-staff skills, all of which have impacted American views of education in subsequent decades.

The passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 reflected many of the ideas touched on by Clune, and cemented a mentality of accountability that persists to the present day. The mandate to examine disaggregated achievement data issued by NCLB illuminated what was termed the United States’ “achievement gap” in a way that could not be ignored. Schools across the nation were forced to acknowledge the number of students not achieving at grade level and their common characteristics: race, socioeconomic status, English proficiency and special needs. States turned their focus to schools where the “gap” appeared the most profound, resulting in studies such as the one conducted by Patricia Miller in 2007, which surveyed school leaders of successful Title I schools in Virginia. The principals interviewed by Miller (2007) provided a list of reasons for their schools’ success, including high expectations, values-driven leadership, data-driven decision making, effective teachers, standards-based curriculum and assessments, quality professional development, parental support, effective teacher collaboration, strong classroom management and high student motivation. Miller’s findings are sound, but really only represent the how of education, failing to take into account the why. Perhaps these leaders are influenced by a perspective shared by Diane Ravitch in 2013, “Today, policy makers think of education solely in terms of its secondary purposes...They tend to speak only of preparation for the work force, not education for citizenship” (p. 237). The era of adequacy, followed by an intense focus on accountability, led to a vision of education that some perceive as limited and mechanical,
as well as a narrowing of the curriculum decried by many (Marshall, 2004; Ravitch, 2010 & 2013).

Some of the most recent research indicates a turning of the tide, as described in the Theoretical Framework that shapes my research. Linda Darling-Hammond’s (2010) work, *The Flat World and Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*, provided a more holistic list of standards than those cited by Clune in 1997. Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin, and Roberts (2015) further delineate how to create such a system in their description of effective high schools. The criteria defined by Darling-Hammond and Rutledge et al. are supported by numerous researchers, as detailed in the subsequent sections of Chapter 2.

**Critical and Deep Thinking.** While it can be difficult to measure on a multiple-choice standardized assessment, the value of critical thinking skills cannot be dismissed by any educator or employer. Yet the complicated nature of defining, developing, and assessing this trait frequently results in the assumption that it is the automatic by-product of a quality education, an assertion experienced educators know to be false. Michael Fullan (2003), a well-known authority on educational reform, described what many educators believe to be their true purpose: “Teaching a child to read is an important contribution, but inspiring him or her to be an enthusiastic, lifelong reader is another matter” (p. 29). Fullan’s emphasis on enthusiasm, as well as the inherent persistence required to be a lifelong learner, provide insight into additional traits demonstrated by those who engage in deep, critical thinking. While we know what this type of meaningful learning looks like, we sometimes struggle with how to get there. Rutledge et al.’s (2015)
interactions with school leaders of effective high schools found an emphasis on high expectations beyond “performance on the state high-stakes assessments” (p. 1070) is crucial.

Where then, do principals direct their demanding expectations? Perhaps the answer is found in the history of education. “Pedagogical progressives suggested that children learned best by following their own interests, expressing themselves, and actively investigating the larger world” (Rury, 2013, p. 145). Langer (1997) agreed, evidenced by her writings about mindful learning and her emphasis on instruction that helps children construct their own meaning while remaining open to multiple perspectives. Darling-Hammond (2010) emphasized the sharing of rigorous content knowledge focused on thematic concepts that students deconstruct and rebuild according to their own interpretations. Lauren B. Resnick, an educational psychologist and contributor to Lessons of a Century: A Nation’s Schools Come of Age (2000), concurred. “If they are taught demanding content, and are expected to explain and find connections as well as memorize and repeat, they learn more and learn more quickly” (p. 177).

Ultimately, the stimulation of critical thinking incorporates many elements, not the least of which include a deep curiosity about the world and an understanding of its interdependence (Langer, 1997; Senge, 2006).

A focus on critical thinking produces additional educational benefits, according to Robert L. Hampel (2000), education historian at the University of Delaware. Hampel described the environment produced by challenging academic expectations: “Schools that do engage in rigorous discourse have many advantages that increase and persist over
time. The climate of the school becomes more professional, centered around dialogue about teaching and learning” (Lessons of a Century, p. 118). Like Hampel, many other researchers point to the importance of a positive, productive school culture in the facilitation of a quality education.

**School Culture.** A study of school characteristics related to school engagement conducted by Finn and Voelkl (1993) emphasized the importance of school culture, a theory that surfaced numerous times in my review of the literature on quality education. While Rury (2013) pointed to relationships and shared norms as a factor that sets quality education apart, Kohl, interviewed by Joe Nathan in 1991, emphatically stated, “All schools should be caring and should function without using the threat of failure as a central motivating force” (p. 679). Rutledge et al.’s (2015) previously cited study echoed these findings, mentioning that intentional efforts to connect with students are directly correlated with higher performance. Dissertators Parlato (2015) and Ridenour (2015) uncovered similar perspectives in their respective studies on student perceptions of belonging and college preparedness. In my own experience, more significant learning certainly occurs when participants feel included and engaged. Zander and Zander (2002) might label this as enrollment, which “[generates] possibility and [lights] its spark in others” (p. 128). Oftentimes a key component of a positive school culture is the offering of a broad array of co-curricular and extracurricular activities, another characteristic of quality education found in the literature.

**Opportunity to Develop Interests.** Parlato’s (2015) study confirmed that “district administrators, school administrators, and teachers [verify] the importance
of...co-curricular involvement to the general climate of the school and to students’ social, emotional, and academic growth” (p. 161). Such opportunities are considered “must-have” by many families, particularly those of privilege (Ravitch, 2013). Annette Lareau, a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, conducted a significant study of the differences between opportunities for middle- and upper-class children as compared to children from working-class and poor backgrounds (2011). While her findings with regard to equity will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections, her observations regarding how families perceive the value of organized activities bear mentioning here. All of the middle-class families that Lareau and her researchers studied prioritized a busy schedule filled with a variety of activities and connected such a schedule to success in school. By contrast, the working-class and poor families that Lareau researched were less concerned about this aspect of their children’s development and education. Lareau’s team identified this difference as “the greatest gulf we observed” (p. 68), describing it as a “class-rooted difference in the organization of daily life whereby middle and upper-middle-class children pursue a hectic schedule of adult-organized activities while working-class and poor children follow a more open-ended agenda that is not as heavily controlled by adults” (p. 68). While Lareau’s study was not specifically aimed at the examination of urban versus suburban perspectives, her comparison of the life experiences of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds provides a parallel example to the research I propose. Lareau’s study yields just one example of this aspect of the conversation about quality education.

Suburban Values vs. Urban Values. “They expect their children to study history and literature, science and mathematics, the arts and foreign languages...They would
insist that the school have up-to-date technology” (Ravitch, 2013, p. 235). As Ravitch described the needs of “demanding” (p. 235), read: suburban, families, she went on to say, “They would expect excellent athletic facilities and daily physical education...They would expect advanced courses...They would correctly anticipate small classes, projects, and frequent writing assignments. They would want a full range of student activities” (p. 235). She rightly asserted that such experiences should be available to all students, regardless of their school’s location. However, Parlato’s (2015) conversation with urban students attending a suburban high school confirmed there are certainly differences. Among the reasons students in Parlato’s research cited for their choice to attend a suburban high school were the presence of more clubs and activities, more rigor, more assistance with future education and employment opportunities and teachers interested in their academic success. Having worked in an urban high school for the last several years, I can assert both the validity and the error present in those statements. While access to resources certainly varies, and inequity of resources has influenced my interest in this research, the influence of perceptual bias cannot be ignored. “The coded language of what makes the school ‘good’ or ‘bad’ belies negative perceptions of non-white and low-income families and their children” (Rivera-McCutchen & Watson, 2014, p. 63). While inequitable resources are a significant source of concern, the impact of parent involvement, and what the educational system values regarding parental involvement, must also be reviewed.

**Parental Involvement and School Culture Alignment.** Lareau’s (2011) research on children from vastly different socioeconomic backgrounds provided a valuable exploration of the concept of parent involvement in schools. As might be
expected, the educators Lareau’s team interviewed expressed a desire for more involvement from their working-class and poor parents. Educators did not, however, desire the level of involvement demonstrated by what many refer to as “helicopter” parents. One parent from a working-class home, Ms. Driver, displayed highly contrasting behaviors and attitudes regarding Special Education services for her daughter, compared to the mother of a child with similar needs from a middle-class home in Lareau’s (2011) study. While educators may bemoan the high level of participation demonstrated by middle-class parents, Lareau observed that such close involvement was directly tied to their children’s success within the school system, both due to the parents’ ability to advocate for their child, as well as because American schooling caters to the principles of what she calls “concerted cultivation” (p. 2). Lareau (2011) defined concerted cultivation as a process engaged in by middle- and upper-class parents that ensures their children develop necessary skills to be successful in life, fueled by concerns that their children be positioned for every advantage. “Worried about how their children will get ahead, middle-class parents are increasingly determined to make sure that their children are not excluded from any opportunity that might eventually contribute to their advancement” (Lareau, 2011, p. 5). According to Lareau, it is this fear that contributes to an elevated level of involvement in their children’s lives, as well as application of a discerning eye in the process of selecting educational options for their child. As a public school employee for the past 20 years, I can confirm that every building and district for which I have worked places importance on retaining the children of such families, and demonstrates this via action and policy. Ironically, all families want the best for their children, which
frequently aligns with what schools purport to do: ensure that every child will be able to engage in additional education or employment in an area of his or her interest.

**Opportunity for Advancement.** Finally, an examination of various educational theorists’ beliefs and research about quality education would be incomplete without discussion of preparation for post-secondary education and career opportunities. As Lareau (2011) identified, “good jobs are closely tied to high levels of education” (p. 263). Ultimately, our work as educators should ensure that students can leave our institutions and go on to pursue work that provides financial security and fulfillment. Unfortunately, as the United States’ economy ebbs and flows, less and less certainty surrounds Lareau’s assertion. This has become especially true as more and more people earn college degrees. Jean Anyon (2014), an American critical thinker and researcher, wrote, “The college diploma has become increasingly less valuable, as more and more people obtain the four-year degree” (p. 53). The influence of unemployment, as well as the needs of the business community are intricately tied with the evolution of American education, including what we view as “quality.”

**Impact of U.S. Paradigm on Evolution of Education.** As stated in Chapter 1, a critical approach informs this research study, and as such, research from critical sources was reviewed. Typical of critical research, analysis of America’s method of education produced less than favorable results. Aspects of our history such as Native American genocide, African American slavery, and Japanese internment camps lead some researchers to view the United States as something less than the “land of the free, home of the brave.” As education mirrors our society, “these historical events produced an
educational system that did not look to reflect the cultural diversity of the U.S. population; instead it worked to ‘Americanize’ ethnic minorities” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 41). Although the Civil Rights Movement, as well as struggles for social justice in more recent history, attempted to shape a new, more inclusive America, the majority culture in America sustains a White perspective, regardless of which racial groups actually make up the majority of the United States. The White, dominant culture carries more weight in many public arenas, including education, resulting in de-emphasis of stories that do not fit that narrative. As a result, any reporting is inherently biased, as all of us, White or not, have been educated under this paradigm. “On the one hand, schools have been primary agents of social control and the reproduction of class, gender, and racial advantages and disadvantages. However, education also has had - and continues to have - potentially liberatory, egalitarian, and transformative functions as well” (Anyon, 2014, p. 163). Education in the 21st century is no exception.

Throughout the history of education reform, various approaches to improve education have been utilized. While I believe that the root cause of the United States’ failure to provide quality education for all students is where our attention should be centered, many researchers and educators disagree, resulting in a variety of educational models aimed at producing better outcomes, and highlighted in the next section.

Quality Education Models

21st Century Skills. Most discussions of 21st century skills include technology. Accordingly, Donovan et al.’s (2014) study of the 21st century classroom found an emphasis on technology, though it was not a singular focus. Another important
characteristic of 21st century learning identified by Donovan et al. (2014) was described as a “flexible learning environment” (p. 176). In such an environment, many forms of communication and collaboration between teachers and students occur, resulting in multiple daily opportunities for “critical thinking, shared meaning and collaborative learning” (Donovan et al., 2014, p. 176). Interestingly, Donovan et al. pointed to the importance of a school culture that creates an environment in which students can engage in such learning experiences, exemplifying the need to consider school culture regardless of the educational model.

Trybus (2013) also identified technology, collaboration, and communication as essential elements of 21st century classrooms. In Trybus’ interview with Robin Fogarty, Fogarty highlighted the need to incorporate “critical and creative thinking” (p. 14) into 21st century learning experiences. Riordan’s (2005) examination of 21st century skills confirmed the importance of learning outcomes that “[drive] the design of the learning experiences” (p. 56). Finally, Riordan (2005) pointed to the importance of a detailed and well-designed curriculum to ensure that educators envision learning processes and outcomes at a variety of levels throughout any given course. Given the emphasis on collaboration and communication, many elements of 21st century classrooms hearken back to the origins of constructivist education.

**Constructivist Education.** “A constructivist stance maintains that learning is a process of constructing meaning; it is how people make sense of their experience” (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 1999, p. 291). Similarly to 21st century skills, constructivism focuses on active learning, but places greater emphasis on the learner’s
construction of that knowledge (Fosnot, 1996), as compared to a teacher-led experience. Constructivist educators facilitate child-centered mastery of content, which includes time for reflection (Fosnot, 1996). Unlike many current-day scripted pacing guides, a constructivist approach embraces the nonlinear facets of learning, encouraging students to continually order and reorder their thinking (Fosnot, 1996). Learning must be dynamic, and incorporate collaboration and interaction with others (Merriam, et al., 1999). Schools with diverse populations face the challenge of teaching learners how to work with those different from themselves, an element of our educational system that extends beyond constructivism.

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.**

“Culturally responsive pedagogy is situated in a framework that recognizes the rich and varied cultural wealth, knowledge, and skills that students from diverse groups bring to schools, and seeks to develop dynamic teaching practices, multicultural content, multiple means of assessment, and a philosophical view of teaching that is dedicated to nurturing student academic, social, emotional, cultural, psychological, and physiological well being” (Howard, 2010, pp. 67-68).

In essence, culturally responsive pedagogy places high value on where students come from and what knowledge they bring to the classroom (Howard, 2010). In that way, it is highly compatible with a constructivist perspective. In order for educators to effectively deliver culturally responsive pedagogy, a great deal of self-analysis must occur, during which the teacher makes a lifelong commitment to the development of “both racial awareness and cultural competence” (Howard, 2010, p. 119). Such a
commitment goes beyond the typical teacher training on child development and content proficiency, requiring teacher preparation programs to commit to foundational experiences for pre-service teachers, which then must be followed by the individual’s ongoing self-reflection and self-analysis (Howard, 2010). When implemented well, a culturally responsive classroom provides space for a constant exchange of information between teacher and student that flows both directions (Howard, 2010). In this space, students are more likely to be recognized for their “leadership skills, creative and artistic ability, initiative in analyzing tasks, risk taking, persuasive speaking, consensus building, resiliency, and emotional maturity” (Howard, 2010, p. 13). Such an environment honors both the child and the community from which he or she emerges.

**Community Schools.** The term “community school” denotes both the physical space, which is positioned as a community hub, as well as a philosophy that “integrates health, human and social services with best-practice teaching and learning” (Williams-Boyd, 2010, p. 9). The two main goals of a community school focus on the success of the student, coupled with the well-being of their family and community (Williams-Boyd, 2010). One of the most well known advocates for community schools is James P. Comer, who developed a methodology known as the Comer process (Comer, 1999). Comer’s model requires schools to organize themselves within three teams: “the School Planning and Management Team, the Parent Team, and the Student and Staff Support Team” (Comer, 1999, p. 1). The teams work together using the principles of consensus, collaboration, and no-fault, with an aim to elevate student learning (Comer, 1999). The equal voice of all three teams serves as a significant factor contributing to the success of schools that utilize the Comer process (Comer, 1999).
Community schools have a long history in the United States, dating back to the early 1900s, when educational reformers introduced community-based social services into the school environment to better serve the needs of children (Williams-Boyd, 2010). Although the concept has ebbed and flowed in terms of popularity, community schools have existed, in some form, since that time. Early versions of community schools engaged area health providers on a volunteer basis to assist families in need. The provision of such services was supported by business people and progressive school employees, but criticized by conservative school workers who felt the non-academic focus was a misuse of limited funds (Williams-Boyd, 2010). Eventually, the model of numerous agencies providing services in a somewhat disjointed manner evolved into a school-based model, seeking to “address interdependent social, emotional, economic and education concerns of the student and of the family” (Williams-Boyd, 2010, p. 12). Over time, the movement has morphed from an assimilation/deficit model to one that values the assets each family brings, informed by their diversity and resilience (Williams-Boyd, 2010). “When implemented with fidelity, community schools increase academic achievement, particularly in math and reading...Further, nonacademic indicators such as attendance, overall climate of the school and neighborhood, also improved as absenteeism, student disruptions and dropout numbers declined” (Williams-Boyd, 2010, pp. 14-15). The sense of caring and personalization inherent in the community school model is also a characteristic of many alternative education programs, which typically produce comparable positive outcomes for students.

Comer (1999) emphasizes the importance of a strong and functional community in his process, and acknowledges that, for many children, “school is the only place where
[children] can get the social structures that [they] need to succeed” (p. 11). Comer (1999) defines a functional community as one where the relationships between adults and children, adults and adults, and children and children are healthy, and in which children’s interactions are always supervised by adults. To create this type of community, Comer recommends a “program that promotes functional rather than dysfunctional community, family, and school performance and in turn, good child development and good performance as adults” (p. xxvii). This type of program, however, requires a focus on funding that addresses the resources needed to create functional communities, versus merely assessing funding needs based on equality. The concept of equality provides the basis for a comparatively new educational model, Critical/Democratic Education.

**Critical/Democratic Education.** A relative newcomer to the wealth of educational frameworks, critical education and its offshoot, democratic education, provide alternative designs that advocate for student and teacher analysis of education’s current reality. While critical education promotes exactly that - criticism of our educational system - democratic education proposes a dual approach of understanding what is, while working to change the status quo (Knight & Pearl, 2000). In an effort to provide a deeper level of understanding of these lesser-known educational models, an analysis of the why, what, and how follows.

In previous examples of educational philosophies discussed in this paper, there exists an assumption that all educators agree on some common themes:

- Children will grow up to be adults;
- Those adults will need to be contributing citizens to our society;
Such contributions will include working at a job and subscribing to our economic structure (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012).

Such a philosophy fosters the identity of a “working adult” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 385). While I am a working adult, similar to most people with whom I associate, critical theorists accurately identify this role as participation in the system, thereby contributing to the reproduction of the “stratification and systemic barriers that many students face as they enter the workforce” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 385). Anyon (2014) maintained “poor and non-white students need to understand the codes of dominant cultural capital and be able to parse them” (p. 173). The development of these skills is central to the theory of critical and democratic education. Educators who subscribe to these principles believe Leonardo’s (2004) words: “Part of the solution can be found in how the problem is addressed in the first place” (p. 13).

Critical or resistance pedagogy is ascribed a number of definitions in the literature, though all are more alike than different. Accordingly, Ken McGrew, a prominent critical theorist, stated “contemporary critical theory emerges from a cluster of traditions within scholarship and activism that despite all being generally associated with the political left in a variety of historical and national contexts often represented competing theoretical perspectives” (2011, p. 235). Zeus Leonardo, another prolific critical researcher defined critical social theory (CST) as “a multidisciplinary knowledge base with the implicit goal of advancing the emancipatory function of knowledge” (2004, p. 11). Another version of this educational philosophy is multicultural social justice education (MSJE), which “incorporates pupils’ interests and capacities while simultaneously helping them to work against inequities and injustices that detract
from…[their] lives inside and outside of school” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 391). Mary Breunig, an activist and Associate Professor at Brock University, stated: “Critical pedagogy is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relation of the wider community and society” (2005, p. 109). Breunig (2005) also pointed to the possibilities of democratic education, which addresses inequities while encouraging students to imagine what “‘could be’” (p. 112; Knight & Pearl, 2000).

In critical and democratic classrooms there is a focus on student-centered learning, originating from the students themselves (Knight & Pearl, 2000; Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). However, this is where the methodologies part ways, with critical pedagogy veering more toward an analysis and censure of what is, and democratic education focusing on what students will create. (Leonardo, 2004; Knight & Pearl, 2000). In a critical classroom, quality teaching is identified as “the ability to apprehend the dialectical relationship between the objective and subjective nature of oppression” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 14). Upon the identification of oppression, the teacher facilitates debate between and among all participants, using democratic methods, which are considered a “central process in promoting a quality education even in the face of an uneven and unjust world (Leonardo, 2004, p. 14). The goal is for students to go beyond the frequently heard platitudes of the “American Dream,” and to challenge the underlying oppression of our society (Leonardo, 2004). “CST improves the quality of education by encouraging students and teachers to take up personally meaningful choices that lead to liberation. This move is accomplished through the practice of critique and a sense for
alternatives, not as separate processes but dialectically constitutive of each other” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 16).

By contrast, “democratic teachers try to persuade all students to critically examine their views and develop ground rules by which open interchanges can occur across the widest range of difference” (Knight & Pearl, 2000, p. 213). In other words, democratic education acknowledges systems of oppression, but focuses more on urging students to reinvent societal interactions within the microcosm of the classroom. This process involves a number of steps, from students deciding what is important to learn, to who is in charge, to who gets to learn. (Knight & Pearl, 2000). Along the way students must also determine how decisions will be made and how conflicts will be resolved (Knight & Pearl, 2000). There is a focus on hope, students are “encouraged to dream and keep their opinions open” (Knight & Pearl, 2000, p. 218).

Above all, both critical and democratic educators advocate for change. “School has to encourage transformative thinking and learning within the production of knowledge, and schools that use standardized cookie-cutter materials for all children will not be places where this occurs” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 95). Unfortunately, it can be “difficult, even for those receptive to equity-oriented perspectives to defend such work on academic and developmental grounds” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 391). This is due, in no small part, to a dominant perspective in education that maintains focus on measuring student achievement via standardized tests and running schools like businesses (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012).
Throughout the preceding section outlining various models of quality education, an important stakeholder perspective is missing - that of students. As my primary research question, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?*, hinges on student perspective, the final portion of my research on quality education reflects existing literature on that topic.

**Quality Education - Student Defined.** Current research regarding the student definition of a quality education does not differ significantly from my own personal perspective. However, as Wiggan (2014), stated, “When educators and researchers impose a definition of achievement, it can be inconsistent with students’ own ways of understanding school achievement” (p. 487). Perhaps this stems from the incredibly diverse groups and organizations that have influence on our educational system. Regardless, students studied by Wiggan (2014) were clear about their beliefs:

“There should be a more fluid understanding and framing of achievement, one that incorporates students’ voices about its meaning, as well as how it is to be assessed. Furthermore, if teachers are to improve their ability to evaluate students, rather than imposing a definition of achievement they must develop a shared meaning with students, as well as an understanding about how students will be evaluated” (p. 487).

In addition to the suggestion that teachers collaborate with students to create assessments and define achievement, students expressed frustration at being assessed on material they had not been taught and advocated for essays or oral examinations rather
than multiple choice tests (Wiggan, 2014). Lock (2010) uncovered similar perspectives in her study of at-risk youth, where students talked about their “desire to learn in groups, engage in discussions/debates, participate in hands-on activities, and to have teachers who would continue to motivate them to keep trying” (p. 125).

The size of the school was another variable discussed by students in Lock’s (2010) research. Students she studied moved from large, comprehensive high schools to a smaller, alternative program, and felt much more connected to school in the smaller setting. An older study from Finn and Voelkl (1993) also engaged students who were more comfortable in smaller schools, finding that attendance was better, students were more academically engaged, and “students feel that the environment is more warm and supportive” (pp. 264-265) in such institutions. The students Finn and Voelkl studied were from non-White populations, and also spoke positively of schools with greater percentages of minority students.

A study done by Miretsky, Chennault, and Fraynd (2016) titled “Closing an Opportunity Gap,” reported positively on the topic of diverse school populations as well. Miretsky et al. conducted a student survey in 2005, finding that diversity, location and high-caliber academics were the three most important reasons informing the students’ high school choices. Similarly, Calzaferri (2011) discovered a preference for Advanced Placement (AP) courses and dual-enrollment options in her study of rural high school students’ perceptions. Finally, Sohn (2003) surveyed students regarding the availability of extra-curricular activities, in which 98% responded positively, indicating the importance of opportunities provided by involvement in activities beyond the classroom.
Another theme uncovered in the literature regarding student perceptions of quality education was the need for human support to ensure a successful academic experience. Numerous studies reported on the importance of a teacher or other adult taking an interest in a student to facilitate his or her success. (Cook, 1994; Swetnam, 2005; Foote, 1985; and Lock, 2010). Ideally, numerous teachers would provide support for each student, but according to Lock’s work, even “one relationship with just one teacher could potentially make the difference between a student’s ability to engage in school, and feel a sense of belonging, or to disengage from school altogether” (p. 124). Conversely, students interviewed by both Wiggan (2014) and Rainer (2009) talked of the significant impact of negative teacher relationships. Rainer’s study of African American male students also revealed the need for parental support, but this theme was far less prevalent in the literature than the emphasis on positive teacher relationships.

Just as students cited negative interactions with teachers as challenging aspects of their education, they also identified a number of factors that could interfere with a positive experience. Finn & Voelkl (1993) found a negative correlation between strict rules and high engagement for at-risk students. Wiggan’s (2014) study of high-achieving African American students revealed the importance of relevant assessments, as students cited standardized exams and an overemphasis on grades as negative aspects of their educational experience. Students in Wiggan’s study were also very aware of educational inequities, and listed standardized tests as one example. Young (2007) conducted one of the only studies similar to mine that I could locate, and found that suburban students were quite aware of the inequities between urban and suburban education. Young’s (2007) study revealed that “less than 50% of the urban students believed their teachers were
culturally aware of the student, parent and community populations” (p. 80) in their schools, highlighting a student-perceived disconnect between their lives and the lives of their teachers. Suburban students in this study felt the opposite - that their teachers were part of their community (Young, 2007). Finally, with regard to preparation for post-secondary options, Mahon (1985) surveyed 563 college freshmen and discovered students who followed a college-prep pathway reported receiving more information and assistance to continue their education as compared to students who were part of general, business, and vocational programs. Students on a college-prep pathway were “significantly more likely to report that they had contact with guidance counselors” (Mahon, 1985, p. 110).

While students surveyed by researchers such as Wiggan (2014) and Swetnam (2005) were not always fully engaged with their high school educational experiences, all perceived a connection between success in school and the ability to pursue further education and obtain fulfilling work after graduation. Ultimately, students and adults agree that a baseline function of education must include graduation and the chance to go on to something else, whether that is additional education or a career.

While numerous additional organizational designs and models exist within the United States’ educational system, including alternative education, charter schools, magnet schools, and many more, those covered in this section of the literature review were found to be most pertinent to the proposed research questions of this study. While numerous models of quality education can be found in the United States, the financing of public education exhibits far less variation. School finance is a pivotal topic with regard
to quality education, as it provides an important support for the realization of any version of a quality education. The following section of the literature review details the variety of school finance structures used in the United States, as well as issues of equity and adequacy in school funding, including mention of relevant judicial cases.

**School Finance**

The means by which public schools are funded in the United States has long been a topic of discussion among all stakeholders. Historically, the bulk of school funding comes from local property taxes, which are essentially a form of state aid, and are supplemented by additional governmental and local dollars. Two significant, though different, ideas support governmental funding for schools, and date far back into United States’ history. “One, central government wanted to promote common schooling in communities that were unable or unwilling to establish basic education programs. Two, central government wanted to promote specific types of schooling” (Walter & Sweetland, 2003, p. 143). Such financial support from the government aligns with efforts to create a united and responsible citizenry.

Today, schools typically receive two types of funding, known as state aid and categorical aid (Crampton, 2010; Odden, 2001). State aid has few restrictions and can be used to fund almost any expense within the school. Categorical aid, on the other hand, is targeted at specific needs based on the size of the student population with those needs (Levacic, Ross & Caldwell, 2000; Verstegen & Jordan, 2009). Typically, categorical aid is awarded for purposes such as “special education, English language learners (ELLs), transportation, and gifted and talented programs” (Crampton, 2010, p.36).
The state aid awarded to all schools can be distributed according to a number of different models, outlined here. Flat Grant Baseline funding involves the fewest number of calculations, as it calls for “a uniform amount of funding distributed on a uniform basis” (Walters & Sweetland, 2003, p. 145). While its simplicity may be considered an advantage, this type of funding does not address the inequities caused by disparate student needs from one district to another. Foundation Baseline funding, which is used by the majority of school districts across the nation, implements a “basic cost or foundation amount of money that is distributed to each district on a relative basis” (Verstegen & Jordan, 2009). “The amount is usually politically determined as appropriate to support educational programs and adjusted for local contributions” (Walter & Sweetland, 2003, p. 145). Some issues of equity are addressed through this model; more than 80% of school districts are funded using this methodology (Walter & Sweetland, 2003). Straight Equalization Baseline is a complicated formula that involves an “indexing procedure that converts a constant amount of funding into a proportional amount of funding. The index is usually created using some measure of wealth such as local property valuation” (Walter & Sweetland, 2003, p. 146). In other words, areas with higher property tax valuations receive less funding and areas with lower property tax valuations receive more, under the assumption that, in the wealthier districts, additional local contributions can be added to generate adequate funding. Guaranteed Local Tax Baseline formula is used by less than 5% of states in the country, and uses a formula of “TAX BASE x TAX RATE = TAX YIELD...which insures that a given tax rate will generate a specific amount of local revenue” (Walter & Sweetland, 2003, p. 146). Funding is equalized between wealthy and poor districts via state supplementary dollars.
(Walter & Sweetland, 2003). Another little-used formula is *Full State Funding Baseline*, which requires “centralized planning, centralized tax collection, and standardized distribution. Local fiscal control is all but extinguished” (Walter & Sweetland, 2003, p. 146). Any of the approaches can be manipulated to increase or decrease equity and adequacy (Walter & Sweetland, 2003).

The question of how to define adequate funding is addressed in greater detail later in this section. A simple explanation of this concept involves the determination of what educational services and opportunities are desirable, how much it costs to provide those opportunities, and how many students are supported by the funding (Levacic et al., 2000). As outlined in the previous paragraph, a foundation funding structure generates a variable amount of base funding for each district due to the difference in property values from one area to another. In the United States, lower property values frequently indicate areas of poverty, which can result in the associated school districts receiving larger amounts of categorical funding known as Title I. Other types of categorical aid are directly tied to student educational needs, and are awarded proportionately to schools with higher numbers of students with the identified needs (Reschovsky & Imazeki, 2001). “Categorical aid programs generally operate by providing eligible students with a special weight” (Reschovsky & Imazeki, 2000, p. 376). Unfortunately, the actual cost of meeting a child’s needs is rarely used as the foundation for determining the weight; rather, dollars available, coupled with political pressures, typically influence the weighting amounts (Reschovsky & Imazeki, 2000).
As stated previously, categorical aid is tied to specific student needs and can only be used for expenditures that state law has linked to the service of those needs. For example, funding tied to transportation costs can fluctuate based on the population density of bus routes in each district (Verstegen & Jordan, 2009). Another area of categorical funding, frequently tied to referendum votes in the state of Minnesota, is the area of capital outlay and construction. Because this funding must be approved on a case-by-case basis through a vote, amounts available to individual districts vary significantly. However, some states include this funding in the state’s foundation formula, where it may then be allocated for specifically approved projects, or even accessed by the district using the state as a guarantor (Verstegen & Jordan, 2009). The most common types of categorical aid are related to populations with low-income, Limited English Proficiency (LEP), and Special Education needs. Most states use weights to provide additional funding in service of those needs, which can range from “1.0 (an additional 100%) in Minnesota for free lunch recipients, to .05, or 5% in Mississippi” (Verstegen & Jordan, 2009, p. 221). Weights for students with LEP are assigned similarly, while funding for Special Education services varies. Some states use the weighted approach, while others employ methods such as direct reimbursement of costs or funding attached to teacher FTE (full time equivalent) for Special Education students (Verstegen & Jordan, 2009).

The numerous means of determining funding for education nationwide, all the way down to the individual building allocation, produce great variations among specific school revenues. A number of methods can be used to evaluate a school district’s funding capacity, as a way of assessing both adequacy and equity, as well as to aid in the projection for future needs. Crampton (2010) listed three areas of consideration, in
addition to equity/adequacy, for the analysis of school funding. “Stability refers to a school district’s ability to predict the amount of funding it will receive from year to year in order to plan effectively for student instruction and to maintain successful programs” (Crampton, 2010, p. 35). Beyond the examination of stability, Crampton (2010) advocated for attention on efficiency, “making the best use of limited resources” (p. 35) and accountability, facilitated by being “proactive in communicating with the media and public how [districts] hold themselves fiscally accountable” (p. 35). Levacic et al. (2000) echoed Crampton’s recommendations, adding the areas of integrity, administrative costs, local democracy, and responsiveness to local conditions. The remainder of this section goes into greater detail regarding the specifics of how funding structures in the United States impact educational equity and various legal actions that have transpired due to inequity of resources.

Foundation Funding. As stated earlier, the majority of states in the country use a foundation model to determine school funding. While such a model can be used to ensure educational equity, other factors frequently interfere with that outcome. As Jonathan Kozol (1991) reported, one common issue involves use of an inadequate baseline amount, known as “a low foundation.” (Kozol, 1991, p. 208). “The low foundation is a level of subsistence that will raise a district to a point at which its schools are able to provide a ‘minimum’ or ‘basic’ education, but not an education on the level found in rich districts” (Kozol, 1991, p. 208). This occurs because the state has limited funding and a foundation model requires state dollars to be distributed to each district in an effort to equalize funding made unequal by varying property tax structures (Verstegen & Jordan, 2009). “Usually localities can ‘go beyond’ the state guaranteed amount with additional property
taxes that are unmatched by the state” (Verstegen & Jordan, 2009, p. 215), a practice that eliminates the equalization effect that foundation funding seeks to provide. For example, “district spending variation appears to explain a substantial amount of variation in school site resources in Maine, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Montana, and Minnesota” (Baker & Weber, 2016, p. 18).

**Property Taxes.** Since property tax-based funding produces significant inequities in school finance, it is surprising that the U.S. has not devised a better system of subsidizing education. Unfortunately, the complexity of our tax coding system, coupled with lack of impact on those with privilege, has resulted in a process that “most people do not fully understand and seldom scrutinize” (Kozol, 1991, p. 207). In an interview with Deborah Verstegen, Arthur E. Wise pointed out that the connection between property tax funding and school budgets is “the only place in our governmental structure where we have this nexus between locally raised funds and spending on a state governmental activity” (2000, paragraph 41). Wise went on to say, “There will never be an end to this problem of inequalities so long as we maintain the linkage between the local property tax and education. The education of children should be financed on a statewide basis” (Verstegen, 2000, paragraph 41). Such a change would have significant positive impact on funding for urban education in particular, due to the high number of tax-free institutions located in cities combined with the loss of most manufacturing companies to the suburbs, which further contributes to their low tax bases (Kozol, 1991; Anyon, 2014). Unfortunately, such a funding shift is unlikely to occur due to the spiral nature of the funding model, and exacerbated by simple human greed. “In effect, a circular phenomenon evolves: The richer districts - those in which the property lots and houses
are more highly valued - have more revenue, derived from taxing land and homes to fund their public schools” (Kozol, 1991, p. 121). Kozol (1991) continued, “The reputation of the schools, in turn, adds to the value of their homes, and this, in turn, expands the tax base for their public schools” (p. 121). Although the system is inherently inequitable, and many benefit from it remaining that way, there have been attempts to mediate the inequity.

**Weighted Student Funding.** “Weighted student funding, known as WSF, is a means of distributing money among primary and secondary schools to promote intradistrict equity” (Fiske & Ladd, 2010, p. 49). The principle behind WSF, a Dutch system, lies in identifying student need, along with the costs of meeting that need, and then attaching those funds to individual students (Fiske & Ladd, 2010). The money assigned to each child, based on his or her individual needs, follows that child to whatever school he or she attends (Fiske & Ladd, 2010). This system is used quite successfully in the Netherlands, but translation to an American system brings challenges. “To achieve the equity goals implicit in the Dutch system, the United States would, at a minimum, have to implement WSF at the state level” (Fiske & Ladd, 2010, p. 52). That would require a centralization of funding that would result in districts with high property tax values receiving less funds than they do under the current structure. While individual districts can elect to use the system to distribute state funds among their schools, that approach limits its impact.

One reason for this limitation is that most United States’ schools are unable to “implement weights anywhere close to those in the Dutch system” (Fiske & Ladd, 2010,
In the Netherlands, weights are determined based upon parental education level and immigrant status (Fiske & Ladd, 2010). Each student from a family with limited education is weighted at 1.25, and students who are immigrants (similar to our ELL population) with parents of lower educational status are weighted at 1.9 (Fiske & Ladd, 2010). “Second, using WSF at the district level does nothing to address funding disparities among districts” (Fiske & Ladd, 2010, p. 52), which is a significant issue of inequity in American school finance.

However, there are a few examples in the United States where WSF has been used. In Connecticut, “the state provided targeted resources to the neediest districts, including funding for professional development for teachers and administrators, preschool and all-day kindergarten for students, and smaller pupil-teacher ratios, among other supports” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 139). As a result, three of ten districts in the state that showed the most improvement in reading from 1990-1998 were districts that received the targeted funds (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In another study, focused at a district level, investigation of schools in Cincinnati, Ohio, found weighted funding for Special Education students based on level of service required, with weights ranging from 1.34 to 2.85. (Levacic et al., 2000). Similarly, schools receiving Title I received a higher amount per pupil if their school met the population threshold defined by the district (Levacic, et al., 2000).

A variation of WSF was attempted in ten districts in California, known as the Local Control Funding Formula, or LCFF (Wolf & Sands, 2016). Under this system, districts received a base amount aligned with enrollment numbers, supplemental grants
were awarded for targeted student groups, and concentration grants were awarded to
districts with populations of 55% or more targeted students (Wolfe & Sands, 2016).
While not as individualized as WSF, LCFF does account for schools in which there are
large numbers of students with high needs, as well as the exponential effects of such a
population distribution. As part of California’s LCFF model, Local Control
Accountability Plans (LCAPs) are required (Wolf & Sands, 2016). These plans are
created collaboratively with schools and community members in all districts to determine
how funding will be spent (Wolf & Sands, 2016). Districts studied by Wolf and Sands
(2016) identified several benefits of the LCFF system. District officials experienced more
flexibility in decisions of state funding allocation due to a shift of funds that increased
general or foundational funding and decreased categorical funding, thereby decreasing
restrictions on how the money could be spent (Wolf & Sands, 2016). The involvement of
numerous district stakeholders in the process of developing the LCAPs was also cited as
a positive outcome of the change in methodology because it “resulted in substantially
more collaboration across departments than what was typical” (Wolf & Sands, 2016, p.
22). Concerns expressed about the model included the ability to engage targeted
populations in the LCAP process, as well as whether the program would provide enough
resources upon full implementation (Wolf & Sands, 2016). In particular, district officials
questioned the ability of the funding model to provide equity in the form of a “high
quality education” (p. 19) for all students.

From Equity to Adequacy. Equity of school funding can be defined both
horizontally and vertically (Crampton, 2010). In a comparison of funding formulas from
five different countries, including the United States, Levacic et al. (2000) defined
horizontal equity as “like treatment of recipients whose needs are similar” (paragraph 5). Vertical equity was defined as “the application of differential funding levels for recipients whose needs differ” (Levacic et al., 2000, paragraph 5). “Basic aid generally addresses horizontal equity issues by allocating a set amount per pupil across the state, [while] categorical aid addresses vertical equity issues by allocating funding to particular types of students who need additional resources to be academically successful” (Crampton, 2010, p. 36). However, neither basic nor categorical aid amounts matter if the base allocations do not provide enough funding to fully address the educational needs of students (Odden, 2001). As a result, numerous school districts across the nation have been the subject of school finance litigation, at both state and federal levels (Berry & Wysong, 2010). However, federal litigation ground to a halt in Texas in 1973, per the outcome of San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez (Newman, 2006). “The Rodriguez decision effectively ended school finance litigation at the federal level by denying that the Equal Protection Clause, which was reformers’ only foothold to the Federal Constitution, could be used to advance educational equality” (Newman, 2006, p. 83). “The shift of focus from equity or wealth neutrality to adequacy in school finance debates ascribes greater importance to the money and achievement nexus” (Addonizio, 2004, p. 56).

Subsequent suits have been brought at a state level, and although 28 states have had their school finance formulas deemed unconstitutional, next steps following court ruling vary by state (Berry & Wysong, 2010). After a school-finance judgment (SFJ), state lawmakers must engage in the usual process of creating law to change the formula (Berry & Wysong, 2016). As a result, sometimes the outcomes produce unintended
consequences. For example, in New Jersey, a court ruling resulted in specific districts receiving higher amounts of per pupil funding (Lauver, Ritter, & Goertz, 2001). Districts with the capacity to raise additional funds themselves did so (generally suburban, middle-class locations), but those without capacity to raise funds (most rural districts) were forced to spend less per pupil (Lauver et al., 2001). Critics might say the results in New Jersey meet neither the definitions of equity nor adequacy.

With regard to the adequacy standard, one interpretation defines adequate as enough funding to “meet state and federal education standards. Adequacy here is defined as ‘sufficiency’” (Crampton, 2010, p. 35). Whether pre- or post-litigation, districts can engage in various forms of analyses to determine whether their school funding meets the standard of adequacy. One method of determining adequate financing for a school district is known as the professional judgment approach (Verstegen, 2006). This method engages professional educators in the identification of the characteristics of a high-quality education and the linked resource needs (Verstegen, 2006). The model is complex, involving a number of steps. A simpler approach was suggested by Odden (2000), and necessitates only three steps, including identification of educational costs, linkage between funding per student and specific outcomes, and naming specific school-wide strategies that will produce said outcomes. Addonizio (2004) identified four methods to determine adequate funds, one of which was the professional judgment approach. In addition, Addonizio (2004) outlined statistical modeling, empirical observation, and whole school design as potential methods of establishing school finance adequacy. Overall, Addonizio (2004) asserted that the adequacy standard for education reversed the traditional process followed by legislatures regarding funding allocations. Rather than
simply equally dividing resources, they must start from the goals to be achieved and attach dollars likely to facilitate those goals. Clune (1997) put it much more bluntly: “The implementation of educational adequacy will consist, for practical purposes, in the finance and restructuring of high-poverty schools” (p. 344).

While 28 of 45 school finance litigation cases have resulted in rulings of unconstitutionality, final results on the impact of said litigation are mixed (Berry & Wysong, 2010). In a 2004 study of school finance suits in the United States since 1970, Jordan, Jordan and Crehan found some benefit to school finance programs, regardless of whether the plaintiff or defendants triumphed. Thompson and Crampton (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of school finance litigation literature, finding “substantial evidence that equity has increased in ways that recognize the influence of public and judicial pressure” (p. 164). Glenn’s 2009 examination of the impact of adequacy litigation on student achievement found evidence that student outcomes have subsequently improved. “However, the differences in mean scores were fairly small in most instances, so this is far from definitive evidence” (Glenn, 2009, p. 261). As Walter and Sweetland (2003) stated, “the vast majority of states’ school funding systems might be unconstitutional and...a very substantial proportion are unconstitutional” (p. 147). Solutions to fix that situation have yet to be implemented.

**Local Educational Foundations.** Local Education Foundations (LEFs) are “small, usually parent-run, non-profit organizations that are affiliated with individual school districts (and sometimes single schools)” (Cuatto, 2003, p. 221). Initially, LEFs were created to equalize funding in urban districts (Cuatto, 2003). However, more
recently, schools of greater affluence have integrated LEFs in their budget structures to provide a host of additional advantages to students, including “art supplies, musical instruments, sports equipment, and not uncommonly, teachers for these extracurricular activities. These foundations fund student scholarships, technology in the classroom, and even capital improvements” (Cuatto, 2003, p. 221). In fact, more prosperous school districts typically find more success via attempts to raise funds in this manner, and LEFs often “exacerbate the very fiscal disparities public policy seeks to reduce” (Addonizio, 2000, p. 70). This is not surprising, considering that lack of funding in a district is directly connected to local property values and wealth; it follows that the “creation of non-profits to raise money from that community will not yield much in the way of results” (Cuatto, 2003, p. 223). Accordingly, Cuatto (2003) argued that public education is a public good that should be supported entirely by public funds, via the tax structure, to ensure that all citizens are equally responsible for contributing to the greater good. Cuatto argued “allowing citizens to contribute money to their own specific schools, as opposed to the whole public education system, undermines the ‘publicness’ of the system” (2003, p. 225). Indeed, the use of LEFs to supplement funding appears to only increase inequity.

**Continued Inequity.** Despite years of litigation and attempted reform of school finance structures, there has been no corresponding improvement in student achievement; conversely, “there is considerable evidence that educational inequality widened substantially” (Rury, 2013, p. 236). In addition, the deeper issue of zip code as a predictor of student achievement has not been addressed (Addonizio, 2004). As a result, funding equity continues to be one of the most serious issues facing urban education (Scherer, 1996). The issue of compensation equity for teachers in these settings compounds the
higher costs of educating urban students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Reschovsky & Imazeki, 2001; Verstegen, 2000). “In most states, school level total salaries per pupil remain negatively associated with district poverty rates. That is, where district poverty rates are higher, total salaries per pupil are lower” (Baker & Weber, 2016, p. 20). In addition, lack of funding also contributes to less access to teaching resources for teachers in urban schools (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Combine students with high needs, directly tied to the inequities of society, with less proficient teachers and fewer resources - is it any wonder that achievement scores are lower, fewer students graduate, and the cycle of inequity continues? The money spent on a child’s education matters; higher rates of success are found in schools with greater numbers of certified teachers (Verstegen, 2000). An adequate amount of funding ensures the ability to hire strong educators and provide the additional wraparound services that address the societal inequities impacting achievement (Brown, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Reschovsky & Imazeki, 2001; Verstegen & Jordan, 2009). Yet we continue to impose the same standards across all school districts without “simultaneously reforming the way financial resources are distributed…. [which] result[s] in a situation where school districts with above-average costs [do not] have enough resources to educate their students” (Reschovsky & Imazeki, 2001, p. 375). Based on those facts, it is difficult to argue with Kozol (2000):

“There are few areas in which the value we attribute to a child’s life may be so clearly measured as in the decisions that we make about the money we believe it’s worth investing in the education of one person’s child as opposed to that of someone else’s child” (p. 44).
Alternatives and Recommendations. More funding for schools serving students with high needs is the solution (Rury, 2013). An initial step in facilitating the process could include ensuring transparency regarding “how funds are distributed to schools, how those schools use those funds, and what resources are available to individual students” (Picus, 2000, p. 79). Beyond securing additional funds and a clear understanding of how the funds are used lies the more complicated question of how funds are distributed. Clune (1997) proposed that schools located in areas of high poverty should receive funding combining high basic funds, categorical dollars and supplements for the extra costs associated with educating students of poverty. More specifically, Verstegen and Jordan (2009) recommended the use of District Power Equalizing systems (DPEs). Rather than the state deciding how much money is needed per child, that responsibility is assigned to the local district (Verstegen & Jordan, 2009). “The local district determines spending and taxing levees within state-determined limits, and the state matches differences in what is raised locally and what is guaranteed” (Verstegen & Jordan, 2009, p. 216). Anyon (2014) recommended “shifting education finance to broad-based, state-collected taxes paid into a common pool” (p. 112). In her view, this would “eliminate inequities that arise out of municipal property and other tax-base differences” (Anyon, 2014, p. 112). The adoption of a new method of school funding is a pivotal component of providing educational justice for all of the children in our country.

Educational Justice and Equity

“The parents of rich children have the money to get into better schools. Then after a while, they begin to say, ‘Well, I have this. Why not keep it for my children?’ In
other words, it locks them into the idea of always having something more. After that, these things - the extra things they have - are seen like an inheritance. They feel it's theirs and they don't understand why we should question it” -Alexander (Kozol, 1991, p. 105).

Alexander’s words demonstrate his understanding of the lack of equity in schools, or “the principle of equality of opportunity” (Rury, 2013, p. 15). Social justice, more specifically, with regard to education, educational justice, can provide a means of shifting the imbalance of power and opportunity. The work is about more than personal beliefs. The work of educational justice addresses aspects of the system, the “cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals” (Tatum, 1997, p. 7). The goal is to transform a system and a nation, built on inequity and marginalization, into a place that embodies the image America projects to the world (Theoharis, 2010). Unfortunately, “the form that social justice most often takes in schools is outcomes based and does not disrupt the social order” (McMahon, 2007, p. 690).

Since the time of Horace Mann, Americans have believed that public education provides a ladder to success in our country, a means by which we can ensure “all social groups contribute to national progress” (Rury, 2013, pp. 78-79). Yet as we have identified the need for reform in education, we have approached it in ways that merely reinforce existing structures, all the while wondering why we cannot effect a change (Senge, 2006). Senge’s (2006) advice, to incorporate multiple perspectives, all the while working together to determine the “right course of action that transcends and unifies all our individual visions” (p. 200) is a path that we have failed to follow. Perhaps this is the
failure of the dominant perspective to recognize its own responsibility for the flaws in the system (Senge, 2006); perhaps the root cause is more disquieting, an intentional undertaking in direct opposition of democracy to “limit the skills and knowledge of a liberal education only to children of privilege and good fortune” (Ravitch, 2013, p. 241). But, as Tyrone C. Howard asks, “Where will the intellectual leadership and political acumen come from if we continue to neglect students from diverse groups and low-income backgrounds?” (2010, p. 150). We have to accept our reality; we have to name it (Block, 2009).

**Description of the Issue.** As already outlined in the section on School Finance, financial resources available to children in poor districts are typically less than those provided for students who attend schools in wealthy districts (Verstegen, 2000). This results in a number of impacts, ranging from the availability of fully-licensed teachers to dollars for classroom resources (Verstegen, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2010). This inequity is even more pronounced in low-income schools with large populations of students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2010), a situation becoming more and more common. “The proportion of K-12 students who attend high poverty schools has increased by 42% since 2000, with almost half of black and Latino students in such schools (and 5% of whites) in 2009” (Anyon, 2014, p. 34). The consequences of a poor education extend beyond the walls of K-12 buildings. “Those who do not succeed in school are increasingly becoming part of a growing underclass, cut off from productive engagement in society” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 23). As this cycle is perpetuated, a functionalist perspective allows us to sustain an “organizational rationale for student failure to be embedded in the student, not the organization or the interplay between the
student and the environment” (Frattura & Topinka, 2006, p. 334). The following sections detail facets of education that necessitate attention from social justice educators.

**Segregated schools.** School segregation is usually thought to be a long-ago eliminated detail of America’s past, an old story about when our country lacked the enlightenment to believe in the equality of every human. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) found that separate facilities, regardless of their equality, were unconstitutional. However, Scott and Quinn (2014), identified four areas that have interfered with the development of quality, desegregated schools since *Brown*. “First has been the early and persistent resistance from many White policy makers and parents to the implementation of desegregation in public education” (Scott & Quinn, 2014, p. 751). As Philip (2012) pointed out, the idea of public education became much more difficult to support for some Americans when “the public was forced to include non-White” (p. 39). Secondly, the issue was muddied during the late 1970s and 1980s, as a focus on excellence, as compared to other countries, and the achievement gap between White and non-White students evolved (Scott & Quinn, 2014). The inception of color-blindness led the legal system to become less responsive to claims of segregation based on race (Scott & Quinn, 2014). “Under this doctrine, schools are segregated not because of housing, labor, transportation, or educational policies but rather because they reflect the residential and schooling preferences of parents” (Scott, 2014, p. 752). Indeed, Perlstein (2004) cited a 2002 study, which found that “the courts, educational researchers, policymakers, and administrators largely abandoned integration” (p. 290). Finally, the emphasis on running schools as businesses further complicated the issue, allowing the concepts of choice and
competition to be utilized as an explanation for racially isolated schools (Scott & Quinn, 2014).

However, as Anyon (2014) stated, “the underlying cause of school segregation is housing segregation itself” (p. 99). Teachers interviewed by Goldring and Smrekar (2000) expressed similar concerns, one stating, “Until housing patterns can be changed and people live together, like you know your neighbor and I know mine, there is no such thing as [racial] integration” (p. 30). She went on to say, “I think we are worse off than we were before, particularly black children. Once their schools were eliminated and they were bused into other areas, their culture, their heritage, their history, it was ignored. It still is” (Goldring & Smrekar, 2000, p. 31). In diverse schools, racial conflict often leads to incidents of racism and classicism, as found in Rivera-McCutchen and Watson’s (2014) investigation into one recently integrated suburban high school. Such conflicts are not surprising, given the differences in cultural capital between White and non-White students, as well as high-income and low-income students, and the various ways in which these differences are rewarded or punished in educational institutions.

**Cultural capital and schools.** Rury (2013) defined cultural capital as a “command of certain types of information and ability that are valued or respected by others with social status” (p. 10). This definition is somewhat limited, in that it privileges the type of cultural capital that garners respect from dominant members of society, or those with social status. Howard (2010) promoted a more inclusive definition, acknowledging that cultural capital is built in all of us through the various experiences we have in life and, based on our sphere of influence, may or may not foster success in school and society. In
our homes, with our family and friends, our cultural capital is generally a reinforcing asset. However, for many students, cultural capital either negatively influences their interaction with institutions in our society or is completely disregarded in those interactions. Given the stratification of our social system Lareau (2011) noted, these occurrences are certainly not random.

Throughout Lareau’s (2011) study of children from middle-, working-class, and poor backgrounds, she observed stark differences in how students’ cultural capital was reinforced or punished by society. In all instances, she found that how parents interacted with their children at home either produced smoother relationships at school or more friction. In particular, Lareau (2011) cited the detailed, hectic, and personalized schedules of activities common to the lives of middle-class children as one way their families prepared them for school success. In the case of Garrett Tallinger, Lareau (2011) noted, “By not mentioning money, the Tallingers and other middle-class parents convey a subtle sense of entitlement to their children. Garrett and his peers are never denied participation in an activity because of its cost” (p. 59). This sense of entitlement hearkens back to Alexander’s statement at the beginning of this section. Lareau (2011) found that children like Alexander, from working-class and poor backgrounds, generally lacked this attitude of entitlement. In the school environment, the perception of entitlement displayed by middle-class families and their children led to advocacy for and realization of important advantages, advantages not granted to working-class and poor families simply because they did not expect them (Lareau, 2011). Howard (2010), agreed, stating, “As a result of our unequal society, school curricula and practices are frequently Eurocentric, biased, and
one-sided, thereby negatively affecting students of color, girls, and low-income students” (p. 45; Anyon, 2014).

Such a one-sided approach does not have to be the reality. If the cultural capital of all students was valued, or as Rury (2013) advocated, rewarded with “greater access to credentials or other forms of social recognition” (p. 11), it would be one way of leveling the playing field and providing educational justice. That type of change would require schools to truly become more student-centered. This type of student-centered learning that ascribes value to all children’s cultural capital allows students to “define their own experiences, to generate their own hypotheses, and to discover new ways of categorizing the world” (Langer, 1997, p.135). It requires a belief in there being more than one right answer.

Whether one believes the socialization that occurs in schools is an intentional process meant to maintain the stratification of society (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012) or merely sees it as an unfortunate byproduct, the reality is that schools “privilege vocabulary, knowledge, and reasoning” (Lareau, 2011, p. 129) of the type that middle-class children are exposed to at home for multiple years before ever arriving at school. Working-class and poor children learn important skills of creativity, flexibility, and respect during their early years that are not privileged in the same way upon starting Kindergarten (Lareau, 2011). Essentially, “the social class resources purchased by affluence are certainly the educational ‘basics.’ They are demanded by curriculum and pedagogy, and rewarded by colleges and the labor market” (Anyon, 2014, p. 87).
The ways in which schools already privilege a dominant (White, middle-class) perspective have only been reinforced by the education reform movement of the last two decades. Instead of stepping back and evaluating the “achievement gap” by asking the question “What is achievement?”, reformers have instead sought to further refine what achievement looks like. “Elites want knowledge to be about efficiency, measurement, objectives/outcomes/benchmarks, profiteering, and corporate capitalism” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 109). By continuing to focus on logistics - the what - instead of ideology - the why - “broader, institutional arrangements around race and class remain unchallenged. The consequences of neglecting ideology include the predictable failure to explain why minority, especially Black and Latino, students do not seem to benefit from many, if not most, school reform programs” (Leonardo, 2003, p. 37). The lack of attention to the cultural capital all students bring to the classroom cannot be ignored as a fundamental cause of this perceived failure. I, too, share Theobald’s (2001) fear:

“I fear that the assumption underlying our current reform agenda - that there exists a fully specifiable and common pathway to success in our society - is providing socially advantaged children with much greater ability to decide the course of their lives than is provided to disadvantaged children” (p. 614).

**Urban education.** Urban schools have received far more attention from education reformers in the battle to overcome the “achievement gap.” While as Crampton (2010) accurately stated, “there is no universal definition of an urban school district” (p. 33), the United States Department of Education labels schools in cities larger than 250,000 people as urban (Crampton, 2010). The Council for Great City Schools specified schools
“located within large cities and school districts with 35,000 or more students” (Crampton, 2010, p. 33) as urban. Since urban schools serve very diverse populations, and the “achievement gap,” by definition, focuses on non-White populations, there is some logic to the amount of effort exerted by reformers to improve urban schools (De Blois, 2008).

The challenges faced by urban school districts are cause for concern as well. From teacher shortages to funding disparities to bureaucratic complexities, each day in an urban classroom brings a fresh struggle (Howard, 2010; Kozol, 1991; Lareau, 2011). In each urban classroom, the ultimate opportunity to address student achievement rests in the interactions between teacher and student. While one, overtly biased researcher, Rebecca Payne (1993), attributed the low achievement of urban children to an obsession with drug culture that leads to educational disengagement, Guy (2009) found “it is more likely that the lived experiences of the individual as well as perceptions of social and structural inequalities contribute to the devaluation of education (p. 296). Scherer (1996) believed the mismatch between the cultural experiences of the adults placed in urban schools and that of their students lies at the heart of the issue. A study of three White, male Assistant Principals conducted by Ragsdale (2013) found that none of them perceived any economic challenges faced by the Black students attending their schools. In addition, Finn and Voelkl (1993) pointed out that the continual negative comparison to White students increased “disidentification from school among African Americans” (p. 253). Perhaps more important is the reality that “the groups currently proposing radical solutions to the problems of urban schools are traditionally wary of, if not hostile to, these urban residents” (Brown, 1997, p. 204). As identified in the School Finance section
of this chapter, real solutions must involve increases in per pupil funding coupled with supports for school success, such as tutoring (Callahan, 2010; Crampton, 2010).

The literature tends to agree on what authentic solutions, beyond additional funding, would entail. First and foremost, “we need the full weight and authority of the federal government to shift our cultural thinking about education and its inextricable link to equity and justice and the future of this democracy” (De Blois, 2008, paragraph 8).

Upon receipt of appropriate resources, Theobald (2001) recommended a three-step approach to addressing change in urban education:

1. Consider whether the proposed solution actually addresses the perceived problem and whether it targets a primary interest for the school;
2. Ensure the evaluation of a school’s quality examines the level of care and concern demonstrated by adults interacting with children, regardless of a measured impact on achievement; and
3. Prioritize work that addresses inequities and positions children from disadvantaged families to increase their societal station.

Sylvia L. Peters emphasized the evaluation of adult behavior inside the building and out (Scherer, 1996). Levin (2009) cited a program, First Things First, as one focused on “small learning communities, instructional improvement, and teacher advocacy for each student” (p. 10). Similarly, Peters, speaks of the importance of teachers coming early and staying late, as well as improving their own attendance rate (Scherer, 1996). In addition, she recommends engaging parents by giving them authority over decisions within the building through inclusion on the school
improvement team, training as instructional volunteers, and having them advise on curriculum writing (Scherer, 1996).

As Theobald (2001) recommended, actions need to be oriented toward the reversal of inequity. While much of this work can take place inside of schools, a great deal must also occur beyond the school walls (De Blois, 2008). Noguera (2015) recommended linking high-poverty schools to “hospitals, health clinics, universities, and social services agencies so that the children’s health, nutrition, and housing necessities can be met and so that educators can focus on what they were trained to do: educate children” (p. 8). However, he also pointed out that “full-service schools” (p. 9) must be assisted by a full-scale plan to address poverty (Noguera, 2015). Anyon (2014) agreed, citing increased minimum wage, creation of jobs in the urban core, improved public transportation, increased taxes for the highest wage earners and corporations, and programs to share the proceeds as necessary changes to truly impact urban education.

**School choice.** Notably, the researcher-suggested remedies in the previous section do not include options of school choice. While there is literature that supports this measure as a viable means of improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged students, other evidence counters that popular claim. Although some may view school choice as a relatively new phenomenon, school systems have been experimenting with the practice since shortly after *Brown v. Board of Education* (Brown, 1997). Initially, school choice was primarily supported by conservative voters, who resisted the idea of desegregation, but also found support among Black families who observed the difficulties
their children encountered while trying to attend integrated schools (Brown, 1997; Trent, 1992).

In the current day setting, school choice is often recommended as a way to increase diversity in schools, ensure families have access to the educational programs they desire, and promote educational equality (Harris III, Ford, Wilson & Sandidge, 1991). Indeed, “parents are clamoring not for access to a common school, but for access to a school of their choice” (Lessons of a Century, 2000, p. 12). However, a critical lens reveals goals and outcomes aligned with school choice that are not at all equity-focused. For instance, school choice advocates often do so out of a desire to leave public education, particularly urban schools of poverty (Lessons of a Century, 2000). A closer reading of Harris et al. (1991) uncovered this stance: “A parent’s choice of his or her child’s education is neither a fad nor an idea whose time has passed especially for parents who can afford to live in the community of their choice or to pay for a private education [emphasis added]” (p. 161). One might question, what about parents who cannot afford to live in a community they desire or to pay for their child’s education? Brown (1997) accurately identified this inherent conflict, stating, “Although choice, via privatization or deregulation, and restructuring may be desirable objectives, the adoption of choice and restructuring as buzzwords signaling improved education has a political rather than a pedagogical genesis” (p. 213). Fowler-Finn (1993) surveyed 41 parents considering school choice options in Boston, and found that nine of the 41 “cited characteristics of the student body in Haverhill, particularly its ethnic background, as a motivation to leave” (p. 62). In a study of Philadelphia parents considering high schools other than their children’s assigned school (Richards High School), Neild (2005) reported “for most
parents, the defining characteristic of Richards was the \textit{kind of student} [emphasis added] who attended the school” (p. 280). Finally, Garcia (2008) found students in Arizona exited schools with minority populations of 30% to attend charter schools with 18% students of color. Thus, as Darling-Hammond (2010) and De Blois (2008) recommended, choice is only an equalizer if students can stay where they are and receive a good education, knowing that \textit{all} of their choices are good ones.

“The prevailing thought among school choice experts has been that charter schools would exacerbate racial segregation in American public schools” (Garcia, 2008, p. 591). While this has occurred in cities across the nation, a more serious concern is the failure to address the various issues that contribute to the desire for choice in the first place. While choice proponents argue that the competition only serves to improve struggling schools as they vie for students, the entire movement disregards the numerous social issues that create struggling schools, not the least of which is lack of resources (Trent, 1992; Verstegen, 2000). Finally, school choice has yet to improve factors of school segregation based on race, language, or socioeconomic status, or educational achievement (Scott & Quinn, 2014; Trent, 1992). These societal factors represent a far more complex problem to address than a continued focus on educational reforms.

\textbf{Societal inequities.} Educational justice cannot be fully realized without tackling the increasingly high numbers of children living in poverty in the United States, one of the most significant tests of our time (Rury, 2013). However, a number of systems keep large numbers of people in our country, many who attend urban schools, trapped in a cycle of poverty (Anyon, 2014). Unfortunately, we are a society that has become
acculturated to a world of “haves” and “have nots,” a situation that feels more normal to U.S. citizens than anything approximating true equality (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). As a result, “the inequality gap of the United States ranks among the highest in...international comparisons” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 155).

Not only do we view the number of people in our country challenged by poverty as part of the landscape, but the way inequality is maintained by our system allows it to go virtually unrecognized by the majority of people (Lareau, 2011). This may be attributable to the influence of dominant culture perspectives versus those from non-dominant cultures (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). “Institutional advantages then are reproduced and expanded over time, thereby transforming individual actions into well-worn social pathways” (Lareau, 2011, p. 265). Eventually we see those advantages labeled as policies that uphold our country’s values of individual rights (Philip, 2012). However, the gain of resources and privilege by one group of people inevitably corresponds with the loss of opportunity by another (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). “Such dual framings...[have] allowed Whites to simultaneously portray themselves as liberal and non-racist while vehemently protecting the privileges and power of White segregated spaces through supposedly democratic processes” (Philip, 2012, p. 32). The result of these unjust systems is a lack of jobs and a wealth of poverty in cities, which contributes to inequity in urban schools (Anyon, 2014). Factors of a life in poverty amplify daily tasks like providing food, clothing, and shelter for one’s children, into insurmountable burdens (Lareau, 2011). This is the quality of life children from disadvantaged circumstances endure daily, directly caused by U.S. policies that reduce access to all areas of social welfare (Many schools, 2009). “The schools must [then] bear an enormous
burden in overcoming the impact of concentrated poverty for the poor and minority children they are committed to educating to high levels (Many schools, 2009, p. 43). The question then becomes, what next?

**Recommendations.** “The first order question is - should the state treat all of its children at least equitably” (Verstegen, 2000, paragraph 32). Virtually every researcher cited in this literature review would answer Arthur E. Wise’s question, as posed by Verstegen (2000), with a resounding yes. The question then, is not whether equity is desired, but how to produce it. Our current educational paradigm has failed to meet this goal, on measure after measure. “When the paradigm can no longer explain or support the anomalies, a shift occurs and a new paradigm is created” (Frattura & Topinka, 2006, p. 339). A survey of theorists resulted in recommendations that focused on three areas: the classroom and school, the community, and society at large.

Within the classroom, use of critical research that is characterized by collaboration between student and teacher is one way to address the “cultural and experiential mismatch” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 364) between urban students and their teachers. Critical research assigns value to students’ voices and experiences and allows teachers to learn as they teach (Lalas & Valle, 2007; Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). In addition, “teacher educators should be willing to push students into the uncomfortable spaces where race is being discussed on an in-depth level” (Howard, 2010, p. 123). The opportunity to examine social inequities, including inequities students have experienced within the school setting, also sets the stage for deeper conversations about race, as well as how racism intersects with other forms of oppression (Lalas & Valle, 2007). Once
students develop a comfort level in their responses, Lalas and Valle (2007) recommended using “critical literacy in expanding students’ responses” (p. 97). All of these techniques support the creation of a cultural democracy within the classroom, which Howard (2010) advocated for as a way to support the formation of students’ academic identities.

**Critical research.** As reported by Steinberg and Cannella (2012), critical research is influenced by beliefs including, among others, the influence of history on human relationships in ways that create structures of power and oppression; context matters and must be considered in conjunction with facts; many oppressed groups accept their oppression and believe in its necessity; and that standard research techniques often, without intention, contribute to the duplication of oppressive systems. As critical research theory provides a lens for the analysis of data in Chapter 4, a brief summary of literature regarding this framework follows.

The foundations of critical research theory align well with a focus on social justice, particularly issues of race and social status (Frattura & Topinka, 2006; Hatch, 2002). “The critical aesthetic asks what is in the interests of all, via democratic engagement in the decision making of culture” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 170). Critical research attempts to understand the ways in which marginalized groups “come to accept and even collaborate in maintaining oppressive aspects of the system” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 105). Several questions can be used as a point of departure in critical research, including “Who/what is helped/privileged/legitimated? Who/what is harmed/oppressed/disqualified?” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 105). By asking these
questions, the criticalist hopes to illuminate for the reader, as well as the participants, the depth of the oppression experienced by those who are marginalized (Hatch, 2002).

Additional outcomes that can be fostered by critical research include uncovering power structures that have gone unnoticed, analysis of language that influences such power structures and prevents their dismantling, and, most importantly, empowering those that have been marginalized by various forms of power (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). As institutions are frequently at the center of oppressive power structures, critical research promotes catalytic authenticity, which “recognizes the importance of institutions changing, not just individuals within them” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 118). In order for institutions to change, however, the people within the establishment must be conscious of their role in the hierarchy and be willing to work against conventional practice (Hatch, 2002).

**Practical application.** Beyond the classroom, school leaders must work to ensure that policies governing the building are helping children, not harming them (Larson, 2010; Theoharis, 2010). Hiring practices must ensure a teaching staff that is professional and committed, and the school climate created by staff needs to receive all families in ways that are culturally relevant (Theoharis, 2010). In addition, the importance of legitimate support systems to foster student achievement by engaging community resources cannot be overlooked (Larson, 2010). The work to create such systems goes beyond the realm of “following a scope and sequence chart, or making certain teachers are following the prescribed grade level curriculum and teaching the content that will be tested on mandated assessments” (Larson, 2010, p. 325). Rather, a leader will need to
become skilled at building partnerships with a wide variety of community agencies (Anyon, 2014; Leonardo, 2003).

Anyone who views him- or herself as a social justice educator must labor to obtain equitable resources for students regardless of their ethnicity, income-level or gender (Philip, 2012; Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). This means working to learn from and with underrepresented neighborhoods, listening to those with different perspectives to learn more about their experiences, and forming coalitions between urban and suburban schools (Anyon, 2014; Miretsky et al., 2016; Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). Resistance should be expected, both from the school community and beyond (Theoharis, 2010). “When educators work with community residents as equals and as change agents to develop community power, movement building is taking place; schools typically improve and student achievement increases” (Anyon, 2014, pp. 173-174).

Summary

Chapter 1 provided a framework for my interest in the answer to the question, “Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?” The personal experiences shared in Chapter 1 also inform my desire to know more about “Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?”, my secondary research question. My initial contemplation of these concepts influenced my decision to research the areas of quality education, educational justice, and school finance. Knowledge gained from those inquiries resulted in the addition of urban education and school choice as literature
sub-categories. My research process led me to investigate critical research as well, due to its strong connection to issues of social justice.

Chapter 2 provided significant detail regarding all of these areas. Components of quality education reviewed included critical and deep thinking, school culture, and opportunities to develop interests, as well as the influence of suburban and urban perspectives and parental involvement on the perception of quality education. Another component in the literature found to be prevalent among definitions of quality education is the focus on post-secondary options. The section on the broad definition of quality education concluded with information regarding the impact of the U.S. paradigm on our collective perspective of quality education.

Information regarding various models of quality education followed, and included characteristics of 21st century education, constructivism, culturally responsive pedagogy, community schools, and alternative education. Available literature on the student definition of a quality education was reviewed, followed by a detailed description of critical and democratic education, theories closely aligned with the philosophy of this research.

The second major section of the literature review covered school finance from a variety of angles. Information regarding the various funding models was shared, with significant description of the foundation model (which is the most commonly used model in the United States) included. Property taxes as a source of school funding were analyzed, followed by several approaches to funding equalization, including Weighted Student Funding, equity and adequacy comparisons, and Local Educational Foundations.
The vast amount of litigation and the lack of significant change that has resulted comprised the next section of the analysis, and the review of school finance literature was completed with a report of potential alternatives and expert recommendations.

The final section of the literature review outlined the theme of educational justice. A description of the concept was followed by research regarding the various ways in which educational justice is evidenced in the United States. Topics included segregated schools, cultural capital, urban education, and school choice policies. In addition, evidence of the varied societal inequities that impact educational justice was provided. Recommendations for how to remedy the issue completed the section, including a description of the critical research perspective, which frames my choice to include this lens in my analysis procedures.

The vast amount of research contained in Chapter 2 certainly suggests that no additional information about these topics is needed. However, the foci of my research, Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?; and Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students? required a more subtle reading of the questions. To obtain student perspectives about the quality of their education with a spotlight on equity, several focus groups were conducted with alumni from both a suburban and an urban high school. For each group of graduates, both racially homogeneous and racially mixed groups were interviewed, with the goal of gaining a sense of the students’ lived experiences. These phenomenological focus groups were
contrasted with elite interviews with the principals from each school. Student responses from the focus groups informed the interviews, along with the analysis of the budget from each school. Grounded theory and critical analysis were used to examine the findings from these three data sources, as I sought to understand whether the adult perspectives of quality education aligned with their budgetary decisions, how closely the student definitions of quality education matched the adults’ perspectives and decisions, and what role equity of resources played in the contrast of these two school communities. Chapter 3 provides greater detail on the aforementioned methodology and its connections to the research questions.
Chapter 3

As previously described, my research seeks to understand how students view their education. Specifically, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?* Further, I hope to answer the question, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?* Chapter 3 focuses on how I answered these questions via my research methodology. I begin by describing the qualitative research paradigm I selected, followed by discussion of the research design, including procedures, participants, and instrumentation. The chapter concludes with details on how I collected and analyzed data, including potential limitations of my research model.

Paradigm

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) describe qualitative research as “methods based on interpretive/constructivist epistemology and numerical data” (p. 6). Further, they define a qualitative researcher’s purpose to include “discover[ing] themes of participants’ meanings” (p. 324). Through my research, I want to develop an understanding of how students view their education: what they define as a quality education, whether they believe they received a quality education, and what bearing school resources had on the quality of their education. I entered into the process with some ideas of my own, but with no preconceptions regarding the students’ perspective on this issue. I sought to learn about the reality of the student experience by talking with students. Their behavior was studied “as it occur[ed] naturally” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 321), a hallmark of qualitative research.
While I worked to remain open to student perspectives, I also recognized my own positionality, and that my perspective is quite political in nature (Hatch, 2002). A number of factors contribute to my point of view, including my gender, work as an educator, level of education, political viewpoints, and my marriage to a Liberian man. Not only that, growing up in a rural state with limited educational access has certainly shaped my views regarding educational equity (Hatch, 2010). These experiences led me to wonder about levels of oppression inherent in the educational system, an example of positionality (Hatch, 2010). “All research, whether willing to admit it or not, carries the hopes and desires, imperatives and motivations of the researcher as an embodied and socially located being” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 172).

When reading how I collected data from my participants and documents, an outsider may view the initial data points as unconnected; however, as a qualitative researcher, my goal was to work with the data, allowing the findings to emerge from the details shared by contributors to my study, using grounded theory as an analysis strategy (Charmaz, 2014; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The conclusions I drew through my interpretation of the information illuminated the connections between the data sets. In addition, my personal elucidation of the information exemplifies another way in which my positionality may influence the final results (Hatch, 2010).

**Research Design**

I embarked on a phenomenological study aimed at an explanation of how graduates view the quality of their education when juxtaposed with issues of equity. Approval to conduct the study was received from Hamline University’s Human Subjects Committee in October, 2016. Focus groups with graduates of a Midwestern urban high
school and a suburban high school from the same metropolitan area provided much of the data. The goal of using the focus group method was to gain insight into how students, both collectively and individually, perceived their high school experiences. That data was compared to data collected from elite interviews with the principals from each school. Finally, document analysis of each school’s budget and demographics helped verify equity of resources, as well as whether there are connections between the principals’ values and the graduates’ experiences regarding quality education.

**Phenomenology.** “A phenomenological study describes the meanings of a lived experience” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 24). My own lived experience includes many years as part of the American educational system, both as a student and as an educator. My years as a student were largely successful. I understood how to achieve within the provided parameters and enjoyed being a student. For the majority of my career as an educator, I viewed our educational system through this lens - that of a successful student who believed in the ideal the system sets forth: those who apply themselves will achieve success. While I still believe that hard work is key to success, my experiences working in urban education have opened my eyes to the sizable impact that inequality of resource and opportunity plays in student achievement, regardless of individual effort.

Throughout my career as an educator I have observed, and often participated in, the evolution of educational change. Despite many heartfelt attempts by every educator I know, none of the reform initiatives I have participated in have resulted in any significant impact on the “gap” that receives so much focus in education. That experience, coupled with my observations of how our educational system often negatively impacts students of
color, led to my interest in phenomenology. “The purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe and interpret the experiences of participants regarding a particular event in order to understand the participants’ meanings ascribed to that event” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 346). I believe we have missed an opportunity to understand how the educational system is experienced through the eyes of a student. By conducting a phenomenological study, I hope to gain an understanding of the experiences of students from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, with the goal of clarifying what quality education truly means to my participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

My interest in phenomenology is born from a deep wondering I have about how educational experiences of others may differ from my own (Van Manen, 2014). The investigation of that question requires comprehension of how students experience education rather than continued focus on implementing adult theories of education reform. By necessity, I must “start with lived experience, with how something appears or gives itself to [me]” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 32). The fact that educational reform has been relatively unsuccessful points to a need to attach greater importance to the actual lived experiences of students and to look for meaning in what steps should be taken next (Van Manen, 2014).

Due to my own success as a student, through a phenomenological approach, I must engage in what Van Manen (2014) refers to as “bracketing” (p. 215). To bracket means to set aside my own assumptions, based on my positive educational experiences as a student, teacher, and administrator, in an effort to remain open to interpretations of the system that differ from my own (Hatch, 2002; Van Manen, 2014). In addition, I need to “suspend my ‘knowledge’ of science...to gain insights into the prereflective meanings
that may show themselves in an ordinary experience” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 217), as shared by the participants in my study. In other words, phenomenology is not about the proposition of a hypothesis and an attempt to prove said theory, but rather it is a “philosophic method for questioning” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 29). To that end, the questions I asked aimed to stimulate participants’ thoughts about the ideas of quality education and equity, but in a way that allowed for multiple perspectives. As Senge (2006) stated, “If I can ‘look out’ through your view and you through mine, we will each see something we might not have seen alone” (p. 231).

Methods

I used three different methods to gather data in response to my research questions: Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?; and Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students? Graduates of an urban and a suburban high school engaged in focus group interviews, principals from each of those high schools participated in an elite interview, and documents containing budgetary and demographic data were analyzed. The following subsections provide greater details about each method, as well as the participants in my research.

Focus groups. Focus groups are characterized by “1) a small group of people, who 2) possess certain characteristics, 3) provide qualitative data 4) in a focused discussion 5) to help understand the topic of interest” (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 6). Essentially, focus groups are a form of interview involving multiple participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Focus group conversations were held with alumni in
non-school spaces close to each school’s neighborhood, such as community rooms in spaces like the YMCA and local grocery stores. The meetings lasted from 60 to 90 minutes each. Focus groups were audio-recorded, and transcribed by a professional service prior to analysis. My use of focus groups allowed conversation to develop naturally, with questions used as a means to focus the topic when needed. While the interview guides were a resource to ensure the focus groups stayed on topic, I maintained an openness regarding the evolution of the conversation.

Hatch (2002) defines focus groups as “sets of individuals with similar characteristics or having shared experiences...who sit down with a moderator to discuss a topic” (p. 24; see also, Krueger & Casey, 2015). The intent of a focus group interview is to uncover a deeper understanding of a particular experience or phenomenon (Krueger & Casey, 2015; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In particular, focus groups are appropriate when ideas generated by a group are of interest (Krueger & Casey, 2015). “By creating a social environment in which group members are stimulated by one another’s perceptions and ideas, the researcher can increase the quality and richness of data through a more efficient strategy than one-on-one interviewing” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 363). Therefore, I assembled focus groups comprised of graduates of the two schools, with a preference for alumni from the previous five years. The involvement of graduates from both suburban and urban high schools allowed me to address the latter part of my research question, regarding equity. Charmaz (2014) defines this as “initial sampling, [in which] you establish sampling criteria for people, cases, situations, and/or settings before you enter the field” (p. 197).
In accordance with Hatch’s (2002) description of qualitative research elements, I aimed to engage participants that mirror the ratios of the various racial groups comprising each school’s population. The target size of each group was six to eight participants, with the desired mixed group from the suburban school made up of 38% graduates of color and 62% White graduates. The urban school’s mixed group target ratio was 79% alumni of color and 21% White graduates (Minnesota Report Card, 2015). Within the non-White groups from each school, I attempted to mirror the racial groups present in each institution. To represent the urban school, I attempted to engage a group made up of graduates who identify as 44% Black, 44% Latino, 4% Asian, and 4% Native American, in an effort to represent the ratios of each group within the school population. With regard to the non-White group representing the suburban high school, I sought a sample made up of 55% Black graduates, 24% Latino graduates, 18% Asian graduates, and 3% Native American graduates, again, intended to represent the ratios of each group within the school population. I worked with graduates who attended school under the principals employed at the schools between 2011 and 2016. These principals also participated in the elite interviews.

Krueger and Casey (2015) recommend generation of a pool that meets standard requirements, listed in the previous paragraph, followed by arbitrary selection of participants from that group. When I contacted the graduates to invite their participation, I asked those who agreed to participate to bring a fellow alumnus, a procedure known as snowball sampling (Hatch, 2002). I employed this strategy to bring a greater level of variability to the data I collected, as it allowed for the participation of individuals with whom I have no personal connection. The samples were homogeneous in the sense that
each focus group was made up entirely of alumni from that specific school, but also fit the definition of stratified purposeful samples, which “include individuals selected to represent particular subgroups of interest” (Hatch, 2002, p. 98).

Participants were asked to reflect on their shared experience of education at their alma mater, including examining their education through an equity lens. Each group answered the same set of questions, in an effort to maintain a uniformity of structure that allowed for themes to emerge and then be analyzed (Krueger & Casey, 2015). In alignment with researchers’ recommendations, six to eight participants were invited to each focus group (Hatch, 2002; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Because the literature identified a connection between equity of resources and school demographics, several focus groups of different racial compositions were held, in an effort to elicit responses that may be more or less likely to occur in single-race versus multi-racial environments (Krueger & Casey, 2015; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Three focus groups of alumni from each school were scheduled: one involving only graduates of color, one involving only White graduates, and one that was racially mixed. This strategy was chosen to facilitate comparison of data for each school, generating triangulation of ideas (Hatch, 2002). Although saturation, “the point where you have heard the range of ideas and aren’t getting new information” (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 23), was not achieved, my intent was to connect with enough graduates to approximate a representative sample and allow themes to surface. The opportunity for the alumni to speak to my research topic in a group setting produced important cultural knowledge regarding the educational environment of each school.
**Pilot focus group.** Krueger and Casey (2015) advise orally testing focus group questions prior to using them in the data collection phase of research. Accordingly, a mini-focus group was held with four graduates from the suburban high school included in the study. Participants gathered for one hour and answered the initial draft of focus group questions. As occurred in the actual research process, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, reminded of confidentiality expectations, and signed informed consent letters. Following the pilot focus group, the data was reviewed and evaluated based on its ability to answer the primary and secondary research questions of the project. Questions were modified as needed.

**Elite interviews.** Elite interviews with the principals occurred in a space most convenient to the interviewee, which was the participant’s home in one case and the interviewee’s school in another. Both interviews were audio-recorded, with the recordings transcribed by a professional transcription service prior to analysis. The intent of the principal interviews was to allow conversation to develop naturally, with questions used as a means to focus the topic when needed. Phenomenological inquiry dictates that no pre-conceptions about the findings be brought into the data collection process. Therefore, while interview guides were used to steer the conversations, I remained open to allowing the dialogue to evolve freely within a framework focused on quality education and equity.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) define elite interviews as those engaging “persons who are leaders or experts in a community, who are usually in powerful positions” (p. 147; see also McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The intent of these interviews was to obtain a description of the educational quality intended by each leader, as well as to probe
the principals’ understanding of equity as it applies to distribution of resources, both within and outside of their respective school districts (Charmaz, 2014; Hatch, 2002; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). My primary research question, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?*, was predominantly answered via the graduate focus group interviews. However, my secondary question, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?* can only be fully addressed through the analysis of the insight of the educational professionals, combined with an examination of each school’s budgetary resources. Once data collection was completed, I specifically focused on the comparison of student and adult perspectives, which was aided by my decision to include principal interviews in the data collection process. Interviews “can complement other methods such as observations, surveys, focus group interviews, and research participants’ written accounts” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 85). Again, the information gained via conversations with the school principals provided an opportunity for triangulation, both with the budgetary and demographic data as well as the focus group data (Hatch 2002).

**Pilot elite interview.** McMillan and Schumacher (2010) recommend use of a pilot interview following the creation of interview questions, as a “check for bias in the procedures, the interviewer, and the questions” (p. 206). The pilot interview was conducted identically to how the elite interviews were held. A principal answered questions, following a brief narrative regarding confidentiality and the signing of an informed consent letter. Following the interview, questions were evaluated based on the data gathered, as well as feedback from the pilot interviewee. As a result, some questions
were modified, others eliminated, and additional questions added, in an effort to ensure greater validity of data gathered via the final elite interviews.

**Document analysis.** Data collected via document analysis was used to interpret results from the focus groups and interviews, as well as to shape the questions asked in those settings. Documents are useful in a study about equity of resources in education, as they are “powerful indicators of the value systems operating within institutions” (Hatch, 2002, p. 117). For my research I analyzed what McMillan and Schumacher (2010) refer to as documents used for “external communication” (p. 361). These types of documents are available for public consumption (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Charmaz (2014) similarly talks of “extant documents” (p. 47), which are those produced without research participant interaction. Accordingly, the documents I analyzed are considered public knowledge and are freely available via the state Department of Education website.

Various aspects of each school’s budget were reported on and analyzed. In addition, demographic information describing each school was pulled from the state Department of Education website to determine whether alignment exists between populations attending each school and respective budgetary allocations.

As I compared the information about each school available from the Department of Education, I utilized a five-step process recommended by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), which includes “location of artifacts...identification of artifacts...analysis of artifacts...criticism of artifacts...[and] interpretations of artifact meanings” (p. 362).

I used document analysis as an additional means to triangulate the data gathered from the focus groups and interviews. “Unobtrusive data are useful to triangulation processes because their nonreactive nature makes them one step removed from
participants’ intervening interpretations, they provide an alternative perspective on the phenomenon being studied, and they are relatively easy to acquire” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, as cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 119). In addition, the school budgets were interpreted as representations of intent, generated within “social, economic, historical, cultural, and situational contexts” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 46). As such, the information helped inform the conversation about equity with the school principals, in particular (Charmaz, 2014). Following the principal interviews, I re-examined their school budget data, seeking to articulate “congruence - or lack of it - between words and deeds” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 50).

As previously stated, budgetary and demographic data were collected via the Department of Education website, which contains numerous public reports about each school. The analysis of budgetary and demographic data began prior to the principal interviews, and continued beyond the completion of collecting participant data, as a way to check facts against statements made during the interviews. As needed, clarification of budgetary data was obtained via follow-up conversations with each principal.

**Instrumentation**

Graduates of each high school were invited to participate in a focus group, with a goal of six to eight participants in each group. Participants were asked questions regarding their views on quality education, as well as the education they received during high school. Topics of equity within their school setting were covered, along with their assessment of the education their alma mater provided versus that of other schools in the area. Specific questions regarding their experience as influenced by their race were posed as well. Please see Appendix A for a full list of questions.
The principal from each high school was invited to participate in an elite interview. The principals also answered questions regarding their views on quality education and how those views align with the education provided by their respective schools. However, the principal interviews additionally included a focus on resources and how resources impact education, as well as their perception of the state of equity within their schools. Principal interview questions are listed in their entirety in Appendix B.

Participants

The suburban school in my study, hereafter referred to as Hartford High School, is located in a Midwestern metropolitan area, and lies within the second-ring suburb of Hartford. The Hartford school district includes one high school, two junior high schools, six elementary schools, one immersion academy, and served 6,958 students during the 2015-2016 school year ("Minnesota Department of Education," 2016). As a whole, the district’s demographic breakdown includes students who identify as 57.1% White, 24.3% Black, 9.9% Hispanic/Latino, 8% Asian/Pacific Islander and 1% American Indian/Native American. Hartford High School is somewhat less racially diverse than the district as a whole, educating a student body that is 61% White, 21% Black, 9% Hispanic/Latino, 8% Asian/Pacific Islander and, statistically, 0% American Indian/Native American ("Minnesota Department of Education,” 2016). Hartford graduates that participated in the study identified as 67% White, 27% Black and 6% Asian/Pacific Islander. There were no Hispanic/Latino or American Indian/Native American participants.

The Hartford school district draws from a number of nearby suburban areas, and educates students from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, providing Free/Reduced Lunch benefits to 37.6% of its student population. A much smaller portion
of students, 12.5%, qualify for Special Education, and an even smaller percentage, 7.6%, receive Limited English Proficiency supports (“Minnesota Department of Education, “2016). Less than 1%, statistically, of the district’s entire population was identified as Homeless/Highly Mobile during 2015-2016 (“Minnesota Department of Education,” 2016).

Students that attend Hartford High School also represent varied economic backgrounds, with 35% receiving Free/Reduced Lunch. Hartford High School is significantly less diverse than the district as a whole with regard to students identified with Limited English Proficiency, as only 3% of the total school enrollment qualifies for these services. Students receiving Special Education services comprise 11% of the student population, and 1% of the student body was classified as Homeless/Highly Mobile during 2015-2016 (“Minnesota Department of Education,” 2016).

The urban school in my study, hereafter referred to as Henry Ford High School, is located in a Midwestern metropolitan city, and lies within the city limits. Henry Ford High School is part of the Tinseltown (pseudonym) school district, a large urban district, which served 36,645 students during the 2015-2016 school year (“Minnesota Department of Education,” 2016). Tinseltown is much more diverse than Hartford, educating 34.4% White students, 37.4% Black students, 17.9% Hispanic/Latino students, 6.5% Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 3.8% American Indian/Native American students (“Minnesota Department of Education,” 2016). In terms of representation, the ethnic populations in Henry Ford High School are somewhat more evenly distributed than in the district as a whole, with a breakdown of 14% White, 25% Black, 25% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander and 3% American Indian/Native American students during
Henry Ford graduates that participated in the study identified as 50% White and 50% Black. There were no Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander or American Indian/Native American participants from Henry Ford High School.

Unlike Hartford, the Tinseltown district primarily draws its students from within the district’s attendance area, which is confined to the city limits. Students attending schools in the Tinseltown school district represent a higher percentage of students living in poverty than those in Hartford, with 62.5% of the total population qualifying for Free/Reduced Lunch. Tinseltown also serves a higher percentage of students with special needs (15.3% of the K-12 population qualifies for Special Education services) (“Minnesota Department of Education,” 2016). Finally, Tinseltown Public Schools provides Limited English Proficiency services to 24.1% of its total population, and 5.9% of Tinseltown Public Schools' students were classified as Homeless/Highly Mobile during 2015-2016 (“Minnesota Department of Education,” 2016).

While Hartford High School is fairly representative of the district’s demographics, Henry Ford High School differs demographically from the greater Tinseltown population in a number of ways. It should be noted that the size of the Hartford school district results in only one comprehensive high school, while the larger number of students served by Tinseltown Public Schools requires seven comprehensive high schools and a number of contract alternative schools to educate all high school students. Henry Ford High School provides Free/Reduced Lunch benefits to 71% of its student body, higher than the district as a whole. Henry Ford’s population with special needs also exceeds that of the district, coming in at 22%, as does the number of students
who receive Limited English Proficiency services, which comprise a third of the school population (33%) (“Minnesota Department of Education,” 2016). The school’s students identified as Homeless/Highly Mobile fall more in line with district numbers, with a total of 5% in this category.

Overall, Henry Ford High School can be described as a school serving primarily underprivileged populations, while Hartford High School serves a more privileged group of students who are mostly white and of higher socioeconomic standing. These differences are also represented in the funding allocations for each school.

Setting

The focus groups were conducted in locations with reasonable proximity to the graduates’ alma maters. Students from Henry Ford High School were interviewed in the community room of the YMCA located across the street from the school. Hartford graduates were interviewed in the community room of a Byerly’s grocery store, located approximately one mile from the school. All focus groups were conducted with participants sitting around rectangular tables, and included refreshments. Each focus group ranged from 60-90 minutes in length.

The elite interviews were conducted in one-on-one environments. Henry Ford’s principal requested that the interview be held at his home, and the interview took place with participant and researcher sitting side by side on a couch. The Hartford principal requested the interview take place in her office at school, and participant and researcher sat next to each other at a table for the interview.
The atmosphere for all interviews was comfortable and relaxed. Minor interruptions occurred when the principals were needed by other parties and the focus group participants left and returned to the room for various reasons.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis began as data were collected, and continued throughout the data collection process and beyond its completion. A grounded theory approach to data analysis frames this aspect of my study, influenced by a critical perspective. Further description of grounded theory and critical research can be found in the following subsections.

*Grounded theory.* I chose grounded theory as a data analysis method for several reasons. Primarily, as I am interested in revealing student-generated definitions of quality education, grounded theory supports that process. More specifically, I am interested in constructivist grounded theory, which Charmaz (2014) defines as “a systematic approach to social justice inquiry that fosters integrating subjective experience with social conditions” (p. 326). The social conditions that contribute to demographic and budgetary differences between the urban and suburban high schools from which my participants graduated resulted in contrasting experiences with, and views about, education.

“The intent of a grounded theory study is very specific: to discover or generate a theory that explains central phenomena derived from the data” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 346). As I interacted with my data, I used a process of coding to identify similarities among participants’ responses. Coding is generally defined as a process involving the use of keywords or terms, which are assigned to any data thought to
be similar in nature (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The process of coding allows the researcher to return to the ideas later and use them to begin constructing theory from the data (Charmaz, 2014). In addition to the ideas expressed explicitly by participants, “we also try to locate participants’ meanings and actions in larger social structures and discourses of which they may be unaware” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 241).

The ability to connect the participant data to larger societal structures provides another compelling reason for my choice of a grounded theory analysis. Like Charmaz (2014), I believe that “social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed” (p. 13). As a result, throughout the data analysis, I continually considered my own positionality and its impact on my study. Undoubtedly, my own past experiences in education, interactions with students and administrators, and beliefs about quality education influence the connections I see among the data and the theories I developed (Charmaz, 2014).

Finally, grounded theory is particularly suited to my study due to the types of data collection I chose, which included focus groups, elite interviews, and document analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). An important component of grounded theory analysis is the process of theory construction, which utilizes both the participant data I collected, as well as data obtained through document analysis. Charmaz (2014) provides a visual example of the process, found in Figure 3.1.
Critical research. In addition to the lived experience of graduates I uncovered via phenomenological inquiry, I brought a critical perspective to analysis of my data. Perhaps I could even be defined as a criticalist, “a researcher, teacher, or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 15).

My research question centers on an institution (high school), as well as on inequities that occur within the institution and beyond its walls. I engaged students from multiple backgrounds in focus group interviews, where their perspectives were heard in community. “Such a critical aesthetic understands that the social contexts we inhabit are crafted according to specific desires and that these must be interrogated and critiqued if
hope for genuine democratic participation in the information and operation of our world is to occur” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012, p. 170).

Ultimately, my hope is that my research will contribute to a movement that I see beginning to take hold in our country. I want to believe in the ideals America claims to represent. I maintain we must apply a critical lens to the educational system if those ideals are ever to become a reality.

**Scope, Delimitations, Assumptions, & Limitations**

This final section of Chapter 3 serves to address factors that impact validity. Maxwell (2013) recommends a seven-step checklist to ensure validity. In the following subsections I will reference several aspects of Maxwell’s (2013) checklist, as I provide information regarding scope, delimitations, assumptions, and limitations.

**Scope and delimitations.** This study attempts to answer the question, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?*, along with a secondary research question: *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?* By limiting the focus to high school graduates, larger issues surrounding the quality of education, particularly those related to K-8 and post-secondary models, are not addressed. My study is limited to the perspectives of high school graduates only, with a definition of a quality education based on their perspectives and the perspectives of their high school principals. Similarly, resources identified to provide a quality education solely reflect the actual funding provided for the schools included in the study, along with the respective principal’s input regarding the impact of financial resources via interview. These foci
were chosen based upon my own experiences in education, working in both suburban and urban districts, and at all levels K-12. I have observed few attempts to involve student voice in the reform of education, and would like to know more about how students view the educational system. As older students are most likely to be capable of articulating their perspectives, I chose to focus on high school graduates. I interviewed graduates rather than current students because working with adults provides fewer research barriers with regard to obtaining consent.

Just as the choice to work with high school graduates is a delimitation of my research, so is the use of public budget documents. The document analysis in my study is somewhat general in nature, due to the type of information that is available publicly through the Department of Education. While more detailed budgetary information could be requested from the schools being studied, this would also entail a more complicated review process in order to obtain permission from those institutions. This factor limits the scope of my research, and places primary focus on the graduates’ perspectives as opposed to a detailed analysis of school finance practices.

Assumptions. I brought several assumptions to my research. I assumed the use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews would provide what Maxwell (2013) refers to as “rich data” (p. 126). Following each focus group and interview, I listened to the recordings while following the written transcription to ensure that nothing was missed, meeting Maxwell’s (2013) parameters for using rich data to impart validity. I also assumed I would have multiple participants willing to be contacted post-interview to validate their responses, as I worked through the analysis process. “Respondent validation” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126) requires the “systematic solicitation [of] feedback
about your data and conclusions from the people you are studying.” Finally, I assumed I could use my three data sources: focus group interviews, elite interviews, and document analysis, to provide the triangulation that Maxwell (2013) cites as a measure of validity.

**Limitations.** A primary limitation of my study relates to Maxwell’s (2013) first measure of validity, “intensive, long-term involvement” (p. 126). My personal finances and my work as a full-time school administrator do not allow me to engage in what could be termed “long-term” research for this particular study. Therefore, my results are not likely to be transferable. However, I examined my data thoroughly, including that which is discrepant, as advised by Maxwell (2013), in order to determine whether the theories I generated are credible. “If negative cases emerge in the data...these cases may indicate the need to refine [my] emerging theory” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 199). Participant engagement was a moderate limitation of the study as well. I scheduled a total of six focus groups, three for each school represented in the study. I structured the focus groups as planned, with White participants invited to one, participants of color invited to a second, and a mix invited to the third. Six to eight participants were invited to each group. However, the final data does not represent perspectives of all that were invited due to a number of participants who did not attend. In addition, an entire group (the mixed group of urban graduates) cancelled. Therefore, the data has a gap with regard to perspectives that may be unique to a group of urban graduates who are both White and non-White. In addition, several of the groups involved fewer than six participants. In total, six students from the urban school participated, including both White and non-White students. Participants from the suburban school totaled 15, and included both
White and non-White participants. Maxwell’s (2013) final three articles of validity, intervention, numbers, and comparison, do not apply to my research.

A final consideration with regard to limitations relates to bias, both my own and that of the participants. As the alumni, who are relatively youthful, could only speak from the experiences they have had, their limited exposure to the broad field of high school education likely influenced their perspective and limited their ability to compare their own experiences with those of others. In addition, my proposed sampling procedure, which engaged primarily participants known to me, as well as some unfamiliar to me, likely impacted participants’ bias (Charmaz, p. 29). Regarding the principals, their relationship with the institution, as well as the school district, likely shaped their answers. In addition, their own educational experiences, whether vast or restricted in scope, had impact on their views about both quality education and equity. As an adult educator myself, I am aware that my educational experiences as a student and as a professional have contributed to the views I currently hold about quality education, equity, and how to provide adequate resources. In addition, my personal relationships with individuals from typically marginalized groups have definitely shaped my beliefs about equity.

Nonetheless, I entered into the research process with an open mind, listening to what my participants had to say, and looking for connections between the various data sources. To the best of my ability, the critical nature of my research was held aside during the data collection and grounded theory analysis process.

**Summary**

Chapter 3 has outlined the methodology for my study. I conducted qualitative research, a phenomenological study aimed at answering the question, *Given the context of*...
one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity? I used focus groups, made up of alumni from urban and suburban high schools, to gather data on this subject. A secondary research question, Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?, was addressed through elite interviews with high school principals and document analysis. As I engaged in grounded theory analysis, I searched for connections between the different data points, with the goal of developing theory based on the data. The purpose of my research was served by answering my research questions through the procedures outlined in this chapter. However, my critical interest in this topic can only be satisfied by the discovery of theory within the data that can be used to further my own mission, that of educational justice for all students.
Chapter 4

As I engaged in research to answer my research questions, I used several methods to gather data. My primary research question, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?* is addressed most thoroughly through the data generated by the alumni focus groups. The information gleaned from principal interviews and school budget data informed my findings for a secondary research question, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?*

**Research Methods**

This phenomenological study was conducted within the qualitative paradigm, utilizing focus groups, elite interviews and document analysis as data sources. My pursuit of qualitative data is framed by my interest in the lived experiences of my participants. This particular focus suits the parameters of phenomenology, as it “describes the meanings of a lived experience” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 24). Upon collection of the data, I used a grounded theory process, informed by a critical research perspective, to analyze the qualitative data. My choice to use grounded theory arose from a desire to remain open to the perspectives shared by participants, despite my own critical lens. Charmaz (2014) identifies this as constructivist grounded theory, “a systematic approach to social justice inquiry that fosters integrating subjective experience with social conditions” (p. 326). Various methods of coding helped shape the grounded theory analysis process. I spent a significant amount of time engaged in coding, sifting through the data and looking for ideas that stood out, either due to frequency or relevance to the
research questions. As I moved through various phases of coding, I also wrote personal memos capturing my thoughts and reflections, and frequently engaged in mind mapping, to make meaning from the data. Statistical methods were used to examine the numerical data gleaned from document analysis. The statistical analysis relied primarily on comparison between the revenues and expenditures of the two schools, examining dollars spent per pupil, as well as percentages of the total budget allocated to, and spent on, various categories within the budget.

Focus group data was collected over the course of several weeks, as graduates of Henry Ford High School and Hartford High School were interviewed. All students were asked 13 questions (see Appendix A), as well as a number of sub-questions. Data from the focus group interviews was transcribed and analyzed, and considered prior to conducting the elite interviews. Participants in the focus groups were assigned a code used to identify each student by racial group, gender and alma mater. For example, FH is the code for a female of color from Hartford. Table 4.1 outlines that structure.

**Table 4.1 Focus Group Participant Codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FH</td>
<td>female of color, Hartford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WFH</td>
<td>white female, Hartford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FHF</td>
<td>female of color, Henry Ford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WFHF</td>
<td>white female, Henry Ford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH</td>
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<tr>
<td>MHF</td>
<td>male of color, Henry Ford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WMHF</td>
<td>white male, Henry Ford</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Elite interview data was collected after all focus groups were completed, spanning a two week period. Principals from Henry Ford High School and Hartford High School were both asked 10 questions, along with some follow-up questions (see Appendix B). Data from the elite interviews was transcribed and analyzed, and complimented by the numerical data gathered from document analysis.
Upon completion of the qualitative data collection, I wrote my first researcher’s memo. An excerpt follows:

Yesterday I finished my data collection by completing my second elite interview with a principal from one of the high schools. As I think back across the different groups I talked with, my mind feels jumbled with the various thoughts the participants shared. One thing I noticed yesterday was that even though the interviewee said a great deal more than my other principal interviewee, I felt like I left with a more surface-level understanding of her perceptions about education and equity. While that could certainly be because I know the first interviewee better, I also wonder whether it has anything to do with the approach that Hartford takes to equity and knowing students versus the approach Henry Ford uses. I also wonder whether the types of students served in each school influence the depth of the approach taken by the administrator.

The document analysis portion of the study began prior to collection of qualitative data, involving comparisons of budgetary amounts from both schools. Various state publications were consulted to verify ways in which each revenue and expenditure amount could be interpreted. Following the completion of the qualitative analysis, a second review of budgetary data occurred, with additional comparisons drawn. Greater detail regarding the results of the document analysis is woven throughout subsequent sections of this chapter. The remainder of the chapter is organized around the outline of grounded theory data analysis provided by Figure 4.2, adapted from Saldaña (2016, p. 56) and Charmaz (2014, p. 18).
Figure 4.2: Grounded Theory Steps and Procedures (Phenomenology)

- **Grounded Theory**
- **Central/Core Categories:** Good Teachers, Choices & Exploration, Preparation for the Real World, Diversity, Inequities
- **Focused Coding & Categorizing:** Axial, Theoretical, Focused, Concept & Categorization Coding
- **Memorandum Writing**
- **Emergent Categories:** Choice & Exploration, Good Teachers, Diversity, Preparation for the Future, Privileges, Personal Relationships, Racism/Discrimination, District Culture & Financial Resources, Supports, Inequity
- **Initial & In Vivo Coding**
- **Data Collection:** Focus Groups & Elite Interviews; Document Analysis
- **Research Questions:** Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school students define the quality of their education and its connection to equity? Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?

- **Recruitment & Sampling of Participants:** Henry Ford High School & Hartford High School graduates; Henry Ford High School & Hartford High School principals
Grounded Theory: Coding and Data Analysis

As I engaged in the exercise of analyzing my data and began to construct theory, I followed the process of grounded theory analysis outlined by Saldaña (2016) and Charmaz (2014), see Figure 4.2. The culmination of this analysis generated two theoretical concepts:

- *White supremacy prevents achievement of an equitable, quality education for all students, through systemically racist practices that maintain the status quo.*
- *Structures supporting educational justice, especially access to a caring and qualified teacher, can interrupt white supremacy to create an inclusive environment where all students have equal access to quality education.*

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to outlining the steps taken to arrive at these concepts.

I started with initial coding methods, including in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016). Initial coding requires the researcher to “study [the] data closely - line by line - and to begin conceptualizing [his or her] ideas” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 19). Throughout this first phase of coding, I wrote coding memos about codes likely to contribute to theory or specifically relate to my research questions, which allowed me to scrutinize my coding and categorization process (Charmaz, 2014). In addition, I began to note in vivo codes, which highlight participants’ verbatim responses. “*In vivo codes are characteristic of social worlds and organizational settings*” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 135). These codes attempt to identify words or phrases that symbolize participants’ assumptions (Charmaz, 2014).

**Initial coding: Connections to theoretical concepts.** Upon completion of the initial coding phase, a number of codes surfaced. The frequency of occurrence,
connections to areas of the literature review, and relationship to the research questions all contributed to the significance of these codes. The codes and their connections to the key areas of quality education, educational justice & equity, and school finance are illustrated in Figure 4.3. Quality education was explored in depth in Chapter 2. The numerous facets of a quality education were contrasted with the data, as shown in Figure 4.3. Similarly, educational justice & equity and school finance were the subject of significant analysis in the literature review of Chapter 2. Connections between the literature and the data are illustrated via Figure 4.3.
**Provisional coding.** Saldaña (2016), describes Provisional Coding as a way to “establish a predetermined start list of codes prior to fieldwork...As qualitative data are collected, coded, and analyzed, Provisional Codes can be revised, modified, deleted, or expanded to include new codes” (p. 168). As was the process for my initial coding of the
focus group data, I tallied the number of times particular codes were assigned to the interview data. Table 4.4 contains the Literature Review sub-categories that were assigned as codes to the principal interview data.

Table 4.4: Literature Review Codes: Elite Interview Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature Review Category/Sub-Category</th>
<th>Code Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Capital</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Culture</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal Inequity</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Finance</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Involvement</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Research</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Models</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to Advance in Future</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban vs. Urban</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Choice</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segregated Schools</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to Develop Interests</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Education</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical &amp; Deep Thinking</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The process of coding the elite interview data using my Literature Review categories and subcategories clarified my mental direction as I engaged in the next step of my analysis, which involved coding the elite interview data using concept codes. When I finished that step, I began writing memos connecting participant quotes to the highest frequency concept codes from both the focus group and elite interview data sets.
At this point in the data analysis, some connections between initial codes and the eventual central concepts can be identified. These connections are detailed in the following sections.

District culture and financial resources. The Hartford principal expressed some frustration regarding district culture and equity, specifically a reference to district-level employees confounding internal inequities with external inequities. The concern for image ties to a desire to look for outside influences so that inequitable internal decisions (which support white supremacy) cannot be challenged. At one point she talked about running advanced classes with very low numbers, “There are classes that run at 11 and unfortunately in this [sic] financial times, that's really a difficult thing to do. It's also really looking at, is it fair for this advanced class to run at 11 and this needy class to run at 36, like are you kidding me?” (Hartford Principal, personal communication, January 5, 2017). At another moment during the interview, the Hartford principal stated,

I do know that the layers are -- it's layer upon layer and I know that the people at the district level would argue that internal inequities are compounded by external inequities. But at some point, yeah --Sometimes it's got to stop, correct. At the end of the day, I can't help but have compounded frustration with the district (Personal communication, January 5, 2017).

Henry Ford’s principal also identified district decisions that contributed to a culture of inequity, and the maintenance of systemic racism.

There's [sic] district machinations that create results. If the district really wanted to enact equity, it would clearly look to grow schools by ensuring that schools that are "historically under-enrolled" are receiving more students. In order to do that,
they would have to perhaps require more students to attend those schools and they're unwilling. They've shown over and over again they're unwilling to do that. And one might argue, especially in our zone, that it's not even that. Now, they are unwilling to allow what they claim. If we're working on market politics by and large, what they're now doing in some ways is manipulating the numbers to ensure that market politics don't play out so that Henry Ford doesn't grow greater because that would cause instability at Sousa (Henry Ford principal, personal communication, December 28, 2016).

At another moment during the interview, Henry Ford’s principal directly connected the assignment of student seats at specific schools to the power of white supremacy:

I think it's patterns of inequity and it gets back to -- you know not to sort of rail against the district, but it gets back to exactly what we're talking about which is the school budgets are predicated on assigned seats. Those assigned seats are said to be linked to historical projections or historical numbers, attendance numbers at each site. They're really somewhat loose projections. I think the idea is that the historical attendance guides projections. I would argue that projections reinforce school growth or attrition. What we see and becomes horribly inequitable [sic] is schools that are "successful" are schools that are more selective, which are schools that are perceived as whiter and better. Those schools aren't frequently in this situation because they'll get capped and they'll receive on the front end the budget that aligns with their attendance projection, which is capped. (personal communication, December 28, 2016).
Although many factors impact school and district decisions regarding the factors mentioned by each principal, both class size and the impact of school choice are variables that can be controlled by school and district decisions. The decision by Hartford to run advanced classes with small numbers (which are populated primarily by White students), thereby forcing an increase in non-advanced class sizes (typically filled with students of color) supports an elitist dominance, where those with social capital continue to be advantaged and those who are marginalized receive reduced opportunities. In Tinseltown, the evidence of white supremacy cited by the Henry Ford principal plays out on a much larger scale. The narrative of “good” schools (i.e., White) versus “bad” schools (i.e., non-White) is maintained through student assignment. Although the assignments are predicated on the concept of school choice, the choice being made has its roots in systemic oppression.

*Racism/Discrimination.* The first round of coding highlighted significant struggles at Hartford High School between the white population and students of color, as evidenced by the data. WMH provides an example, describing his conflict with another student, Evan Crockett, over an event referred to by the students as the “Nordic Ski thing.” A racist incident (the Nordic Ski thing/event, a situation in which students on the Nordic Ski team held a “ghetto” spirit day) occurred, led by white students. The administration admonished them, but only after students of color protested. White students expressed anger at the challenge to their dominance, and were shot down by the administration, leading Evan Crockett to post a racist comment on Facebook. Another white student (WMH) saw the comment, but rather than challenging it himself, reported it to the
administration, who then disciplined Evan Crockett again. With regard to the same situation, WMH also described students of color being “roasted” by staff:

There were teachers that had kids that were kind of acting out, that were of color, and they would roast them. It was just like you could see the anger in their voices and it was like this is very palpable. I never got that and none of us probably did because we weren't a kid that was of a different race getting bused in the school. But you're not going to get thrown through a window by a para if you're a White kid fighting another White kid. That's just not going to happen (personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Reactions of students of color to this incident and its response are best understood within the context of resistance to White supremacy, just as the anger of staff and students - often manifested toward students of color - is illuminated by a framework of White supremacy and White fragility. The Hartford principal also relayed a conflict with a non-White staff member, which she attributed to her efforts to hold him accountable to expectations. She spoke of the Nordic Ski situation, for which she felt persecuted and blamed. Conceivably she felt this way because she believed she had responded the best way she could. Yet, how did the environment exist in which the White students felt comfortable holding a ghetto spirit day? It is a clear indicator of the White space, which was maintained by White privilege. The scandal perceived by the principal seemed more related to the student walk out that followed than to the occurrence of the ghetto spirit day itself.

Privilege. Related to issues of racism, privilege also stood out as an important idea during the first round of coding, and a clear structure to maintain the stasis of the
educational system. White students from both schools were able to recognize White privilege at some level. However, students from Henry Ford expressed a perception that they had not benefitted from it during their school experience. “I personally didn't see any but I know that there's always a chance that someone can [sic]. I'm not going to say that there isn't any. There could possibly be some, I just didn't experience [sic] (WFHF, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Students from Hartford alternated between an unwillingness to acknowledge the impact of White privilege and failure to even identify it as a factor.

And almost not even making ourselves culpable but that we exhausted these resources to an extent and because we were busy doing that, taking this time and energy to do that and the space to do it in Hartford, that meant that there were kids that couldn't do it...Not that it's like a culpable thing but if you really think about it, if every single student at Hartford was as involved as we were to some degree, would that have been possible?” (WFH, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Their principal’s statement provides a telling backdrop for that narrative.

So I think yeah, because I think equity is a frame of mind and how as well, when you think about how are you really meeting the needs, how are you really focusing on what is best for students. Not what's best for our staff because that's sometimes how we can get caught up in that or that's for the political -- if you have political parents like we have in Hartford that could advocate strongly. Well, what about these other parents that don't advocate? So I think it plays a huge role
in quality education. I think it needs to be right there. (H Principal, personal communication, January 5, 2017).

The student acknowledges White privilege, though indirectly, sees how it benefited her, but shies away from responsibility for the subsequent impact on those less privileged. Her perspective is reinforced by the principal’s assertion that equity is a frame of mind, rather than an outcome.

Supports. The first round of coding provided examples of the types of supports students connect to a quality education, which are illustrated in Table 4.5. These codes contributed to early researcher thoughts regarding how students define quality education, in response to the primary research question.

### Table 4.5: Supports for Quality Education Identified by Graduates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supports</th>
<th>Henry Ford</th>
<th>Hartford</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers/Staff</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Structures</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Support</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in Activities</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources/Meeting Basic Needs</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Class/School Size</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Focused on Improvement</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Motivation</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Centered</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Common characteristics or needs for a quality education, as identified by graduates from both schools, include: Teachers/Staff, Involvement in Activities and Student Centered.
Notably, access to a qualified teacher is a theme present in the data analysis from early stages through completion. Experiences with caring adults proved to have significant impact on graduates from both schools.

**Personal relationships.** Students from both schools viewed their personal relationships with staff as valuable, both as a support through difficult situations and as a general benefit to access various opportunities and accountability supports. Students of color from both schools spoke of the importance of connecting to staff of the same racial background. In particular, students of color from Hartford mentioned a support staff member (African American) whose office provided refuge when the school environment felt unsafe.

It was just like him, just his knowledge, on top of like when different things were going on in the school, in the building itself with administration, with teachers, with anything, you know you could go talk to him what you said stayed between you and those four walls in such a way. I think that definitely helped (FH, personal communication, December 19, 2016).

Students from both schools, and of all ethnicities, valued the advice and wisdom of older staff members, and were often inspired by their passion for their content area. While they didn’t use the word mentor, the relationships they described could be labeled as such: for example, “I had her my junior and senior year and just loved her, and we had a great relationship and just probably fueled part of my passion for Spanish and made me [sic] what I want to do” (WFH, personal communication, November 26, 2016). Conversely, students also described situations in which the relationship with staff was not supportive, and caused a hindrance in their learning. “I had a brutal time in physics but it wasn't
because of the class. That's all I'm saying” (WMH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

Good teachers. “Good” is the general term I chose to encompass all of the data that graduates shared about ways in which teachers positively impacted their education. There were students who referred to good teachers, but the intent behind the descriptor was to be intentionally vague, since the ways students described the impact were so varied. Specifically, student described good teachers as those who:

- Facilitate student choice and exploration
- Facilitate student ownership of achievement
- Support students in their learning
- Form connections with students
- Connect students to resources
- Care about their students
- Show passion
- Challenge their students
- Change lives
- Make learning fun

Preparation for the future. Just as students agreed on the impact of a good teacher on their education, they emphasized the purpose of education as a preparation tool for their future. While the students were not in agreement regarding whether skills needed for their futures were present in their educational experiences, there were clear patterns regarding which areas were deemed necessary to be prepared for one’s future. Henry Ford students focused on ways in which their high school education was tied to their next
steps, whether college or the work force. Only the students of color at Hartford talked about the future in these process-oriented terms, focused on how education would help them complete the next steps in their lives. The White students at Hartford spoke about the connections to their future in a more concept- or opportunity-based manner, speaking about diversity, challenging coursework, and opportunity to explore their interests. Information shared by White students from Hartford seemed to assume the various life events mentioned by students of color (going to college, getting a job) would occur, regardless of their K-12 educational experience. Their education was not about making those events happen, but rather a means to enrich the experiences and ensure they were well-placed for success in those arenas. Students of color at both schools recognized the ability to navigate whatever system is at play as important. White Hartford students emphasized the need to explore interests as a part of a quality education, but did not focus on need for access. While this did not come up with Henry Ford students, it was alluded to by their principal. He also talked about education as a way to work towards equity.

I do think that when we looked at like things that we've done or with things that I've done at Henry Ford that I think play into the idea of educational justice were to redistribute how we spend our money just in staffing...to cut back on remedial courses that again in my mind were about the enactment of a pedagogy of despair and to reinvest in higher level electives, in arts electives that were again about hope and recognition of students, to around our Latino community, to invest in programming that recognizes the value of their first language or the language, I should say, the language identified with their racial classification (HF Principal, personal communication, December 28, 2016).
Inequity. A number of examples were generated when students were asked to talk about inequities in their schools. Hartford students recognized the inequity between their facilities and those of other schools, specifically recognizing they had access to better facilities. They also spoke about inequity between suburban versus urban educational experiences, though it was unclear as to the breadth of the facts informing their perceptions.

I think one of the most important classes that I took when I was in education was my diverse and exceptional learner class, why I learn about diversity and how to help those who are faced with different opportunities were unable to take all the opportunities that were given. I only took one course on that and I believe that I should have taken like three courses. I think that's important enough in the current state of our country where there's such a large gap, achievement gap between white students and minority students, where we need to know more about it. Of course, there needs to be more money placed into those inner-city schools because especially I think it was last year there was a Twitter handle going on where schools in Detroit didn’t even have toilet seats and they had roaches all over their school. (MH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

Several Hartford graduates cited lack of family support as a negative impact on the urban educational experience, a significant inference considering the lack of evidence shared to support that assertion. One student in particular talked about urban students not wanting to be in school, not seeing the value in the system. However, some Henry Ford students did acknowledge the school’s “developing” nature, which confirmed the Hartford students’ belief that urban schools are working at a disadvantage: “I mean I got
an education but maybe it wasn't to the full extent it could have been, but I mean Henry Ford is a developing -- like it's a developing school and it's progressively -- it's getting better” (WFHF, personal communication, December 21, 2016). However, the Henry Ford students saw their school as developing in comparison to other urban, albeit whiter, schools, and did not mention suburban schools at all.

Another inequity mentioned by students at both schools was the treatment of students in advanced courses versus the treatment of students in non-advanced courses. Several saw greater teacher effort and recognition connected to participation in International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced Placement (AP) classes.

I also had her and I thought -- well, because I remember hearing from my friends who were just in regular World History and I was in AP History and I would, you know, my friend would always be like, "Oh, she prepares for your class and does so much more for your class and doesn’t really do much for the regular World." She brags about the AP World to the regular World (WFH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

A Henry Ford student expressed a similar observation:

[Staff should] encourage average students that way so then they think that they can be or they think that they can get to college that they want to get to. I think that they -- not even just them but staff they really focused in on IB students to get them where they need to go and then they lose focus of other students (FHF, personal communication, December 19, 2016).

Students at both schools saw involvement in these classes as a “White” behavior, one student going so far as to say, “especially if you're African American and you're in
IB, that's like a big thing” (FHF, personal communication, December 19, 2016). However, students of color from both schools spoke about the encouragement they received that influenced their decision to participate in high-level coursework. Sadly, Hartford students talked specifically about how teachers had lowered expectations for students who weren’t A students and spent more time and effort preparing for their advanced classes.

They are there to support a student that's like pretty much already competent enough to do it, that wants to be the A student, and that is going to give a decent shot at it. They're not really prepared for a student that may be brilliant in their own way and have a lot of things to say and maybe has a lot of protests that are valid that aren't being channeled in the right way. They're not really there to equip somebody to learn how to evolve their voice in a way that it can appeal to lots of people. They're there to make sure kids that are pretty good at math can potentially get better at math (WM, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

The access to advanced coursework is an important aspect of providing a quality education. However, the clear differences students perceived regarding teacher effort for advanced versus non-advanced classes sheds light on continued inequities, despite availability of advanced course offerings.

Not surprisingly, students from both schools spoke about inequity of discipline based upon race. It was a more emotional topic for Hartford students, filled with numerous examples. There was commonality between the White and non-White students
in their perception of the administration, as they stated that disciplinary decisions were frequently tied more to PR and image than ethics.

I think there were times when the -- this wasn't like a constant but there were definitely times where I felt like the administration was more concerned about PR and making sure that events didn't blow up in their face than equity or fairness I guess or what would be considered like, you know, okay, this kid did that, you got punished in this way. I see how if I did this, I would get punished in this way.

There wasn't really like a clear line on that. You could kind of get throttled if you did the wrong thing if that was going to have more perception publicly within the high school, within the faculty. Depending on how much your incident blew up, they would be going after you in different ways...It was sort of like there were four problems. Two of them were high visibility or perception and two of them were just not as talked about or known, and they were going to focus on killing the problems that were going to blow up in their face more so than delivering best solution [sic] that had equity among all of them. There were rules, but it was sort of like they could exercise them in whatever way they needed to, to achieve their agenda which definitely seemed present but it wasn’t clear to us what that even was. You felt their presence through the different ways in which they would yank the chain but they weren’t yanking it equally hard each time on each person

(WMH, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

A sentiment unique to the White students from Henry Ford was the recognition of their own minority status within that school.
I think it helped me gain a certain amount of empathy or sympathy, whichever one it is, because it feels bad even saying that I'm slightly a victim of my race because on a larger scale, it's definitely not the case on the national scale but at Henry Ford, there were isolated incidents. It doesn't feel good hearing someone say there's too many White people here (WMHF, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Perhaps the most telling contrast of all was the difference in reaction between the Henry Ford and Hartford principals, having read a scenario about an underfunded, poorly managed school. The Hartford principal said she had never worked anywhere that bad and tried to draw a parallel to a situation in her current district, however one that was quickly resolved. The Henry Ford principal immediately saw the scenario as an almost verbatim description of his own school.

**Diversity.** Surprisingly, there was a much greater emphasis on the importance of diversity among Hartford participants, despite the fact Henry Ford is a significantly more diverse school. It was primarily White students and the principal from Hartford who spoke about the positive impact of diversity. While both students and the principal viewed diversity as a selling point for the school, previous sections have already outlined the ways in which the school functioned as a White space.

**Second phase coding: Focused, axial, and theoretical.** The second phase of coding included focused, axial, and theoretical coding (Saldaña, 2016). “Focused coding means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through and analyze large amounts of data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). One purpose of focused coding is to examine earlier codes and determine their capacity to translate to concepts, and
eventually, to theory (Charmaz, 2014). As categories began to form, I engaged in axial coding, which involves “coding the dimensions of a category” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 19). The purpose of axial coding is to begin the process of bringing data previously broken down by initial coding into cogent focus through the connection of categories to subcategories (Charmaz, 2014). The final coding process I incorporated is theoretical coding, which Charmaz (2014) defines as “a form of coding to integrate and solidify the analysis in a theoretical structure” (p. 19). Theoretical coding facilitates integration of the concepts and ideas that have emerged throughout the coding process, as the researcher moves toward construction of theory (Charmaz, 2014). During this portion of the coding process, I wrote analytical memos, aimed at “examining, explaining, and conceptualizing data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 169).

While I remained open to multiple possibilities, I selected this particular methodology and analysis process based on my desire to illustrate the various inequities that pervade the educational system, as observed during my time as a teacher and administrator. This is a common use of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). The coding and memo-writing processes contributed to the creation of a theoretical framework, which is used to “provide an anchor for [the] reader and to demonstrate how [my] grounded theory refines, extends, challenges, or supersedes extant concepts” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 310) already present in the literature on educational quality and equity. Throughout the analysis exercise, Krueger and Casey (2015) point to the need for examination that is “systematic…verifiable…sequential…[and] continuous” (pp. 140-141). In other words, the process must be clear, result in findings that align with what
others might conclude, make use of appropriate participants and methodology, and ensure that data collection and analysis run concurrently (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

As I engaged in the various levels of coding, I frequently paused and wrote researcher memos, see Figure 4.2, aligned with Charmaz’s (2014) and Saldaña’s (2016) recommended grounded theory construction. As I assigned codes, wrote memos, revised codes, and crafted additional memos, categories began to generate concepts and point toward theory.

**Research question analysis: Concept and causation codes.** Upon completion of my initial round of coding, I returned to the central ideas of my research questions—quality education, equity, and resources—in an effort to identify connections between the data and those pivotal concepts. I read through my early memos, and wrote additional thoughts and ideas as related to each of the main concepts in my research questions. During this phase of my data analysis, I also used two additional forms of coding: concept and causation coding. I tallied the number of times that codes were repeated, using frequency as a measure of importance to further solidify important concepts. For example, “inequity” was assigned to 141 participant quotes. A number of other codes intersected with “inequity” for many of the pieces of data, an example of which is shown in Table 4.6.
### Table 4.6: Inequity Cross-Referenced with Various Initial Concept Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Quote</th>
<th>Related Initial Concept Codes</th>
<th>Memo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“especially if you're African American and you're in IB, that's like a big thing.” (FHF)-Female student of color, Henry Ford</td>
<td>Racism/Discrimination; Privilege</td>
<td>Why? Because participation in advanced academic courses is not expected for students of color, particularly African Americans? Why is that, and where does that messaging come from?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I would definitely say there was racial inequality in situations that you would think would happen that shouldn't happen in a safe space was happening and then when confronted, administration or people, felt like people were being too dramatic or overdramatizing... it's like that's another slap in the face so am I just supposed to keep turning the cheek to it? I think that was something with racial inequality and just discrimination.” (FH)-Female student of color, Hartford</td>
<td>Racism/Discrimination</td>
<td>Minimization of a student’s feelings due to administration invalidating their experience as a person of color. She felt the ghetto day attack personally, the ways she heard people talk felt like mocking of her as a person. Most likely, she had learned to code switch, and having someone appropriate her style of dress, musical preference, speech patterns, was an enormous violation of the community she thought she belonged to.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A similar process was followed for initial concept codes that occurred with high frequency in either of the data sets. These codes are listed in Table 4.7. As the memos were written, all related codes were also notated in relation to each sourced quote.
Table 4.7: Initial Concept Codes Used for Memos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Count-Focus Groups</th>
<th>Count-Elite Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inequity</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for the Future</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice &amp; Exploration</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Relationships</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Teachers</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privilege</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports/Activities/Programs</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism/Discrimination</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge/Passion</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Resources</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Culture</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At times, the overlap between codes generated additional causation codes, which “attempt to label the mental models participants use to uncover ‘what people believe about events and their causes’” (Munton et al., 1999, as cited by Saldaña, 2016, p. 187). Table 4.8 provides examples of causation codes.
### Table 4.8: Causation Coding Generated via Memo Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Concept Code</th>
<th>Causation Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I think that if we had more people to sit with them and encourage them, then they would apply themselves definitely, wholeheartedly.” (FHF)</td>
<td>Personal Relationships</td>
<td>&gt;&gt;Supports&gt;&gt;Access to Individual Help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I would say that we have -- the parents who are most invested or show up at more events, and that includes our leadership team, tend to be more socioeconomically privileged and I'm thinking about the theater parent group...whiter. I think that's definite -- yeah.” (Henry Ford Principal)</td>
<td>Privilege</td>
<td>&gt;&gt;Role of Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“That's like completely rework of the entire culture of our state or of our nation actually because that's, what's really hard is I don't think that there's a value in educators at all. I think we're very disrespected. A lot of families either don't value us and generationally don't value us for lots of different reasons or believe they're entitled to everything under the sun because they've graced us with their presence and their taxpayer money on our schools.” (Hartford Prin)</td>
<td>Privilege</td>
<td>&gt;&gt;Barriers&gt;&gt;Broken System</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Concept and causation coding provided further substantiation for several of the impressions and themes generated by the initial coding process. Focused coding was used to additionally develop the ideas.

**Focused coding: In vivo and versus codes.** After writing memos regarding all of the highest frequency initial codes, I printed all memos and sorted them by the primary code I had assigned to each. I then began regrouping the data, looking for themes. As I sorted the data, I experimented with sorting by school, sorting by gender, sorting by ethnicity and sorting by participant type (student versus school leader). During this process, I reflected on any grouping that resulted in a coherent idea through memo-writing. I also noticed some patterns that led me to use some Versus Coding, which “acknowledges that humans are frequently in conflict, and the codes identify which individuals, groups, or systems are struggling for power. Critical studies lend themselves to Versus Codes” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 124). I used the copy/paste function of my word processing application to create a document containing the original data, any new in vivo or versus codes, and the new memo. An example is provided in Table 4.9.
Table 4.9: Analytic Memo Produced via Focused Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Quote</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Yeah, Art Crawls. I would say the Art Crawls. I think it gave everyone a chance to express themselves in their culture and it brought the community together, so I really like that.” (FHF)</td>
<td>“Express themselves in their culture” “Brought the community together”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Female student of color</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There is a lot of staff that is diverse too. It’s not just one and usually some students can feel that they can relate to one of the staff if they were the same in a way. I feel like that’s what Henry Ford helps with a lot is that it's not just one race. It's multiple. So I never found myself as an outcast or anything like that. It wasn't just me. It was Caucasians and Hispanics and Somali and stuff like that.” (FHF)</td>
<td>“Staff that is diverse” “I never found myself as an outcast”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Female student of color</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I totally am because in IB, the ethnicity wise, I really didn't see any Caucasian. I've seen Hispanic, Somali. I've seen a variety. It was never just all Caucasian.” (MHF)</td>
<td>IB represents school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students of color at Henry Ford felt represented among staff. They saw their culture being celebrated and recognized. They had a place in the IB program. There is a sense of centrality that can be claimed by anyone within the school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Completion of this round of focused coding resulted in some researcher observations related specifically to privilege and equity, which I summarized in two separate memos, “Nordic Ski Team Event” and “Being Othered.” As previously mentioned, the Nordic Ski team at Hartford High School held a “ghetto spirit day,” which occurred during the time the principal was the school leader, as well as during the period many of the focus group participants attended school at Hartford. The incident was mentioned by the principal, as
well as a number of participants, and the reactions were quite different depending on who
recalled the situation. An excerpt from the researcher memo provides details below:

FH, a student of color, viewed the situation as a personal attack as well, but with far more reason to do so. She talks about her issue with use of the word “ghetto” as an adjective, and also talks about how she has learned to code switch, and didn’t appreciate her style of music, dress, or speech being mocked by the ski team. None of the students interviewed were on the ski team. However, dressing like “rappers,” and calling the day “ghetto” spirit both smack of cultural appropriation and stereotyping. There’s little defense for those actions, and it’s interesting that both White participants who shared about the experience in any detail found a way to direct the emotion of the situation back to themselves versus identifying with how students of color must have felt at the time.

As I thought about that particular situation, it led me to consider the concept of being “othered,” the subject of another researcher memo written during that same phase of the study.

A student from Hartford, who came in as an EL student, described how others in the EL program were mocked at times. He was exempt because he was friends with popular students who were basketball players, and so people didn’t make fun of him. Another Hartford student also recalls students being mocked because they were Somali, and laments the fact that she didn’t speak up about it.

In contrast, a White student from Hartford goes into great detail about how easy things were for him while he was there. No discussion whatsoever of being mocked, and even asserts that the only reason he was successful was because
“people knew him,” and it had nothing to do with race. He provides counter-examples in an attempt to prove his belief that all success comes back to individual effort.

Later in the memo, “Being Othered,” I discuss the racial differences between participants from Henry Ford:

White students at Henry Ford also struggled to see their own privilege, stating that choices at Henry Ford are based on one’s individual life and not on race, that many factors impact a student’s experience. While there may be truth to these statements, Henry Ford is not immune from privilege. Students gave examples of ways in which certain populations were treated differently. There was far less acrimony on both sides, however, than was evident at Hartford.

Using these memos, as well as codes generated through concept, causation, in vivo and versus coding, I was able to fortify my thoughts around the dimensions of the main themes of my research questions, quality education, equity, and use of resources. Descriptions of those ideas follow in subsequent sections.

*Quality education: Supports.* Hartford and Henry Ford students identified various resources that supported their success while in high school. For some, it was the allotment of extra time that TASC (Teachers And Students Connecting-an advisory structure) provided to finish up on homework, or having somewhere to go after school. For others, the opportunity to access one-on-one assistance from teachers was pivotal. Formal programs, such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and TASC were mentioned by students from Hartford, while the Henry Ford students were more focused on the individual relationships that provided support. This connects to what
the principals said, as Hartford’s principal spoke about specific programs, while Henry Ford’s principal talked about knowing the “whole student” and being “student-centered.” Hartford’s approach requires financial resources to implement, whereas Henry Ford’s focus centered more on human interaction. Henry Ford students also valued the College and Career Center (CCC), which was a place they could go to get assistance with applications, filling out financial aid forms, and other details related to preparing to go to college. FHF stated,

I feel like Henry Ford has it honestly, just after -- teachers staying after school so it's kind of like if you can't do it at home, that was me. I couldn't do homework at home at all. I had to do it at school. So having that opportunity to stay after school with teachers or just go to the CCC or the Writing Center or the library, when it was open for a longer period of time, then there is more than one place that you can go to. It's not just this is your only option (personal communication, December 19, 2016).

Quality education: rigor. Students from Henry Ford were divided on the level of rigor provided by their education at Henry Ford, but in agreement that rigor is important. While some felt their IB courses made college easier, others felt that IB wasn’t enough preparation.

I'm going to say this but at the same time I also don't agree with it at the same time, but the IB program actually, I like the program and I like how it was laid out and supposed to work just because now in college, it feels like my classes are way easier than my IB classes were. I'm not sure if that's just because IB classes were super stressed out and they emphasize this is so important. But I think having the
IB kind of structure is really nice, kind of having that importance of like we're going to push you harder because this is what you have to expect, but it wasn't what I expected. Now, college isn't anything like what anybody said it was (WFHF, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Hartford students spoke more specifically about the connections between the AP classes they had access to and college, particularly with regard to how to convert the AP classes to college credit. Several students saw the opportunity to earn college credit while in high school as an important advantage. It was clear to Hartford students that they were expected to go to college.

I feel pretty good about Hartford preparing me for college, but one thing I didn’t feel the best about is that there's just so much power that you have as a college student as far as choice goes and I just remember going in freshman year, they handed me like a four-year plan and like you got to take these classes. Looking back, I'm only a junior and I switched the whole thing up. It's completely different than what they wrote down. Had I known some things in high school, had I known that AP classes were -- I mean for me I'm going to a private school. Had I known AP classes would have saved me thousands of dollars, I probably would have taken them even though they were hard and would have taken up my time because they would have just -- it would have transferred in as some general education credits that I wouldn’t have to do that and I could focus on what I actually want to do in college, not take -- I don’t want to do western civilization in college. That's something I easily could have done in high school. I spent my time there and it's more cost-efficient for me (WMH, personal communication,
November 26, 2016).

Upon reexamination of my memos from this phase of the research, I wrote an additional memo, reflecting on how these differences also connect to the concept of equity.

The increasing emphasis on college attendance has been viewed as a measure of equity for the last decade by educators throughout the field. This message was evident in the conversations held during Hartford focus groups, as well as during Henry Ford focus groups. Is pushing college attendance a way to interrupt White supremacy? On its surface, I believe it is, but given the scarcity of jobs, I also question the wisdom of pushing students to amass debt they may not be able to pay off. Those from less privileged backgrounds are less likely to have the fallback supports needed to manage student loans if they aren’t able to secure a job with adequate salary upon college graduation. In addition, the rise in college dropout rate has been an unintended by-product of a focus on college attendance (Researcher memo, March 18, 2017).

*Quality education: choice and exploration.* Students from Henry Ford spoke about the importance of choice as applied to both coursework and activities. They connected that choice to the need to discover personal interests, both as a way to be involved with the school, as well as to determine a future career interest. There was some lamentation of the limited choices at Henry Ford, especially as compared to another nearby high school. Students praised opportunities in music, theater, art, robotics, math, and College Possible.

Probably coming just from personal experience, my best friend went to Sousa,
and so a lot of like the things she was involved in mainly like band concerts and I'd always be at Sousa for that kind of stuff. And then hearing what class that she took or what programs that they do that we don't do, and there have been times where I'm like, I wish Henry Ford did this because I'd totally do it. Like the theater program like before we got it, I was going, Sousa did Grease or something and I was like, wow, we should do that, and then we got the theater program. I feel like that's -- there's certain things that Sousa has that I wish that I could see at Henry Ford, but I don't know if it's because they have more kids than us or what it is, but there are certain things that I would hope to see Henry Ford get not just to be better than them but just have more opportunities for kids like languages. I feel like -- I've heard at least a lot of my friends wanted to have more than three. I know that Sousa had German and Ojibwe and Chinese and stuff like that. I feel like if we could do something like that, that would be pretty cool (FHF, personal communication, December 19, 2016).

Students at Hartford were well aware of the incredibly wide variety of choices available at their school, for both courses and activities. They generally praised the school for offering so many opportunities. WMH stated:

And compared to most schools, absolutely. We forget to think about especially look at our conference and look at the things that we learned compared to what they learned. And I think we definitely have a quality education. Yeah, we might not have the best test scores on standardized tests, but at the same time we are offered so many more courses in a wide variety of things like we're offered shop courses. We had strong music programs. We had -- what else? I don’t know.
Athletics. We had business things. There's a wide variety of classes. I took a class on health care professionals and I got exposed to tons of different professions and got to go on field trips to go visit doctors and things like that. I don't think in other schools you could have the opportunity to do that (Personal communication, November 26, 2016).

Among courses and activities mentioned were spectatorship at basketball games, music offerings, athletics, business courses, health care courses, the culinary program, shop courses, woodworking, AP classes, various clubs, and field trips. However, Hartford students also expressed frustration about the numerous required courses that limited their ability to take advantage of all those choices. Hartford graduates shared frustration about their high school career being a very set path, indicating that having personal choice about what to learn would have been much more engaging, also increasing their personal investment in their education.

Yeah, exploration because I feel like I, I don't know about you guys, but I spent four years like I already have to this, this and this, like I'm for sure doing this with my life because I'm a planner. So that's just the way things are, and then I move to school and to college and like you're given that plan like you do this, this and this. You have to prepare the rest of your life. I know like I changed everything this semester for what I want to do, my classes. It's been a relief to be able to figure out like I don't actually like this anymore. I feel like this. I don't know how to put that into words for what a high school can do (WFH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).
Other students who were given personal choices (in other realms or ways) spoke highly of the experience as a way to increase their engagement. Hartford students also identified the pursuit of various activities as a way to determine their future path, but the mandatory courses interfered with that for some, resulting in their not really knowing what they loved until they were partially finished with college. Hartford students spoke of opportunity to explore their interests and passions, and even possible future careers. This opportunity stemmed from both access to a variety of experiences, as well as an element of independence that students found rewarding. However, some students lamented the fact others didn’t have access to those opportunities.

I guess with choice, it’s great to have these, it’s just that it’s hard to focus, it’s bad to focus solely on those that push, to focus solely on the upper, higher education levels because it’s easy to forget about those in the lower, the lower route (MH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

Quality education: Diversity. Students at Henry Ford acknowledged that there were differences between students, but felt that their diverse school experience equipped them to successfully interact with people different from themselves, and saw that as a skill necessary beyond high school.

I mean in middle school, I did go to two middle schools. I went to Carver and then I transferred over to Selby. Just being around Carver and there's a lot of White kids there and they didn't have very many people of color. Then I transferred over to Selby, I noticed there's a lot more people of color, a lot more diversity there than there was in Carver. This is how the world looks. There's a lot
more color in the world and a lot more cultures to learn from (WMHF, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Being able to adapt and continually change is a valuable skill. Related to that, the ability to be open to other cultures and learn from them is something Henry Ford provided its students.

The White students from Hartford were very vocal about the value of diversity they learned as students there, as compared to either the White students from Henry Ford or the students of color from either school. The majority of the White students from Hartford left to attend colleges that were less diverse than HHS, and they were very cognizant of that shift. They saw their high school experience with a diverse population as a positive thing, and a marker of the quality of the education they received at Hartford.

I think the thing that I actually think is kind of funny about this is that I go to a private school in Colorado. It's predominantly Caucasian, White, by a pretty high percentage, like 85% or something. They think that I went to like an inner-city, like some ghetto school. I was like this is just not true. That's real life. It's just funny what a little bit of perspective does because, I honestly, I miss the aspect that we had described earlier just about what diversity brings to a school from the school that I'm in because I think that indoctrination is an issue, at least for my school. I miss having the alternative viewpoints. I miss learning about other people and I think that school leaders, I think the question was, would be wise to have that perspective as far as zooming out on the broader scope. We're here critiquing just one school, but I think that there's a wide range of positives. I feel completely positive about my experience at Hartford. There were some setbacks,
but am I held back by them? (WMH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

**Quality education: Caring and qualified teachers.** Hartford students had a great deal to say about the importance of teachers in their education. They cited numerous ways in which teachers impacted their learning, frequently talking about the need to be pushed or challenged. They described their teachers as passionate, compassionate, willing to help. There were a few complaints, regarding teachers who either didn’t push/challenge/teach, or those who were intimidating, scary, or otherwise negative. By and large, however, the description of education from Hartford students emphasized the quality of their teachers.

On the other hand, Henry Ford students spoke less about the quality of their teachers and more about the importance of having a good relationship with their teachers. When asked what made her successful at Henry Ford, FHF replied,

I'd say Ms. Nelson or Ms. Smith. If I had personal problems going on, they're always there for me to just sit in their room and talk about anything that I needed to talk about, whether if it was school or if I was just having personal issues (Personal communication, December 19, 2016).

Although Henry Ford students were especially vocal about their need to connect personally with the adults in the school, all students identified mentors as being important. Participants cited a number of reasons to support this belief, including an opportunity to hear about what they were experiencing from someone who had been there; learning about life outside of high school; feeling cared about, as an individual and as a student; and finding an ally with whom they could talk, vent, and cry, among others.
Benefits students gained from personal relationships included understanding and leniency regarding their own personal situations; support from someone who identified as the same racial background; freedom to learn in ways that were student-driven; higher levels of engagement; and feeling motivated, supported and held accountable.

As I reviewed these perspectives, I was curious about the differences between the graduates in this particular area. A number of questions came to mind: Why was there so much more focus on teacher quality from the Hartford students? Was it a result of the constant messaging that the teachers there are good versus the narrative in Tinseltown that Henry Ford is not a good school? How much truth is there in those narratives?

Quality education: Barriers and resources. Finally, as students spoke about positive aspects of their education, they also identified situations that interfered with their access to a quality education. Students from both schools identified a variety of factors as barriers to a quality education. Some of them are out of the realm of influence for a school, such as the student’s personal effort or social drama. Others, like issues of race, and academic matters like lack of rigor or differentiation, are completely within the control of the school.

The two schools took different approaches to confronting those barriers. Hartford’s principal spoke about specific programs, while Henry Ford’s principal talked about knowing the “whole student” and being “student-centered.” Hartford’s principal claimed financial resources did not play a big part, but also talked about various approaches to improve educational outcomes that all required financial resources to implement, and acknowledged that a lot of professional development occurred. In addition, the Hartford principal described her budget use in terms of extras, projects that
enhanced the school, such as allowing the students to take charge of renovations to create
gender-neutral bathrooms and individual coaching professional development (PD)
opportunities for 75 teachers. While the PD was focused on culturally responsive
strategies, it is unclear how that actually changed the culture of the building. In contrast,
Henry Ford’s principal identified little flexibility in how he spent his budget dollars,
likely the reason for the relationship-based approach to addressing inequities or barriers.
For example, spending $125,000 to create/improve a gender-neutral bathroom is not an
option at Henry Ford. These claims were substantiated via document analysis of the
budget allocations and expenditures from the two schools, which will be detailed in the
following sub-section. The Henry Ford principal also claimed that budget is not really a
lever of change, and that it’s about acculturation of the staff to truly believe in the success
of every student. However, he then went on to talk about how he used the flexible parts
of his budget, and gave many examples of how he has tried to create conditions of equity
using his limited dollars. He also talked at length about the inequity within the district as
a whole, which is not something that the Hartford principal mentioned, likely because
there is only one high school in that district.

I think budgeting on the front end. I mean, just to be clear like Washington High
School is perceived as a success story. Its success began with a redistribution of
attendance areas that really pulled from Henry Ford. So overnight they were fresh
started which is an investment in resources and then overnight they grew. They
grew if only because the district gave them more students. Henry Ford declined
because those students came from Henry Ford's attendance area. Not that all those
students would have gone to Henry Ford but there's district machinations that
create results. If the district really wanted to enact equity, it would clearly look to grow schools by ensuring that schools that are "historically under enrolled" are receiving more students. In order to do that, they would have to perhaps require more students to attend those schools and they're unwilling. They're shown over and over again they're unwilling to do that. And one might argue especially in our zone that it's not even that. Now, they are unwilling to allow what they claim. If we're working on market politics by and large, what they're now doing in some ways is manipulating the numbers to ensure that market politics don't play out so that Henry Ford doesn't grow greater because that would cause instability at Sousa (Henry Ford principal, personal communication, December 28, 2016).

The contrast is striking, as Henry Ford not only appears inequitable compared to Hartford, also as compared to other high schools within its own district. The reasons impacting these two spheres of inequity are the same: White privilege and the impact of forcing a capitalist system upon school districts, thereby tying budget to seats, and seats to choice and desirability, and desirability to being White and offering choice, and then the whole cycle starts over again. These are the strategies of systemic racism, of White supremacy.

Financial resource analysis: Allocations. As is the case for the majority of the United States, schools in Minnesota receive the majority of their funding via taxes, both state-collected (income and sales taxes) and locally collected (property taxes); this funding is then broken down into three categories (Johnson, 2015). Each district receives dollars appropriated from the state in the form of general (based on a per pupil formula) and categorical (based on costs that can vary from district to district) allocations. In
addition, districts access funds via state paid property tax credits and local property tax levies (Johnson, 2015). “The basic general education formula for FY 2016 is $5,948 per pupil unit” (Johnson, 2015, p. 11). Those dollars are combined with a number of additional funding streams to create the total general education revenue (Johnson, 2015). An analysis of the revenue collected by Henry Ford High School and Hartford High School for use during 2015-2016 revealed a higher per pupil allocation for Henry Ford High School, showing students at Henry Ford are funded at 1.16 times the amount allocated for those attending Hartford High School, before taking into account the categorical funding sources (see Table 4.10).

Table 4.10: (“Minnesota Department of Education,” 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hartford High School</th>
<th>Henry Ford High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dollars per ADM (Average Daily Membership) served</td>
<td>Dollars per ADM (Average Daily Membership) served</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic General Education</td>
<td>7,184.86</td>
<td>7,205.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensatory</td>
<td>347.69</td>
<td>2,115.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficiency</td>
<td>17.66</td>
<td>109.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating Capital</td>
<td>285.82</td>
<td>285.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating Referendum</td>
<td>2,335.52</td>
<td>1,916.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location Equity</td>
<td>522.45</td>
<td>523.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q Comp</td>
<td>281.78</td>
<td>274.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other General Education</td>
<td>106.07</td>
<td>399.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal General Education Allocations</strong></td>
<td><strong>11,081.85</strong></td>
<td><strong>12,829.97</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further, examination of additional revenues that account for the higher numbers of students living in poverty (Title I funding) and those with special needs that attend Henry
Ford as compared to Hartford, revealed an even larger funding advantage per pupil at Henry Ford High School, based solely upon numerical evidence (See Table 4.11).

**Table 4.11: (“Minnesota Department of Education,” 2016)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hartford High School</th>
<th>Henry Ford High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dollars per ADM (Average Daily Membership) served</td>
<td>Dollars per ADM (Average Daily Membership) served</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>937.54</td>
<td>1,652.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title I</td>
<td>18.93</td>
<td>534.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Operating</td>
<td>335.19</td>
<td>1,214.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Capital Expenditure</td>
<td>1,318.32</td>
<td>280.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Fund Total Allocations</strong> (includes figures from Table 4.10)</td>
<td>13,691.83</td>
<td>16,512.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This information may seem to contradict the claim made by the Henry Ford principal regarding his lack of budgetary flexibility. However, the majority of the dollars in his budget are derived from what are known as “encumbered” sources, meaning that the monies must be spent in very specific ways to serve identified students from populations such as Special Education and English Language learners, explained more fully below.

*Financial resource analysis: Expenditures.* Although Henry Ford High School receives a larger allocation of funding per student than Hartford High School, that alone does not fully illuminate the financial resources available to students attending each school, particularly how those resources are used. Examination of the expenditures at each site provides further details. One expenditure that stands out, as it does not relate to direct student services, is that of district level administration. Henry Ford High School spends almost double what Hartford spends per pupil in this category.
Table 4.12: Expenditures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hartford High School Dollars per ADM (Average Daily Membership) served</th>
<th>Henry Ford High School Dollars per ADM (Average Daily Membership) served</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District Level Administration</td>
<td>489.93</td>
<td>908.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Level Administration</td>
<td>290.85</td>
<td>325.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular Instruction</td>
<td>5,536.26</td>
<td>6,983.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career &amp; Technical Education (CTE)</td>
<td>549.16</td>
<td>552.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education (SpEd)</td>
<td>1,561.84</td>
<td>2,769.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Activities &amp; Athletics</td>
<td>723.57</td>
<td>380.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Support Services</td>
<td>626.81</td>
<td>1,657.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil Support Services</td>
<td>709.78</td>
<td>1,252.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation Maintenance &amp; Other</td>
<td>1,291.11</td>
<td>1,283.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Transportation</td>
<td>748.45</td>
<td>938.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital Expenditures</td>
<td>278.18</td>
<td>296.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Expenditures</td>
<td>12,805.94</td>
<td>17,347.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Being forced to allocate such a high percentage of flexible dollars per student to district-level expenses results in further reduction of flexibility in spending at the building level. Thus, the bathroom renovation project that occurred at Hartford based upon student request would not be feasible at Henry Ford, as the remaining dollars in the budget are not available for such an expense. Although the financial funding structures in education are supposed to ensure equity, realization of equity is hindered by those structures in some ways and by the flexibility of privilege in others.
*Equity: Is White supremacy interrupted?* Information shared by students in the focus groups pointed to the subtle maintenance of “White” spaces in a variety of ways, from greater recognition and support for students viewed as “achieving,” to emphasis on following a prescribed path of athletic participation and college preparatory coursework, to perception of quality or normal education being a suburban phenomenon.

*Success begets success.* Students from both schools relayed stories about how students enrolled in advanced courses were privileged. MH shared, “Yeah, I'm pretty sure a couple, more than just one teacher would do that with a kind of low ball, the regular MUSH [Mainstream U.S. History] and then they actually -- they're talking good stuff about APUSH [Advanced Placement U.S. History]” (Personal communication, November 26, 2016). Henry Ford students had the same experience:

I'm saying because some students aren't given the same opportunity. Okay, yes, we're all given the same education but you have people in your corner to back you up. Some people don't feel like they have that or maybe they don't apply themselves to resources but they're doing the best that they can. Even them just going to school is something. We know that some people at Henry Ford who just going to school is a big deal like them even showing up is a big deal. I don't think that because I'm in IB I should be praised more than an average student that could possibly be going through something at home or it doesn't feel like they have the resources (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Similarly, students from both schools spoke about expected pathways to success, which I reflected on in the researcher memo below.
Students at both schools spoke of greater attention paid to athletics than other activities or clubs within the school. They connected that recognition to winning and possibly making money for the school. It seems like an extrapolated connection to capitalism, which I believe drives professional sports. Ultimately, White owners make the most money, while the (mostly) black players earn a percentage. Students recognized that other activities and clubs had value, inspired hard work from their members, and yet were not celebrated by the school in the same way as sports. They viewed this as inequitable (Researcher memo, February 9, 2017).

Within the data collected via the focus groups, as well as the elite interviews and document analysis, there was little formal evidence of these patterns of White supremacy being interrupted at Hartford High School. Within the financial data, there was a higher percentage of budget dedicated to facilities at Hartford than at Henry Ford (see “Other Capital Expenditure, Table 4.11”). Not surprisingly, the physical state of Henry Ford is typical of other high schools in the Tinseltown district with similar percentages of students of color. Hartford students noticed these differences when traveling to TPS schools to compete for sports, which was also mentioned by the practice focus group participants.

White Hartford students made a number of statements with a theme of adult attention and privilege directed at students who walked through the door well on their way to success. A statement from WMH was particularly poignant:

Another huge inequality was that like, it was almost as if like the kids who had a reputation for trying in classes would get like the teachers would recognize that so
they'd be like "I need to make sure these kids are doing well." But if a kid was trending upward in his grade but was going from a C to a B+, he got lost in the shuffle. There was no recognition of how each individual person was doing on their own trajectory. It was more like if you didn't meet the A, so I shouldn't really spend my time as a teacher to think this kid could -- like if you're wobbling on the A margin, you get the attention because you're almost there, you're almost to the perfect standard, what we're going to say as excellent. It's like not even charted because we don't really do A+. But if you're hovering around the B- range and you just got out the C range and you're just trying to pass your classes because you get bused in and you never learned what you're supposed to in elementary school because maybe you didn't have the opportunity to, and you're hovering on that B- range, they're going to give you this look like do better and that's probably the biggest inequality (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

There was acknowledgment that some students (probably many of whom were “bused in”) weren’t receiving that attention simply because they weren’t already perceived as extraordinary, or because they arrived lacking skills that faculty deemed necessary to move forward and succeed. But students also backed away from answering who might be responsible for that neglect.

I think equity just -- it's hard to place blame or culpability or reason behind, is it all of these teachers that aren't pushing or pulling enough or is it all of these students who don't have the drive to meet halfway, like whose fault really is it? But it's nobody's fault. So it's just like this middle ground of -- I don't know. It's like I'd love to -- I wish I could think of an example, like a one in a million
outstanding student that I knew who really overcame something in Hartford and really was -- maybe like a student of color, who was so smart and wow, like this all happen and I can't really think of these isolated events where we were celebrating the academics of somebody as much as we would celebrate the yearbook coming out or something like that. I feel like it was just this everything -- there wasn't a lot of change happening (WFH, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

“Nobody’s fault,” and equity “just what you made it” in a school that is predominantly White and seeks to maintain its socioeconomically privileged White base is akin to letting the school and district off the hook. That mentality puts the responsibility on the individual, without acknowledgment that some individuals come to the system with alignment and some do not.

Another area in which system alignment paved the path to success was highlighted when students answered questions about whether their education prepared them for their future. A White student from Hartford talked about opportunities like sports and trips, the chance to explore his interests. He felt prepared and lucky to have had such opportunities. He recognized others may not have had access, but was not able to fully acknowledge the reasons behind that inequity.

Students should be allowed to have an opportunity but that opportunity might be different for every person. Some people might value a trip more than playing basketball. You make different decisions based on the opportunities that you have, but I think that opportunity, the equality of opportunity is a touchy subject because I mean clearly all of us are different, have different experiences and it
depends on who we are as people. I think it should be dependent more on that but unfortunately it depends on things like money. It depends on -- I mean money limits your opportunities for sure. I was fortunate enough to go on the majority of those trips but I think that they’re valuable good experiences a lot of people should have but also think that people would rather have other opportunities, which is also important. I mean you can guarantee -- you can to some extent guarantee equality of opportunity but it's not necessarily the best thing. I think that that goes back into the whole you got to focus on the student and that includes the whole student, the background not just the academic student, which is so often the priority (WMH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

A student of color from Hartford talked about opportunities that she deemed necessities, such as learning to cook, drive, balance a budget.

Because like I feel, like I know they made the requirement of financial literacy, but that was after the class I graduated. From class of 2015 and everybody, that's after me, they now have to take financial literacy but it's like, what about us? We need financial literacy so that we would know how to do our 401(k)'s, our tax forms and all that stuff, how to do a budget (FH, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Both of these students from Hartford are speaking about opportunities that should be provided in school. The White student acknowledged that sports/activity participation is often connected to money. The student of color also spoke about the need for money to access the necessities now that they are no longer offered in schools. Societal inequities lead to families not being able to support their students in the same way. Things that used
to be provided by the schools are expected to be provided by families. Families of privilege don’t value cooking, learning to manage money, driver’s education as part of their educational experience; they expect “rigor” and opportunities that will boost their child’s chances of success in terms of career. Families who have limited resources are then left to provide their children with access to those life skills on their own, in addition to the reality that their children still may not have access to the “rigor” that families of privilege have demanded.

*Expectations: suburban vs. urban, White vs. non-White.* While the Henry Ford students compared their school to a whiter urban school, and saw stasis at the whiter school, Hartford students perceived suburban schools as more heavily resourced than urban schools, as well as more successful. Hartford students stated that teachers don’t want to teach in urban schools and that students are less supported there.

It's hard to teach in an inner-city school because if you look at -- and a lot of stuff we talked about is like that socioeconomic, like the fact of going home and having parents that are driving you to say, "You should go to school. You should learn more," that type of stuff. If you teach at an inner-city school, you don’t get that fulfillment as quick as you would have. Let's say Hartford or Maple View and those places, you have to work your ass off in order to get that status of students that are actually engaged in their courses. I think inner-city schools are hard because, and a lot of teachers don’t want to go there because they are hard, like they take a lot of time. You have to invest in not only the education you're giving them but them as people because they don’t have that support system. I think inner-city schools are hard to teach and that's the reason that there's not many
good teachers there just because it's hard work (WMH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

While their beliefs reflected stereotypes, they also contain accuracies, if Henry Ford is viewed through a White, middle-class lens, as the majority of our country tends to do.

Another realm in which students shared perceptions of what was expected, as tied to race, regarded enrollment in advanced courses. When talking about the fact that most students in advanced classes at Hartford were White, there was discomfort, but also a sense of acceptance of that reality.

There’s definitely a group of kids that you frequently took the same classes with, like I took a lot of AP or whatever. You see the same faces all the time and I almost wonder if people who weren’t taking -- you know, these classes like were they ever pushed or suggested to take these other ones? (WFH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

By contrast, a male student of color from Hartford shared,

Yeah, you might like -- I mean right here you got a pretty good picture. We were best friends for our whole high school career (indicated White friend). Someone that took literally all Honors and AP classes and then someone that took -- I took one AP, a couple of Honors but it's just because that's his route and my route is my route (MH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

By contrast, Henry Ford students felt a push to take IB classes, especially if they were African American, as shown by FHF’s words, “especially if you're African American and you're in IB, that's like a big thing” (Personal communication, December 19, 2016).
While White students in both schools were expected to achieve academically, focus group data illustrated that students of color were expected to require behavioral support. There was commentary about discipline that varied by race, in favor of White students, and most noted by White students. These observations occurred during focus groups from both schools. Perhaps the most pronounced example was what Hartford students referred to as the “Nordic Ski thing,” an incident also relayed by their principal. A female student of color from Hartford, who was involved in the situation, spoke most compellingly:

I would definitely say there was racial inequality in situations that you would think would happen that shouldn't happen in a safe space was happening and then when confronted, administration or people, felt like people were being too dramatic or overdramatizing. I'm not sure if -- I think you were there when the Nordic Ski did that situation. That's very personal for me, because it's like, I listen to all different types of music. I have a different type of conversation that I'm going to have right now than I'm going to have with Tierra or somebody, like it's a completely different thing, and for somebody to try to mock or mimic me. That's personal and to end up having a person who's strong enough to confront it but then get suspended, it's like that's another slap in the face so am I just supposed to keep turning the cheek to it? I think that was something with racial inequality and just discrimination (Personal communication, December 19, 2016).

Her White peers also shared frustration with how the event was handled. “It was like, oh, we're all Minnesota, nice, you know. Black people are great but when they did that walk
out, it was like no one knew what to do about anything” (WMH, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

When asked about inequities in the school, the Hartford principal also spoke about the “Nordic Ski thing.” However, her perception of what happened differs markedly from the students’ memories.

There were some things that as I transitioned to that principalship that were going on behind the scenes and there were some things that needed to, as with any, I'm sure with David moving into my position as well, that need to be tightened up here or there, things that just need to be done, not everybody liked that and I was a little bit of a scapegoat...Saying that our school is racist and there's a group of kids -- we had ghetto spirit day. Well, the real story behind that is not at all that, but it was a really nice scapegoat on a White woman and I just took it and just kept on, lots of tears that year because I was just, I think also just so personally offended as well of being -- so I guess I know how it feels a little bit with other people that are targeted because of this or that. I was definitely targeted for being a White woman, super personally offended saying I was racist or this or that, when that wasn’t at all what was going on (Hartford Principal, personal communication, January 4, 2017).

The White students from Henry Ford spoke about a sense that White students were treated more fairly with regard to discipline, but with much less vehemence than their Hartford counterparts. The students of color from Henry Ford, while aware of racial disproportionality, were also less angry about the idea of discriminatory discipline than their peers from Hartford.
I would see like in trouble African American male students always, and then it's like just send them home, just send them home, just send them home. It's definitely about race 100%. I feel like they don't -- they didn't have someone. It's not necessarily that, okay, Michael or Elvin didn't have time for them but it's like they have so many other things to do. There's always so many other staff. Everyone just didn't have the patience for them like I've seen -- especially my cousin Cory. We know how tough he is and no one wants to babysit him all day, but I think that if someone -- well, I think Jay did a little good job being with him throughout the day making sure that he got where he needed to go and staying in class with him, but I feel more staff like that, that actually you had -- like were patient and were with students that needed that extra help, they would definitely be where they need to be because they might not have a support at home. They might not have someone telling them they can do it, instead they have someone just telling them, "You're not going to ever amount to anything," which can get to them (FHF, personal communication, December 19, 2016).

As I reflected on the totality of focus group data regarding inequity, I wrote the researcher memo below.

There is a starkness of difference in the perspectives of White students from Hartford versus White students from Henry Ford, and yet their perceptions come from the same place. Essentially, Hartford was a White space, and willing to “house” students of color, but not willing to change the conditions of the space to ensure all felt welcome, safe and respected. When things happened that did result in harm to the students of color in the community, and they stood up for
themselves, the whole school was divided on what that meant, what should happen.

The White students interviewed were not on the Nordic Ski team, and therefore positioned themselves as onlookers for that event. In general, the White students viewed the administration’s responses to issues of race as inadequate. The principal’s response was to form committees of staff to talk about behavior and student focus groups to re-focus the energy of the students involved in the walkout. Her perception of the focus groups she organized is quite different than one of the students interviewed, who participated in the focus group and was a leader of the walkout. The student viewed the focus group as an attempt to ensure Hartford didn’t have a “bad rep,” a dismissal of the “complexity” of the situation. The principal saw it as a way to redirect the students involved, who were (in her opinion) being unduly influenced by “unprofessional” staff. Those staff are likely the faculty who “supported it,” according to one of the Hartford students interviewed.

Henry Ford is a diverse space, and for a White student, losing that sense of centrality, being “other” was sometimes off-putting. And yet, that is the exact intent of the principal, as he sees a need to “symbolically and systemically shift” the institution. “I think we have to work more diligently to both symbolically and systemically shift to foster greater engagement” (Henry Ford Principal, personal communication, December 28, 2016). He’s motivated to do that by the inequitable outcomes he sees for students in the building. So data is driving his decision-making, but rather than subscribing to the traditional tenets of education, he believes it has to look different in order for his students
to succeed. He acknowledged that at schools where the populations are better “aligned,” there is less work to do.

All of these passes through the data, coupled with my own reflection, allowed me to begin to envision themes within the data. In order to clarify those ideas, I engaged in theming the data, as described by Saldaña (2016). “Overall, a theme is an extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 199). For this part of the process, I returned to the interview guides for the focus groups and elite interviews, and isolated specific questions that contained direct connections to my research questions. I then reviewed the data transcripts, looking at each individual response to the question, and summarizing the meaning of the participant’s answer. I grouped the participant quotes by theme, and bolded them based upon whether the participant was White (non bold) or non-white (bold). I also utilized regular font for one school and italicized font for the other. Table 4.13 provides an example of this step of the data analysis process.
Table 4.13: Theming the Data

I: How would you describe a quality education? (Focus Group) If you were to define a quality education, what would you say? (Elite Interview)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Quote</th>
<th>Quality education is...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For me, I love the classes I had at Henry Ford. I think that's the key element for me. I can't work in large spaces with a lot of people. I need that one on one, individual attention. It's hard for me to grasp the concept of a lot of things. I think that with the class size being as small as they were, they really helped and getting that they want to help after school when they were there and you needed them, they really helped. You being engaged as well, them just not like giving the lesson and you not paying attention that you have to want it for yourself. FHF</td>
<td>-individualized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like if the students are more invested in what they're learning about, then it's going to make everything way more easier and way more interesting. It's sort of having like that interest from the students is going to make it way easier for the teacher, to not have to deal with issues and then you won't have kids -- you might have kids that come in and are like, &quot;Oh, I don't want to do this. I'm just going to do whatever.&quot; They're going to go off on their own thing. But I feel like having the students more involved in the way their education, and what they learn, would make everything way better. WFHF</td>
<td>-individualized -student constructed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it's important to have a good relationship with your teacher and have them know you well enough to know what your learning style and to know what you need, to learn. WFH</td>
<td>-individualized -forming good relationships with teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After completing the theming process, I sorted the individual quotes by theme and looked for connections between themes. To aid in this process, I created a visual representation of the themes, as shown by Figure 4.14.

**Figure 4.14: Quality Education**

Engaging in the visual analysis uncovered additional facets of the data and illuminated several new connections. Specifically, I noted the emphasis on teachers deemed “good” by the participants, and the various components that contribute to good teaching.

**Post-second round coding analysis: Code mapping and category formation.**

Upon completion of the second round of coding, I felt confident that I had uncovered some significant categories, but needed additional analysis to arrive at central concepts.
Saldaña (2016) suggests the use of a variety of “focusing strategies” (p. 274) to distill the ideas further. I moved forward from coding to code mapping, which provided needed clarification of my categories and sub-categories.

**Code mapping.** While the connections made evident through theming confirmed the other analysis I previously completed, additional examination of the data was required to generate theory. I turned to Saldaña’s (2016) description of code mapping as my next step. Saldaña (2016) describes code mapping as a method to surface a “level of abstraction...which transcends the particulars of a student, enabling generalizable transfer to other comparable contexts” (p. 278). For this step of the data analysis, I created a taxonomy, in which “categories and their subcategories are grouped but without any inferred hierarchy; each category seems to have equal weight” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 278). This process resulted in six categories: Good Teachers, Advice to Leaders, Choice and Exploration, Inequity, Preparation for the Real World and Diversity. Underneath each category, I listed all related codes. Any codes that did not fit were discarded. After completing that table, I grouped the data again, creating sub-categories for each category, and using the remaining applicable codes as supporting data for the sub-category. Finally, I created a mind map to illustrate connections between the categories and the larger concept of Quality Education, see Figure 4.15.
Upon completion of the mind map (Table 4.15), I saw many connections, and was familiar with significant amounts of supporting data supporting those connections, which led me to believe construction of theory was possible.

**Analysis of Data Supporting Final Categories**

As previously stated, six categories emerged from the exhaustive data analysis process - Good Teachers, Advice to Leaders, Choice and Exploration, Inequity, Preparation for the Real World and Diversity. Each category connects back to one of the research questions, representing the researched population’s responses. The next section details the data analysis supporting the creation of each category and its connection to specific research questions: *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high*
school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?; and Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?

Category I: Good teachers. Through answering questions regarding the components of a quality education, as well as talking about ways in which they were successful during high school and prepared for life beyond high school, high school graduates highlighted the importance of good teachers in answer to both research questions, Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?; and Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students? The initial coding process generated “Good Teachers” as a code, with 50 separate participant quotes connected to that idea. As the analysis proceeded (as described in previous sections), a number of other codes were connected back to “Good Teachers,” as illustrated in Table 4.16.
Table 4.16: Good Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good Teachers</th>
<th>&quot;a good teacher can change a kid's life&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;an ally for me&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;passionate&quot;</th>
<th>support vs. callousness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>allies</td>
<td>&quot;everyone wanted you to succeed&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;push you a little bit, not pull you&quot;</td>
<td>Challenge/Passion=Engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engagement: lack of differentiation</td>
<td>&quot;foundation of respect&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;push you&quot;</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engagement: teacher</td>
<td>&quot;fueled part of my passion&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;she's an African-American woman like me&quot;</td>
<td>Individualized Approach</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engagement: lack of rigor</td>
<td>&quot;has an impact on each student&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;someone saw potential in me&quot;</td>
<td>Indoctrination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genuine interest in students and their lives</td>
<td>&quot;I'm going to help you get through it&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;teachers are the foundation&quot;</td>
<td>Learning for students AND adults</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good teacher supercedes subject area</td>
<td>&quot;if I need to cry, I can cry&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;teachers that really invested in you&quot;</td>
<td>QE=Advanced Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>importance of good relationship with teacher</td>
<td>&quot;It's my job to teach, kid's job to learn it&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;teachers that really made a difference&quot;</td>
<td>QE=Hard Work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mentor</td>
<td>&quot;lots of sincere people that didn't just quite know what to do&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;there's some brilliant teachers there&quot;</td>
<td>Relationships/Compassion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rigor</td>
<td>&quot;made something fun&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;they have a lot of wisdom&quot;</td>
<td>Skipping=Disengaged</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>safe space</td>
<td>&quot;most engaging class that I ever took&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;they wanted you to persevere&quot;</td>
<td>Supports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;advocate for me&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;my go-to guy&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;to dream that all students can be as successful as all other students&quot;</td>
<td>Testing vs. Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;always there for me&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;not very inspiring pedagogy&quot;</td>
<td>personal commitment vs. job requirement</td>
<td>Updated Content</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being pushed</td>
<td>high school is hard</td>
<td>resources: differentiation</td>
<td>resources: people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student centered</td>
<td>&quot;acculturation of staff&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;depends on the student&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;don't really know how to help or what to do&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;everyone learns differently&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;hold them accountable&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;know what you need to learn&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;one on one&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;some anger from staff&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;super engaging, safe, inclusive, supportive, caring&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;used to be super excited for school&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As previously described in the description of the data analysis, a variety of methods were used to condense codes and generate categories and sub-categories. Upon completion of
the process, sub-categories supporting “Good Teachers” included: Life Changers, Allies and Advocates and Challenge and Passion=Engagement. These sub-categories are supported by excerpts from the data.

**Life changers.** A White, male student from Hartford shared:

The biggest thing for me is teachers...We're all talking about teachers and they're just worth a lot more than they get paid. A good teacher can change a kid's life and it's just worth a lot more than they're getting paid (WM, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

Similarly, a student of color from Henry Ford stated, “all programs should be supported and that staff should go and show their face or they should just try to be supportive of it as much as they can because that really has an impact on each student” (FHF, personal communication, December 19, 2016). Henry Ford’s principal provided the strongest testimony of all, identifying professional development as a tool to “advance a culture where we come to celebrate and recognize our ability to work with all students, to dream that all students can be as successful as all other students” (Personal communication, December 28, 2016).

**Allies and advocates.** Students from both schools provided numerous examples of how teachers served as far more than deliverers of content, identifying the support of a teacher as instrumental in the obtainment of a quality education. Students of color and White students from both schools emphasized the need for their teachers to be truly invested in them as people, as illustrated by student FH, a female student of color from Hartford: “know for AP World, I would've never took AP anything if it hadn't been for Ms. Hines. She came to class, she told me, "I'm going to help you get through it," and she
stuck to her word” (Personal communication, December 19, 2016). Another female student of color, from Henry Ford, shared a similar perspective, “I don't know if I would even be in IB. I've definitely worked for that spot but it’s because someone saw potential in me that I was there. It wasn't necessarily that I pushed myself to be there” (Personal communication, December 19, 2016). Hartford’s principal also connected the concept of good teaching to work beyond content delivery: “I think but it has to start with being super engaging, safe, inclusive, supportive, caring. I think if those things aren’t met, it doesn’t matter how genius a teacher is with their content” (Personal communication, December 28, 2016).

One difference among the student responses regarding how teachers impacted their lives was the description of teacher as ally, which was cited more frequently by students of color. Several students of color, from both schools, referred to staff members in terms of their ability to provide emotional support, describing such adults as “my go-to guy,” “an ally for me,” and “always there for me.”

*Challenge and passion=engagement.* Across the board, both students and school leaders talked about the importance of teachers stimulating student engagement, using a variety of means to ensure achievement. A White female student from Hartford shared, “I think having teachers that are passionate and actually care about their students is a big aspect” (WFH, personal communication, November 26, 2016). Hartford’s principal acknowledged, “I think overall, there’s some brilliant teachers there” (Personal communication, January 4, 2017). Another skill students identified as key to their engagement was the ability to individualize and differentiate their learning. A White female Hartford student asserted, “I think it's important to have a good relationship with
your teacher and have them know you well enough to know what your learning style [is] and to know what you need, to learn” (Personal communication, November 26, 2016). A female student of color from Henry Ford also pointed out the importance of the teacher knowing her learning style and providing individual attention, “For me, I love the classes I had at Henry Ford...I can't work in large spaces with a lot of people. I need that one on one, individual attention” (Personal communication, December 19, 2016).

**Category II: Choice and exploration.**

As was the case for “Good Teachers,” the category of “Choice and Exploration” arose from participant answers to questions about quality education, as well as elements that contributed to their individual success while attending high school. The initial coding of focus group data generated 60 connections to “Choice and Exploration.” Processes detailed in previous sections of this chapter generated a similar table, Table 4.17, to represent codes connected to “Choice and Exploration.”

**Table 4.17: Choice and Exploration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice &amp; Exploration</th>
<th>Updated Content</th>
<th>&quot;literally make anything I wanted&quot;</th>
<th>Sports/Activities/Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;exploring for yourself&quot;</td>
<td>opportunity</td>
<td>&quot;lots of electives and programs&quot;</td>
<td>Testing vs. Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;freedom to explore&quot;</td>
<td>prescribed path</td>
<td>&quot;more freedom to explore and just take chances&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;no time for anything else&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;choosing what you want to do&quot;</td>
<td>student centered</td>
<td>&quot;people are finding what they like to do&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;really interested in things&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;help them figure out where they want to go in life&quot;</td>
<td>support: activities</td>
<td>&quot;pursue a passion&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;students are more invested&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;it interests me, because I want to learn more about it&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;engagement equals achievement&quot;</td>
<td>QE=Advanced Learning</td>
<td>values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;valued member of this choir&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;i was passionate&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;you have to want it&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;my decision&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As was the case with data analysis for the category Good Teachers, a number of sub-categories for Choice and Exploration were generated through the process, including: Student-Centered, Future Oriented and Structurally Supported.

**Student-centered.** Student WMH, a White male student from Hartford, spoke at length about the opportunities he was afforded to explore his passion for movie making.

Yeah off that, I feel like probably the biggest group of people that actually affected my future going forward was definitely the English department...I had a good enough relationship with them and being in Heigl's office and talking to Cox, he kind of gave me a position as videographer/editor but really that meant I could just make whatever kind of videos I wanted....I felt like I was more like -- there's a different level of respect there and I could learn more from -- ask them stuff that I couldn't with other faculty. It was like easy -- the student-teacher formality kind of broke down and that was just sort of like a mutual respect which made me able to like have more freedom to explore and just take chances I guess (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Later in the focus group, WMH went on to say,

I felt most engaged senior year. I mean besides spring quarter but spring quarter because the video thing Cox let me do was awesome because I realized I can do whatever I want and I realized what I was doing there and I was like I should make a video about something that matters. I'm like, okay, I'm going to do -- and then somebody suggested something about hipsters. So I made a video like what's a hipster and it was kind of funny and I was really proud of it because I talked to tons of different people and people gave different answers and they were all
trying to find what it was, not that we really could. It ended up being more about stereotypes and I was just really proud that I had made something that was about something real that was also funny that nobody had told me to do, that I had come up with on my own. That was a huge moment that made me want to do film when Cox gave me the freedom to literally leave his class, wander around the school with my camera and my tripod and two people that I could tell it to and literally make anything I wanted (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Along the same lines, a White female student from Henry Ford identified the connection between passion and high quality effort, “Yeah. Being really interested in things. I felt like I was passionate about it because I was really involved and trying my best at it too” (WFHF, personal communication, December 21, 2016). For both students, these opportunities to pursue their interests in high school connected to their choice to study those fields upon enrollment in college.

**Future oriented.** Another sub-category of Choice and Exploration generated by the analysis is Future Oriented. Students emphasized the importance of being afforded freedom to study subjects connected to their future plans. MHF, a male student of color from Henry Ford stated, “And that's why I think, like how you guys added the theater classes and the art classes, I really appreciate that because you guys are -- like people are finding what they like to do in like you guys added the music classes and all of those electives, it can help them figure out where they want to go in life” (Personal communication, December 19, 2016). A male student of color from Hartford agreed with the assertion that learning needs to connect to the real world: “You finish one test and then you have to prepare for the next test, and it doesn’t give time for your teacher to
teach you how to apply it to real world problems” (MH, personal communication, November 26, 2016). One of his female peers from Hartford agreed, “Yeah, the tests are like one and done. You don’t really learn from it usually. You just move on to the next thing” (WFH, personal communication, November 26, 2016). Unfortunately, the test-focused environment of education often results in a disconnections between student interests and learning. In addition to the need for a curricular focus on students’ interests, data analysis also revealed the need for Structural Support, the final sub-category of Choice and Exploration.

**Structural support.** As students discussed the importance of choices in their educational experience, many referenced access to a variety of elective courses, as well as extra- and co-curricular activities. In addition, several students talked about programs that complimented their learning, such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination). Student WMHF, a White male student from Henry Ford, described a quality education in these terms,

> I'd say that content and technical knowledge of math and science is a must but then a whole lot of free interaction among the students and I would say a lot of opportunities to do that you want and find out what you're interested in and want to do with your life, so lots of electives and programs and stuff like that. And then when you find what you want to do, you practice it. That's important to me

(Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Students from both schools also spoke of their opportunities to engage in advanced coursework, such as courses offered through Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB).
I thought we also had a good amount of AP classes compared to a lot of other high schools like my friends in college are from -- we're able to take so many -- which a lot of us are transferring into college which helps us prepare for like the classes that we take in college. When I got to college I was like, oh, these classes aren’t like as hard as like a lot of people have made them out to be but because I've taken more college classes and AP courses and stuff like that. It also helps me get better because I'm ahead of everyone else (MH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

Finally, access to programs that support student achievement, such as AVID, was another important structural component cited by students from Hartford, as discussed by student FH, a female student of color. “I would say -- well, AVID is a program. I would definitely -- AVID is probably why I'm in college today and being as successful as I am” (Personal communication, December 19, 2016). Many educators see college as the next step for students before they enter the real world, and graduates from both schools shared a focus on such preparation as essential to receiving a quality education.

**Category III: Preparation for the real world.**

While most of the students interviewed identified preparation for college as an important next step in their journey to adulthood, that process was not their primary focus with regard to being ready to go out on their own. Students talked more about the necessity of what they called “life skills,” as well as exposure to potential career paths and the value of personal ownership of the decisions shaping their futures.

**Exposure to career paths.** Hartford students spoke of opportunities to explore their interests and passions, and even possible future careers. These opportunities
stemmed from access to a variety of experiences, as well as an element of independence that students found rewarding. WFH, a White female student, shared,

I think for me the most successful grouping I had was, I was a double music student and I took guitar all three years, and there was one year I did before school choir group and I was in two of the three bands that they have now. I think my sophomore year all of the music instructors knew who I was. And just kind of having the different people in the different musics, like band and the choir, just having all those people and having different perspectives and whether or not, like FH said, how we had different sports and stuff, we all had that one common activity that we all did. It just helped me realize that that was the environment I wanted to be in even after high school. That's where I grew the most (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

However, some students lamented the fact they didn't have access to those opportunities.

One thing I wish that we did have that I know other schools did, there's either -- I can't remember if it was mandatory or it was just highly available of having like an internship or exposure with someone in a potential field that you want to go into as a senior year thing. We had ProPEL but ProPEL was really competitive and it was really -- I feel like you weren’t available for like fourth block, that's what it was. You couldn’t do it. I really wanted to do it but I knew I would be missing that all the time for sports or different things. I think that would have been really helpful for us to explore like this would solidify like this is what I want to or this is what I don’t want to do. I shouldn’t waste my money in college classes trying to do this (WFH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).
While WFH felt frustration due to her full schedule and its impact on her ability to explore other opportunities, other Hartford students spoke positively of their ability to decide for themselves what to learn about, and ultimately, what career field to pursue.

**Student ownership.** WFH, a White female student from Hartford, described a situation in which she had to select between two of her passions, and identified that as a particularly engaging moment.

Our soccer sections game, section finals game was against Wixon my junior and senior year, same night as the choir concert, both years. Here are these two things, where I was good at both of them. Was I better at choir? Should I forfeit this soccer game and forego it just because I know that I'm maybe a more valued member of this choir and do I skip something? That felt very engaged and it almost felt like this social or academic -- or athletic and music stuff, those were those decisions where I had to decide for myself what I wanted to allocate my time to instead of a teacher or a coach or a director saying, "This is what you have to do" (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

As student FH, a female student of color from Hartford, related her experience in trying to finish high school, she was more pragmatic:

I kind of, that summer, came to the realization that if I want to get done, then I got to do my work and if I got -- if it's hard, then I just got to have to get out of my own way and go talk to teachers and let them know that I'm not understanding this. I stayed after a lot and I came early a lot, but it was worth it because I did not want to be there another year (Personal communication, December 19, 2016).
Life skills. Unfortunately, several students identified skills needed to survive in the real world, but felt their high school education was lacking in that area. Student WFH, who was quoted previously regarding her busy schedule, said,

I was the opposite. I didn’t slow down with my classes. I did stuff all the way through. I almost wish that I could have had like that chance to breathe. I feel like in place of classes that you really don’t do anything for senior year to have something like life skills, like who actually knows how to change a bike tire or car for that matter or that kind of stuff. It's stupid basic things that you should know to be able to live on your own. And I feel like that would have been -- although it might have been like the easiest class ever, it would have been better than doing nothing (Personal communication, November 26, 2016).

WFHF, a White female student from Henry Ford, also spoke about skills she wished had been part of her high school education.

I feel like we should -- my mom always filled me like home ec [sic] skills like being able to learn how to sew or balance a check, just like the basic things that usual people just use in life. Like, granted you don't really need to balance a checkbook because everything is pretty much on a card nowadays, but just being able to -- I don't know how to sew. I would never know how to sew like my mom or the teacher or something like that, but I had one home ec class in middle school and it was really fun to learn how to make stuff from scratch. I think having something like that, you can kind of bring in the outside world, outside the educational environment, kind of incorporate that, I think would be really beneficial (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).
Throughout the analysis of data from the two schools, the differences and similarities in student responses demonstrated the complexity in describing a quality education. Such complexity was present in the analysis of the concept of diversity as well.

**Category IV: Diversity.**

Being able to adapt and continually change is a valuable skill. Related to that, the ability to be open to other cultures and learn from them is also something Henry Ford provided its students.

The White students from Hartford were far more vocal about the value of their diverse school than all other students interviewed. The majority of the White students from Hartford left to attend colleges that were less diverse than HHS, and they were very cognizant of that shift. They saw their high school experience with a diverse population as a positive thing. Analysis of the data uncovered deeper truths about the importance of diversity. While exposure to people different than themselves was a frequent topic for White participants, the non-White participants’ responses pointed to the importance of inclusion and a responsive educational environment, where diversity provides an opportunity for deeper learning. Discussion of the findings regarding diversity incorporates several researcher memos, in addition to participant quotes.

**Inclusion.** Students of color at Henry Ford felt represented among staff. They saw their culture being celebrated and recognized. There was a sense of centrality that could be claimed by anyone within the school.

There is a lot of staff that is diverse too. It's not just one and usually some students can feel that they can relate to one of the staff if they were the same in a way. I feel like that's what Henry Ford helps with a lot is that it's not just one race.
It's multiple. So I never found myself as an outcast or anything like that. It wasn't just me. It was Caucasians and Hispanics and Somali and stuff like that (FHF, personal communication, December 19, 2016).

While student FH, a female student of color from Hartford, viewed her school environment as inclusive, her peer, FH, also a female student of color, had a different take.

I'm glad I went to Hartford for that because my cousin lives in Indiana. She is in a school where people just will call her the N word like right to her face. I'm glad I went to Hartford and the schools that I went to because I've never experienced that. (FH, personal communication, December 19, 2016)

By contrast, FH, her peer, shared,

And also, just some of it was just like being racist teachers that when they came to Hartford, that's when they were at their most diversified environment, and so they didn't know how to talk to people of color and talk to me specifically. They didn't know quite how to handle students. It was always she's angry and it's like, "No, I'm actually fine. I'm just talking -- maybe my voice is elevated but I'm fine." That was definitely a struggle going through Hartford, always having to advocate or okay, I have to bite my tongue because this teacher feels this type of way, but I need to get through this class because I need to graduate or stuff like that and just have to try to navigate the system so you wouldn't have to not repeat a subject or even repeat a teacher (Personal communication, December 19, 2016).

FH also emphasized what she saw as a challenge for her teachers: the importance of learning along side of the students.
Learning for students and adults.

Yeah, dismissed. It was dismissed like no, you're over -- it's like for you to have or to try to have a different type of language, for you to have a type of different type of dress, that's personal. I think another reason is that it was something they're not used to. They've never experienced it before. They've never really understood the actual culture, the traditions, the different things that we, that people of color do. For them, to experience it when people are getting their own comfort zone, when they're in that own comfort zone that they're try to back up like, they're like, No, I don't want to be in this because of this means I have to think differently. I have to open my mind to something different. I think as student leader there, that's what I continuously challenge the administration. I was in a focus group with them eventually and I continuously challenged their way of thinking, their way of processing something that came from something (FH, personal communication, December 19, 2016).

By contrast, Hartford’s principal believed attempts to help the staff engage in culturally responsive instruction were important:

Then really kind of what we learned from Dr. Halle was really validating it for me different backgrounds like kids come from different cultures and layers of cultures that kids come from and really valuing and affirming that and then really challenging students to support students who challenge them and hold them accountable and really give them the best experience possible so that they can make it out in the real world and give them opportunities as we learned (Hartford principal, personal communication, January 4, 2017).
She also believed these efforts were effective:

I think that we worked really hard. I think that as the school continued to diversify, I think really teaching the staff to understand the different rings of culture and really get into it. It's not just about our Black and Brown students, it's about our students of all races and ethnic backgrounds and religions and sex orientation and gender and all that, the other rings of that and really helping -- I think that I guess I believe that 99% of educators that go into education are there because they care about kids and they want them to be successful and they want to help them get there (Hartford principal, personal communication, January 4, 2017).

Students from both Hartford and Henry Ford were quite aware of their diverse environments, and both groups recognized that diversity as a valuable aspect of their education. However, the lenses through which they perceived diversity were quite different.

**People different than me.** Student WFHF’s statements about diversity are quite different from those of Hartford students. She talks about how no one should be left out, regardless of who they are, that all cultures are valid and should be included. Her own knowledge of other cultures was gained through College Possible, a program through which students spend many hours together in preparation for going to college. So rather than viewing co-habitation of a space as a way to learn about other cultures, she points to a legitimate experience shared with people different from her, that gave her a window into how other people think and act.
I feel like being in such a setting where it's so diverse besides culture just like income wise too, like having College Possible. I met some of my lifetime friends through that program. Like me and MHF, that's my guy. Like College Possible, just knowing that you're in a group of like, yes, it's low-income families but no matter what our race was, predominantly -- I mean considering them was only like three, four White kids in our class, it kind of exposes you to different cultures. I feel like having that opportunity to look at other people and see who they are and how they live their life, and respect that. I think it helps. Personally, I think it just helps with my view of the world. I think that's what Henry Ford helped me the most, to be honest (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Hartford students also recognized the value of being surrounded by people from a variety of backgrounds. Student MH, a male student of color from Hartford, stated,

And you know when you get into a real-life job or you move on to secondary or post-high school education, there's going to be other people that might be different races or different backgrounds than where you came from and Hartford kind of gives you that in high school (Personal communication, November 26, 2016).

Similarly, WFH, a White female from Hartford, made connections between her high school and post-high school life:

I feel like it also kind of diminished like stereotypes like I got friends that would go to Eastman and different places and they just -- they don’t really notice that but then like say certain things and I’d be like, oh, my gosh! Why would you say that? I feel like going to Hartford definitely kept in much more open line and like I go
to the U now and it's like also very diverse place. It's just helpful having so many different opinions and backgrounds and cultures around you (Personal communication, November 26, 2016).

Although it took some time to surface, as Hartford students dived more deeply into their examination of the school’s diversity, a variety of inequities impacting either their own education, or that of their peers, became evident. Henry Ford students also recognized inequities in their educational experience, and principals from both buildings shared similar analyses.

**Category V: Inequities.** Equity, as an outcome, as expressed by the Henry Ford principal, or as a mindset, as the Hartford principal described it, is often understood by what it is not. Equity is not White supremacy, equity is not racism and discrimination. Privilege prevents the outcome of equity, and certainly influences one’s mindset about equity. While I went in search of the ideal, what I found in the data was its antithesis.

*White supremacy.* The words “White supremacy” were not spoken by any of the participants. However, the circumstances, feelings and systems described by both graduates and the school leaders exist as a result of White supremacy. Tyrone C. Howard (2010) describes the way White supremacy contributes to systemic and internalized racism, exemplified by his words regarding critical race theory, which provides scholars with unique ways to ask the important question of what racism has to do with inequities in education, by centering the discussion on racism and thereby examining racial inequities through a more critical lens than multicultural education or achievement gap theorists do (p. 99).
Through a lens of critical race theory, I identified supporting factors of White supremacy: racism and discrimination and the concept of privilege.

*Racism and discrimination.* Participants shared a range of experiences representing racism and discrimination. Students of color from Hartford expressed concerns, ranging from being perceived as “lazy,” to a significant incidence of cultural appropriation, the “Nordic Ski thing,” aka, “ghetto spirit day.” FH shared how that situation impacted her,

It did because -- I don't know. I struggled with -- I having to be the spokesman, the spokesperson of people of color or women of color. FH has a different view than I might have on the world about being black as a black woman. She may not be -- and this shouldn't be the stereotype. She's a ghetto -- because I am wild and I have a very loud laugh and so I shouldn't be looked at as ghetto. Ghetto is not a thing; it's a place. I mean I've called people out for that all the time but I think having people come to you and ask you like that type of thing, I struggled with that...when the Nordic Ski did that situation (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

FH also described Hartford as a “predominantly White institution,” proposing that for most staff, it was their “most diverse setting.”

White students from both schools recognized discriminatory practices in terms of school discipline. Students from Hartford openly talked about how their peers were targeted based on skin color, while they often went unnoticed despite engaging in bad behavior.
And then the other question was how my race interacted with my experience? I think it was pretty easy being a middle class White kid because that's what it had been before they started moving kids in. When they started busing kids in, it got a lot reversed. I think the city of Hartford has always been diverse, but it was not hard and you could kind of get away with a lot of crap just based on how flaggable you were (WMH, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

A student of color from Henry Ford talked about how “African American male students” were sent home anytime they got in trouble, and White students from that school shared that sentiment, “The perception was that generally White people were treated a bit better possibly because there weren't as many repeat offenders. Which would make sense because it's the minority population I guess, I'm not sure” (WMHF, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Visible efforts to preserve White privilege came to light during conversations with Hartford alumni, as well as their principal. A denial of the impact of Whiteness characterized several statements from WMH, including his words regarding equality, “the equality of opportunity is a touchy subject because I mean clearly all of us are different, have different experiences and it depends on who we are as people” (Personal communication, November 26, 2016). The Hartford principal couched her protection of White ideals, talking about how she had to avoid being “too aggressive” with regard to equity. Perhaps the most insidious example of how White supremacy influenced the culture in both schools was the often-voiced acceptance of such privilege as a matter of course, the “norm.” While White Hartford students and their principal spoke about their
world in terms of their Whiteness, the Henry Ford principal’s perspective was tinged with frustration,

In order for equity to occur, there needs to be a redistribution of resource and a mindset shift as to what is equitable. What we've done or what I feel I've had to do in my career in TPS [Tinseltown Public Schools] is constantly swim against the stream that pays lip service to equity but is mindful of stasis and invested in stasis (Personal communication, December 28, 2016).

*Privilege.* Such stasis is the foundation of privilege. Although White privilege may be identified as the type most closely tied to White supremacy, other varieties of privilege surfaced in the data, and also serve as foundational supports for the maintenance of White supremacy. Students at both schools pointed to elements of academic privilege, ways in which students who were high-achieving were favored and supported in ways that maintained their privilege. MH, who took the diversity seminar class at Hartford, shared,

Sometimes if you're not, like if you are of color, you might not see too many of those in the advanced classes or in certain classes. You might think it's just solely, just a average White class or, that diversity seminar was predominantly black class. I think I had probably two people that were not of color (Personal communication, November 26, 2016).

Another student from Hartford talked about patterns of educational inequity that are established long before high school and negatively impact students’ opportunities while in high school:
Some students that didn’t have that support system at home might not have sat down and looked at the course guide. They might have just been told like I was, this is your four-year plan. This is what you're going to be taking in high school and that's it. This is what your past performance has indicated to us so this is what you should do. It comes from an administrative stance and that's seen as authority in kids they don’t realize that they have that choice to like move past that. They're not going to be able to know that on their own. I think that that's just making that whoever that is aware is extremely important because it's not a choice if you're not aware of it. You can’t choose something you don’t know about (WMH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

While both students are referring to ways in which students viewed as successful are held up within the system, what is missing is how those patterns intersect with and support White privilege. White students enter our educational system already aligned with the expectations. Over the course of Kindergarten through eighth grade, students who are aligned with the system experience greater and greater gains, while those from marginalized populations typically fall farther and farther behind. By the time the students reach high school, their “position” as a student is already entrenched. Thus those who are aligned take the advanced courses, and those who are not, don’t.

Students from both schools also spoke about the way athletes were privileged in their schools. Although this type of privilege may seem removed from White privilege, I believe it creates an environment in which everyone is comfortable with a “haves” versus “have nots” structure. When asked why sports might receive more accolades, FH, a Hartford student of color, replied,
Winning. It's like if you have a team and it's always winning, why wouldn't you want to talk about it and let people know? It's like when they go to state and they're on TV, it's like good for them. I bet those basketball players worked super hard, but there's other people in the school that worked just as hard in their little clubs. I think it's just the way the world is kind of, just some things are more important than others (Personal communication, December 19, 2016).

FHF expressed similar views when asked the same question:

I've heard about that as well. I've heard that they -- sports they get money for the school and that's why they're praised more. I don't know if that's necessarily true. I've never played sports there. I think that is kind of true that they do get praised more like, "Oh, come to this game tonight." (Personal communication, December 19, 2016).

Socioeconomic privilege played a larger part in the perspectives shared by Hartford students than those at Henry Ford, most likely due to greater disparity in socioeconomic status in the Hartford school community. WMH, a Hartford student, spoke about how his childhood experiences framed his success, and maintained that race was not a factor.

The thing is I don't think it comes down to the school itself. It's like the reason I did well in school is because my parents raised me to be responsible and then in school they check on me every once in awhile. If I was Black and they did the same exact thing, I think I'd have the same situation. But it really just is like a culmination of everything because I mean if you don't -- if your family doesn't have the money to let you play sports or just all these different things that
culminate into what you see at school (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

The fact that he specifically identifies the lack of influence race had on his success (from his perspective) illustrates how socioeconomic differences frequently allow White individuals to shift their attention from race to other factors in search of an explanation for their privilege. Similarly, a student from Henry Ford who hails from the other end of the socioeconomic continuum also claimed socioeconomic status as a greater factor than race with regard to inequity:

I think being White, it comes with this notion of people just kind of thinking like, "Oh, you're like --" the general notion is like, "Oh, you're close-minded. You're this way." And people just kind of make general statements about you. But not everybody is like that and it's kind of like -- it's not even like people just being judgmental. It's just people just assuming that just because you're White, that means that you have money, you have this, you have that. And it's like not everybody is like that, like granted yeah, I'm White and there is privilege with that, but that doesn't mean that I have every single privilege. I think kind of like connecting with different people of different races in Henry Ford and kind of like them figuring out who I was and where I was, I think opened their eyes and opened my eyes to accept who they were and their cultures and them accepting who I am. I'm not just the stereotypical White person that lives next to Lake Cooper, and "Let's go to Sephora guys." No, I'm not like that (WFHF, personal communication, December 21, 2016).
Students from Henry Ford spent less time talking about White privilege than did the White students from Hartford. However, the Henry Ford principal was very aware of how the concept of White privilege impacted his students.

I bring that up because I do think that, it's what I do think, that when you concentrate poverty or you concentrate populations of students who come from communities that do not align with the educational system, who come with factors such as EL status that are going to lead quite naturally to at least initially lower test scores and when those things are valued highly, then that is the primary narrative, that sort of narrative cements inequity. I do think that again part of the mind shift piece that we need to continue to work toward is to ensure that our teachers recognize the abilities and talents of our students and see what they are capable of (Henry Ford principal, personal communication, December 28, 2016).

Henry Ford students also spoke about White privilege, with a sense of acceptance.

Honestly, I think that they are not as supported I feel because it's like they know what they're doing when they come in, so it's not like they're going to need any help, if that makes sense...Particularly, I'm speaking about Caucasians. I don’t think that when they walk in, people will think like they might need help or support in any area, that they might have it all on their own. I personally didn’t see them getting help with things that they might need help with (FHF, personal communication, December 19, 2016).

That resignation, or acceptance of White privilege, which mirrored the way students spoke about privilege for athletes, was a theme in the data gathered from the Hartford focus groups as well, from some students of color as well as from White students.
I thought that it was a really sheltered environment and when I was like 2000 miles away from my house, I was like I got everything handed to me. It was so easy there. They had... everything was taken care of. In terms of like -- it really changed -- when I came to college, it really changed my perspective on race too because UCSB is the most diverse and it's actually 40% to 35% White people. It was interesting to meet a bunch of people that were like me that weren't White (WMH, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

**Suburban vs. urban schools.** Another inequity identified by students was the differences between different types of schools. However, the Hartford students seemed to have a greater awareness or concern for the differences between their school (a suburban high school) and urban schools, or “inner city schools,” as described by one participant. While few had actually been to an urban school, and none had ever attended one, their experiences with students who had open-enrolled into their school from Tinseltown seemed to inform the bulk of their perspectives. Their words made it clear that, despite all of their pride in the diversity of their school, they viewed that diversity as problematic as well.

As a whole, I think Minnesota education is pretty solid. I mean we get ranked really well, but I think in the metro area the fact that Hartford is taking a bunch of kids that are being bused in and the other schools just aren't, is partially a geographic thing, but I think it's like the suburbs are going to get a better education than the inner city I think because they have to deal with less of this stuff. For as much as we're getting kids bused in, there are schools that have to deal with this that don't even -- it's like an organic problem there instead of being
brought in to Hartford, not to say that that's not natural at Hartford. I'm just saying
I think Minnesota ranks pretty high with the education because as a whole, as the
state goes, we don't really have a lot of diversity in Minnesota, so I don't think
those issues get brought up and I think it's easier to educate a very homogenous
group of White kids if you don't necessarily have -- you don't have to deal with
many factors (WMH, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

The students that did have any personal knowledge of urban education obtained it
through participation in sports or activities that traveled to schools in Tinseltown. WMH
shared his thoughts about that experience,

It seems like there are schools in different places that are almost reverse
segregated or segregated to different races and also just like the quality of school,
like John Brown is pretty run down but then you got this Podunk town like an
hour north and they have a brand new high school. It's like why -- I know there's
not that much money in this county. I know it's not from tax money. Where is this
all coming from? Where is the equality in all of that? I think just like the quality
of facilities really highlights it I guess in my mind but just because that's the only
way I've seen it (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Henry Ford students barely mentioned suburban schools, but were aware of the
inequities that existed between their school and other schools in the city, which is a topic
their principal spoke to as well. Reference to the differences by WFHF seemed to
acknowledge the inequity while also providing rationale for it:

I think that part of what maybe happened is I guess Henry Ford had a reputation
and they're obviously working very hard to correct that in the public eye, whereas
Sousa is the popular school and that's kind of the standard and they can get lazy (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Such statements provide insight into the deep complexity of the inequities between the two schools, and the structures that support the maintenance of those inequities.

**Complexity.** Although White students from Hartford seemed matter-of-fact about the status quo, they also expressed frustration. While they were frustrated, they also claimed an inability (on their own part or of the adults) to do anything about the inequities, as shown by the words of WFH,

> I feel like although we have this claim like, oh, we're so diverse and we were but did you really learn that much from it? You kind of learned just I guess about other people and how they are. One of the great things that my school [college] at least made us do was you had to take ethnic studies class and learned about like different people in living cultures, how to interact, how people think. That's one thing, like having the diversity foundation but I feel like one of those types of classes would have been really cool to take. I don’t know if I just didn’t take them because I wasn’t interested. It didn’t fit in my schedule. I don’t know. But to talk about those types of people, I don’t know if high school is just you're not ready for it, but… (Personal communication, November 26, 2016).

WMH spoke at length about the ways in which the school demonstrated hypocrisy regarding their claims of diversity,

> We're not going to interact. I hear what you're saying and I laugh at your jokes and I might crowd around when a couple of people fight, but I don't really know where the intersection between races was at Hartford at all, because we ate in
different rooms, we stood in different places. We were at different levels in the school because they got bused in and then a lot of times weren't coming from places that taught them well enough that they were prepared for the high school so they got a better school, but it was like they were kind of getting marginalized by the teachers because they weren't really necessarily ready for in some cases the class situations. It was more when I came to college I was like, oh, there are Mexicans -- this was a new realization to me but I was like, oh, there are people that -- race situations in California are much more, I would say, normalized because there's -- 30% of the population is Hispanic and another 15% to 20% is Asian and that way -- and then they're all integrated in a way that it's like they're from the suburbs, they're just like the White population maybe with just a few less generations of time they've been to college but it was like, oh, okay, I have friends that are five different colors and they do well in school and they're prepared. A lot of them are smarter than me and it shouldn't be this kind of like hands folded, like elephant in the room type thing that it was at Hartford (Personal communication, December 21, 2016).

However, he also compared his college interactions with people of color against his own suburban standard, which shows a lack of true understanding of the complexity of inequity. He could benefit from what the Henry Ford principal described as a “mindset shift,”

In order for equity to occur, there needs to be a redistribution of resource and a mindset shift as to what is equitable...I don't know if that was clear but in essence I don't think that we as a greater institution have shown that we're willing to invest
-- well, perhaps to foresee where we're inequitable, to recognize what would be equitable, and then to be bold enough to invest in equity because that would be about redistributing resource (Personal communication, December 28, 2016).

**Educational justice.** What the Henry Ford principal is speaking about is educational justice, a theme woven throughout his interview, and one that was never mentioned by or alluded to by the Hartford principal. Henry Ford’s principal emphasized his ideas about equity throughout the interview, including the way in which engagement is negatively impacted for students from marginalized populations.

Clearly, I think to be more equitable, we need to better engage all. I think that students who have a history, not necessarily students who have a personal history of marginalization tend to be students who come from communities that are historically marginalized and they've internalized expectations that they have of the institution and how it functions and what their role is in it or what their place is in it. I think we have to work more diligently to both symbolically and systemically shift to foster greater engagement (Personal communication, December 28, 2016).

Yet when asked what leaders could do to address systemic inequities, the Hartford principal briefly touched on the real problem, and then quickly backed away from it. That's like completely rework of the entire culture of our state or of our nation actually because that's, what's really hard is I don't think that there's a value in educators at all. I think we're very disrespected. A lot of families either don't value us and generationally don't value us for lots of different reasons or believe they're entitled to everything under the sun because they've graced us with their
presence and their taxpayer money on our schools (Personal communication, January 4, 2017).

Rather than dig into what it would mean to rework our culture, she instead turned to the devaluing of education. However, I do not believe a failure to rework our culture is about the devaluation of education; it is about the devaluation of people.

**Discarded Categories and Subcategories**

As the data analysis process drew to a close, and clear categories and subcategories emerged, a number of categories and subcategories were set aside. The discarded categories were eliminated based upon weaker connection to emerging themes and/or commonalities that allowed them to be merged with other categories. Table 4.18 lists those categories and subcategories.
Table 4.18: Discarded Categories and Subcategories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discarded Categories and Subcategories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assimilation</td>
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<td>Community/Safety</td>
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<td>Equity</td>
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<td>Image</td>
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<td>Peer Influence</td>
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<td>School Violence</td>
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<td>Teacher Burnout</td>
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<td>Transition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of recognition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learn from those around you</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patronization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious inequity</td>
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<tr>
<td>You don’t know what you don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult vs. kid</td>
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**Concepts: Theoretical and Central**

As stated in the earlier sections of Chapter 4, two theoretical concepts emerged from the process of data analysis in this study. Identification of these ideas as concepts, based upon the categories raised to final category status, is supported by Charmaz’s description of this process,
We choose to raise certain categories to concepts because of their theoretical reach, theoretical centrality, incisiveness, generic power, and relation to other categories. Raising categories to concepts includes subjecting them to further analytic refinement and involves showing their relationships to other concepts (2014, p. 247).

**Theoretical Concept I.**

The following statement comprises the first theoretical concept: White supremacy prevents achievement of an equitable, quality education for all students, through systemically racist practices that maintain the status quo. This theoretical concept connects to the categories of Diversity and Inequity, and subcategories of People Different Than Me, White Supremacy, Suburban vs. Urban Schools and Complexity.

**Theoretical Concept II.**

The following statement comprises the second theoretical concept: Structures supporting educational justice, especially access to a caring and qualified teacher, can interrupt White supremacy to create an inclusive environment where all students have equal access to quality education. This theoretical concept draws from the categories of Good Teachers, Choice and Exploration, Preparation for the Future, Diversity and Inequity. Subcategories that inform this concept include: life changers, allies and advocates, challenge and passion=engagement, student-centered, future oriented, structural support, exposure to career paths, student ownership, life skills, inclusion, learning for students and teachers and educational justice. Essentially, educational justice is defined by the presence of all the previous subcategories in the list. The world can only change and break the cycle of White supremacy through enactment of educational justice,
which can change students’ lives through provision of the opportunity to engage in educational experiences that are student-owned and student-centered. Teachers and students must learn together, and even unlearn, new ways of being, in a space that provides structural support for this learning and ensures that all students leave with the necessary life skills to pursue the career path of their choice, while also bringing a new and different narrative to the world outside.

Summary

Early in my research process, almost a full year before writing this chapter, I highlighted this quote from Charmaz:

The critical stance in social justice research combined with the analytic focus of grounded theory broadens and sharpens the scope of inquiry. Such efforts locate subjective and collective experience in larger social structures and increase understanding of how these structures work (2014, p. 326).

Charmaz goes on to talk about the ways in which research with a social justice focus can help us examine the world around us through fresh eyes (2014). She identifies resources, hierarchies, ideologies, and consequences as factors that interact with social justice research (2014). Throughout the process of this study, I certainly encountered evidence of all of these components. Resources, whether human or financial, had significant impact on the educational experiences of the students interviewed. Hierarchies influenced the decisions made by the administrators. Ideologies framed the ways in which the schools functioned and the humans interacted with one another. The consequences of the inequities studied can be seen throughout our country, even though
the group of students interviewed is only beginning to heighten their own awareness of the ways in which race and privilege intersect and impact their individual world.

The original research questions, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?* and *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?* are not questions with simple answers. While insufficient data was collected to generalize theory to an entire population, what became clear through the data analysis process is the permeation of White supremacy throughout this Midwestern suburban and urban area. Despite the hard work, good intentions, and collective efforts of many individuals, widespread, systemic change has yet to occur. Chapter 5 explores the findings of the research and connections to literature, with a focus on implications of the results. In addition, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are outlined.
Chapter 5

This qualitative phenomenological study used focus groups, elite interviews, and document analysis to explore the questions, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?* and *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do school leaders support a quality, equitable education for all students?* This concluding chapter investigates the implications of my findings, taking into account limitations of the study. In addition, recommendations for future research are included, along with concluding thoughts.

Connections to Literature

As described in Chapter 2, three distinct areas of the literature provided context for this study: quality education, school finance, and educational justice and equity. Notable analysis of the literature can be found in Chapter 2 and will not be repeated here. However, some key themes from the literature reviewed can be connected to the findings.

**Quality education.** The school leaders and students interviewed echoed a number of ideas described in the literature pertaining to quality education, as reviewed for Chapter 2. All participants talked about the importance of challenging curriculum, having opportunity to explore interests, how school culture impacts students, and ways in which education must prepare students for their futures. Significantly, the ideas of suburban versus urban values, which relate to how parent engagement aligns (or not) with school culture, were also a topic of conversation among many of the White students from Hartford. The Henry Ford principal’s descriptions of the ways in which he uses his resources to provide equity align with Ravitch’s (2013) words regarding the desires of
suburban parents, “They would expect excellent athletic facilities and daily physical education...They would expect advanced courses...They would correctly anticipate small classes, projects, and frequent writing assignments. They would want a full range of student activities” (p. 235). He, too, placed emphasis on ensuring his students have access to the arts and other electives, which was recognized by alumni from Henry Ford. However, a twist on Ravitch’s claim lies in his desire to also reinforce the gifts the students bring to the building by offering courses that are reflective of the students’ cultures and backgrounds. In that way, he has linked ideas about quality education to the concepts of educational justice and equity, thus creating a school culture where students feel welcomed and valued.

On the other side of the spectrum lie the descriptions of inner city schools shared by the White students from Hartford. Indeed, their perspectives communicated the pedagogy of despair that Henry Ford’s principal works to eliminate. The Hartford students’ views align with the summary of Lareau’s (2011) research shared in Chapter 2, evidenced by their beliefs about parents who are not engaged or do not support their child’s learning. Their principal echoed these beliefs when asked about how to ensure equitable outcomes for all, as she answered with concerns about who actually values education and who does not, rather than discussion about how educators can change the current reality. Lareau’s (2011) description of concerted cultivation provides a frame for the views held by the Hartford students and their principal, who have likely been the recipients of such an upbringing. Speaking from that experience, anything else appears indifferent, even apathetic. However, Lareau (2011) would argue, as would Henry Ford’s
principal, that these different approaches are merely misaligned with an educational system that has been designed for, and revolves around, White, middle-class ideals.

Most enlightening in the data gathered regarding quality education are the ways in which it aligns with other student-centered definitions of the concept. Chapter 2 discussed several characteristics of student-defined quality education, including incorporation of student voice, collaboration between teachers and students, emphasis on smaller learning communities, the importance of diverse school populations, the need for caring adults as part of the educational experience, and a connection to future career pathways. Throughout the conversations with students from both schools, all of these themes surfaced as they discussed their beliefs about what had made them successful, barriers to their success, the markers of a quality education, and their advice to school leaders. Many moments caused me to pause internally, as I listened to the wisdom being shared by young people, and lamented the educational community’s collective failure to hear their message. One young man’s words particularly struck me:

So invoking like a community that embraces trying, embraces failure, embraces exploration because I think that's one of the things that I wish we would have been able to do really in high school was explore more because at 18 you have to choose where you want to go to school and what you want to do for the rest of your life. I think it's hard to do that at 18. So if we allowed students to have, in high school, decisions over more things, facing their own consequences and not just I think keeping them to a structure of this, this, this, this, this but allowing them and building a community that allows them to feel like they're grown up and feel like they have their own decisions because if you're prepared, you need to be
prepared for not only the classroom aspect of things but also the societal aspects, like the aspects that have to do with making our own decisions and deciding what you want to do for yourself, not just what your parents have told you or a community that invokes like that failure like I said, and then also just the social aspect (WMH, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

Another young woman spoke about her frustration that adults did not listen or adapt to ensure her education provided her with what she needed.

I guess I would piggyback on that, I feel as a person I was kind of forced into going to college, and I feel like Hartford prepared me for college but not for the real life. When it came time for me to file taxes, when it came time for me -- like I worked through high school, I worked two jobs and I felt like when it was like, why are you so tired? It's like, outside these walls, I'm working two jobs to help my family, and I don't think Hartford really understands that. It's more of a college-driven than a life-ready or preparing for life after high school because not like -- that goes back, not everybody goes to college. College is a great thing but that's another expense as well when being able to look at your loans, being able to like, okay, I can actually pay my loans back now or I actually have to wait. I think that's one thing that I would say I was just like I don't know what to do. I literally have to learn, sit down and have my mom teach me. I spent all this time, I spent four years in high school, and why didn't I -- why wasn't I forced to learn that, when I was forced to learn genetics and all these other different things that -- I mean granted you don't -- some of the stuff you don't use and I feel -- that came with my challenge as well during high school is am I really going to use this? No.
I would question that and I think when you would challenge somebody who has a higher authority than you, they get aggressive or defensive (FH, personal communication, December 19, 2016).

She elaborated further, later in the interview,

You only learn what they want you to learn. I'll speak of my college, there's things that I learned within my freshman year of college and I was like, why haven't I learned any of this history and I've been taking history for four years in high school?...And being honest like you might not actually need this even though you have to take it. That's okay but just get through with it because I didn't need genetics at all. I didn't use it. I haven't used a thing from it (FH, personal communication, December 19, 2016).

Statements like the two preceding left me with a heavy heart, as I was forced to reflect on my own role in the educational curtailment of student engagement in true, deep learning. However, I was encouraged by the reasonable advice students had to offer when asked how school leaders could improve. WFHF shared,

I feel like possibly giving the students something that they want to learn about, maybe like sitting down at the beginning of the semester, as a class, as a teacher, and talking to your students, and outlining what this course is and what are you more interested in (personal communication, December 21, 2016).

One of her peers offered similarly wise advice,

Maybe listening more to the students. Like recently, you've got like -- last year you guys had the student board, like panels that would come in and talk to the staff, which I think can be really helpful because not all staff members get that
time to sit down and actually listen to what the student has to say because days get busy and life goes on and work is work, but no one gets that time to sit down and actually listen to the students. So maybe having students actually sit down and talk with everybody and kind of explain this is what we want and the reason that we want it and let me show you how we can do this. If they're able to do that, then I feel like people should respect the fact that the students are making that choice to kind of take charge in their education. I feel like if they're taking charge, it's like they're investing more in themselves and not having the opportunity to do that kind of like throws kids off (WMHF, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

Finally, a graduate from Hartford provided compelling suggestions for how to improve:

Sit down with them and ask them what it is that they want to -- what is it that they like doing, not even about education like don't ask them how we they can help them succeed. That's going to be related to ten contingencies that they probably can't control. If you sit down and ask kids like what do you want out of this world? What do you want out of life? What do you like doing? What do you enjoy doing and what makes you happy? Then you can start to localize and what the purpose of education is. I just don't think there was ever that one-on-one interaction between student and administrator that had weight. Like maybe if you would -- even if they had an interaction, whether it was with the HR guy, it's like that HR guy doesn't -- my answer to him isn't going to matter. I think that if you really want to break through the barriers of education and all this and if you had a way individually, for administrator, a teacher, a principal, to know on a personal
level what that kid was going after and be able to motivate them towards that, I mean there's some entity that did that while also making a better way for students to have a voice within the school and tell this administration because it was so disjointed at Hartford to be like one lone protester getting expelled or suspended for seven days. They didn't really have their ear to the ground in terms of what the student body was saying. So I would say communicate individually and then encourage communication among the school about things, because that way you can actually solve these things, because to say there's one solution in all of Minnesota, to all of the school problems, is absolutely absurd. I just think they need to be more cognizant and less like 20th century like, okay, here's your test. Fill it out. Let's go to school. You need to engage with people in a way that they're going to start communicating with people about what they think (WMH, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

At the root of all the students’ words is the act of listening. While it was discouraging to hear the ways in which they have been disappointed and let down by public education, it was encouraging to realize that my instincts at the beginning of this study were right: we need to listen to the students and really examine whether our efforts are producing the impact we, which includes the students themselves, want. This is a first step to producing equitable, quality education for all.  

**School finance.** Beyond listening, equitable resource allocation must accompany efforts to equalize the educational playing field. Once resources have been allocated, appointment of a thoughtful school leader can ensure work toward equitable outcomes begins. Formulas used to determine funding for schools are merely combinations of
numbers. The values that drive how those formulas are created, and how the funding is used, are the real workhorses of establishing equitable outcomes for students facilitated by equitable funding. Both schools studied receive funding according to a foundation model. Unfortunately that funding allows neither equity nor adequacy to be fully addressed in either school. In the case of Hartford, the principal talked about values and how she worked to ensure her resources represented those values. Yet both White students and students of color from the school expressed concern regarding the inequities they witnessed. At Henry Ford High School, the principal also talked about how values must drive decisions but lamented the lack of resources he was afforded to make his vision a reality. While the students felt a sense of belonging in the school, they also described it as developing and recognized their lack of resource when compared to other area schools. In both schools, authentic systems to enact educational justice and equity are sorely needed.

**Educational justice and equity.** I opened this section of the literature review in Chapter 2 with the following quote, which bears repeating.

“The parents of rich children have the money to get into better schools. Then after a while, they begin to say, ‘Well, I have this. Why not keep it for my children?’ In other words, it locks them into the idea of always having something more. After that, these things - the extra things they have - are seen like an *inheritance*. They feel it’s theirs and they don’t understand why we should question it” -Alexander (Kozol, 1991, p. 105).

Indeed, the students from Hartford, many of whom are heirs to greater resources, generally saw their position as their just due. The students from Henry Ford, many of
whom came from lesser circumstances, viewed their world as “just the way it is.”

Throughout the literature about educational justice and equity, themes were described that were then reiterated in the data. From segregated schools and the influence of cultural capital to the significant inequities found in urban schools and the way school choice reinforces those systems, my research provided a living example of the unjust nature of our state, country and world. While societal inequities certainly reinforce these unfair circumstances, the way our school systems are designed supplements the inequity, and the participants interviewed were well aware of the outcomes, if not the intent. There is no doubt “institutional advantages then are reproduced and expanded over time, thereby transforming individual actions into well-worn social pathways” (Lareau, 2011, p. 265). The question that must next be answered is, “Then what?”

**Implications of Findings**

The findings of the research study center on the data gathered from the graduates and school leaders of the suburban and urban high schools studied. The data is intentionally focused on the human experience, a phenomenological investigation into the opinions and experiences of a small group of alumni and their school leaders from two Midwestern high schools, one suburban and one urban. As such, the theoretical concepts generated by the data are not generalizable across all populations. However, the findings may certainly be meaningful to the participants, particularly the urban leader, who is still the principal at Henry Ford High School. I intend to formally share the findings with that individual, in the event that he is able to find use for the information as a leader of the institution.
The experiences I have had as an educator, as well as a learner, certainly influenced my lens as I entered into the research. While I worked to maintain an objective stance so that theory could emerge through the grounded theory analysis process, I also recognize my critical nature undoubtedly impacted my findings.

The two theoretical concepts generated by the data provide a context for discussion of implications. Theoretical Concept I states, *White supremacy prevents achievement of an equitable, quality education for all students, through systemically racist practices that maintain the status quo.* While such a statement may seem obvious, I believe the subtlety of modern-day White supremacy necessitates a deeper analysis of what this really means. My own experiences as a White, female educator for the past 20 years shape my interpretation of this statement. I have taught in a variety of educational environments, from a community with very little wealth and bi-cultural diversity, to spaces with significant gaps between ends of the socioeconomic spectrum and moderate diversity, to an incredibly diverse school with a mix of middle-class and financially challenged students. All of those institutions, and the people within them, engage in systemically racist practices that maintain the status quo--but to different degrees. My time spent teaching and leading in these schools has illustrated the wide variety of ways that White supremacy can show up. It can be very obvious, with hate speech commonly used and little effort to disguise prejudices. White supremacy can hide behind substantial work on equity and a welcoming attitude toward diversity, visible only in the ways decisions are made about what classes will run and which students will have access to advanced coursework versus an assignment to remedial classes. And White supremacy can also live in a space where every child is said to be embraced, but some are
continually suspended more than the rest and fail more often than those with lighter skin. As a person who has worked in all of these educational environments, loved children in all of these schools, and believed deeply in the promise of public education, it is disheartening to accept the reality that I have contributed to the power of White supremacy as well. That is where the power of the statement lies, however, as the only way to dismantle what exists is to realize and accept one’s own culpability. I believe our world, which includes our schools, can only change if we all begin to do this.

Theoretical Concept II, *Structures supporting educational justice, especially access to a caring and qualified teacher, can interrupt White supremacy to create an inclusive environment where all students have equal access to quality education*, provides hope to counteract the grim reality of Concept I. The creation of such structures is the action that we can all take to push back against the permeation of White supremacy. The structures alone are not enough. Hearts and minds must change as well. But while we wait for that to take hold, there are actions we can take, which can serve to provide solace for many who feel the despair of our reality.

What are these structures? The reader need only listen to the voices of the students interviewed for this study to identify the ways in which we can move forward. Our schools need to be diverse, but that is not enough. As the Hartford students acknowledged, sharing a space must be more than coexistence to facilitate true understanding of those who are different than oneself. Within a diverse space, caring and qualified teachers can lead the way to creating a community that is sincerely inclusive. Such a community insists upon learning for everyone and from everyone. The concepts of critical and democratic education can serve as a framework from which to draw. The
reality of preparing students for the world outside is acknowledged, but is not taken as the sole charge of education. As Anyon (2014) stated, “poor and non-white students need to understand the codes of dominant cultural capital and be able to parse them” (p. 173). But all children deserve the opportunity to imagine what “‘could be’” (p. 112; Knight & Pearl, 2000). The possibility of a brighter future, a better world, demands more than the technical approach most schools currently revolve around. Curriculum and standards are what Anyon (2014) is referring to; the dream of something more is what can sustain all of us who believe humanity can do better.

**Limitations of the Study**

As previously acknowledged, the scope of the study is its greatest limitation. While all contributors were willing and thoughtful, the small numbers of participants create a study that cannot be generalized across multiple populations. This limitation is exacerbated by the fact that all graduates hailed from two schools, further narrowing the application of findings.

**Gaps in the data.** In addition to the small sample size of the full group, several gaps in the data exist. Although three focus groups were scheduled for each high school, with equal numbers of participants invited to each, significantly more Hartford students participated than did Henry Ford students. In addition, two attempts were made to hold a focus group including both White and non-White Henry Ford students, but participants did not show up for either session. Therefore, the dimension of data gathered from a group with a variety of racial backgrounds is limited to that gathered from Hartford alumni.
Similarly, while efforts were made to include representation from all racial groups attending each school—in proportion to the size of each group’s population—there were racial groups from each school that were not represented. As a result, the data is limited in scope, both in terms of including voices from the missing populations, as well as impact on the group conversation that may have resulted from more diversity within the focus groups.

Finally, as the researcher, my intimate knowledge of both school districts likely had impact on participant responses, as well as on my analysis. Although I believe that all participants were honest, it is impossible to know whether more or less would have been said to a completely neutral and unknown facilitator. In addition, my deep knowledge of both school districts certainly influenced my interest in the topic, the questions I chose to ask, and the lens through which I interpreted the results. Every effort was made to maintain neutrality throughout the data collection and analysis, with the understanding that a purpose of the study was to examine the findings through a critical lens.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Based upon the findings, further inquiry seems warranted in three areas. First, neither staff nor families were interviewed for the study. Including such perspectives would generate a richer description of the similarities and differences between perceptions of quality education and equity held by members of the suburban and urban communities.

Secondly, I believe a survey of a much larger number of graduates from both schools could help determine whether the patterns that emerged in the focus group
conversations represent widely held beliefs and experiences or only the observations of a few.

Finally, the evolving nature of the urban school contrasted highly with the more static and established setting of the suburban school. If the urban school continues on its current trajectory, which appears headed toward a more stable position, a follow-up study to examine whether future graduates regard the environment similarly to this study’s participants could be informative. A question I still hold is how much the developing environment of the urban school impacts its school culture. In other words, because the school’s leadership and staff are in a mode of continuous improvement, does that prevent a feeling of stasis, or mask the recognition of structures that support White supremacy, allowing everyone involved to avoid acknowledgment of their presence? I also wonder how often are suburban schools described as “developing?” Does that ever happen? Do we allow schools outside of the city to “fall apart”? Why not? A true anti-racist perspective would actually label all schools as developing. To do otherwise indicates an acceptance of White supremacy and its influence.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Chapter 1 began with my personal recollection of readings, internalized over the course of my graduate studies, beginning with my first encounter with Kozol (1991), and continuing with Darling-Hammond’s (2010) acknowledgment of the educational world’s willingness to accept inequity for some in order to maintain privilege for others. My aspirations to help create a more equitable world were awakened on that sunny, summer day in 2000, as I sat on the curb waiting for my ride and reading Kozol’s words. Years of working with students who enjoyed privilege, as they learned alongside those who did
not, created a frustration inside my heart and a commitment deep in my soul to make these inequities known. My work as a leader at an urban high school challenged every fiber of my being and opened my eyes to the complexity of our society, as well as the beauty of our diverse country. But as we enter into a new dawn following the 2016 Presidential election, I also recognize my fatigue, and more than ever, my own privilege. The contradictory nature of my beliefs and my own human capacity present the challenge that is the work of educational justice. I recognize and embrace the answers to my question, *Given the context of one urban and one suburban high school, how do high school graduates define the quality of their education and its connections to equity?* As an educational leader, I understand the work that needs to be done. I know I cannot do that work alone. In the words of Margaret Mead, I will march forward in search of that “small group of thoughtful, committed citizens” who want to help me change the world.
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Appendix A

The purpose of this focus group is to gather information that will help me understand graduates’ views about the quality of their education and how that relates to equity in the greater society. This focus group will last for 60-90 minutes. Whatever you say here will remain confidential. That means that I won’t reveal what was said here by individual name, although we will share the information that you give in general. It also means that all of you agree not to share the comments made here with others outside this group. It is extremely important that we all understand the nature of this confidentiality since it will help us to get as clear and honest a picture of your school as possible. I will record this focus group and transcribe the tape. Where needed, fictional names will be substituted for the names mentioned here. Since each of your perspectives is important, we need to make sure that everyone gets a chance to express their opinions and no one takes too much of the air time. I will take responsibility for time-keeping and making sure that we address all of the questions. Use your best strategies to express your opinions without making others feel uncomfortable.

Opening Question

1. Thank you for being here today! As we go around the circle, please tell the group your name and what year you graduated from (name of school).

2. What is one thing you will always remember about going to school at (name of school)?

Introductory Question
3. Were there events, rules or people that helped you succeed at (name of school)?

That made it difficult to succeed?

**Transition Question**

4. In what ways did your high school education prepare you for life after high school? In what ways were you not prepared?

**Key Questions**

5. Thinking about high school, when were you least engaged in school and why?

When were you most engaged in school and why?

6. As we discuss quality education, I would like to understand what you think contributes to a quality education. How would you describe a quality education?

7. Given your description of a quality education, do you think you received a quality education at (name of school)? In what ways?

8. If you were to compare (name of school) to other high schools in the metro area, would you say the education you received was better, worse or about the same as what students received at those schools?

   a. What are some reasons influencing your answer?

9. Were there inequities within your school? Can you describe what that looked like?

   a. What do you think contributed to equity/inequity in your school?

10. When you think about your school experiences and your personal racial identity, how would you describe how school was for you as a Black/Latino/Native/Asian/White student?
a. Do you think your racial identity forced you to face certain obstacles in school?

b. Do you think students from other backgrounds have had the same experiences/opportunities as you in school?

c. Do you think students who share your racial identity in general face obstacles in schools?

**Ending Questions**

11. On a broader level, what are your thoughts about education and equality in (name of state) as a whole?

12. Do you have any advice for school leaders with regard to how we might ensure all students, regardless of their racial or socioeconomic status, receive a quality education?

13. Is there anything else you would like to share today?
Appendix B

The purpose of this interview is to gather information that will help me understand your views about quality education and how that relates to equity in your school. This interview will last for approximately 60 minutes. Whatever you say here will remain confidential. That means that I won’t reveal what was said here by individual name, although we will share the information that you give in general. It also means that you agree not to share the comments made here outside this setting. I will tape this interview and transcribe the tape. Where needed, fictional names will be substituted for the names mentioned here. I will take responsibility for time-keeping and making sure that we address all of the questions.

1. Tell me a little about yourself—where you’re from, how you got into education, how long you’ve been with this system?
2. My research addresses how graduates define a quality education. If you were to define a quality education, what would you say? What are the components?
3. Do you believe the students in this school receive a quality education? Why or why not?
   a. What are steps you have taken to work toward your ideal?
   b. What role does equity play in obtaining a quality education?
4. Are there inequities within your school? If so, please describe. If not, what factors contribute to equal access?
a. When you think about inequities in your school, how do you use your budget dollars to address issues of equity?

5. How are the values of equity and quality education reflected in your school’s mission statement?

6. How do you use your school’s financial resources to enact those values?

7. How do you use your school’s financial resources to enact those values?

7. How are various racial and socioeconomic groups involved in shaping the guiding principles and values of your school?
   a. Are there racial or socioeconomic groups within your school that have more decision-making power than others? What does that look like?
   b. If not, what are the factors you believe have prevented this power differential?

8. **I would like you to read a scenario about a school environment in the days prior to the start of the year.** “School begins in eight days. Many high school teachers have returned to their classrooms to begin preparing for the year. The assistant principal and principal are still working on the master schedule because budget uncertainties kept everyone guessing until almost the last minute; student schedules haven’t yet been created. The school still has more than four unfilled positions in math, physical education, social science, and English. The district apparently hasn’t given the school approval to hire staff for these positions, as there’s an expectation that the number of students who have registered will be greater than the number of students who actually arrive on the first day of school. If he could, the principal would hire teachers for these sections, but as the district has not given him permission to do so, they remain unfilled. It’s impossible to
know which students will arrive and which won’t. Will the school have more 9th graders than expected? Will all of the 11th graders from the previous year return for their senior year? Which classes will have more than the maximum number of students, and which will be cancelled because they won’t have the minimum number of students? Counselors have tried to determine the appropriate number and type of courses to be offered, yet they can’t predict student attendance.

According to state law, the school and district have 13 school days to make the necessary adjustments to the schedules. During those 13 days, many students will have their classes changed. Some students will have several classes changed. Many students will have their classes changed on the 12th and 13th days — three weeks into the school year. These students will have to readjust to a new teacher, new classmates, and new class expectations. They’ll be asked to return their first textbook and to catch up in the book being taught in their new class. They’ll be expected to somehow “know” what students in their new class know, even though they weren’t in that class for the first three weeks. How is a teacher supposed to help these students catch up? Some of these students will have spent those first 13 days with an underqualified substitute.” (Chassman, pp. 57-58)

a. Have you ever worked anywhere in which these conditions were reality?

If so, where?

1. What do you think contributes to a situation like the one described above?

2. How does RHS/HHS align with this scenario? If it doesn’t, what do you think prevents it?
9. What do we, as educational leaders, need to be doing to create conditions that prevent the scenario above?

10. Is there anything else you would like to add?