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WHAT ARE TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF AN EQUITY COMMITTEE?

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Public schools are a massive entity that serve the unique and diverse needs of millions of children each year. Educators, administrators and policy makers affect the wide variety of needs that walk through the doors of an elementary school each day. Educators rely on the ability to collaborate and communicate with each other by dividing tasks and sharing information and experiences. Equity committees are often used to facilitate and support the collaboration among educators. In this chapter, I will discuss my research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?*

The goal of this research was to identify teacher perceptions of an equity committee. It was essential to find out more about the participants' beliefs and experiences that contribute to their perceptions of what an equity committee does, what it should look like and how it should function. Understanding that the participants have different beliefs, backgrounds and perceptions of equity committees was helpful in the understanding of teachers' perceptions of an equity committee.

Rationale

Educators understand that students come into schools needing their most basic physiological needs met—such as food, water, air—before they can feel safe, a sense of belonging, self-esteem and ultimately progress toward self-actualization (Harper & Guilbault, 2008, Taormina & Gao, 2013). Schools often use Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Harper & Guilbault, 2008) as a guide to support a wide variety of student needs. This theory also states that for children to reach their full potential, and to be motivated to learn at school, it is essential to respond to their unique needs (Harper & Guilbault, 2008).

Elementary schools support student development using Erikson's theory of Psychosocial Development that divides into eight life-stages each with an intention and purpose (Adams, 2008). The first five stages of life are the most transformative and lead the individual toward identity formation (Adams, 2008). This incredibly transformative time has the potential to positively or negatively impact the individual, based on their lived experiences (Adams, 2008). According to Erikson's theory, an elementary aged student would typically be concerned with feelings of competence or aptitude (Adams, 2008). This life stage plays out in elementary schools everywhere.

Schools have different needs based on the students that attend, the educators that teach and the policies that govern each district. However, all students come to school with a distinct and important set of needs that change each day. As educators, we are faced with the responsibility of responding to our students to help them reach their potential. But, we are also faced with the responsibilities of daily routines that make it hard for us to understand what our students need and when they need it. Luckily, in my experience, educators are great collaborators. That is, they often talk about issues facing their classrooms and share resources to support the school-wide community. Commonly, many schools have committees that help brainstorm ideas to discuss, assess and respond to the needs of the school community. As such, an equity committee often becomes useful in supporting student needs and continuing education and collaboration for educators.

I call upon these examples because I feel that my students are supported, cared for and loved by the educators that I work with who spend countless hours being innovative and thinking of ways to respond to the fundamental needs of our students. Since starting my career in education in 2010, an equity committee has been present throughout each experience I have

had. These equity committees have functioned differently, had evolving areas of focus and have prioritized engagement for both staff and students in the importance of equity in the elementary school.

Context

Over the past seven years as an educator, I have served hundreds of elementary students, each of whom has had an important and unique identity in their classroom, in their community and in the world. In my building, 80% of my students come from low-income families and receive Free and Reduced Lunch prices, over half of our population speaks two or more languages, and many students face challenges in our world that many adults have not, and may never, encounter. I have many students who racially identify in more than one category, students who connect deeply with their native language (commonly not English) and speak often about their family traditions. My students come to school ready and eager to learn about the world around them, share about their experiences, and do their best. I am proud to be able to support them in such an important time in their development and education.

In addition to being sensitive to the academic, social and emotional needs of my students, I am aware that their racial, cultural and ethnic identities are being supported or neglected based on my actions, words and resources. My students depend on me daily to create a rich and diverse classroom environment that reflects the racial diversity in the classroom. They expect that their teachers highlight where they come from, both ethnically and linguistically. I do this to promote my own global awareness and to ensure student engagement in the classroom and beyond. But more than that, I want students to develop a sense of self-importance, significance, pride and global awareness that connect them deeply to themselves and their families.

All students need a supportive advocate to engage them in an education system that has so often failed to be sensitive to their unique place in the world. Children, who will become adults, need to learn skills to navigate the ever changing and diversifying world around them. I am hopeful that if I increase my own education and critical awareness of how an equity committee can best serve my students, I will be better suited to facilitate conversations that promote equity among both students and staff, and ultimately share my findings to support students.

Exploring this research question provides the opportunity to become even more aware and focused on important racial, cultural and social-emotional issues facing education today. With personal growth and continued passion for education, I am confident that this project can provide me with the resources to do this important work and reflect on the answer to the research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?*

Coming from a relatively homogenous (mostly middle-class, suburban, and white) public school environment growing up, I was not personally confronted with issues surrounding racial equity until I became an educator. In 2010, I served with AmeriCorps through the Minnesota Reading Corps (MRC). I decided to take on this challenge because I had just graduated from college with a degree in English, and I was not ready to make a permanent professional choice about a future career. I had spent four years of my undergraduate experience reading books from diverse authors and reading about diverse experiences, but it wasn't enough to help me figure out what I personally wanted to do for a career. I had several ideas about the world, but hadn't had experiences that helped me solidify my own personal beliefs. The MRC commitment was only one year of service, would look great on a resume and offered a chance to pay off some student loan debt, so I was confident that I could spend some time reflecting on

where to go next professionally during my year of service. Unexpectedly, I ended up getting placed at the same school where my mother has been an art teacher for over 15 years. During that time, I recall going to work with her, hearing about her trials and tribulations of being an educator and had vehemently decided that I did not want to pursue a career in education.

However, during my first year participating in MRC, I was confronted with answering the purest, deepest and most curious questions of students, and realized that I didn't have my own solid perspective to share with them. Their questions changed the way I thought about the world, and I realized that I needed to challenge the students back with questions to help them better understand their own perspectives.

By the end of my first year of service, I had changed immensely and was hungry for more experiences and information about how to stay on the path of being an agent of change. I enrolled at Hamline University to pursue career in education. After that first year working with students, I simply could not imagine doing anything else. I wanted to feel connected to a community of educators who were actively seeking opportunities and new ways to deliver the best possible education to the future of the world.

Throughout my experience completing my teaching license, I encountered opportunities to reflect on my own education, my limited experience teaching elementary students and how these things can make a profound impact on the world. Similar to the feeling I had when I had started teaching, I was compelled to continue searching for issues that really inspired me to think about the world and my place in it. I enjoyed having the opportunity to reflect on these issues in a safe space, understand my own perspective and by the end of the program, I felt ready to become an educator.

After I completed my teaching license, I was extremely grateful to accept a position at the same site where I had served as an AmeriCorps member. It felt enormous to have been offered a teaching position and I had already participated at the school and in the community where my teaching career officially began.

I decided to continue my personal growth by becoming a member of the equity committee at school and made deeply profound professional relationships with people who had committed their teaching service to equity. I was a member of this committee for several years and shared my perspective with other educators to help better the experience of my students. It was a truly transformative experience.

Through working with the equity committee, I was able to partake in several professional development opportunities surrounding equity issues of race, policy and teaching practices. I began to develop a strong sense of my teaching philosophy, and I have been able to bring my knowledge into the classroom to support student learning. I am fascinated by these issues because they are so delicately intertwined. I fully accept that I will never be done learning about the powerful implications of equity in education. I am grateful that my voice and perspective will be able to make real, powerful and impactful change on students and the communities I am a part of.

Because of these experiences, I have explored the research question *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee*. In the next chapter, I present a review of the literature on equity and equity committees. In doing so, I contextualize how these notions have been previously explored in educational research. After, I will share the action research plan for how to answer the research question.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Overview

This chapter will review the literature about issues affecting educational equity in elementary schools to contextualize teacher perceptions of an equity committee. This chapter will present a definition of the term equity as well as make connections to policy implications and the external factors that impact equitable education for elementary students. Connections between equity and achievement will also be presented through research surrounding assessment, including high-stakes testing. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2007) and teacher preparation programs will also be discussed at length. Effective equity leadership strategies and the use of effective equity committees will be put forth. This literature review provides a shared vocabulary for understanding equity in education and illustrates the issues affecting educational equity. It is presented to help answer the research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?*

Equity

Defining Equity. Within the last decade, the difference between equality and equity has been brought to the forefront of this discussion. The research is clear in that educators are focused on creating equitable educational opportunities for all students. In doing this, it is vital to understand distinct differences between these terms.

It is well documented in the literature how to define equity and how to create an equitable educational environment for all students. For example, Singleton and Linton (2006) define educational equity as raising the achievement of all students while reducing the gaps between the highest and lowest performing students, and eliminating the disproportionate and

predictability of the students who occupy each group (p. 46). “Equity has replaced the older concept of equal educational opportunity... Equity places more emphasis on notions of fairness and justice, even if that requires an unequal distribution of goods and services” (Valli *et al.* 1997 as cited in Gillborn & Youdell, 2000).

The equality focuses on equal resource distribution while the term equity becomes an, “operational principle that enables educators to provide whatever level of support is needed to whichever students require it” (Singleton & Linton, 2000, p. 47). Using the term equity helps educators understand the need to provide opportunities for all students with what they individually need to succeed (Singleton & Linton, 2000, p. 47). In this way, Singleton and Linton posits the term equity to guide educators toward student achievement and it allows educators to support individual students with varying degrees of need. This distinction is especially important when searching for the function of an equity committee, and teacher perceptions of their purpose. Using and understanding the term equity changes the context of what it means to support students as an educator.

Policy. Educational policy is a factor that guides educators in creating equitable educational experiences for students. The research of Brighthouse, Ladd, Loeb, and Swift (2016) links decision-making with schooling by connecting policy and opportunity. Brighthouse et al. (2016) describe educational goods as, “the knowledge, skills, dispositions and attitudes that inhere in people and have the potential to contribute to their own flourishing and the flourishing of others” (p. 3). Educational goods, in this context, are the things people can offer to society, at large. This idea links policy with creating and extending opportunities for students because educational goods can be acquired through any lived experiences, including, but not limited to formal education (Bridghouse et al., 2016). Without opportunities to build skills, acquire

knowledge and foster healthy dispositions and attitudes, the value of these educational goods can change. Policies inherently have the power to support the development of educational goods and give them a greater value in society, at large.

Policy has an integral role in educational equity because the policies themselves affect the proponents of the educational system. “Although the division of policy sectors is artificial, decision makers are bound to focus on the values that are most readily realized by the levers at their disposal. Schools are the natural focus [of policy making] because they are designed specifically to produce educational goods in children (Brighouse et al., 2016, p. 3). Therefore, as policies support resource distribution to create opportunities for students, “it matters not only how many opportunities there are overall but also how those opportunities are distributed” (Bridghouse et al., 2016, p. 10).

Education has become a highly visible and politicized topic as there are many stakeholders interested in the policies surrounding education. Understanding that policy can directly affect equity in education, policy-making can be abstract and often subjective as it can be rooted in value judgements (Bridghouse et al., 2016, p. 4). There are also many components to the distribution of these educational goods once policies are created. Brighouse et al. (2016) explains that there are many stakeholders who influence the implementation of policy:

In practice decision-makers cannot directly distribute educational goods or prospects for flourishing. Federal, state and district level decision makers determine how funding is distributed, and how it may be used; they regulate schools by creating incentives and constructing and implementing accountability systems, and by imposing licensing requirements. Decision makers at the school level choose how to allocate students to teachers, which teachers to hire, and what kind of instructional leadership to

provide. Classroom teachers decide how to allocate their time, energy and attention within the classroom, and to what end. (p.10)

This excerpt shows the interconnected channels through which policies are created and educational goods are distributed. Policy and equity are intertwined; educational equity is directly affected by the implementation of policy. Policy implications need to be considered to understand the intended purpose of an equity committee, and teacher perceptions thereof. Darling-Hammond (2010) argues that to achieve an equity focus in policy making, “national and state education[al] policy should be guided by...commitments to support meaningful learning on the part of students, teachers and schools and to equalize access to educational opportunity...” (p. 279). For educational equity to be sustained, policies must support the goals and ideals of educational equity.

Darling-Hammond (2010) advocates for educational equity by holding the federal laws accountable. “To survive and prosper, our society must finally renounce its obstinate commitment to educational inequality and embrace full and ambitious opportunities to learn for all our children...ensuring that every child has access to adequate school resources, facilities and quality teachers.” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 309). Policies will directly affect student outcomes and to create the most equitable environment for students, policies must be made by equity-minded policymakers. In turn, schools would be supported by equitable policies. The students would ultimately benefit from these practices. When considering the role of an equity committee, policy implementation and its effect on equity is pertinent to the discussion about teacher perceptions of equity committees.

External Factors. There are several external factors that affect equitable education. Although these factors are intertwined with and contribute to the educational system, these

external factors are often outside of an educator's control. Social and systemic influences impact the way educational equity affects students. It is important to consider the social and systemic influences on education when exploring the functions of an equity committee in an elementary school.

As mentioned previously, Brighthouse et al. (2016) present a framework to identify educational goods that can also be considered factors external to the learning that happens in schools. Understanding this framework can help educators recognize the factors beyond their immediate control during the school day. Many educational goods, or factors influence children outside of the school day, and even before they are school aged. "How parents talk to, discipline, and socialize their children are as relevant to the development of educational goods as are experiences in day care, school and other formal settings outside the family. The educational process begins before children enter formal schooling and carries on after they leave it" (Brighthouse et al., 2016, p. 3).

Researchers have noted that educators are often frustrated by the number of external factors that affect education. Some findings show that, "educators often blame social, economic or political factors external to the school" (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 3) as reasons for underperformance, student behaviors, and enormous workload. Even thirty years ago, Tomas A. Arciniega (1977) as cited by Singleton and Linton (2010) affirms that the education system has attributed many equity issues to factors outside of the realm of education. The list of external factors addressed by Arciniega echoes many contemporary arguments; the purpose of this argument appears to illuminate sources for the short-comings of students or the educational system, at large. "The reason for failure in school is said to be the fault of poor homes, cultural

handicaps, linguistic deficiencies, and deprived neighborhoods” (Arciniega, 1977, as cited by Singleton & Linton, 2010, p. 5).

Educators who are actively pursuing equity-oriented teaching practices have moved away from using language of deficit (Ladson-Billings, 2007) in speaking about equity and achievement. Briefly, the language of deficit, a term coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (2007) is a negative way that many stakeholders dialogue about the external factors that affect student performance. The deficit language focuses on what students are lacking and how they may burden the educational system (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Ladson-Billings suggests a paradigm shift to address these issues in a way that empowers students, rather than blames these external factors. Explaining that “parents just don’t care” or that “their families don’t value education” are common misconceptions used to explain why some students are not successful in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Other myths pertinent to this discussion surround issues of students not having the exposure or experiences necessary to access the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Ladson-Billings’ (2007) recommends that socially and culturally, the language surrounding these issues needs to change. Instead of talking about an achievement gap, a phrase that places blame on students and families, the term education debt is more effective in moving toward a dialogue that holds all stakeholders accountable (Ladson-Billings, 2007). This paradigm shift correlates directly to uncovering the intended purpose of an equity committee in an elementary school, and teacher perceptions of said committee.

The literature shows that several external factors do affect the educational system. Some researchers have pursued this idea beyond broadly citing social, economic or cultural issues and have called for educational reform. “The fundamental problem is that we have pushed the current [educational] system as far as it can go and it cannot go far enough. If we care about all

students...we cannot ignore real problems or merely seek to ‘get around’ the present system”. This awareness goes on to suggest that instead of blaming the social and systemic issues for inequities, educators and policy makers should work together to reshape the system (Darling-Hammond, 1997, as cited by Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 5). This is a common theme that appears in the current literature that is pertinent to the research question. The literature suggests a renewal of the system at large to better address issues of educational equity.

Further examination of external factors illuminates the inequities that are prevalent in the current system. For example, large districts with larger budgets are a key component to inequity (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The resources some schools are provided create educational inequality. A school with higher funding per pupil has more resources than a school with fewer dollars. The implications of this type of inequity shows that schools with less money are less likely to encounter a wide array of educational resources (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 22). This problem has been plaguing schools and issues surrounding equity in education for a long time:

This is not a new problem, of course. Throughout 200 years of slavery, century of court-sanctioned discrimination based on race, and a half-century of differential access to education by race, class, language background, and geographical location, we have become accustomed in the United States to educational inequality...we often behave as a nation, as though we are unaware of the equally substantial inequalities in access to educational opportunity...” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 22)

The existing literature has identified various external and often historical factors that may affect student opportunities for equity in education. Some literature focuses on educational goods and experiences that are not related to school, others focus semantics and even on an overhaul of the

system, in general. All of these factors, however, affect the way students experience and have access to educational equity. The themes illuminated in this section of the literature review support the discovery for an answer to the research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?* The literature supports a renovation of the education system and the components that affect it. It points to finding new and innovative ways to address educational equity issues, and attempts to provide accountability for all stakeholders.

Achievement

Defining achievement. To fully uncover teacher perceptions of an equity committee, understanding the link between achievement and equity is essential. This assumes that educators want to create an equitable educational environment to support student achievement through the understanding of equity and its connection to achievement.

The definition of achievement in education has changed many times throughout history. Theories and best practices have changed over time to address the needs of student achievement in schools. Achievement can be defined by identifying learning standards or learning targets to guide educators in supporting appropriate skills and knowledge for students in each stage of their schooling (Farr, 2010, p. 21). An examination of achievement suggests that it can be measured in three ways: academic growth, learning goal mastery and gap-reduction targets (Farr, 2010, p. 41). Measuring academic growth isolates student skills that grow from the beginning of the year to the end of the year, such as math or reading (Farr, 2010, p. 41). Learning goal mastery centers around grade-level expectations or the mastery of a specific learning target (Farr, 2010, p. 41). A gap-reduction target model refers to reducing the difference between high performing and low performing students (Farr, 2010, p. 41). These

three models define the ways achievement is characterized in education today. All three models point to the same themes: Did students learn and how much did they learn?

If resources were allocated according to student need, schools would be able to support students as they reach these goals. When identifying why students haven't made adequate growth or mastered learning goals, understanding teacher perceptions of an equity committee becomes increasingly important.

High-stakes testing. High-stakes testing is a broad topic; however, it can briefly be connected to equity in education because it has played a large role in determining student achievement. High-stakes tests are the focus for many districts. High-stakes tests measure how much the student has learned, and in turn is seen to measure the effectiveness of the teacher, school and district, as well. High-stakes testing is a method of assessment that establishes, “the quality of student learning, and in turn, the quality of the education afforded to students...the obtained results have major implications for those tested and hold consequences for schools and their educational stakeholders as well” (Boykin, 2014, p. 499). Assessment is used as the foundation of measuring the achievement of students, teachers, districts, state-wide, nationally and internationally and is consequentially linked to resource allocation (Boykin, 2014).

There are challenges that come along with the pressures associated with high-stakes testing. Some research proposes that, “...more narrow tests, limited to a multiple-choice format, have been found to exert strong pressures to reduce the curriculum to subjects and modes of performance that are tested” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 71). A national survey found that 85% of educators gave less attention to subjects that would not appear on state tests (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 71). This research proves that educators focus more of the school-day on test preparations to boost student achievement on high-stakes assessments, leaving

behind many aspects of curriculum such as writing, research and investigations (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Reducing the curriculum to test preparation happens most frequently and intensely in schools serving low-income and minority students where meeting test score targets is a greater struggle. This leaves these students with the least access to the kind of learning that will prepare them for college and contemporary careers (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 72). Nearly half of educators nationwide report that their schools could raise test scores without improving learning, and nearly three-fourths believe that high-stakes test scores do not accurately depict the quality of instruction at their site (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 72).

According to this research and considering that failure on high-stakes tests can be consequential to schools, it would be important to raise and maintain good test scores to keep schools from losing resources. This concept severely impacts students. Based on a review of the literature, a theme has emerged. There is a contradictory cycle happening that is detrimental to student learning. Districts that do not have high test scores consequentially, may not receive sufficient resources to boost performance for the next test and in turn, educators are choosing to prepare students for these tests, instead of teaching them skills that they will need to know beyond the classroom. When both of these things occur simultaneously, students are impacted. Not only will students be missing integral resources needed to increase test scores, they will be missing out on educational experiences rooted in problem-solving and innovation.

Linking assessment and equity. These high-stakes tests have impacted issues of equity and fairness. There is a debate within the existing literature concerning the attitudes of educators and policymakers in how to use these assessments to best serve all stakeholders. One approach argues that an improvement in student achievement (and high-stakes tests scores) is contingent on the research and discovery of effective practices and successful implementation

thereof, as well as “better-targeted resource allocation” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 73). While the other philosophy argues that the problem exists because of unfocused and unmotivated teachers and students whereas, “standards and tests will motivate change if they are used to target punishments to those who fail to meet them” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 73).

For policymakers, high-stakes test scores have been used as a means for education reform. “Tests and assessments are comparatively cheaper than other approaches” (Boykin, 2014, p. 502) and policy surrounding test-scores can be created and implemented outside of the actual classroom, without changing any variables inside the schools. Policy-makers who approve sanctioning schools based on high-stakes test scores do not support policies that make any systemic changes needed to, “truly change the conditions of learning for most vulnerable students” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 73). Some of these systemic changes include reducing class size, increasing teachers’ salaries, and more professional development (Boykin, 2014, p. 502). The implementation of new high-stakes testing outcomes does not address class size, teacher salaries or professional development opportunities.

Therefore, high-stakes testing affects educational equity. Although high-stakes testing has been used to clarify goals by policymakers and focus educator’s energy on achievement on these tests, “tests alone have not improved schools or created educational opportunities without investments in curriculum, teaching and school supports” (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Those primarily affected by the policy implications of these high-stakes assessments are low-income students of color further endorsing inequality in many ways including access to high-quality teachers (as fewer well-qualified teachers are willing to teach at “failing” schools), and proper resource distribution (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Some discourse shows that recently, it is becoming more widespread to use assessments to promote equity in schools (Boykin, 2014). Boykin argues that, “Large-scale assessments should principally serve the purpose of equity so that greater numbers of children will be more successful in school” (National Research Council, 2001 as cited by Boykin, 2014). When the results of the assessments are not distributed evenly among the populations who partake in high-stakes tests, there is cause for conversation about why this is happening, and how to use the results to better impact student learning (Boykin, 2014). “Equity is not obtained if the results do not lead to greater (or at least equal) access to the educational, professional, or status opportunities or to at least equal performance outcomes...” (Boykin, 2014, p. 501).

Culturally Relevant Teaching

Teacher preparation. To understand teacher perceptions of an equity committee, discourse also points to teacher preparation programs. Many teacher preparation programs have the power to produce effective educators committed to the idea of equity in elementary schools. Social justice has been an important component in teacher preparation programs (Furman, 2012, p. 192). “Social justice ‘encompasses a range of terms—some more powerful than others—such as equity, equality, inequality, equal opportunity, affirmative action, and most recently diversity’” (Blackmore, 2009, as cited by Furman, 2012, p. 193). However, even though social justice and issues of equity are evident in many teacher preparation programs, there is a wealth of literature dedicated to reframing, critiquing and understanding teacher preparation programs. Some research calls attention to the trends prevalent in teacher preparation programs through the last fifty years; one trend focuses on how to support pre-service teachers in increasingly diverse environments and the inequalities among them (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2010, p. 10). Potentially, teacher preparation programs could

be adjusting to address the increasingly diverse populations going to schools in the United States and are increasingly concerned “with how to prepare a teaching force capable of producing equitable learning opportunities and outcomes for diverse students in the context of enduring inequalities” (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2010, p. 114).

Through an examination of several University-based teacher preparation programs, studies concluded that teacher-candidates were offered varying degrees of experiences and assignments to reflect on their personal beliefs, and those of teachers and the education system, at large (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2010). That among the majority White, monolingual teacher candidates, they “must develop critical awareness of the privilege they derive from their membership in racially, ethnically, and linguistically dominant groups” (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2010, p. 114). The study concluded that one singular course intended for understanding and interacting with diversity and privilege, was not enough to fully impact teaching (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2010, p. 115).

Other findings report teacher perception of preparedness to teach in diverse environments. One study of pre-service teachers at an undergraduate program in the southeastern United States concluded that most pre-service teachers are interested in learning more strategies and resources to teach culturally diverse groups (Barry & Lechner, 1995, p. 153). Students reported they had little knowledge about how to achieve this (Barry & Lechner, 1995, p. 153). Granted this study was over twenty years ago, the research-based recommendations knowing this about pre-service teachers is still pertinent today.

There is often a disconnect between educational theories explored in teacher preparation programs, and the practical implementation of what one has learned due to lack of context for preservice teachers (Nieto, 2007). If academics presented their theories to teachers in way that

shows an understanding of the daily routines of teachers, many teachers would be more willing to reflect and implement new teaching methods. Contextualizing theories and other new methods for teachers, is important because it encourages a reflective tone beyond practical applications of equity related content (Nieto, 2007). A practical application of equity related content might be a teacher wanting to purchasing books or posters that would accurately reflect the student population. Nieto offers a deeper, and more effective suggestion to ensure that equity is present more genuinely through this process. “Instead of simply looking to decorate their classrooms with posters that reflect diversity, we would discuss how school policies, and practices...have a much greater impact on students’ life chances than posters” (Nieto, 2007). Instead of buying a poster for the classroom that reflects the student population in question, the more effective solution would be to reflect on the purpose and usefulness of these tools. As opposed to using these tools as a simple solution to the problem, contextualizing their purpose helps the educator remain equity minded and reflective.

The solution then, is that that multicultural education should be infused directly into all required courses for pre-service teachers at the university level (Barry & Lechner, 1995). The other recommendation states that pre-service teachers should be given the opportunity to learn from professionals, parents and community members who exemplify diverse cultures (Barry & Lechner, 1995; Guerra, 2012). That is, teacher preparation programs “should promote opportunities for critical reflection, leadership praxis, critical discourse, and develop critical pedagogy related to issues of ethics, inclusion, democratic schooling, and social justice” (Furman, 2012, p. 199). These factors will create leaders in educational equity.

Adopting a global mentality is another theme prevalent in the research about teacher preparation programs. Globalization affects every aspect of public education; however, teachers

are leaving teacher preparation programs still unprepared to teach diverse learners (Nieto, 2014). The existing literature makes a distinction between multicultural education and global interconnectedness. It was mentioned previously that multicultural education is effective when it is infused into every aspect of curriculum for all preservice teachers. Multicultural education doesn't become part of a teaching practice unless it is embedded into the thought process, planning and reflection of the practitioner. Similarly, the "increasing diversity and inequity in the US and globalization of the world's economic, political, technological and environmental systems have altered the knowledge and skills young people need to become effective citizens" (Merryfield, 2000).

One study makes this distinction between multicultural educators and global education by identifying the contexts that bridge the gap between these two ideologies. Global awareness becomes separate from multicultural education when an experience makes a profound and personal impact on the individual (Merryfield, 2000). One study explored experiences of individuals who encountered others who were substantially different than the people they had interacted with until that point in their lives (Merryfield, 2000). These experiences, usually traveling to another country with cultural or language barriers, had powerful impacts on the individuals in the study. Many participants reported feeling culture shock when confronted with being an outsider. Culture shock is defined as the, "disorientation that occurs whenever someone moves from their known comfortable surroundings to an environment which is significantly different and in which their needs are not easily met" (Cushner, McClelland & Safford, 1992 as cited by Merryfield, 2000, p. 439). After working through their own personal culture shock, the participants also cited broad systemic factors that impacted their awareness and in turn, their teaching practice. "The teacher educators who left the US...came to

understand temporarily what it feels like to live outside of the mainstream” (Merryfield, 2000, p. 439). The lived experiences as outsider then support the individual as they begin to reflect on their beliefs. “The contradictory nature of the experiences often led to puzzlement and sustained reflection” (Merryfield, 2000, p. 439). This study suggests that finding effective teachers comes from intentionally recruiting individuals who have lived global experiences, instead of just having learned about multicultural education in the classroom (Merryfield, 2000). Supported by the literature, equity committees could have functions as far reaching as teacher preparation programs, and even be included in the hiring process.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Research linking equity and achievement can be helpful in identifying the factors and teaching strategies that promote and sustain equitable achievement. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2007) has been identified as a way to support equity and student achievement. It is a framework used in teacher preparation programs, as well as professional educational settings to provide educators with a sense of how to cultivate academically achieving students while facilitating an environment where students see themselves positively and actively in schools (Schmeichel, 2011, p. 221). Gloria-Ladson Billings, who is widely cited for contributions in regards to the Culturally Relevant Pedagogy framework, suggests that this work should support students in “maintain[ing] their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, as cited by Schmeichel, 2011, p. 221). Newer elements of Culturally Relevant teaching place an emphasis on the educator as someone who must “possess a critical stance toward the social forces that create inequity” (Schmeichel, 2011, p. 227).

Other research surrounding student assets includes the ideas of self-efficacy, self-regulated learning, and incremental beliefs (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007;

Yeager & Walton, 2011 as cited by Boykin, 2014, p. 512). Strategies that promote student confidence, put students in charge of their own learning, and support a growth mindset towards competence increase student engagement and achievement (Boykin, 2014, p. 512). Asset-based strategies have had a positive impact on student achievement, such as: high quality teacher-student relationships, collaborative and highly engaged learning, meaningful learning contingent on the inclusion of student experience and deep connections, cultural resources seeing families and communities as assets to student learning, and direct instruction to support student problem-solving, and critical thinking skills (Boykin, 2014, p. 513).

Educators should accept full responsibility for teaching by: adhering to a coherent and agreed upon curriculum, implementing individualized instruction and quickly identifying struggling students who need a more intensive and creative approach to the content (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 71). Highly individualized instruction increases achievement for all students, and similarly, when teachers invest in student learning, achievement increases (Farr, 2010).

There are three general approaches to support educators in deeply investing in students who are working toward increased academic achievement: a welcoming environment, a strong culture of achievement, and teachers' instructional decisions (Farr, 2010, p. 103). Characteristics of a welcoming environment include a safe space where students feel comfortable enough to take risks (Farr, 2010, p. 103). Within a culture of achievement, teachers help students understand that progress and achievement is highly valued (Farr, 2010, p. 103). Student achievement then occurs because of teachers' instructional decisions. This is apparent when student objectives or learning targets are relevant, rigorous and empowering for students (Farr, 2010, p. 103). Other literature details strategies that support equitable student

achievement. This list includes high-quality teachers, high-quality teaching that effectively supports the learning process, rigorous and relevant curriculum, and a personalized school environment that fosters positive connections among students and staff (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 162). Should an equity committee commit to supporting or sustaining one or more of these strategies?

A commonly cited curriculum proposal advocating for the importance of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy breaks the overarching terminology idea into six smaller characteristics (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). These strands are not meant to stand alone, as they are interconnected and made up of knowledge, skills and mindsets that culturally responsive educators possess (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The six strands are as follows: 1) sociocultural consciousness, 2) an affirming attitude toward students from culturally diverse backgrounds, 3) commitment and skills to act as agents of change, 4) constructivist views of learning, 5) learning about students and 6) culturally responsive teaching practices (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). These strands support educators' growth, participating in new experiences and the opportunity to profoundly connect with students to become agents of change, even beyond the educational system. The strands of this curriculum proposal are themes that are evident in the literature previously reviewed in this chapter. The literature suggests that having support to commit to these six strands will provide an opportunity for educators to become culturally responsive, and in turn, increase student success.

Another aspect pertinent to the implementation of culturally responsive teaching strategies includes power. Lisa Delpit argues that there are five aspects that make up "the culture of power" that are deeply connected to education (1988). The culture of power exists in the classroom can be enacted in both subtle and overt ways; Delpit's framework acts as context

for understanding the culture of power. This framework explores the rules or codes for participating in the culture of power; the rules are decided by those who maintain control of the power (1988). When individuals are told specifically how to access these power structures, and are explicitly told what the rules are, they can more readily access the culture of power, thus making acquiring power easier (Delpit, 1988). Additionally, a key tenant to interacting with this framework suggests that “those with power are least aware—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence [and] those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (Delpit, 1988, p. 282). This tenant speaks to the existing literature and discourse surrounding teacher preparation programs and the lack of teacher preparedness to navigate issues of power structures, and cultural differences. Existing literature about equity in elementary schools points to self-reflection, meaningful global experiences and an active awareness about these power structures. These ideas are essential in giving students the tools they need to access multiple experiences.

Commitment to Equity

Leadership. Equity leadership is a powerful indicator of whether schools with highly diverse populations are successful (Furman, 2012, p. 194). Additionally, this leadership should seek to be continuously improving and even reinventing the ways schools are serving their students (Furman, 2012, p. 194). The themes consistent with equity-minded leadership, “are that leadership for social justice is action oriented and transformative, committed and persistent, inclusive and democratic, relational and caring, reflective, and oriented toward a socially just pedagogy” (Furman, 2012, p. 195).

If equity is valued in elementary schools, leadership focused on equity is essential. When only a few members in a school are committed, and focused on equity, the impact of their work

will not be as strong (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 230). “If a vision for equity and anti-racism is only embraced in selected classrooms, departments or schools, those educators who are disengaged will simply move to places in the district where fear, resistance, inequity and racism remain unaddressed” (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 231).

Principals have the power to achieve widespread equity by influencing the staff at schools. For instance, the principal oversees “recruitment, preparation, licensing, hiring and ongoing professional development” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 302). As principal, it is essential to use an equity lens in all these areas to ensure a culture of equity in the school. Principals should also know how to and be accountable for evaluating teaching, as well as organizing productive professional development and managing school improvement (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 323).

The principal plays an important role in equity efforts in schools. The principal acts as the site leader, and without complete commitment and support of the principal, school wide equity efforts will crumble (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 235). The principal should be embedded into all equity efforts at personal, school-wide and district-wide levels to ensure the transfer of learning to all staff members (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 235).

Equity teams. Although you can find information about equity teams on countless district websites across the United States, the research surrounding the effectiveness and implementation of such committees is sparse. One framework that supports using equity committees in schools is Courageous Conversations (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 230). Courageous Conversations embed equity into all levels of a school’s development: personal, professional, and systemic (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

The Courageous Conversation model employs Four Agreements to support educators engaging in a discussion about equity; they are to stay engaged, speak your truth, experience discomfort and expect and accept non-closure (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Beyond these four agreements, the model uses Six Conditions for conversations surrounding issues of racial equity. These conditions aim to guide the conversation and keep members on track. The conditions work together to help members engage in conversations about race, sustain the conversation after the members have shown a willingness to be engaged, and then deepen the dialogue through societal examples (Singleton & Linton, 2006). The last component to using Courageous Conversations is the Courageous Conversation Compass that acts as a personal navigational tool to support difficult conversations about race in a professional setting. The research of Singleton and Linton have identified four ways people deal with racial information: Emotional (feeling), Intellectual (thinking), Moral (believing) and Social (doing) (Singleton & Linton, 2006). The Four Agreements, The Six Conditions and the Compass work together to create an atmosphere that supports school-wide conversations about equity, both personally and systemically (Singleton & Linton, 2006)

Beyond having conversations as a staff, and deepening one's understanding of equity on a conversational level, the framework of this research (Singleton & Linton, 2006) advocates that equity teams should be used in schools to support emerging leaders who are committed to school-wide equity. The model recommends using three subcommittees to support educators in combating issues of inequity in schools.

First, the Equity Team, is made up of individuals who have a passion for understanding equity work to investigate their own personal beliefs and behaviors, lead the school in examining their own equity biases, and establish a community for skill development

surrounding issues of equity. Using this framework, over time, the continuous Courageous Conversation model and efforts toward school-wide equity become the standard (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Then, the Collaborative Action Research for Equity (CARE) team engages teachers that are ready to explore equity on a research-based level. “CARE is designed to support teachers in discovering the challenges that exist in their relationships with students of color and then to improve their instructional delivery accordingly” (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 233). Teachers working with the CARE team to identify a focus group of students and engage student voices in conversations about race, equity, achievement and leadership. Through this, the CARE team can uncover barriers and brainstorm strategies to support students (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 233).

Third, the Partnerships for Academically Successful Students (PASS) team develops and strengthens the community by engaging them in conversations about equity. School-based PASS Team members engage the community-based educators [families, clergy, law-enforcement officials] in Courageous Conversations to build trust with those who are supporting students (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 234).

Summary

This chapter served to communicate a shared language about equity in education and reviews the literature pertinent to this topic. The existing literature defines equity. It differentiates between the terms equity and equality and why using the term equity is pertinent to the research question (Singleton & Linton, 2006; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). The literature reveals the implications of policy on equitable public education (Brighthouse et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2010) and the literature points to other external factors affecting educational

equity such as race, socioeconomic status and educational goods or experiences (Boykin, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2007). The literature defines achievement using learning targets and standardized testing; it considers the implications of high-stakes testing in connection to consequences or rewards based on achievement (Boykin, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Farr, 2010). This chapter contains literature on the perceived effectiveness of teacher preparation programs in creating educators prepared to commit to equity work in schools (Barry & Lechner, 1995; Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2010; Furman, 2012; Merryfield, 2000; Nieto, 2007). The discourse also explains the framework used to construct culturally relevant pedagogy in education (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Schmeichel, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This chapter closes with a rationale for strong equity leadership in schools from teachers, principals and equity committees (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Furman, 2012; Singleton & Linton, 2006).

This literature was reviewed in an attempt to reveal background knowledge about equity committees, how it functions in an elementary school and provides context to understand the research question. Chapter three discusses the research methods used to answer the research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?*

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Research Question

The literature review from Chapter Two explored the research that has been done on equity in schools and how an equity committee can help support the equity and achievement of students. Assuming that educators want to create a positive and equitable environment for all students, the research lends itself to uncover the functions of an equity committee as well, and generates background knowledge to answer the research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?* In this chapter, I describe my action research methods to discover an answer to my research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?*

Research Paradigm

The purpose of this research was to explore and identify teacher perceptions of an equity committee. The research method I used to explore this question was done using a qualitative lens. Qualitative research aims to help the researcher be an examiner of the environment. This research method relies heavily on the experiences and perspectives of the participants in the study. According to Creswell (2014), to explore this research question and gather authentic data using a qualitative approach, the researcher collects data at a site where the participants are familiar with the issue in question. The researcher will collect data by examining documents, or through interacting with the participants using observations or interviews (Creswell, 2014).

Many sources of qualitative data can then be gathered by the researcher and organized into categories to synthesize the findings. As a qualitative researcher, I was faced with reflecting on my own role in the study and how my place within the research question might shape the outcomes. Knowing this, multiple sources of data were reviewed and categorized to

illuminate the perspectives of the participants. Creswell (2014) suggests that since there are many factors in qualitative research, including the own researcher, the research question remains complex and larger themes can be drawn out from each perspective considered.

Through an examination of the literature, support for using a qualitative approach was established. The issue of equity in education is extremely complex and is effected in by multiple factors. Educational equity is not only affected by history and policy, but it can affect student achievement; meanwhile, there are arguments surrounding the effectiveness of using an equity lens as a tool in education. The issue is broad and multifaceted, and each stakeholder brings a unique perspective to the issue. Therefore, collecting data to illuminate the function of an equity committee is especially delicate. Using qualitative research, these factors can be illuminated by the perspectives of each participant. A qualitative approach emerged as the best research method to discover the perceptions and opinions of individuals.

Research Methods

This qualitative research study applies the constructivist worldview, which assumes that individuals develop subjective meaning of their surroundings, and seek to understand their surroundings based on their experiences (Creswell, 2014). The goal of using a constructivist research approach relies heavily on the views of the participants in the study.

Constructivist framework was evident in the research instruments through the use of open-ended and broad questioning. Open ended questions were used to gain insight into the meaning that the participants have constructed about the research question. It will be important to have a variety of contributors to elicit as many perspectives as possible.

Additionally, it was important to me personally to explore equity in education. Through educational experiences in my own teaching and through leadership roles in various settings, a

focus on equity seems to be prevalent in education. This conversation sounds distinctly different to various stakeholders. To confront even one small part of the issue can be uncomfortable, as many educators hold strong and persistent beliefs about equity in education and these conversations often feel unfulfilling or unsurmountable.

Understanding that using qualitative research inherently includes the researcher, and accepting that social constructivism is based in ongoing change that is inherently linked to context and personal beliefs, I intentionally focused on collecting unbiased information from each research participant. Social constructivism and qualitative research design challenges the researcher to focus on the continued construction of meaning through interactions, experiences and perceptions of the participants, rather than seeking confirmation of the existing literature or perspective of the researcher (Creswell, 2014). As researcher, I have examined my own personal beliefs and biases about equity committees and I have uncovered my own perceptions about the intended use and function of equity committees in schools.

Participants and Setting

The setting for this research took place at an elementary school located outside a Midwestern metropolitan area. As indicated in a School Board presentation from Fall 2016, this setting serves a population of 532 students which include, 36% African American, 28% Hispanic, 24% White, 8% Asian, and 4% American Indian. It was also reported that 81% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, 33.5% are English learners and 13.4% are special education students (Dewitt, 2016).

The teachers for this study were observed during a two-day invitation-based district wide equity committee meeting facilitated by an outside presenter. Of the people in attendance, 22%

(i.e. 4) were teachers whereas the remaining 78% of participants were directors or administrators at the district level.

Research Instruments

Research instruments for this study included field notes, survey responses, and semi-structured interviews. First, in June of 2017, I observed an intensive two-day district equity leadership meeting facilitated by a person hired outside of the district. These direct observations, provided a baseline of understanding of how an equity committee works, what goals the committee is hoping to achieve and gave insight into who is identified as an equity leader. This will be discussed in further detail in chapter four.

Using the information gleaned through my data collection methods, I then identified topics, trends and themes. I recorded interactions among the participants which gave insight into how the members were interacting with the content of the meeting. I was also able to observe the structure, and leadership in this meeting.

Another data collection method included an electronic and anonymous survey to elementary educators at the same district (see Appendix A). This survey was developed to uncover teacher perceptions about equity committees. The questions were intentionally open-ended with the objective of getting genuine, personal and diverse responses from the participants. I used this data to report trends and themes recorded in the responses of the survey. Using an electronic format was appealing because it was an efficient way to collect responses in a short amount of time. The respondents were able to remain anonymous, and remained relatively free from time constraints. This format gave the respondents time and space to craft thoughtful responses (Cresswell, 2014).

All the responses were recorded in short-answer format. I searched for repetition to identify keywords and themes among the responses to each question. The questions were open-ended and broad which allowed for complexities and multiple perspectives to be present in this research.

Follow-up teacher interviews were conducted after the survey data had been collected and reviewed. Survey participants had an opportunity to be interviewed after the survey data collection window had closed. Based on the survey results, I was able to interview an elementary classroom teacher, an elementary English Language teacher, an elementary specialist teacher, and an elementary Gifted and Talented teacher.

These 30-45 minute interviews were conducted in a one-on-one format and off-campus setting (coffee shops) during summer 2017 (see Appendix B). I chose off-campus sites to allow respondents to fully focus on the task at hand. It was also important that the site was convenient for the respondents. I believe that this reduced the amount of interruptions compared to having conducted the interviews at the school site, during the school year. Taking these things into consideration, I have reason to believe that participants were sincere and engaged during the interview process about their perceptions of equity committees.

Up to this point much has been discussed. As a reminder, in this qualitative study I utilized social constructivist methods, observational field notes, and electronic survey and follow-up interviews as data collection methods to address the research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?* Such methods are considered appropriate for such a study (Creswell, 2014).

Ethical Considerations

Before this research project began, the Human Subjects Review process was completed through Hamline University. Prior to collecting data, I spoke with the principal of the school to present background information on myself as researcher, and of the study. I then presented a letter of informed consent that was signed by the principal on behalf of the organization (see Appendix C). Included in the survey was an explanation of the project, and an opportunity to consent to participate in the research (see Appendix D).

It was vital to this project that the respondents felt safe and anonymous as they were sharing information about their schools and careers while sharing willingly and openly about their beliefs. As researcher, it was important to protect their identities and ensure that they would remain anonymous throughout this process. I wanted each participant to know that their genuine and often vulnerable responses were essential to this project, and that I would protect their identities throughout the sharing process.

Data Analysis

All content was recorded digitally. Field notes collected at the district-wide equity committee was hand-written, and word processed to allow for an opportunity to identify themes and key ideas. Survey results were collected via Google Forms and the written responses were analyzed by theme. Third, the interview questions were word-processed at the time of the interview. This decision was made instead of recording audio responses to in an attempt to follow-up with interview participants about their responses as the interview progressed.

Upon the completion of data collection, the process of data analysis began. I was able to look at the data from each research instrument separately. That is, the data and outcomes of each segment of this research project were analyzed thematically by research instrument.

Reading and rereading the transcripts from these experiences was not scientifically objective, however, I was able to find correlations between responses and themes started to emerge. There were three big themes that appeared within each section of research. Some of the same themes emerged from the data collected among all the research instruments, however, each instrument had some distinctly unique themes, as well. The findings of this research will be discussed at length in the next chapter. The following chapter will also call upon the literature review to further illuminate the themes that developed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This study was done to attempt to uncover the answer to the research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?* The first part of this study, focused on obtaining background knowledge of district equity practices by attending a district-wide equity leadership meeting. The second part of this research project used a survey to inquire about teacher perceptions of equity committees and included eight short-answer questions. The last part of this research centered around follow-up interviews with teachers each having distinct content areas (i.e. Teacher A, classroom teacher; Teacher B, English Language teacher; Teacher C, music teacher; Teacher D, Gifted and Talented teacher).

Next I discuss the results which are divided into three subsections: district equity findings, survey findings, and interview findings. Articulated in each subsection are the three major themes which emerged. After which, I describe the connections among the themes present in this research with the existing literature.

District Equity Findings

To gain background knowledge on equity committees in general, I attended a two-day district in-service geared toward equity leaders in suburban district outside of a Midwestern metropolis. Of the eighteen people in attendance, only four were teachers and 16 were administrators. The meeting was facilitated by an outside presenter, Marceline DuBose. A brief synopsis of her perspective and philosophy was presented to participants at the meeting. DuBose has experience working as an educator, as well as working with education on a state level. She has gone on to receive several degrees and accolades from prestigious universities such as Harvard, and now spends time working with districts facilitating equity leadership

trainings. This two day training included a presentation of the research surrounding educational equity in schools, a chance to converse with other participants about relevant issues, and deep personal reflection.

Day One of the training proceeded as follows: an introduction to the presenter and participants, a shared definition equity, a ninety-minute discussion on including multiple perspectives in leadership and change, a short film entitled *The Red Folder* (Kallam, 2016) and subsequent discussion about the themes and allegorical contexts within the film, the types of change and how change is typically experienced in professional communities such as schools, how to engage the “change network” toward the promotion of equity in schools, an analysis and discussion surrounding the types of social power, a reflective activity that called upon personal leadership styles, and two Ted Talks (Smith, 2014 & Mwangi, 2014) surrounding the ideas of voice and silence, respectively (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017). The day ended with a reflection on the learning that occurred that day, and what the participants were eager to share with others (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017).

Day Two of the training proceeded as follows: a brief introduction to the presenter and participants, a shared definition of culture and subsequent discussion thereof, a dialogue about the “typical” or “ideal” student based on teacher responses, a demonstration of the typical school systems including expectations and engagement, a discussion on student experiences when their learning styles don’t match the typical school systems, a rich discussion surrounding participants personal preferences in regards to communication elements such as exchange rate (pacing), time management, task completion, relationship building, emotional displays, and a discussion on direct versus indirect messages (Rowles, Field Notes, June 13, 2017). The day

ended with a quick look at two case studies (Gorski & Pothini, 2013) to enhance and reflect upon the learning of the session (Rowles, Field Notes, June 13, 2017).

Themes

Shared Language. Throughout this meeting, it became increasingly apparent that having conversations about educational equity often hinges on using specific language that is shared and understood by the community using it. It became evident that having a shared understanding about a term or concept enhanced the productivity, flow and response to the discussion.

The training opened with a definition about equity at large (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017). The presenter (DuBose, 2017) shared the following definition for equity in education from Elena Aguilar (2013):

In its most simplistic definition, equity means that every child gets what he or she needs in schools – every child, regardless of where she comes from, what she looks like, who her parents are, what her temperament is, or what she shows up knowing or not knowing... Equity is about outcomes and experiences – for every child, every day.”

It was important to call upon this shared definition of equity so early in the training, because it allowed all members to use it as a framework for all further discussions. Many members pointed out that they felt uneasy engaging in discussions about equity with colleagues and in their settings because of a lack of shared language (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017). It is unclear if the district intends to share and use this definition with other staff members, or if it only served as a guiding definition for the training.

Another example of the importance of shared language occurred during the discussion about social power. The presenter asked the participants to define power. It became clear that

many participants had different ideas about what social power meant and how it might be used (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017). The presenter then shared a definition for power that was used to engage and fuel the subsequent discussion about the types of social power and how they are used in leadership. Presenting a shared definition for the concept of power was an integral step in propelling this discussion forward. Some participants communicated that having a shared definition of power helped them formulate and articulate their own ideas (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017).

Shared language came up as an important theme when discussing equity through the definition of culture. Through the intentional shared definition of the concept of culture, participants assessed elements of their own culture and could further their learning to identify elements of culture that are misunderstood, make them uncomfortable or feel resistant to change (Rowles, Field Notes, June 13, 2017). In this instance, the use of shared language encouraged participants to go from merely learning about culture from an observer to participating in their relationship with cultural norms and concepts (Rowles, Field Notes, June 13, 2017).

It became apparent that using shared language can also perpetuate inequities in the educational system (Rowles, Field Notes, June 13, 2017). Through the presentation of terms used by teachers to describe the “ideal student”, meanings and associations with each term were discussed by the participants (Rowles, Field Notes, June 13, 2017). The discussion went from simply being about words to their complex uses in the educational system at large, and promoted a deeper and more meaningful look at the way students are often perceived by the bias of their teachers (Rowles, Field Notes, June 13, 2017).

Ultimately, the use of shared language took the concepts from abstract to deeply relevant and personal for the participants. This was apparent when participants would share their

experiences by interacting with these terms, and how using a shared language helped to “level the playing field” and “fill in the blanks” that are often hidden from discussions surrounding equity (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017).

Self-Awareness and Reflection. The importance of self-awareness and personal reflection emerged as a theme during this equity training. It was clear that the presenter expected the participants to reflect on their own styles of teaching and communication through using an equity lens (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017). To further promote this reflection and self-awareness, the presenter told personal anecdotes that were relatable to the participants (Field Notes, June 12, 2017). This was apparent when participants responded to the stories by making connections to their own lives, nodding their heads, or whispering to colleagues about their own experiences (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017).

One concrete and specific way this self-reflection was woven into the training was through the use of questioning. For example, questions using an “equity lens” were used to sort through the issues at hand (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017). Three guiding questions for each discussion topic were explicitly used, not only keep the conversation focused, but to call upon active reflection of the participants (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017).

The guiding questions were: 1) Which students benefit most from my style of teaching? 2) Who may be experiencing disadvantage with my teaching style? 3) How can we maximize who experiences benefit and minimize who experiences disadvantage? (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017). The first question calls upon the participants to think about their teaching or leadership style. The second question calls upon participants to reflect on their style through an equity lens by understanding that differences occur in educational settings among leaders, teachers and students. The third question asks participants to actively remain aware of their

own styles and the styles of others to maximize positive the experiences for those involved. These three powerful questions were a reminder to the participants to remain engaged in self-reflection required to be an equity-minded district-leader (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017).

Other examples of routine self-awareness and reflection practices were apparent in the activities that participants were asked to partake in. Most of these activities centered around identifying a personal preference, defining what it means and then dissecting the advantages and disadvantages to each perspective. The presenter did this by using some concrete visual examples. For instance, the presenter shared maps from different parts of the world and facilitated a discussion about their differences and potential biases. The presenter also facilitated active self-reflection by using more abstract examples. An example of an abstract discussion was when participants were asked to identify their own personal leadership styles and consequently examine the advantages and disadvantages others might experience when working with them (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017).

Participants seemed eager to engage in self-reflection and active self-awareness throughout this process. It appears that it acted as a central theme to connect with others. Participants used self-reflection to gain knowledge and understanding about promoting equitable education practices and combating potential conflicts that often arise in educational settings (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017).

Resistance. The third theme that emerged from this training was the idea of resisting or challenging the status quo. Many discussion topics spiraled into conversations about systemic inequities, disagreements with various education-based stakeholders, and the pressure to “go with the flow” (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017).

The district leaders were intentional about who was invited to attend this training. That is, people identified as equity leaders were invited to partake in this training. District leadership shared that to stay focused on their equity efforts, individuals were intentionally selected to attend district equity meetings. As shared by district leadership, this choice was made due to the sensitive nature of discussing equity topics (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017).

The presenter shared the same sentiment through a discussion on change. DuBose (2017) shared information about how change is typically experienced, how to manage change, and how to engage others in efforts to change. These discussions focused on changing school environments to be more equitable and to better serve all staff and students in an equitable way (Rowles, Field Notes, June 12, 2017).

The main talking point here was to engage the participants in a shared understanding that change is led by leaders, and it is often slow and systematic. In this case, to promote district-wide equity practices, certain people were selected as leaders to persuade others that are more “quickly to adapt” while not focusing on the people that are resistant to change. This trend seemed to align to the information about the district’s equity initiatives: that to make change, they carefully and systematically chose participants for the equity committees. The decision made by the district was supported by the presenter.

Survey Findings

An electronic survey was sent out to teachers at the research site an attempt to answer the research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?* There were thirteen respondents to this survey. Each question was a short-answer question to uncover the perceptions the respondents have about the uses, functions and purposes equity committees (Appendix A). Of the thirteen respondents, 31% self-identified as “very familiar” with equity

committees, 54% self-identified as “familiar” and 15% self-identified as “not very familiar”. The respondents at the site are 98% white and 98% female, so the probability of most of the respondents fitting into those categories are probable.

Themes

Resources. Based on the results of the survey, most teachers cited that the equity committee acts as a resource for staff and students. When asked about how participants have experienced equity committees, 70% of the responses stated that the equity committee should provide relevant resources for staff to explore. Many of the responses indicated that they had personal experience interacting with teaching tools, books and lesson plans provided by the equity committee. The 30% of responses that did not include this theme mentioned personal experience participating on the equity committee itself. It is safe to assume that the committee members have experience providing the resources the other respondents.

When asked about their perception of an equity committee in general, responses identified that the committee is an important resource for increasing awareness for the school’s equity initiatives. Forty-six percent of the responses included the word “important” and 31% used the word “awareness”. This is directly linked to using equity as a resource because teachers at the research-site are understanding equity and its link to education through the resources provided by the committee.

There was a wide range of responses as participants attempted to identify what resources the equity committee offers. Some responses stated that they rely on the equity committee to provide tangible teaching tools to use in the classroom, while other teacher responses focused more on personal growth. That is, the resources provided by the equity committee are time and space to foster self-growth. Other responses revealed concern about systemic inequities; the

resource provided in this scenario would be support to process and understand relevant systemic concerns. Overall, most responses cited that equity committees should provide resources to staff in some way.

Using equity as a resource appeared in responses concerning the equity committee's intended purpose. When asked "What is your perception of the equity committee's intended purpose?", seventy-seven percent of the responses included the importance of using resources provided by the equity committee. This shows that teachers perceive the equity committee to intentionally provide resources to staff. Additionally, when asked "Based on your perception, what are the benefits of having an equity committee?", 62% of the responses cited that the equity committee provides relevant and useful resources to the staff when it comes to tackling matters of equity.

Although many responses cited equity resources as a benefit, when asked, "What are the barriers that keep us from using an equity committee...?", the theme of resources came up again; respondents cited a lack of resources as a barrier. This is evident in 54% of the responses. Teachers included *time* and *money* as underprovided resources, and without more time and more money, equity initiatives fall short. That is, without adequate time and money, equity issues introduced by the committee and even supported by the staff will not work.

While sifting through the responses about resources, another mini-theme emerged from the survey results: equity training. At least one response to each question in the survey incorporated the concept of equity training. This means that in every question asked in the survey, at least one response reflects equity training and professional development as a factor in equity committees in schools. 70% of teachers cited that they had experienced the equity committee through a professional development session or a committee-led training. When

asked about the barriers that keep equity committees from functioning properly, terms such as *untrained staff*, and *lack of coaching* came up in the responses. The respondents shared that when teacher training and equity-based professional development is lacking, it begins to hinder the success of the equity committee.

Collaboration. Collaborative practices emerged as a theme from the survey results. The respondents were familiar with teacher-led committees. As previously stated, most teachers had some familiarity with the equity committee itself. For instance, when asked about a utopian equity committee scenario, 70% of respondents listed terms consistent with collaboration. Terms such as *inclusion*, *involvement*, *buy-in*, *support*, and *coaching* lead me to consider that a collaborative environment is ideal for an equity committee.

Of the many benefits from having an equity committee, *conversation*, *connections* and *discussion* were terms used in multiple responses. Of the thirteen responses, six responses included collaboration as beneficial to schools. One teacher wrote that their equity committee benefits the school because they, “help teachers build connections and create safe and comfortable learning environments” (Survey, 2017).

Furthermore, survey results demonstrate that “teacher buy-in” is a popular theme among teacher perceptions of equity committees. The term “teacher buy-in” was used in the responses to illustrate the participation (or lack thereof) surrounding equity initiatives. “Teacher buy-in” can be imagined as a spectrum; from equity leaders who participate in all initiatives to equity naysayers who are not willing to approach equity topics. Although teachers perceived the purpose of the equity committee to be collaborative in nature, teacher perceptions of equity committees cited “teacher buy-in” as a barrier.

Teacher buy-in is included here because it illustrates the importance of participation: If teachers expect the equity committee to be collaborative in nature, and yet, many people are hesitant to collaborate, equity initiatives face the challenge of convincing educators to engage in equity work before equity work gets done. Ten of the 13 responses included terms or themes connected with teacher buy-in; the responses cited *willingness*, *teacher buy-in* and *support* as barriers to a functioning equity committee. Teachers did not hold back when asked to make suggestion to form a stronger and more functional equity committee. From these responses, 70% of teachers suggested that the district give them more time to collaborate and share ideas with many stakeholders such as administration, other teachers, parents, community members and students.

School Climate. It became apparent that many of the teacher-respondents began to link their perception to the equity committee with school climate. One response specifically stated that the intended purpose of the equity committee is to, “improve school climate” (Survey, 2017). Another response cited one of the benefits of an equity committee as offering space for “...thoughtful reflection and discussion about difficult topics such as race, prejudice and culture, [so] we can improve our school climate...” (Survey, 2017). Most of the answers to the same question included words and phrases like “our school” or “our kids” which added a deeply personal component to the responses. I found that most teachers were talking about their experiences directly, even though the questions urged teachers to think about equity committees in general. This is noteworthy because it appears that teachers believe a functioning equity committee can exist in schools that foster a climate where true collaboration can happen and relationships can grow.

When asked about the barriers that keep equity committees from functioning, 54% of responses cited fear of judgement, fear of being called racist, or being uncomfortable examining prejudice or experiencing change. These responses show that over half of the teacher-respondents felt that these barriers personally affected them or other staff members, and deterred the effectiveness of the equity committee. Upon further examination of teacher responses, I noticed that many responses cited lack of administrative support as problematic at their site. For instance, 46% of responses cited administration as a barrier to the equity committee's success. Lack of leadership by administration affects teacher perceptions to equity committees, and influences school climate.

Teacher Interviews

Following the district equity in-service and after closing the electronic survey, I conducted four follow-up interviews to further understand the research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?* From the results of the survey, I conducted follow-up interviews with four teachers, all experts in distinctly different departments; a classroom teacher (Teacher A), an English language teacher (Teacher B), a Music teacher (Teacher C) and a Gifted and Talented teacher (Teacher D). In the survey, all the interviewees had expressed interest in being interviewed to bring clarity and specificity to their responses to the survey questions.

The results from the interviews were challenging to analyze. The answers to the interview questions were extremely specific to each teachers' experience and were not straightforwardly identifiable. Some of the answers to the interview questions were distinctly different from those addressed in the previous sections, while others seem to align closely to the findings from the research earlier in this chapter.

Themes

Support from Administration. Three of the four teachers expressed the importance of support from administration when considering matters of equity. This was consistent with the concepts that emerged from the district in-service and the survey results. When asked, “What would make the equity committee function better?”, three teachers cited that strong and clear administrative support would make the committee better. Teacher B stated that administration would need to, “back equity and support it by living it and showing the kids that they are in the fight...” (Personal Interview, 2017). Teacher A also mentioned more district support to create a better equity committee, and teachers are often confused or without clear direction when an administrator isn’t represented at the committee meetings (Personal Interview, 2017). Likewise, more visibility at the equity committee meetings and delivering committee-made decisions to the whole staff would help support equity initiatives building-wide (Teacher A, Personal Interview, 2017).

Teacher C shared frustrations concerning committee assignments and connected this element administration’s support. Teachers at the research site are assigned to a committee, so the equity work being done on the committee is often fragmented and without a shared goal (Teacher C, Personal Interview, 2017). Some of the staff serving on the equity committee have been trained in matters of equity, and others have not which makes it challenging to build on previous planning and implementation (Teacher C, Personal Interview, 2017). Support and guidance from the administration would help alleviate this issue.

School Climate. Again, as revealed in the results from the survey, school climate surfaced as a theme while conducting interviews. All four teachers mentioned elements about school climate that act as a barrier to the equity work done by the committee. Teacher A

suggested having deeper and more meaningful equity-based conversations as a whole staff to connect to each other. This might also improve personal and professional relationships and foster an equity-based learning community (Teacher A, Personal Interview, 2017). Teacher B mentioned “low morale” and how it affects school climate. Teacher B stated hopes that staff and administrators would work together to, “be courageous enough to have the conversations even though they are uncomfortable” (Teacher B, Personal Interview, 2017). These conversations would boost equity engagement on a building-wide scale (Teacher B, Personal Interview, 2017).

On the same note, Teacher D stated that the school climate is affected by the equity committee itself because the committee can appear judgmental (Personal Interview, 2017). When teachers feel judged and told what to do and what to believe, the equity committee’s efforts don’t work (Teacher D, Personal Interview, 2017). Teacher D stated, “The judgement needs to go away...Even if the committee feels there is no judgement, they need to work on that perspective” (Teacher D, Personal Interview, 2017). Teacher D went on to share that asking students, families and staff which equity issues are important to them would help give the committee more focus to serve their specific population. Teacher D went on to say, “I like to believe our learning community is more open and attempting change than the committee seems to believe” (Teacher D, Personal Interview, 2017).

Student driven decisions. Of the four teachers interviewed, 100% of responses stated that the equity committee should work to serve students. 50% of the responses stated that only students should be served, while the other two respondents included families, and staff as well. This jumped out as a theme because it was one of the only instances when all interviewees agreed.

Even though teachers were in agreement about the equity committee focusing on student needs, some discrepancies surfaced. For example, Teacher D stated that the whole learning community (students, families, community members, and staff) should benefit from the implementation of an equity committee. Teacher C stated the same idea; that the equity committee should serve students, families and staff. Teacher A and Teacher B stated that the equity committee should serve students and did not mention other stakeholders. This is noteworthy because it shows that there is confusion about who the equity committee should focus on throughout the school year. It raises questions about whether to offer professional development for staff, or if students are the only stakeholders that should benefit from the committee.

Summary of Findings

From identified themes, the parallel to existing literature was apparent in that no new additional themes were identified (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Schmeichel, 2011; Singleton & Linton, 2000). The three research instruments (direct observation, survey and personal interviews) used to gather data to answer the research question were distinctly different, however, some common and similar themes can be called upon to summarize the findings from this project.

Three key themes that emerged from my field notes at the district equity committee meeting, which served as background to this project. First, that shared language is incredibly important to dive into matters surrounding equity. To ensure that all participants involved understand what equity is and what an equity committee does, defining important terms is imperative. Second, that self-awareness and reflection play a large role in how teachers interact with equity issues. With time and opportunities to reflect, it was clear that teachers were willing

to share their experiences, ask questions and commit to equity work. Third, that in order to understand certain systemic inequities, and challenge the status quo, a resistance to the norm is required. In this case, the district picked specific educators to lead the charge.

Three distinctly different themes arose from the results of the survey. First, teachers perceive the equity committee to be a resource to their building, and ultimately believe that an equity committee benefits the school by providing resources to staff and students. Next, teachers perceive equity work to be collaborative in nature, but that is easier said than done. While teachers did cite a strong understanding about committee work being a cooperative experience, many responses also cited a lack of collaboration as a barrier to having a functional equity committee. Last, teachers' perceptions of equity committees are largely based on the school climate. That is, if teachers feel that the school climate doesn't support equity, they may opt out of equity work, also.

Results from the interviews revealed three themes as well. The first theme that emerged from the interview responses centered around administration's support and commitment to equity. Most teachers interviewed stated that more guidance from their administration would help support their understanding and engagement in equity. The next theme that emerged was consistent with that from the survey responses; school climate drives the building-wide perception of equity committees. When morale is low and teachers perceive judgement, equity work can be challenging to do. And last, teachers agreed that students should drive the equity committee's initiatives. Although some teachers' perceived the equity committee to serve the staff and learning community at large, all teachers interviewed agreed that students were to be included in the equity committee's planning and service.

In the next chapter, I reflect on major learning from conducting this study, briefly revisit the literature, highlight implications and limitations from this study and make recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Overview

This chapter is the conclusion in answering the research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?* In this final chapter, I reflect on major learning this study, briefly review the literature, discuss implications and limitations from the research study and make recommendations for future research.

Major Learning

As researcher and as an educator, major learning has occurred from this project. Some of the learning has hinged on my positionality throughout the completion of this project, other learning has become apparent from the results of the study. Reflecting on the context of this study has also been an important part of the learning process.

One outcome from this research project is a deeper understanding of my personal positionality. It was often a challenge to step out of an educator role, and into the role of researcher. Throughout this process, I was constantly reminding myself to be looking at the data objectively. I was able to separate my personal and professional opinions from the data that emerged from the research. Some items that seemed relevant to myself as educator did not appear in the results. For example, I thought it was significant that an outside presenter facilitated the equity meeting from which I gathered field notes. This was noteworthy to me as an educator because the district-equity content came from a perspective outside of the research-site. It was not a significant item to discuss in the context of this project, but personally remains interesting. Another way my positionality affected this project was a sense of connectedness to the content and research subjects. The data was obtained from a site where I've witnessed

major changes over the past decade. Uncovering the perspectives of educators in this study was vital to the project, and I had to separate myself from the understandings I have gathered from being a part of the community. From the outcomes of this project, I feel qualified to make a case for how to make this equity committee function in the context of the research subjects.

The context of this study is another major learning theme that was important to explore in my reflection on this project. Understanding that equity is broad and ever-changing adds another layer to this study. From the literature, it's clear that equity committees exist in schools all over the country (Singleton & Linton, 2006). School websites often have resources dedicated to sharing the work of their equity committees. However, the function of equity committees is varied in school context because of the students, staff and communities they serve. This research project uncovered teacher perceptions of equity committees at a small site, with a specific context. That is, the themes that emerged are specific to the research site.

Using a qualitative lens to conduct this study emerged as the best option (Creswell, 2014). From qualitative studies, the findings tend to be non-generalizable and specific to the context from which the research was conducted. Creswell (2014) argues that the purpose of qualitative studies are not contingent on making broad and generalized statements. The purpose of this study was to uncover teacher perceptions of the equity committee, specific to the research site. It was not the purpose of this qualitative study to understand the findings in a broad and generalized context.

Connections to Existing Literature

Connections to the existing literature were made upon completion of this project. One important way the literature was connected to this project was through providing a shared definition for many terms used throughout this project. For example, equity scholars from the

literature previously reviewed in this project define terms pertinent to their equity work to create shared language among participants (Singleton & Linton, 2006; Valli *et al.* 1997 as cited in Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). It was vital in my research to use and define equity consistently; this is validated in the research.

Another connection to the literature are the external factors discussed at length previously. Throughout my research, many educators referenced the external factors that affect equitable education. Some external factors consistent in both my findings and throughout the literature review are the systemic inequities that exist in education (Darling-Hammond, 1997 as cited by Singleton & Linton, 2006), the money that districts have to spend on equity initiatives (Darling-Hammond, 2010), and the time constraints surrounding equity because more pressure is made on making academic gains and other curriculum endeavors (Boykin, 2014; Farr, 2010).

An emphasis on Culturally Relevant Teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Villegas & Lucas 2002) was also prevalent in teacher responses gathered through data collection. Although the specific terms were not used often in the responses, the sentiment remains the same. Teachers stated that more training for equitable teaching practices would be helpful and necessary to build on equity engagement throughout the building. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2007) and an equity foundation in teacher preparation programs (Boykin, 2014; Delpit, 1988; Farr, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) were discussed in the literature review because of their direct correlation to training and preparing educators to respond to the needs of their students. This was validated by the responses of educators. Educators cited these resources as valuable and important to continued equity growth in schools.

The last major connection between my research and the existing literature is that of equity leadership. The cannon of existing literature reinforces a strong need for equity-based leadership in schools in order to be successful (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Furman, 2012; Singleton & Linton, 2006). A call from teachers and the literature alike prove that strong equity leadership is essential to having a functioning equity committee.

Implications

Using the literature review and the findings from the research as a guide, few implications emerged from this research. One conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that resources are lacking for schools to do authentic equity work. Stakeholders (e.g. teachers, students, administrators, parents, community members and policy-makers) have differing priorities regarding education. Each perspective has an important role in the function of the public-school system, however; teachers repeatedly stated that time and money are essential resources to have a functioning equity committee. This problem cannot be solved by teachers alone; stakeholders need to compromise and agree that equity is a priority if this issue is to be resolved.

Another implication from this research is that an emphasis on self-awareness and reflection, whether in a professional setting or in a teacher preparation program is essential to a functioning equity committee. As cited in the literature review (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2010) and stated by survey responses in the data collected from this project, it is essential to focus on preparing teachers to do authentic equity work with students. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2007) has been well-researched and implemented in schools across the country. A deeper look and more focused training for schools looking to do this would be worthwhile. Other research shows how to implement functioning equity committees (Singleton

& Linton, 2006). Although these may be referenced in schools, following the recommendations made by the research with fidelity would create better functioning equity committees with purpose and partnership among staff and students.

In addition to the concept of equity training and fostering self-awareness and reflection among educators, school climate and leadership are essential to creating an equity committee that works well within a school environment. Seeking out strong equity leadership from within the staff, and finding research based methods and/or experts to support schools would be a worthwhile investment for districts.

Limitations

This research study comes with limitations. One limitation is my connectedness to the research-site and subjects. It was challenging to turn away from my personal understandings and look only at the data collected through the research. My positionality affected the types of questions I asked my research subjects, and affected the way I understood their responses. For instance, with my prior knowledge of the research-site, I could potentially assign more meaning to teacher responses, however, I was careful to remain objective in my position as researcher. If I had conducted this study at another site, the same understandings would not be present, and it would be easier to remain completely objective.

Another limitation is the small sample size used to gather data. Only thirteen teachers responded to the survey, and of those respondents, four were interviewed. Since the sample size remains small, it is important to remember that findings from this research are limited by so few responses. Additionally, the research-site was limited to one, small district which correlates with the narrow findings and may not be considered generalizable.

Recommendations

Even with the completion of this research project, there is more to be done to answer the research question: *What are teacher perceptions of an equity committee?* First, I would recommend another project that focuses on understanding policy implications to connect the laws and stakeholders more specifically to my findings. This could yield new information about how to make equity work a priority for all stakeholders.

It would be interesting to assess how equity committees function due to the policies that govern public education. A deeper understanding of this issue is necessary to connect the research from this study to a broader context. It would also serve as a way to generalize the responses to create equity committees with a more formulaic approach. Connecting policy and equity in this way could better prepare equity committees, specifically, to proactively respond to policy changes. Instead of needing to rebuild the work already done by the equity committee, a deeper understanding of policy would help committees build on and plan for future work and become strategic about working within policy constraints.

Secondly, I recommend conducting a similar study with students and families. Connecting the research from this study to the communities that equity committees serve is vital to create a broader understanding of what equity committees need to function. Surveying and interviewing students and parents would be one way to gather data about their perceptions of equity committees. The data collected from the study could be used to personalize the mission and function of an equity committee to be beneficial for the community. Many of the teachers' survey responses stated an emphasis on including families and students in the design and implementation of an equity committee.

Third, I recommend an implementing an inventory within equity committees and among staff members to assess the needs of committee members and the staff as a whole. This is important because it creates a mission and shared understanding of the purpose and function of the equity committee, and would create greater buy-in for teachers at large. This inventory would not only include multiple perspectives, but would be a data-driven response for committing to equity issues. It would create a productive environment for which the equity committee could plan and implement professional development for staff, create or research teaching tools and resources for teachers and still respond to the various needs of students.

These results will be communicated to the participants and the administration at the research-site. I believe that this project will help the site assess and continue growth in equitable education. Understanding teacher perceptions of equity committees is a small, but powerful step toward empowering educators to continue to fight for equity in education.

Closing Thoughts

Continuing to advocate for equity in education is a daunting task. In this research, there was a consensus in this study that shared language, collaboration, self-awareness and a supportive environment make equity committees stronger, while lacking resources, and resistance to change exist as barriers. Existing literature suggests that focusing on equity-based educational policy (Bridgehouse et al., 2016), balancing the systemic inequities that exist through high-stakes testing and resource distribution (Boykin, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Farr, 2010) and creating high quality teachers through teacher preparation programs or equity based professional development (Barry & Lechner, 1995; Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2010; Furman, 2012; Merryfield, 2000; Nieto, 2007) are all positive steps to take toward creating equitable environments in education. By devoting our attention toward the factors we can

impact, I believe that educators can make a true and profound impact on the future of equity education in America.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire:
Teacher Perceptions About Equity Committee
Inquiry

1. How familiar are you with the use and implementation of equity committees in schools? In what ways have you experienced the presence of an equity committee in schools?
 2. What is your perception of an equity committee, in general?
 3. What is your perception of the equity committees intended purpose?
 4. Based on your perception, what are the benefits of having an equity committee?
 5. Based on your perception, what are the drawbacks of having an equity committee?
 6. In a utopian system, what would an equity committee look like? What would its purpose be? How would it be implemented?
 7. What are the barriers that keep us from using an equity committee in the way you described it would be used in a utopian system? Think of as many factors as you can.
 8. What specific actions or suggestions do you have (for teachers, other educational staff, parents, students, administrators, the system at large) to help bring us closer to the utopian view you described?

Appendix B

Interview Follow-Up:

Teacher Perceptions About Equity Committee

1. What do you believe the purpose of an equity committee is?
2. Who does the equity committee serve?
3. Who should the equity committee serve?
4. What would make the equity committee function better?

Appendix C

Letter of Informed Consent

May 4, 2017

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a graduate student at Hamline University working on an advanced degree in education. As part of my graduate work, I plan to conduct research with elementary teachers in our district from May-July 2017. The purpose of this letter is to request your participation. This research is public scholarship and the final product will be catalogued in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository. It also may be published, or used in other ways.

The topic of my master's thesis is teacher perceptions on equity committees. I am wondering specifically: what are the functions of an equity committee? I plan to interview teachers about their perspectives and experiences with equity committees. Each interview will be recorded last about 30 minutes. The interview questions will be provided ahead of time. After the interviews, I will analyze and summarize the responses. I will also show my findings to the participants and to our school administrators.

There is little to no risk if you choose to be interviewed. All results will remain confidential and anonymous. Pseudonyms for the district, school and participants will be used. The interviews will be conducted at a time and place convenient for you. All recordings will be destroyed after the completion of my study.

Participation in the interview is completely voluntary. At any time, you may decide that you do not want to participate. You may decline to be interviewed or have your interview content deleted from the thesis at any time, without any negative consequences.

I have received approval from the Hamline University IRB and from our administrator, Principal DeWitt, to conduct this study. The capstone will be searchable in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons. The results of this study may be included in an article, professional journal, or a session at a professional conference. In each case, your identity and participation in this study will be kept completely confidential.

If you agree to participate, please keep this page. Fill out the duplicate agreement to participate on page two, and return it to me by mail or copy the form in an email no later than June 1, 2017. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Isabel Rowles

irowles01@hamline.edu

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview

I have received the letter about your research study for which you will be interviewing elementary school teachers to answer the research question: What is the function of an equity committee in elementary schools? I understand that being interviewed poses little to no risk for me, that my identity will be protected and my responses will be confidential. I understand I may withdraw from the interview at any time without negative consequences.

Signature

Date

Appendix D

Request of participation

I am a graduate student at Hamline University working on an advanced degree in education. The purpose of this question is to request your participation. The 8-short answer survey will be confidential and anonymous. I have received approval from the Hamline University and from Principal DeWitt to conduct this study. If you agree to participate, please select YES. Please complete this short survey no later than June 9, 2017.

