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SEARCHING FOR A VISION: UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN
RURAL MINNESOTA

by

Jessica Murphy

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctorate in Education.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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ABSTRACT

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The level of clarity and commitment to educational equity varies from district to district and is different in a rural district as opposed to an urban district. The purpose of this dissertation study is to clarify the educational equity work in a rural setting for myself and others. This qualitative study utilized grounded theory analysis and autoethnography¹ to answer the primary question of *What are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge that equity specialists in rural Minnesota describe as being effective to better prepare them in their work toward achieving educational equity?* The study focused on perspectives shared from equity specialists and administrators from several rural, predominantly white districts in Minnesota. Surveys, interviews, and a focus group were used to collect data over the course of one calendar year. This study concluded with five major findings: 1) equity in rural Minnesota is primarily done by white females, 2) equity specialists work to create a culture of self-reflection, 3) equity specialists work to build capacity so as to not work alone, 4) habits are difficult to change, and 5) equity work is increasingly important and expanding.

Key Words: educational equity, equity specialist, rural, Whiteness, identity, power and privilege, culture, responsive instruction, institutional bias.

¹ Grounded theory analysis and autoethnography are defined further in chapter three.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to create clarity for the role of equity work, describe the perceived impact in a rural setting, and articulate necessary topics of training for equity specialists. Equity specialists are staff who develop, support, and monitor their school Achievement Integration Plan aimed at addressing gaps in educational equity. This chapter begins with my journey in equity work to highlight the context of this study. Included is information about the Achievement Integration program and ties to legislation. Next is an exploration of the role of bias and mindset followed by differentiating between accountability and training.

Personal Journey in Equity Work

Achievement Integration Program. In 2010, I accepted a position as the literacy/diversity coach in my district. This was a new position created through the use of Achievement Integration (AI) program funds. Since this program and position was new to our district, it did not have much structure to it. All I knew was that it was an opportunity to work as a literacy coach and that I would figure out the diversity part as I went. The goal of this program, as outlined on the Achievement and Integration Program (2017) website, is to “pursue racial and economic integration, increase student achievement, create equitable educational opportunities, and reduce academic disparities based on students' diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds in Minnesota public schools” (Purpose section, para. 1). The first three years of this position were frustrating as I grappled to make sense of my role and gain a better understanding of the

Achievement Integration program and legislation tied to it. Our rural district's AI plan was meant to close the achievement gap and increase interracial contact. The Achievement gap as defined by The Glossary of Education Reform (2013) as "any significant and persistent disparity in academic performance or educational attainment between different groups of students, such as white students and minorities, for example, or students from higher-income and lower-income households" (Achievement Gap section, para. 1).

Multi District Collaborative Council. One feature of the AI program is to participate in a Multidistrict Collaborative Council (MDCC) which consists of eight adjoining districts that border the racially isolated district. Identification of a racially isolated (RI) district, outlined by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) resource: Frequently Asked Questions - Achievement and Integration Program (2016), is based on

comparing adjoining districts' percentage of enrolled protected class students...When a district and one of its adjoining districts have a 20 percent or higher difference in their number of enrolled protected students, the district with the higher percentage is considered racially isolated. (p. 2).

The primary purpose of our MDCC settled into providing support for one another in writing and managing our individual AI plans. Each district plan is tailored to meet the needs of protected class (self reported non-white and free or reduced price meals enrolled) students in their respective district. This is done by goal-setting and designing

strategies to meet stated goals. These strategies must be research-based in any of the following areas, as outlined in the Achievement and Integration Plan Guide (2017):

1. Innovative and integrated pre-K-12 learning environments.
2. Family engagement initiatives to increase student achievement.
3. Professional development opportunities focused on academic achievement of all students.
4. Career/college readiness and rigorous coursework for underserved students, including students enrolled in alternative learning centers.
5. Recruitment and retention of racially and ethnically diverse teachers and administrators.
6. Equitable access to effective and more diverse teachers. (p.8)

Determining how my district implemented any of the strategies suggested by the AI program guide was daunting. My initial years felt like filling out paperwork, scheduling buses, and convincing teachers to participate in collaborative classroom efforts with our neighboring racially isolated district. One strategy the MDCC used to increase interracial contact between the racially isolated district and adjoining districts was to create collaborative classroom opportunities. The intention was to pair up one group of students from the racially isolated district with one group of students from an adjoining district to build relationships between students through shared learning opportunities. Convincing teachers to plan a collaborative relationship with another district was challenging. There were many times I thought that I would enjoy my job better if I could eliminate this *diversity* component and focus solely on literacy. What I

really needed was a better understanding of educational equity. A working definition of educational equity I have distilled through research is: educational equity ensures that all students, regardless of individual characteristics have access to supportive, high-quality learning experiences that develop their fullest potential (Dagli, C., Jackson, R.G., Skelton, S.M., & Thorius, K.A.K., 2017; "Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012; "Ten Minnesota Commitments to Equity", 2018).

In the fourth year of this position, the racially isolated district hired a new Director of Equity Services. His insight and passion helped me have a stronger focus. Our skill sets and backgrounds complemented one another and we found an ally in each other. While the membership of our MDCC continued to change each year, the Director of Equity Services and I have been able to move forward in our equity work. He introduced me to Dr. Sharroky Hollie's work with Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) Instruction. CLR aims to develop both the mindset and the skill set of teachers to approach instructional decisions from an asset-based, cultural lens rather than a deficit lens (Hollie, 2012). We also brought in a pair of Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) trainers to help our MDCC make sense of our own positionality.² The (IDI) is a "cross-cultural assessment of intercultural competence that is used by thousands of individuals and organizations to build intercultural competence to achieve international and domestic diversity and inclusion goals and outcomes" ("IDI General Information", 2020, para. 1). These experiences helped me form a better understanding of equity work. It is multi-faceted and fluid as the needs of students continue to change, district

²Positionality: A researcher's display of position or standpoint by describing his or her own social, cultural, historical, racial, and sexual location in the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 489).

demographics continue to change, resulting in instructional practice needing to change. My role in a rural, predominantly white community is to make clear the connection between equity and instructional practice.

Statement of Problem

The training opportunities I have had and my work with colleagues has expanded my equity understanding, however I still see a need for further professional development. My experiences as an equity specialist have created an interest in equity education primarily because in the early years, I lacked training and resources to frame this work. In the work with the MDCC, I am the senior member and frequently sought out for direction, but I have been guessing my way through the work of equity. The evolution of my own understanding seems to be a common story among peers. If I am grappling with misunderstandings and unclear direction, so are others. The purpose of this dissertation study is to clarify the work of educational equity for myself and others.

The work of educational equity is different in districts that are predominantly white than in districts with racial diversity. Much of equity research has been done in diverse urban schools. This study aims to address the importance of equity work in a racially homogenous rural setting. My experience and the perspectives collected in this study point to the challenge of convincing teachers and administrators in predominantly white districts to participate in equity development. The willingness to see value in this work is limited by the lived experiences in a racially homogenous environment. This is the heart of my research as an equity specialist of an adjoining district in the MDCC.

The equity specialists in the MDCC that I am part of have a high turnover rate and our collective work is stilted as we mentor new people. Again, equity specialists are staff who develop, support, and monitor their school Achievement Integration Plan aimed at addressing gaps in educational equity. It has been my experience that most people in our MDCC were given this role as an addition to their current job. For example, a number of our members are also district assessment specialists, some are instructional coaches, and others are superintendents. This has resulted in meetings wrought with frustration as new folks try to make sense of the program among their other job duties.

Research Question

These personal experiences lead me to my primary question: *What are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge that equity specialists in rural Minnesota describe as being effective to better prepare them in their work toward achieving educational equity?* I use the term *equity specialist* loosely since many members do not hold this title, but are held to the same requirements. For this study, I am focusing on people who have three or more years of experience with the Achievement Integration program or other equity experiences. I am curious about what makes them stay in equity work, how they go about evolving their own understanding and the understanding of others.

Context and Importance

The school system is powered by its people and policy. This research examines the development of equity specialists as their work supports the policies that form the basis of the AI program. Castagno and Hausman (2016) point out “As in most diverse school districts, teachers, administrators, and those with decision making power are still

largely white, middle- and upper-class, and native English speakers” (p. 100). I grapple with how this cross-section of educators can close the achievement gap. The decisions we make as educators are from our own lived experience, understanding and training.

Researchers of culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy suggest teachers work on developing both their mindset and instructional skill set to affirm the home culture of their students (Gay, 2010; Hollie, 2015).

Bias and mindset. The bias and mindset of equity specialists plays a role in their interactions with teachers and the students they serve. The Great Lakes Equity Center’s newsletter asserts that: “Unexamined and often unconscious biases, often lead to teacher misunderstandings about student behavior and aptitude and affects decisions regarding an equitable inclusion of diversity in curriculum and everyday classroom practices”

(“Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - for Equity”, 2012, Educate section, para. 6).

Teachers are limited by their own understanding as they make critical decisions about students, curriculum choices, and instructional practices.³ Equity specialists have an opportunity to work with teachers to promote reflective practices with an equity lens, but must be aware of their own biases as well.

Equity specialists who disaggregate achievement data and disciplinary data by race and socioeconomic status is one way to investigate disproportionate instructional practice. Pairing reflective practices with data from student groups can create a greater accountability to historically marginalized students. Historically marginalized students are defined as “individuals or social groups who, by virtue of their race, gender,

³ Chapter two will further highlight the role of bias and mindset in equity work.

geographical location (rural, township, or poor neighborhood), etc., have historically been placed on the margins or periphery of the mainstream social and economic hierarchy” (Cross, M., & Atinde, V., 2015, p. 308). Castagno and Hausman (2016) support previous research “that the sort of accountability mandated by NCLB makes educational inequity visible and, therefore, serves an important role in displacing educators’ deficit views” (p. 106). In other words, legislation requiring districts to report the proficiency rate of students in various sub-groups on standardized tests can be an effective tool to get districts to pay closer attention to the educational experience of historically marginalized students. For the purposes of this paper, I am not looking to review the efficacy of Legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Rather, I refer to their existence to highlight the accountability that legislation and policy created for schools, and the necessary work of equity specialists.

Accountability versus training. Policy around desegregation requires people to manage AI programming, but provides limited training and support for the required equity work. Matrices, paperwork, surveys, and guiding questions to promote inquiry support the creation of a plan. It is my belief that impactful change accompanies a deeper understanding of equity work. The purpose of this research is to determine what equity specialists need to make meaningful change in equity work. Castagno and Hausman (2016) suggest, “Accountability measures may draw attention to perpetual achievement gaps, but unless they are paired with structural explanations and trainings to address institutional oppression, they fail to close such gaps” (p. 107). I am curious about the training of individuals in rural small districts who are appointed to the role of equity.

The purpose of this study is to create clarity for the role of equity work, describe the perceived impact in a rural setting, and articulate necessary topics of training for equity specialists. The intended outcome is for the education profession to be better able to focus on meaningful change in educational equity.

Summary

Choosing to research the role of equity specialists is a direct reflection of my evolution as a leader. I have struggled to insert myself as a leader in equity work. After all, I am a white woman of middle class; what value does my voice have in this work? What I am learning is that because I embody the majority, a critical look at the evolution of my understanding is important to equity work. If we are reliant on the majority to do the work, a critical look at ways to support the advancement of understanding is important.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation is organized into four additional chapters. The literature review in chapter two begins by defining educational equity. The remainder of the chapter is broken into an overview of five critical areas of equity work: personal identity, power and privilege, the role of culture, professional learning, and institutional bias. Chapter three is an overview of methods used to collect data for this study: survey, qualitative interviews, and a focus group. A rationale for using grounded theory and autoethnography as analysis methods is provided. Chapter four is a summary of results. Finally, chapter five provides discussion of the study's findings, limitations, and suggestions for further study.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The primary question this study addresses is: *What are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge that equity specialists in rural Minnesota describe as being effective to better prepare them in their work toward achieving educational equity?* The research in this chapter provides context to frame content knowledge related to educational equity. The skills and dispositions to support such work is framed in chapters four and five. This chapter begins by defining key terminology related to educational equity and barriers that get in the way of systemic change. The remainder of the chapter focuses on areas of equity work for equity specialists to consider. These areas include:

- personal identity
- power and privilege
- the role of culture
- professional learning
- institutional bias.

Definitions

Achievement gap. “Any significant and persistent disparity in academic performance or educational attainment between different groups of students, such as white students and minorities, for example, or students from higher-income and lower-income households” (“The Glossary of Education Reform”, 2014, Achievement Gap section, para. 1).

Achievement Integration (AI) Program. This is a program through The Minnesota Department of Education, supported by desegregation legislation. The program goal “is to pursue racial and economic integration, increase academic disparities based on students’ diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds in Minnesota public schools” (“Achievement and Integration Program”, 2017, Purpose section, para. 1).

Adjoining districts. School districts that share a border with the racially isolated district and participate in the Achievement Integration Program.

Capacity building. “Effort made to improve the abilities, skills, and expertise of educators” (“The Glossary of Education Reform”, 2014, Capacity section, para. 2).

Courageous conversations. A strategy for breaking down racial tensions to have interracial conversations that allow those who are knowledgeable to share their truth and for others to learn (Singleton, 2015).

Cultural competency. The National Center for Cultural Competence defines cultural competency as “having the knowledge, skills, and values to work effectively with diverse populations and to adapt institutional policies and professional practices to meet the unique needs of client populations” (Getha-Taylor, H., Holmes, M.H., & Moen, J.R., 2020, p. 59).

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Instruction (CLR). “The validation and affirmation of the home (indigenous) culture and home language for the purposes of building and bridging the student to success in the culture of academia and mainstream society” (Hollie, 2012, p. 23).

Educational equity. The Minnesota Department of Education defines educational

equity as “the condition of justice, fairness and inclusion in our systems of education so that all students have access to the opportunities to learn and develop to their fullest potentials” (“Ten Minnesota Commitments to Equity”, 2018). The Great Lakes Equity Center extends this definition to “ensure each student, regardless of her or his race, gender, socioeconomic class, ability, religious affiliation, gender identity, linguistic diversity, and/or any other characteristic, is supported to achieve academically” (“Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity”, 2012). The working definition I have distilled through research is: educational equity ensures that all students, regardless of individual characteristics have access to supportive, high-quality learning experiences that develop their fullest potential (Dagli et al., 2017; "Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012; "Ten Minnesota Commitments to Equity", 2018). This will be the definition used when referencing educational equity.

Empathy. “The ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling” (“What is Empathy?”, 2019, para. 1).

Equity specialist. Staff who develop, support, and monitor their school Achievement Integration Plan aimed at addressing gaps in educational equity.

Growth mindset. The belief that a person’s abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work (Dweck, 2006).

Historical trauma. “Historical trauma is unresolved grief of a people due to systemic loss, is felt across generations and impacts subsequent generations” (Shea, H., Mosley-Howard, G. S., Baldwin, D., Ironstrack, G., Rousmaniere, K., & Schroer, J. E.,

2019, p. 554). Symptoms of historical trauma have been attributed to health disparities in cancer, increase in mental health disorders, high poverty rates, low academic achievement, and high suicide rates.

Historically marginalized students. “Individuals or social groups who, by virtue of their race, gender, geographical location (rural, township, or poor neighborhood), etc., have historically been placed on the margins or periphery of the mainstream social and economic hierarchy” (Cross, M., & Atinde, V., 2015, p. 308).

Implicit bias. Implicit bias is a mental process that stimulates negative attitudes about people who are not members of one’s own ‘in group.’... Implicit bias affects the way that we think about ‘out groups’ and it influences the way that we react to and interact with out group members. Implicit bias operates in what researchers call our ‘implicit mind,’ the part of the brain that we commonly call the ‘subconscious’ or the ‘unconscious.’ This means that implicit bias can operate in an individual’s mind without a conscious awareness of this process. (“Race Equity Glossary”, 2020)

Institutional bias. Oxford Reference defines institutional bias as: A tendency for the procedures and practices of particular institutions to operate in ways which result in certain social groups being advantaged or favoured and others being disadvantaged or devalued. This need not be the result of any conscious prejudice or discrimination but rather of the majority simply following existing rules or norms. (“Institutional Bias”, 2020)

Intercultural communication. Sue et al. (as cited in Dagli et al., 2017) specifies

that “educators should be mindful of word choice, gesture, tone of voice, and treatment during content delivery regardless of instructional methods, which may be positive messages (micro-affirmations) or negative messages (micro-inequities) conveyed to learners” (For Equity Now section, para. 10).

Leadership practices. “Support leaders in their pursuit of leveraging equity oriented professional development to prepare culturally responsive and sustaining educators. Establish an equity vision, be a critical consumer of professional development, commit to continual learning” (Moore et al., 2016, For Equity Now section, para. 1).

Microaggressions. “The everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue, 2010, para. 2).

Middle class. “The Pew Research Center says that anyone who earns between a mere two-thirds of the median household income and twice that falls within it [middle class]” (Leary, 2019, p. 6). At the time of this dissertation, the median household income is \$75,500, deeming the middle class household income range between \$56,625-\$151,000.

Mindfulness. “The self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience... accompanied by a particular orientation toward one’s experiences in the present moment” (Bishop, Lau, Shapiro, Carlson, Anderson, Carmody, ... Devins, 2004, p. 232). When in cross cultural situations, Tuleja (2014) adds that mindfulness requires awareness of your own feelings, thoughts, and actions as well as

those of other people.

Multidistrict Collaborative Council (MDCC). A governing board consisting of one racially isolated district, and any adjoining districts that participate in the Achievement Integration program. The purpose of this council is to collaborate in ways to increase interracial contact and support efforts of each district’s AI plan. (“Achievement and Integration Program”, 2017).

Personal identity. “Identity is shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts” (Tatum, 2007, p. 99).

Power and privilege. Howard (1999) compiled research from McIntosh, 1988, Nieto, 1998, and M. Weinberg, 1991 to define power and privilege as “Social arrangements of dominance cause privileges to flow to certain groups whether or not those privileges are earned. Likewise, penalties, punishments, and inequalities flow to other groups through no fault of their own other than their group membership” (p. 33).

Protected class students. See historically marginalized students.

Racially Isolated (RI) district. Identification is based on comparing adjoining districts’ percentage of enrolled protected class students... When a district and one of its adjoining districts have a 20 percent or higher difference in their number of enrolled protected students, the district with the higher percentage is considered racially isolated. (“Frequently Asked Questions - Achievement and Integration Program”, 2016)

The role of culture. “Engaging in ongoing conversations with colleagues about the role culture has in teaching and learning” (“Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For

Equity”, 2012, Educate section, para. 10).

Trauma. “Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea” (“Trauma”, 2020, para. 1).

Barriers

State education agencies and school districts have policies and procedures in place to help promote educational equity, yet a disparity exists. There are a number of potential explanations for why these barriers get in the way of systemic change.

Darling-Hammond (2010) offers political currents as one such explanation:

Local, state, and sometimes federal policies frequently force schools to change course based on political considerations rather than strong research about effective practice... and the students most harmed are the most vulnerable students in urban and poor rural schools where the political currents are strongest and changes of course most frequent. (p. 14)

Another potential barrier resides in the lack of an equity focus in the development of teachers’ instructional practice. Equity work is multifaceted, but the depth of exploration is often limited. Dagli et al. (2017) conclude that this limitation “contributes to incomplete and inaccurate understandings of the complexity of individuals’ identities and social and cultural contexts, and the effect of these on educators’ professional learning, growth, and development” (Did You Know section, para. 1). Unpacking this barrier for greater understanding is the primary focus of this study. It is important to

mention additional barriers that exist such as structural racism, individual racism, a lack of political and personal will to effect change, and the lack of resources to effectively make change. However, each of these areas are beyond the scope of this research study, but they certainly impact educational equity.

Areas of Equity Work

To combat the barriers listed above, The Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC), formerly Great Lakes Equity Center, asserts equity work be done in five critical areas: personal identity, power and privilege, the role of culture, professional learning, and institutional bias ("Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012). Its recommendation is to explore and have conversations in these areas in the order listed. The rationale is personal identity is the basis for more complex systemic exploration. These areas will be the organizational system for my research to determine: *What are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge that equity specialists in rural Minnesota describe as being effective to better prepare them in their work of educational equity?*

Personal identity. Equity specialists have the potential to help those around them increase their self-awareness of one's own cultural and personal identities since they are tasked with developing, supporting, and monitoring their school Achievement Integration Plan aimed at addressing gaps in educational equity. This work creates a habit of reflection on the basis for decisions made in the classroom. Decisions around curriculum choices, instructional practice, discipline processes, and ways to honor the identities of students in the classroom impact student experience of learning. Tatum (2017) explains

that “identity is shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts” (p. 99). This begs the question: How is identity created?

An identity depends upon others; we know who we *are* by knowing who we *are not*. The sociologist Charles Cooley (1922) termed this dynamic *the looking glass self*. By this he meant that our identities develop based on what others reflect back to us. These others include our parents, caregivers, teachers, peers, images in the media, authority figures, role-models, and more. (DiAngelo, 2016, p. 41)

The conclusion of DiAngelo’s analysis is that teachers help develop *the looking glass self* of students. Therefore, an understanding of teacher identity is critical. Since many equity specialists in rural Minnesota are white educators, I will begin by focusing on the development of white identity.

A critical look at Whiteness identity development. The focus on Whiteness comes under scrutiny as Howard (1999) shares that

Some researchers (Fine et al., 1997) claim that enough has already been written about Whiteness. They worry that understanding Whiteness could surface as the new intellectual fetish, leaving questions of power, privilege, and race/ethnic political minorities behind as an intellectual ‘fad’ of the past. (p. 95)

Howard (1999) responds to this criticism by stating “We cannot begin to dismantle the legacy of dominance without first engaging Whites in a deep analysis of our own role in perpetuating injustice” (p. 95). Howard (1999) shares the research of others to bolster his point that “In terms of racial identity, it is important to point out that whites, for the most part, are not accustomed to seeing ourselves as racial beings (Carter, 1995), and as Helms

(1990) notes, 'If one is a White person in the United States, it is still possible to exist without ever having to acknowledge that reality.' ” (p. 85).

Dominance is a recurring concept throughout the research for this study. It is important to clarify its application as we move into research on power and privilege. The purpose of exploring Whiteness identity, white culture, and power and privilege for this dissertation is to get a sense of how these factors interact and impact each other in rural school systems. The depth of research in each of these areas are beyond the scope of this study.

Power and privilege. As Howard (1999) shares conclusions from Fine et.al, an important piece of equity work is exploring issues of power and privilege as they relate to race, culture and difference. In order to facilitate discussion and exploration of power and privilege, equity specialists must consider the suggestion shared by West, 1993a (as cited in Howard, 1999) “that we must begin not with the ‘problems’ of marginalized groups but with the fundamental social flaws that have been created by White dominance” (p. 46). For the purpose of this research, I will limit the exploration of white dominance to examples and situations that manifest in a school setting. It is important to understand the flow of power and privilege, outlined by McIntosh, 1988; Nieto, 1998; M. Weinberg, 1991 as: “Social arrangements of dominance cause privileges to flow to certain groups whether or not those privileges are earned. Likewise, penalties, punishments, and inequities flow to other groups through no fault of their own other than their group membership” (as cited in Howard, 1999, p. 33). In other words, dominance is having power and having privilege. Helms (1990) shares research to extend this concept by

focusing on the role of psychological power within the flow of power and privilege:

Psychological power within a group refers to individuals' perceptions that they can control the resources of the group in a manner that is beneficial to themselves. Power can result from the numerical representation of one's racial or attitudinal kinspeople in the group. It can also result from one's perceived ability to influence the norms of the group. Where numerical representation is concerned, a fairly common finding is that Whites tend to be most comfortable in racially heterogeneous groups when the proportion of Whites to Blacks is around 70% to 30%, whereas Blacks are most comfortable when the proportion is around 50% to 60% (cf. Farley, Schuman, Bianchi, Colasanto, & Hatchett, 1978; L. Davis, 1979). (p. 191)

Equity specialists can use these explanations to guide their work in helping white educators understand power and privilege in the context of the school they work.

The school experience of marginalized students. The realities of power and privilege are highlighted in the school experience of marginalized students and their families. To explore this, Howard (1999) suggests white educators set aside their "assumptions of dominance" and shares quotes from Delpit's research to highlight the frustration from African American colleagues who feel that white teachers "think they know what's best for everybody's children and they don't really want to hear what you (Black) want to say" (p.75). This is a reminder to listen to parents and other voices from historically marginalized groups. The work needs to be in helping white teachers see through the perspective of their students and parents. Helms (1990) agrees by stating,

“Many Black people will be suspicious of the motives of a person who devotes so much attention to helping Blacks rather than changing Whites” (p. 62).

To be mindful of their dominance, equity specialists may need some practice and guidance in making space for the stories of marginalized students. In other words, Howard (1999) believes white educators cannot fully know the struggles of our students, “but we can work to create an empathetic environment in which their stories and experiences can be acknowledged and shared. Too often, the legacy of privilege and the luxury of ignorance have prevented us from seeing and hearing one another” (p. 75). This understanding can conjure a wealth of emotions and reactions (DiAngelo, 2016) for educators to work through and potentially stifle forward action. Kivel (as cited in Howard, 1999), helps create a context for these emotions by stating: “We are not responsible for having been born White, but we are accountable for how we respond to racism and dominance in our schools and communities today” (p. 78).

Resistance to shift power and privilege. To conclude this section, it is important to explore research around the resistance to shift or share power and privilege. For instance, Tatum (2017) suggests “we may be living in a color-*silent* society, where we have learned to avoid *talking about* racial difference” (p. 24). The implication is that schools are not talking about racial difference, and if we do not talk about it then nothing will change. In an interview with a school administrator from a predominantly white school, Castagno and Hausman (2016) share the insight they gained from an administrator as to why changing behavior is such a challenge:

There is not a sense of urgency, and I don’t think there is a real feeling of need...If

there is a pressing need then you make the effort and you try to adjust your behaviors or your thought patterns. If you don't, then I think it's just too comfortable to stay where you are. (p. 102)

This administrator's perspective sheds light to the difficulty of equity work in rural Minnesota where schools are primarily white. In addition to staying in the comfort zone, Castagno and Hausman (2016) found "Schools that were secure in their aggregate performance on standardized assessments generally did not see equity as something useful or necessary" (p. 105). Equity specialists who facilitate exploration around the impact of power and privilege among predominantly white educators will do well to keep these two insights in mind. Castagno and Hausman (2016) believe, "If the goal is social change towards equity, it is clear that what we have been doing has not worked well or quickly enough" (p. 108). This claim is evidence that current equity work is failing and calls for change.

The role of culture. Advocacy is one component of the work of equity specialists. One way to do this is through "engaging in conversations with colleagues about the role culture has in teaching and learning" ("Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012). It is not common practice in white culture to talk about race or what it means to be white or spend too much time focusing on cultural nuances. "Besides opening the circle of power to those who have historically been marginalized by it, the work of advocacy also involves reeducating many of our White colleagues who are not ready for such inclusion" (Howard, 1999, p. 76). It is important to note that white equity specialists need to collaborate and partner with people of color through their equity work.

“White educators and leaders in the White community should take on the responsibility of undoing White ignorance, rather than relying on people from other racial groups to carry this burden” (Howard, 1999, p. 77). One body of research that is helpful in undoing white ignorance is Culturally responsive pedagogy, which is explained in greater detail later in this chapter.

Professional learning. The research (Jackson, 2011; Schlager, 2018) suggests teachers feel they are unprepared to address the needs of culturally and socioeconomically diverse students. To support professional learning opportunities for teachers to participate in collaboration, they need a sense of clarity and direction; this is set by an established rationale for their work. “Teachers reported that the professional development offered related to equity was too general and not specific enough to the classes or content they teach. Furthermore, many teachers noted that the district does not convey a sense of pressure or expectation that equity ought to be a priority for teachers” (Castagno & Hausman, 2016, p. 103). This suggests a need to create opportunities for deeper exploration of professional learning in educational equity.

This study aims to gain clarity on how equity specialists demonstrate their efficacy through the lens of leadership roles and professional development. The following section highlights the purpose and importance of professional learning in the areas of leadership practices, intercultural communication, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Leadership practices that support equity. Schlager (2018) articulates that the work of educational leaders “is to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to ensure that every student receives the highest quality instruction every day”

(p. 5). One vehicle to support this work is through professional development with an equity focus. Moore, T., Jackson, R.G., Kyser, T.S., Skelton, S.M., and Thorius, K.A.K. (2016) offers guidance for educational leaders to “support leaders in their pursuit of leveraging equity oriented professional development to prepare culturally responsive and sustaining educators. Establish an equity vision, be a critical consumer of professional development, commit to continual learning” (For Equity Now section, para. 1).

Fullan (2013) conducted a number of case studies on systemic change in schools and found some commonalities among successful districts. The research team found:

A very small number of elements are at work: fierce moral imperative, relentless pursuit, leadership capacity, instructional focus, and up-close monitoring and learning. What makes it all doable is the building of widespread ownership and shared commitment to help each other. (p. 23)

The *relentless pursuit of a fierce moral imperative* is determined by the culture of the school. Fullan (2013) points out that many districts think they are doing these things (valuing moral purpose, capacity building, etc.), but find they are not getting anywhere. Simply having these elements is not enough, so he suggests: “these components must be integrated in a way that is focused and cohesive. They must be deeply implemented in practice. It takes many motion leaders to get the chemistry right” (p. 29). This level of implemented practice evolves over time with special care from teachers and leaders involved. If equity is to be a collective moral purpose, focused work needs to be done to build capacity among educators. In King, Artiles, and Kozelski’s view (as cited in Moore et al., 2016),

There is benefit in teaching technical skills in order to stay abreast of new instructional methods within a discipline, however to do so without incorporating culturally responsive and sustaining practice in professional development, quality, safe and inclusive learning opportunities for all students will not be realized. (Did You Know section, para. 5)

To make successful systemic change, leadership practices must support the work of equity specialists and other teacher leaders among their buildings.

One role of K-12 leadership is to support the professional learning of teachers. Moore et al. (2016) implore “Equity oriented leaders understand that... equity oriented professional development must be more than a set of “sit and get” experiences - placing educators in passive roles - toward engaging educators as active participants in the co-construction of learning” (Why it Matters section, para. 5). This assertion is the premise for equity specialists to participate in constructing professional learning experiences to ensure equity is a component for their colleagues.

Intercultural communication. The teachers in each school create a culture for professional growth. To inspire growth, leadership must take into account the needs of adult learners in an effort to create systemic change. Sinek (2013, p. 38) has developed a theory of the Golden Circle that calls for the importance of communicating “why” we do things before exploring “how” and “what” we do as an organization. For example, teachers must know “why” they choose to teach, which determines “how” they go about doing the teaching and that is evident in “what” they ask students to do. The journey of growth all begins with leadership clarifying the “why” of professional development.

Much like Fullan (2013), Sinek (2013) advocates for clarity and direction to create a collaborative culture of adult learning.

One focus for equity professional development is for educators to be aware of how they communicate with students. Intercultural communication, defined by Sue et al. (as cited in Dagle et al., 2017) specifies that “educators should be mindful of word choice, gesture, tone of voice, and treatment during content delivery regardless of instructional methods, which may be positive messages (micro-affirmations) or negative messages (micro-inequities) conveyed to learners” (For Equity Now section, para. 10). The delivery of the message is just as impactful as the message itself. Educators communicate a multitude of messages, verbally and non-verbally, throughout their day and need to be made aware of their impact.

Culturally responsive pedagogy. Diversity in student populations is increasing at a greater rate than diversity among teaching staff, as reported by the US Department of Education in their State of Racial Diversity report (2016). This trend creates a needed layer of professional development to include culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy. For the purposes of this paper, I will use Hollie’s (2012) definition of Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) Pedagogy as “the validation and affirmation of the home (indigenous) culture and home language for the purposes of building and bridging the student to success in the culture of academia and mainstream society” (p. 23). The CLR pedagogy is an approach, not a curriculum. A teaching staff that is mindful of instructional practices that validate and affirm students to build and bridge their behavior and achievement in an academic setting is one way to make

systemic change.

The reflective nature of CLR pedagogy is aligned with Sinek's (2013) *Golden Circle* concept. The act of exploring the "why" of instructional practice in relation to student culture may dictate changes in how staff interact with their students. Hollie (2012) asserts "Educators have to shift their beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge to a stance that sees what the student brings culturally and linguistically as an asset, a capability, and an element that can be built upon" (p. 32). With a teaching staff that is still predominantly white there is work to be done to elevate the profession's cultural competency.

Current research trends in education should, according to Hattie (2009), shift from instead of asking What works? we should be asking What works best? It would not be difficult to find substantive research studies to support the impact and efficacy of many teachers' favorite initiatives, but in terms of educational equity, the key is figuring out what works best for historically marginalized students. Again, educational equity ensures that all students, regardless of individual characteristics have access to supportive, high-quality learning experiences that develop their fullest potential (Dagli et al., 2017; "Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012; "Ten Minnesota Commitments to Equity", 2018). To promote the development of such a reflective practice, I propose a closer look at shaping all forms of professional development with CLR pedagogy in mind to meet the needs of adult learners and create systemic change for our diverse learners and the teachers that work with them (Figure 1). Again, CLR pedagogy is "The validation and affirmation of the home (indigenous) culture and home language for the purposes of building and bridging the student to success in the culture of academia and mainstream

society” (Hollie, 2012, p. 23).

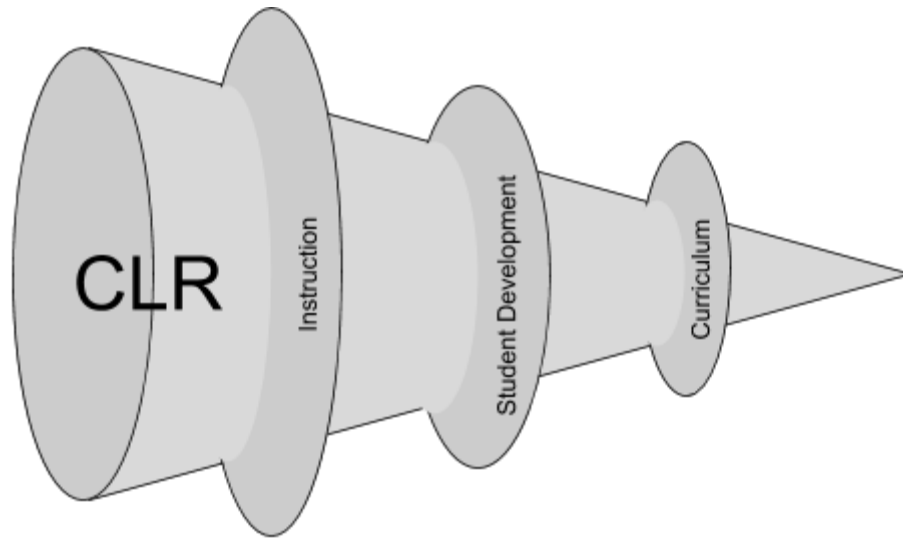


Figure 1. CLR forms an embedded professional development model.

Common areas of professional development are instruction, student development, and curriculum. Exploring these practices with embedded CLR pedagogy supports educators to determine what works best based on accountability measures and outcomes of all students. For example:

- When adopting a new literacy curriculum, be sure to analyze the authenticity of the characters that represent diverse cultures.
- While exploring topics to broaden teachers’ understanding of child development that is appropriate to the age they teach, be sure to include the impact of the rings of culture (Hollie, 2012).
- While implementing new instructional strategies, balance them with Hollie’s (2012) CLR protocols for classroom management and discussion protocols.

A more detailed study of this application is beyond the scope of this research, but worth noting as a consideration.

Institutional bias. Equity specialists have the opportunity to foster discussions within schools to pursue social justice in all practices by addressing institutional bias.

Institutional bias, as defined by Oxford Reference (“Institutional Bias”, 2020) as:

a tendency for the procedures and practices of particular institutions to operate in ways which result in certain social groups being advantaged or favoured and others being disadvantaged or devalued. This need not be the result of any conscious prejudice or discrimination but rather of the majority simply following existing rules or norms. (Institutional Bias section, para. 1).

Schools, like many institutions, have policies and procedures they have practiced since their inception. This alone perpetuates institutional bias. Tatum (2017) asserts, “Those biases manifest themselves in ways that matter - whom we offer help to in an emergency, whom we decide to hire...” (p. 25). Unchecked, some of these practices inadvertently work against populations the institution is meant to serve.

Historically, white culture has been the advantaged social group, but Howard (1999) reminds us that “cultural groups within our borders evolve, adapt, migrate, intermarry within other groups, and transform themselves over generations and decades of change and flow” (p. 67). The experience of school is very different for students who are outside the advantaged majority thus, equity specialists and district leadership needs to take a look at operational practices that affect all students. For example, some of these operational practices are: communication with families and other stakeholders offered in

multiple languages, selecting students who are eligible for gifted and talented programming and advanced placement classes, post secondary educational opportunities, student of the month selection practices, student leadership roles, access to technology, and disciplinary practices. Identifying a disparity is the beginning, changing policies and practices to rectify the disparity is actively addressing institutional bias. Evaluating institutional practice can be uncomfortable but necessary to identify how certain social groups are being advantaged and others are being disadvantaged. In the absence of such reflective practice, “whose interests are being protected in order to effect fundamental changes to the status quo” (Castagno & Hausman, 2016, p. 97)? Equity specialists have an opportunity to offer an equity lens when in discussion around policies and procedures being used by their institution. Taking a critical look at procedures is one way of shifting institutional bias.

It is easier to continue making decisions the way they have historically been made, but Castagno and Hausman (2016) remind us that:

While equality should be a long-term goal of a just society, practicing equality in the context of inequality means the status quo is maintained. We must make equity our central concern until such a time that equality is reached and can be maintained. (p. 99)

Discussion and acknowledgement without action perpetuate institutional bias. “Without action for social justice, mere acknowledgement becomes a particularly cynical form of White privilege” (Howard, 1999, p. 79). It is the role of the equity specialist to promote action and change.

Summary of Research

Chapter two provided a shared understanding of educational equity and an overview of areas of work for an equity specialist. These areas of research provide context for my dissertation question: *What are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge that equity specialists in rural Minnesota describe as being effective to better prepare them in their work toward achieving educational equity?* Highlights from each section are summarized in the following paragraphs, beginning with an overview of barriers and then an overview of each area of equity work.

A number of barriers exist that potentially perpetuate a disparity in achievement between historically marginalized students and white students. Barriers addressed in this chapter include:

- policy change that has been based on political considerations rather than research on effective practice
- lack of equity focus in the development of institutional practice
- endemic racism, both structural and individual racism, in our institutions
- lack of political and personal will to effect change
- lack of resources to effectively make change

Personal identity is dynamic and complex, consisting of individual characteristics, family dynamics, and historical factors, all of which are nestled in political and social contexts. Since the majority of educators are white, an emphasis on white identity analysis is a critical component to dismantling dominance and work toward reducing injustice. However, white culture is not accustomed to thinking of themselves in terms of

race, so there is much work to be done in this area of equity work.

In addition, we need to think about identity in its social and structural contexts, in terms of the power and privilege associated with different positions. Power and privilege exists when certain groups are advantaged while other groups are disadvantaged. In the context of a school system, this power resides in the dominant white culture. Shifts in power are met with resistance since it is easier to maintain the status quo and dominance is often overlooked by those who are privileged. It is not enough to reflect on and interrogate one's own identity; in order to attend to the imbalances of power, white educators must make space for other voices, must listen to and engage with historically marginalized students and families in their district. These are "individuals or social groups who, by virtue of their race, gender, geographical location (rural, township, or poor neighborhood), etc., have historically been placed on the margins or periphery of the mainstream social and economic hierarchy" (Cross, M., & Atinde, V., 2015, p. 308).

Engaging in conversations with colleagues about the role of culture in teaching and learning is another important component of reflective practice. As previously stated, white culture is the dominant culture in schools. These conversations are aimed at re-educating white colleagues to open the circle of power. One way to validate and affirm the culture of historically marginalized students, advocacy work must be done in collaboration with people of color.

Professional learning is segmented into three areas: leadership, intercultural communication, and culturally responsive pedagogy. The role of leadership is to deeply implement equity practices. Thus, research calls for professional learning around leading

from an equity lens. A consideration to be aware of is intercultural communication. Guidance for this can be found in Sinek's (2013) concept of the golden circle that encourages organizations to communicate "why?" we do things before exploring the "how?" or the "What?" we do. Once the "why?" mindset is explored, education practitioners can find practical application through culturally responsive pedagogy. This instructional practice, as described by Hollie (2012), asks teachers to be mindful of instructional practices that validate and affirm students to build and bridge their behavior and achievement in an academic setting.

Institutional bias occurs when practices and policies exist that give an advantage to certain groups and a disadvantage to other groups. To address this, districts look at data sets to identify disparities between groups. The research notes that identification is only the beginning. Meaningful change comes when institutional bias is recognized, addressed and rectified.

The research from these areas of equity create a focus and structure for data collection tools that align within chosen methodology described in the next chapter.

Preview of Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter three begins with the rationale for a qualitative study of equity specialists as means to capture a data set that highlights the work they do as well as the rationale for using grounded theory and autoethnography to analyze and highlight findings. Next, the chapter provides a detailed explanation of intended participants, settings, and the use of the following data collection methods: survey, qualitative interviews, and a focus group.

The chapter concludes with a grounded theory analysis process and assumptions made prior to conducting the research.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Research Paradigm and Rationale

This dissertation was framed as a qualitative study utilizing grounded theory and autoethnography analysis methods. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) define qualitative research as “methods based on interpretive/constructivist epistemology and numerical data” (p. 6). They explain that the value of qualitative research “add[s] to the literature by building rich descriptions of complex situations and by giving directions for future research” (p. 324). This aligns with the research goal for this study: to provide clarity for equity specialists working in a rural setting. As defined in chapter two, equity specialists are staff who develop, support, and monitor their school Achievement Integration Plan aimed at addressing gaps in educational equity. The complex nature of educational equity calls for an exploration of perspectives that can be unearthed through qualitative research. Creswell (2014) lists practices of qualitative researchers: “collects participants’ meanings, brings personal values into the study, studies the context or setting of participants, makes interpretations of the data, and collaborates with the participants” (p. 18). The focus of this research is to develop an understanding of how equity specialists define equity work and determine ways to strengthen collaboration among this network of professionals. Thus a qualitative methodology was best suited for this research.

Two qualitative methodologies were used to offer descriptive analysis: grounded theory and autoethnography. Upon first glance, they appear to be in opposition since grounded theory requires the researcher to relinquish control and allow participants to

guide the direction of the project (Charmaz, as cited by Gubrium & Holstein, 2002), where autoethnography positions the researcher as the subject of the project (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). For this study, the findings from grounded theory analysis created the necessary focus for autoethnography, resulting in a more dynamic study.

Grounded theory. Grounded theory (GT) guided the analysis of this study since the findings are “grounded in the views of participants” (Creswell, 2014, p.14). More specifically, a constructivist GT methodology was utilized to “focus on how participants’ construct meaning in relation to the area of inquiry” (Chun, Birks, & Francis, 2019). A key attribute to grounded theory is that data drives the direction of the research. This requires the researcher to be led by the perspective of participants and set aside preconceived notions they bring to the study. The result is shared agency between the researcher and participants. To accomplish this, the order of data collection in this study went as follows: survey, followed by qualitative interviews, then a focus group.

Grounded theory calls for analysis of each data set to inform the next data set. Charmaz (as cited by Gubrium & Holstein, 2002) generalizes the work of grounded theorists as they “look for ideas by studying data and then returning to the field to gather focused data to answer analytic questions and to fill conceptual gaps” (p. 676). This resulted in a richer description from participants and more robust findings. Chun, Birks and Francis (2019) offer a framework for conducting grounded theory research. Elements from this framework are highlighted throughout the remainder of this chapter along with an explanation of their implementation.

Autoethnography. Autoethnography is a qualitative method that allows the researcher to investigate their own positionality among the research topic. Adams, Jones, and Ellis (2015) describe this research method further as “it offers nuanced, complex, and specific knowledge about *particular* lives, experiences, and relationships” (p. 21). Bochner and Ellis (2016) add that it “displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 65). My experience as an equity specialist for the past eleven years positions me to reflect on the learning curve I have experienced in understanding the complexities of equity in education among a predominantly white district and community. Thus, I chose to include autoethnography as an additional piece of analysis.

Autoethnography can take many forms - short stories, poetry, personal essays, journals, and the like. For this study, I have included autoethnographic reflections in chapter four that share pivotal learning moments in my experience as an equity specialist that are pertinent to my findings. Bochner and Ellis (2016) offer a collection of precepts, or assumptions, to consider when crafting an autoethnography, four of which deeply informed the autoethnographic reflections I created:

- The researcher is part of the research data;
- Research involves the emotionality and subjectivity of both researchers and participants;
- Researchers should accept an ethical obligation to give something important back to the people and communities they study and write about;

- What researchers write should be “for” participants as much as “about” them (p. 56)

Offering autoethnographic reflections positioned my experience within the research, displayed honest vulnerability, and offered an account that other equity specialists may connect with.

Researchers must consider the ethical challenges of their work and determine steps necessary to address such challenges. In addition to the process set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), autoethnography offers a platform to honor the complex nature of equity work that is steeped in social justice. Bochner and Ellis (2016) use the term relational ethics to include “mindful self-reflection about the researcher’s role, motives, and feelings during the research process” (p. 139). These elements of reflection provided guidance while writing the reflective statements as well as analyzing my findings. Continual self-reflection around my role and motives created a clearer focus to highlight the experience and perspective of participants since I had a separate space to house my perspective. Autoethnographic writing is intended to be intimate and vulnerable to showcase a deeper experience, for the reader, within a research topic.

Setting and Participants

This study sought to capture the perspective of equity work in the rural setting. My research question is: *What are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge that equity specialists in rural Minnesota describe as being effective to better prepare them in their work of educational equity?* Inquiry began with purposive sampling, described by Chun, Birks, and Francis (2019) as “selecting participants who could answer the research

question” (Purposive Sampling section, para. 1). This was done by sending out a survey to all equity specialists in rural Minnesota that participate in the Achievement Integration program to generate a participation pool. The goal of the Achievement Integration Program (2017) “is to pursue racial and economic integration, increase academic disparities based on students’ diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds in Minnesota public schools” (Purpose section, para. 1). From there, people who expressed interest in participating in the qualitative interview portion of this study were contacted through email. Fifteen people indicated they would be willing to participate in an interview, six of which were superintendents. In the end, seven interviews were conducted. Interviewees were selected based on the following criteria: (a) Job title & description. The goal was to get as many equity specialists as possible; in smaller districts the superintendent often serves as the equity specialist. (b) Location: distance from researcher. (c) Years of experience.

Interviews were conducted in one-on-one environments where the participant felt most comfortable. For the focus group, a centrally located space was dictated by the members of the group. The intent for all interviews was to create an inviting, calm environment with minimal distractions.

Data Collection Methods

Three methods of data collection were used to create the data set for this study. First, a survey was disseminated to equity specialists that participate in the Achievement Integration program in rural Minnesota. Next, qualitative interviews were conducted of equity specialists who expressed interest in participation in this study. Followed by a

focus group of equity specialists and administrators who demonstrate passion and commitment to equity work. Finally, the researcher submitted a series of autoethnographic reflections alongside the stories of fellow equity specialists.

The purpose of this study, positionality, and bias were considered as the initial survey, interview and focus group protocols were developed. Seidman (2013) advises that, “by concentrating on the details of participants’ experiences, interviewers strive as best as possible to guide their participants to reconstitute their lived experience” (p. 18). To explore participants’ experiences, a set of interview questions were created and piloted “as a check for bias in the procedures, the interviewer, and the questions” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 206). Based on the results from pilot interviews, a focus group protocol was created, and piloted as well. Both sets of final protocols are presented in the appendix.

Survey. The purpose of the survey in this study was to collect demographic patterns from equity specialists in rural Minnesota as well as find people willing to participate in qualitative interviews. In addition, *snowball sampling* was utilized - “a strategy in which a successive participant or group is named by a preceding group or individual” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 327). This way the network of equity specialists assisted in generating the data set. The office of equity and innovation at Minnesota’s Department of Education provided a contact list of participants in the Achievement Integration Program. This included superintendents, equity specialists, and business managers. This list was cross referenced with the document from the research in chapter two: Maps of State and Metro Integration Districts (2017). This map has the

entire state of MN and a metro map. Email contacts from the metro schools illustrated on this map were removed. The remaining emails were from non-metro districts, thus creating the survey distribution list.

The survey was disseminated through an email approved by Hamline's Institutional Review Board process. The survey was built using Google Forms and consisted of 16 questions. At the end of the email a link to the survey form was embedded. The composed email with a survey was sent to the distribution list. A number of emails came back for a variety of reasons: no longer with the district, email no longer exists, or out of the office. A week after sending the initial survey, a reminder/thank-you email was sent to the distribution list giving a deadline of one more week to complete the survey. In the end, 32 people responded. Of those 32 people, 18 were willing to participate further through an interview, focus group, or both.

Description of coding and data analysis process. Since the survey was created using google forms, downloading results into a spreadsheet was an effective way to sort the data. Using tools within google sheets allowed some of the data to be populated in the form of a pie chart or a bar graph. Each section of the survey served a different purpose requiring the data to be analyzed differently.

The first section was demographic data. Most of these questions populated either a pie-graph or a bar graph representing participant responses, making conclusions visible. The visual representation of these questions can be found in Figures 2 through Figure 7, found in chapter four. One question asked participants to write in their job title(s). This information was used to generate Table 1, Job Titles, also in chapter four.

The second section of the survey inquired about participants' training and content knowledge. Again, many of these questions populated bar graphs, making conclusions visible. The visual representation of these questions can be found in Figures 8 through Figure 11, found in chapter four. Once data was in this form, comparative conclusions were able to be drawn, also reported in chapter four. Grounded theory analyzes data in a constant comparative analysis cycle (Chun, Birks, & Francis, 2019) where the data analysis brings the researcher back into the data for further findings.

The final question in this section inquired about the level of preparedness participants felt they had to do the work of educational equity (Figure 8). This was followed by an open-ended prompt to have them explain their reasoning. As reported in chapter two, the working definition I have distilled through research is: educational equity ensures that all students, regardless of individual characteristics have access to supportive, high-quality learning experiences that develop their fullest potential (Dagli et al., 2017; "Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012; "Ten Minnesota Commitments to Equity", 2018). To analyze these results, a separate document was created by simply copying and pasting the responses into a google document. In this form, patterns were found among similar levels of preparedness, reported in chapter four.

The third and fourth sections were short answers in reference to disposition and skills necessary for equity work. Again, a separate document was created to house these responses by simply copying the column of responses and pasting them into a google document. In this form patterns were found by reading for repeated phrases and ideas. These patterns are displayed in Table 2 and Table 5, found in chapter four.

Qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews were conducted of people who have been part of equity work for at least three years to gain their stories and perspectives. Warren (as cited in Gubrium & Holstein, 2002) offered “the purpose of most qualitative interviewing is to derive interpretations, not facts or laws, from respondent talk” (p. 83). Similarly, Seidman (2013) distilled the purpose of interviewing as taking “an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). The intended purpose of these interviews was to find intersectionality among the experiences of equity specialists.

In preparation for the interviews, the survey responses were read, looking for patterns in responses to craft additional interview questions to go deeper into the work of equity specialists. Upon finishing this analysis, two additional questions were created and added to the interview protocol (Appendix B, questions 4 & 5). An email was sent to selected interviewees to begin the process of finding an interview time and location that worked best for them. A copy of interview questions (Appendix B) and the IRB letter of informed consent (Appendix F) was provided prior to the interview. The rationale was to allow participants time to reflect on their experience if that was their preference. However, it was not required. All interviews were recorded using the voice memo app.

The interview protocol found in Appendix B was designed to elicit open-ended perspectives from equity specialists in rural Minnesota. Utilizing a qualitative interview style allowed each interviewee to dictate the flow of the interview. One interview was conducted at a local coffee shop, one at the local library, one in the researcher’s office,

and one in the researcher's living room. Three interviewees expressed interest in conducting the interview remotely through the use of google hang-out.

The interview experience was not rigid in nature. All questions were asked in the course of each interview, but the order changed based on the depth of the interviewee's answers. Some interviewees answered two questions with one answer, resulting in a change of order. As interviewees were answering, notes were taken that lead to clarifying questions and ensured each question was answered. The goal was to connect these perspectives to the body of research used to inform this study. Interview times varied in length from 19 minutes to 39 minutes. Letters of informed consent were collected from interviews that were conducted in person. The letters of informed consent were collected through email from those whose interviews were conducted remotely.

Interviews were transcribed by FocusForward, a company that creates transcripts from recordings. In an effort to maintain confidentiality, FocusForward utilized a REDACTED tag whenever the interviewee mentioned the name of a person, location, or district. Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym by conducting a google search of popular names of different decades that correlated to the age of the interviewee and chose a pseudonym from that list. Each transcript file was marked with a number and the interviewee's pseudonym. Within two days of uploading the audio files, FocusForward emailed me the completed transcripts.

Description of coding and data analysis process. Analysis of each transcript utilized grounded theory and followed four coding phases. First, each transcript was printed and read to determine themes that emerged. In this phase, themes related to skills,

dispositions, and content knowledge were jotted in the margins. The purpose of this initial stage of coding is for “fracturing the data to compare incident to incident and to look for similarities and differences in beginning patterns in the data” (Chun, Birks, & Francis, 2019, Initial coding section, para. 1). Second, to determine the frequency of word usage, each transcript was uploaded into wordclouds.com. This website provided two things: one, a visual of words commonly used in the transcript, and a word list that included a word-count frequency for each word in the transcript. Words were eliminated that were indicative of speech patterns, such as the words ‘really’ and ‘kind of’. Also, words such as ‘redacted’ and ‘inaudible’ were eliminated. For example, In Maggie’s (personal communication, April 19, 2019) transcript, the most frequent words used were: Work (51), Students (40), Equity (29). These word counts were used as a search list to go back into the transcript and find the phrases that contain these words to capture the context of their use to determine themes. Third, a search for phrases with ‘I feel’, ‘I believe’, and ‘I think’ was conducted to find patterns of disposition. A coded document was created to organize notes in the following categories: skills, dispositions, or content knowledge. Lastly, quotations were selected from all notations that were evidence of these three sections.

Focus groups. Focus groups are a means of gathering data amidst a group discussion on a predetermined topic (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Setting the conditions for a focus group is critical to foster “a social environment in which group members are stimulated by one another’s perceptions and ideas” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 363). The group consisted of two equity specialists with three or more years of

experience and two superintendents whose districts participate in the Achievement Integration Program. The purpose was to generate a shared depth of knowledge that experience provides. Two of these participants came from the interview pool as well.

The question set used for the focus group, found in Appendix C, was finalized after a constant comparative analysis (Chun, Birks, & Francis, 2019) of interview responses. Based on themes that emerged from the interviews, two questions were added to the focus question protocol (Appendix C, questions 2 & 6). These questions helped facilitate the discussion in the hopes that group synergy would unearth deeper reflection. An additional benefit of gathering this group of educators together was to create a support network for their individual work in equity.

The location of the focus group was a conference room. This was determined based on the geographic location of participants; It was centrally located among the group. Details of the event were shared through google calendar; the invitation was sent to all participants, accepted by all participants, and a reminder was sent two days prior to the event. The conference room was set up with materials at four spots so participants faced one another. Each spot had: an IRB consent form (Appendix F), one suggested reading list (Appendix D), and one pen. Nameplates for participants were laid out for them to pick up as they entered so they could choose their own seats. I positioned myself at the end of the table to facilitate the discussion with the question set, and materials to hand out.

As participants arrived they were introduced to one another, and invited to grab refreshments. This created a casual atmosphere where people began to make connections

with one another. Before the discussion began, participants signed an IRB consent form, were reminded that the discussion would be recorded, and names of people, districts, and places would be redacted or assigned pseudonyms. Next, we looked at the suggested reading list that was generated through the research for this dissertation (Appendix D).

To promote the importance of everyone's voice and create a sense of community among the group, a Culturally Responsive Protocol from Hollie's (2018) work, the five finger share, was used. CLR pedagogy promotes the validation and affirmation of the participants for the purposes of building and bridging them to success in the culture of academia and mainstream society (Hollie, 2012). This protocol asked participants to respond to five prompts, found in Appendix E. There are multiple ways to use this protocol with groups. For our purposes, each participant chose to share two of their five responses. Next, the question set (Appendix C) and discussion norms (Appendix E) were passed out to participants. Questions were not sent to participants ahead of time in hopes to create a more genuine discussion as opposed to a sharing of answers. Setting norms for discussions is an effective way to empower and honor all perspectives in the room as well as keep the discussion on track. They create a safe space for participants to share their experience with strangers and speak candidly. Suggested norms from Standing Partnership's website were used ("Laying Focus Group Ground Rules", 2011). Another CLR protocol was utilized to review norms: whip around (Hollie, 2018). This protocol was a quick way to review the norms and get everyone's voice in the space. The intention of the five-finger share and whip around of norms was to create a low-pressure experience for participants to use their voices in the shared space.

The focus group discussion took one hour and was fluid in nature. As participants were discussing, notes were recorded that prompted clarifying questions and changed the order of questions. The goal was to connect these perspectives to the body of research used to inform this study. In the end, all questions from the question set were asked.

Description of coding and data analysis process. The file of the focus group recording was uploaded to the Focus Forward project space to get transcribed. Once the transcript was received, the video recording was deleted. Analysis of the focus group transcript utilized grounded theory (Chun, Birks, & Francis, 2019) and followed two phases. First, the transcript was read to determine the themes that emerged. In this phase, themes related to skills, dispositions, and content knowledge were jotted in the margins. Second, the notations were condensed and organized into related categories that made up theme analysis as reported in chapter four.

Assumptions

The final section of this chapter will focus on perceived assumptions around the exploration of this project. This research study began with the assumptions that equity work in an all white setting is experienced differently than in a diverse setting. Another initial assumption was that the triangulation of data collection tools (interviews, focus groups, and my autoethnography) would provide a rich context that added to the body of knowledge of equity work. An additional assumption was that my current network would yield participants for this study. A final assumption is that grounded theory would provide the flexibility needed to unearth participants' truths and allow a fluid exploration of topics.

Summary

Chapter three focused on the proposed methodology for this study to answer the question: *What are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge that equity specialists in rural Minnesota describe as being effective to better prepare them in their work toward achieving educational equity?* A qualitative study utilizing grounded theory and autoethnography analysis methods was the chosen model for this study. There were three methods of data collection: survey, qualitative interviews, and a focus group. The purpose of this study is to provide support to clarify the area of equity work for myself and others.

Preview of Chapter 4: Results

The next chapter will report diagnostic information gathered from the survey followed by selected quotes taken from six interviews of equity specialists organized in three categories of skills, dispositions, and content knowledge. This same organization was applied to reporting the findings of the focus group meeting. At the end of each section an autoethnographic reflection is shared.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

The purpose of this study is to clarify the work of educational equity for myself and others who work in a rural, predominantly white community. Therefore, the following question was created: *What are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge that equity specialists in rural Minnesota describe as being effective to better prepare them in their work of educational equity?* Educational equity ensures that all students, regardless of individual characteristics have access to supportive, high-quality learning experiences that develop their fullest potential (Dagli et al., 2017; "Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012; "Ten Minnesota Commitments to Equity", 2018). This research study asked participants to reflect on their experience with educational equity in a rural setting. Through the use of surveys, interviews, and a focus group, participants were asked to define their role and share what they feel their job requires.

This chapter represents the comprehensive findings that resulted from a state-wide dissemination of an equity specialist survey, a set of six interviews, and one focus group. As stated in previous chapters, equity work looks different in a rural setting than it does in an urban setting. This chapter will also provide an overview of data collection methods used, the stages of data analysis using grounded theory, and a summary of research findings.

Survey

The equity specialist survey for this study was designed to collect demographic data and general information about the work of equity specialists, found in Appendix A. The survey was sent to all 86 non-metro districts participating in the Achievement Integration Program. In the end, 32 people responded. Again, The goal of this program, as outlined on the Achievement and Integration Program (2017) website, is to “pursue racial and economic integration, increase student achievement, create equitable educational opportunities, and reduce academic disparities based on students' diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds in Minnesota public schools” (Purpose section, para. 1). Results from the survey are highlighted in the figures and tables below.

Participants. The majority of equity specialists in rural Minnesota participating in this study were white (90.6%; Figure 2), females (68.8%; Figure 3), with more than 10 years of experience in education (71.9%; Figure 4). Again, an equity specialist develops, supports, and monitors their school Achievement Integration Plan aimed at addressing gaps in educational equity.

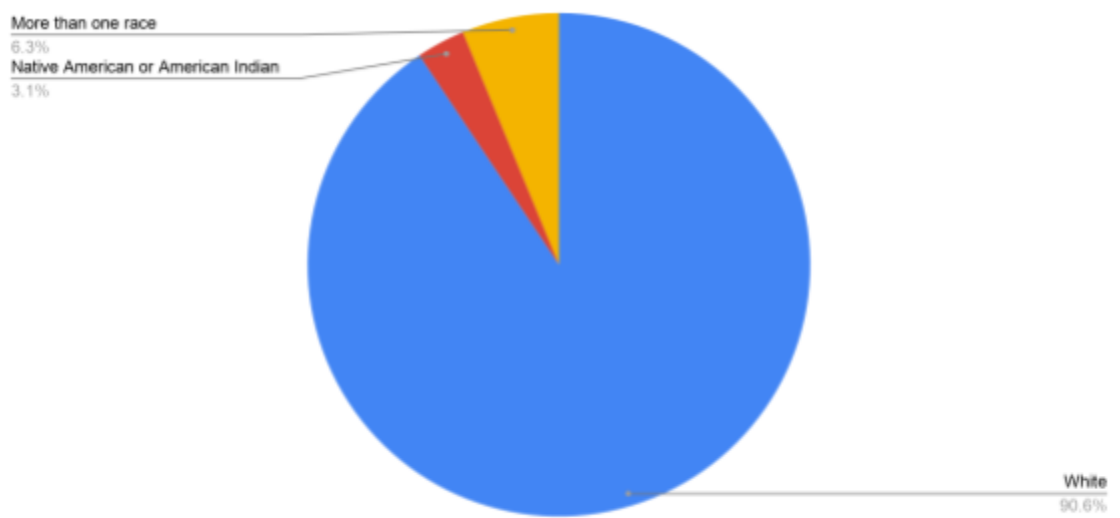


Figure 2. Select the option that most accurately describes your race.

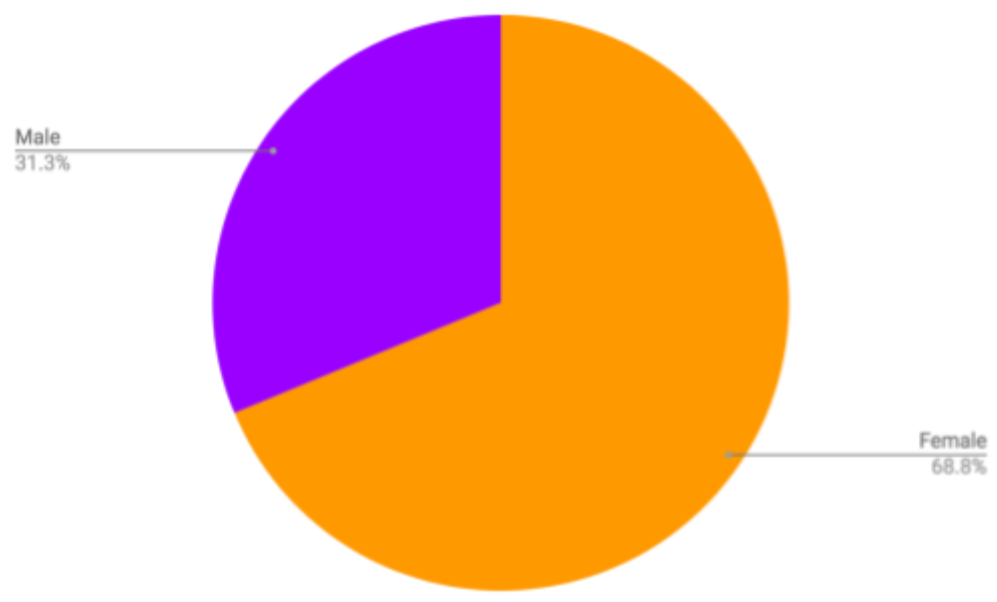


Figure 3. Which gender do you identify with?

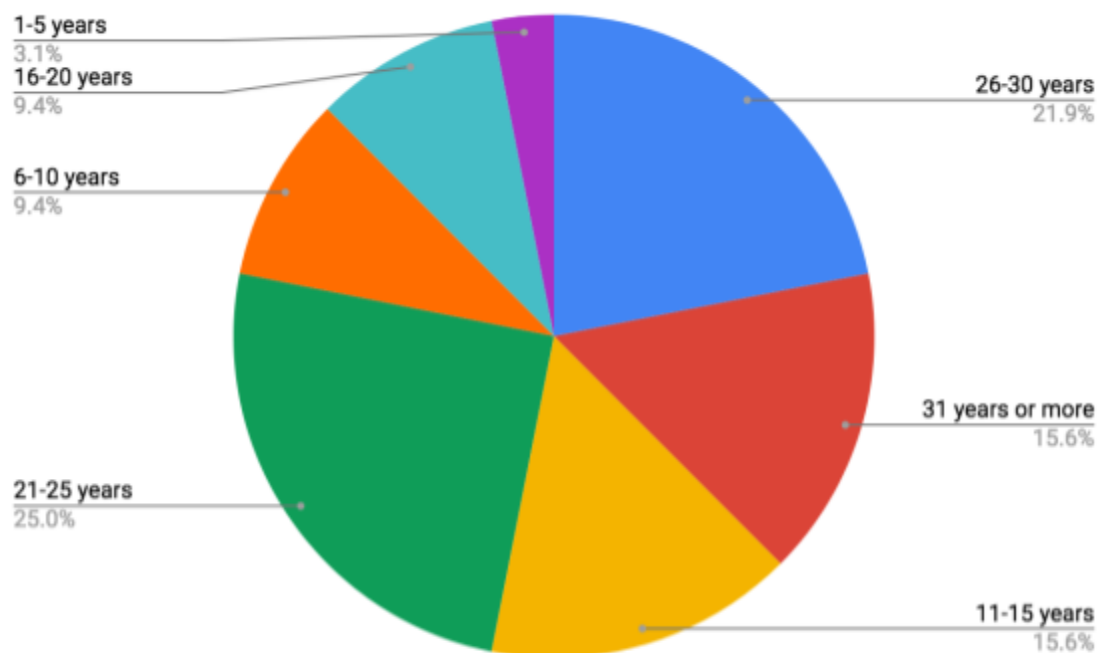


Figure 4. How many years have you been working in education?

The survey was distributed to all rural districts participating in the Achievement Integration program. Table 1 outlines the job titles of participants. Position titles give an indication of responsibilities in a district. Specifically, in regards to equity, there are positions that have the power to make policy and determine which initiatives staff should focus on. These decisions typically fall on administrative positions, comprising 67.7% of participants in this study, and listed on the top half of Table 1. For this data analysis, terms such as *coordinator* were interpreted to indicate a position that coordinates a specific area of work, thus specializing in that work; 32.2% of participants fall into this category, listed in the second half of Table 1. This is in contrast to administrators who oversee all district work, specializing in the business of a district as opposed to the implementation of a program.

Table 1
Job titles, n=31

Title	Number of participants
Superintendent	8
Assistant Superintendent	1
Superintendent and Principal	2
Principal	6
Executive Director	1
Community Education Director	1
Director of Teaching and Learning	2
Professional Development Coordinator	1
District Assessment and Integration Coordinator	1
Teacher/Arts Magnet Coordinator	1
Integration Coordinator/AVID District Director	1
Educational Equity Coordinator (ELL and MEP)	1
Teaching and Learning Specialist	1
EL Teacher/Coordinator/Family Liaison	1
Instructional Coach/Equity Specialist	1
Student and Family Advocate	1
Business Manager	1

To differentiate further, participants identified years of experience working to promote educational equity in a formal capacity versus an informal capacity. Formal capacity was framed as a leadership position or title related to equity work. For example: equity specialist, director of equity services, or achievement integration staff. Figure 5 shows 51.7% of participants in this study reported formally working to promote educational equity between 1-5 years. Informal capacity was framed as applying an understanding of equity in decisions made as a teacher, principal, or superintendent. Figure 6 shows 34.4% of participants reported 6-10 years of informally working to promote educational equity, and 15.5% in each category: 16-20 years and 26-30 years.

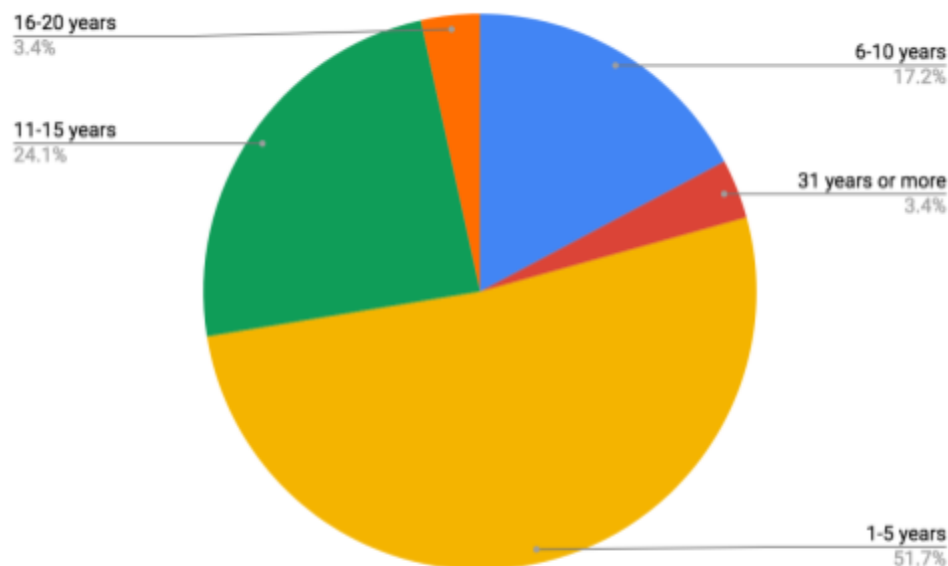


Figure 5. How many years have you been working to promote educational equity in a formal capacity? This may mean you have a leadership position or title related to equity work.

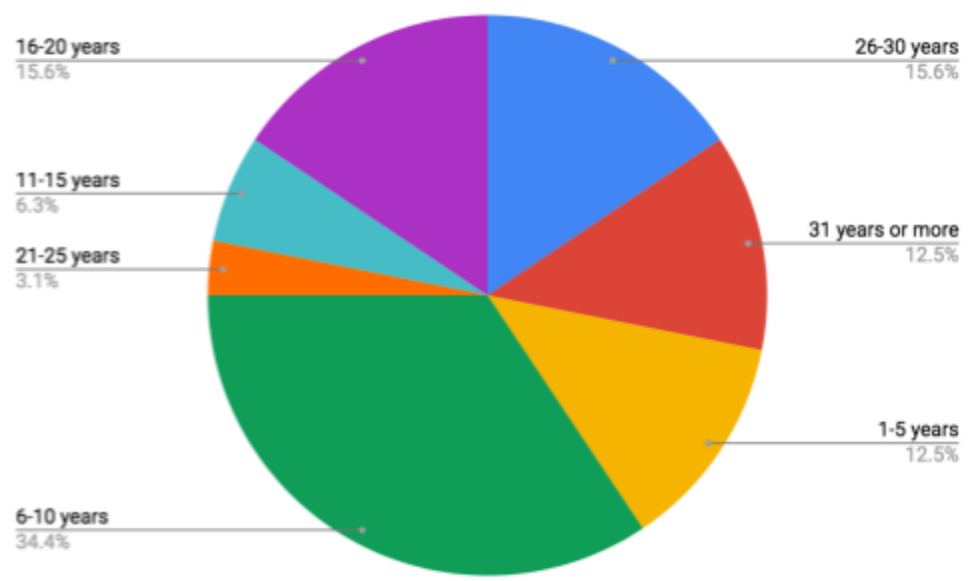


Figure 6. How many years have you been working to promote educational equity in an informal capacity? This may mean you apply your understanding of equity in decisions you make as a teacher, principal, or superintendent.

Disaggregating the data set further, 15 participants reported having 1-5 years of formal experience promoting educational equity. Of these 15 participants, Figure 7 shows 53.3% of these participants reported 6-10 years of informal experience promoting educational equity.

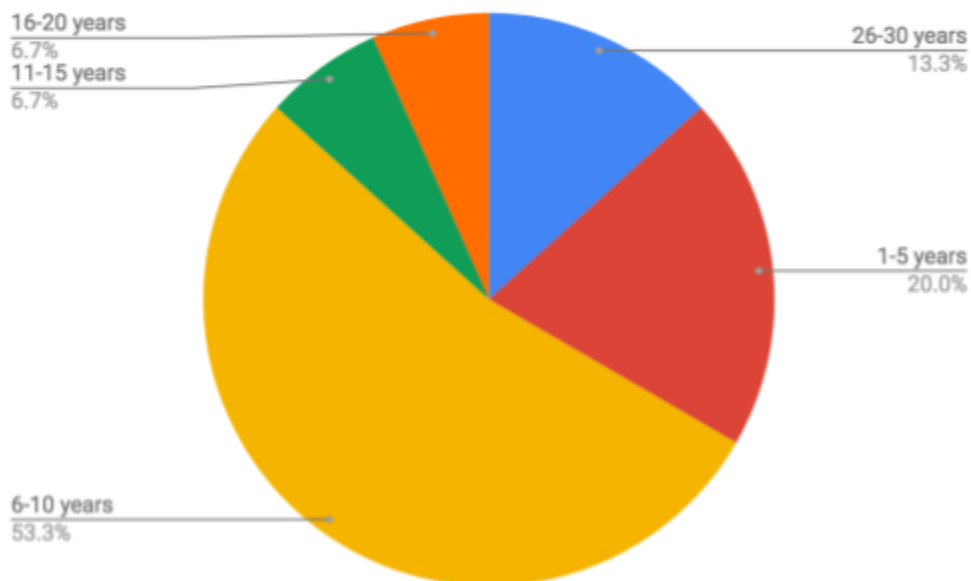


Figure 7. Years of informal experience promoting educational equity among participants who reported 1-5 years of formal experience promoting educational equity.

Two open-ended questions were crafted in the survey to answer the question:

What are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge that equity specialists in rural Minnesota describe as being effective to better prepare them in their work toward achieving educational equity? Evidence of these responses are found in the remainder of this chapter

Skills. For the purpose of this study, skills are defined as tasks or things equity specialists do in their job. An open-ended question on the survey asked participants to consider the variety of situations, roles, and job duties they found themselves in while working to promote equity. Job duties listed among the 30 participants who provided a response fall into four categories: 1) ensuring students have equitable access to resources and teachers, 2) ensuring staff is prepared and sensitive to the needs of all students, 3)

support for families, and 4) administrative duties. The responses to the prompt: describe your job duties and skills as they relate to equity can be found in Table 2.

To perform any duties found on Table 2, participants reported the importance of building their own capacity to understand someone else's point of view through building relationships and active listening skills. As one participant stated, "analyzing Whiteness and privilege in all that I do is essential as it impacts my own perspective, as well as that of others. So, being mindful of this in all decisions is likewise a practice that must happen continuously." One component of building capacity is learning to grapple with discomfort. In order to perform the duties listed in Table 2, equity specialists mentioned the ever-present discomfort that comes with change and their abilities to navigate these feelings in order to assist others to do the same.

Table 2
Job duties, n=30

Ensure students have equitable access to resources and teachers.	Ensure staff is prepared and sensitive to the needs of all students.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy writing and discourse analysis review to make more inclusive and culturally appropriate. ● Curriculum assistance. ● Intervention. ● Affinity group facilitator. ● Determine equitable course placement and extracurricular programming. ● Facilitate opportunities to develop student leadership skills. ● Teach students about equity. ● Serve on Student Resource Team; ensure students needs are met. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Instructional coaching. ● Oversee peer-to-peer coaching to grow capacity for equitable learning environment. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Response to behavior ○ Data use to inform instruction ● Research best practices and facilitate professional development to expand staff understanding of equity. ● Ensure staff understand the needs of EL students and how we can give them an equitable experience. ● Directing when equitable factors are not being considered.
Support for families.	Administrative duties.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Translating and interpreting. ● Explaining school processes. ● Communicate with families on a regular basis. ● Listen to families so they feel valued. ● Making families aware of their rights. ● Making families aware of norms in our culture for parent/school relationships. ● Finding resources and funding. ● Bridge communication with families to get students help (assess for special education services). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hiring ● Facilities ● Communication to promote equity. ● Oversee World's Best Workforce Plan ● Oversee Achievement Integration Plan and budget. ● Oversee Title II and Title IV programs. ● Examine school and individual performance data.

Disposition. The National Council for Accreditation and Teacher Education (NCATE) defined professional disposition as “professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities” (Honawar, 2008, para. 3). The survey asked participants to consider this definition and provide a response to the open-ended question: What dispositions do you believe people need to possess to be successful in the world of equity work? Six disposition traits emerged from the data: 1) be compassionate and empathetic, 2) be aware of their own implicit bias, 3) be reflective, 4) be open-minded and possess a growth mindset, 5) be resilient, and 6) believe in all children. To preserve the sentiments of the responses, it is important to note that the use of pronouns “we” and “they” and “their” are referring to equity specialists as a group in the explanations of each trait.

Be compassionate and empathetic. Empathy is defined as “The ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling” (“What is Empathy?”, 2019, para. 1). One participant explained this disposition trait as “we need to have a compassionate understanding of people - we all deal with a variety of issues - whether it be historical trauma, cultural stereotypes, or regional issues.” As stated in chapter two, “historical trauma is unresolved grief of a people due to systemic loss, is felt across generations and impacts subsequent generations” (Shea et al., 2019, p. 554). This requires strong listening skills, cultural sensitivity, and the willingness to learn about the situation of others.

Be aware of their own implicit bias. As stated in chapter two, Implicit bias is a mental process that stimulates negative attitudes about people who are not members of one's own 'in group.' ... Implicit bias affects the way that we think about 'out groups' and it influences the way that we react to and interact with out group members. Implicit bias operates in what researchers call our 'implicit mind,' the part of the brain that we commonly call the 'subconscious' or the 'unconscious.' This means that implicit bias can operate in an individual's mind without a conscious awareness of this process. ("Race Equity Glossary", 2020)

One participant frames this trait as having a "self-awareness of their thoughts and actions and the impact on others." In addition, this trait includes having an awareness of privilege, as well as their own values and beliefs. Another participant adds "we are in a field where we have the power to influence and teach. Therefore we should make sure that we are living by example."

Be reflective. The trait of being reflective was discussed in two capacities: strong self-reflection skills of the equity specialist themselves, and being reflective of the context in which they work. Self-reflection is tied to the trait of being aware of their own implicit bias. One participant describes self-reflection as a "hunger to learn about self." Another participant asserts that "people need to be open to reflecting on their own biases and blind spots. We need to be willing to say 'I never thought of it that way. I need to adjust my perspective.'" An interpretation of this trait in the context of their work, another participant shared: "I believe they need to be focused on the culture of the district they are working in. They need to be empathetic, a problem solver, and understanding of the

needs associated with equity.” A reflective disposition is being comfortable with discomfort. Overall, participants mentioned being lifelong learners and change agents working within schools.

Be open-minded and possess a growth mindset. This trait refers to being open to diverse views, listening objectively and being sensitive and aware of personal bias. Growth mindset is the belief that a person’s abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work (Dweck, 2006). Participants shared notions of being open-minded as equity specialists as well as developing this trait among other staff. “To help other staff members with growth I feel that you have to understand their experiences to figure out how to bridge their gap of knowledge.” Participants mentioned having a strong understanding of adult learning and working to cultivate relationships with staff who have not yet begun developing an equity lens. It is a commitment to finding ways to invite those who are resistant to join the conversation.

Be resilient. This trait requires having an understanding of what equity work is and the courage to address it daily. Resiliency is embedded in Brown’s (2015) work around the notion of vulnerability, and emphasizes this trait as finding a constructive way to move through experiences and grow from them while maintaining our authenticity. One participant stated that equity specialists “need a thick skin. White educators have to be willing to get in the arena to challenge inequities instead of sitting back and supporting the status quo.” Another participant added that an equity specialist is “a person who can be level headed, however, be able to do some push and pull with administrators as well as teachers.” Equity specialists usher people through new understanding and need to be able

to do so without taking things personally. The trait of resiliency asks equity specialists to work in discomfort and share their truth while managing feelings of being judged or intimidated.

Believe in all children. The trait of believing in all children is demonstrated by having a clear understanding of who equity specialists are trying to promote equitable practices for. One participant explained “this should include an understanding of how the specific group faces institutional bias, how they are affected by power and privilege, and how culture factors into their experiences at school.” Another participant offered a set of belief statements that shape their work as an advocate:

Each student deserves respect just because they are human. Each student has a valid viewpoint that is uniquely their own. Each student can be encouraged to see each other through the eyes of empathy and kindness. This does not require agreement, but the ability to see past my own views and into the world of another.

A general consensus from comments related to students was that of having a predisposed belief that “all students can and will learn.” Participants mentioned the impact of developing genuine relationships with students and families as the cornerstone for upholding this disposition trait.

Training and Content Knowledge. Participants reflected on their experience with training geared toward developing their content knowledge in equity. Figure 8 reports a general rating of how prepared participants feel they are to do their work in educational equity. Sixty-two point five percent of participants feel prepared or strongly prepared, whereas 37.5% of participants feel unprepared or strongly unprepared.

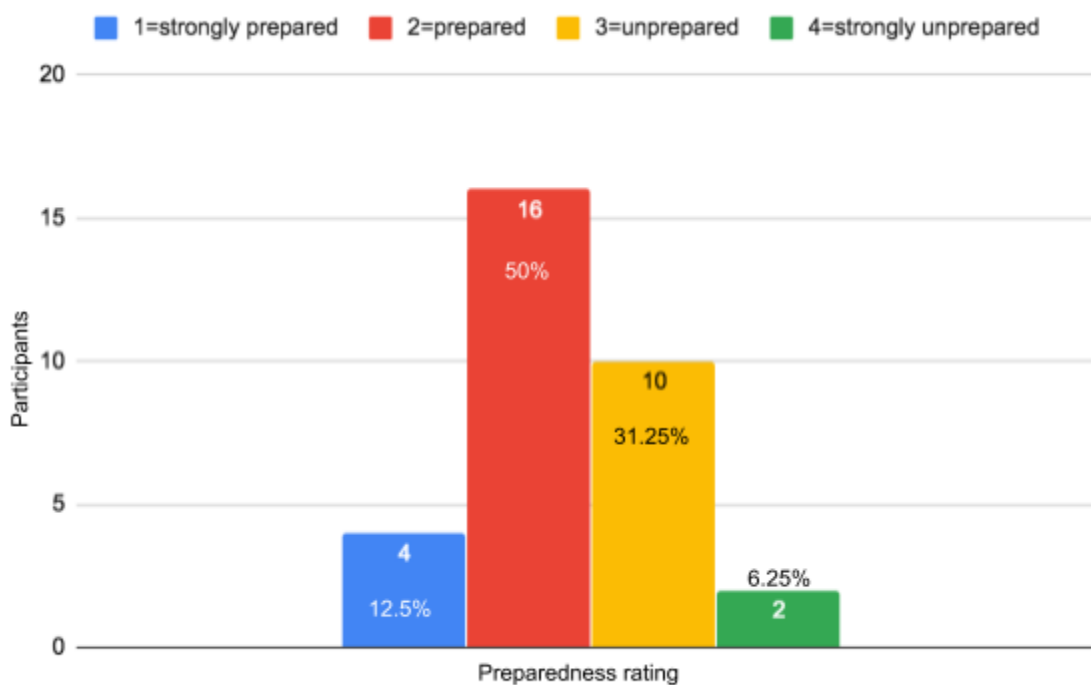


Figure 8. To what level do you feel prepared for your work in educational equity?

The survey asked participants to explain the rating they gave. Those that felt prepared or strongly prepared shared their conclusion that training is ongoing since the field is evolving. One participant stated “the field of equity is ever evolving and a laser focus is needed especially in more discreet elements of race.” Those that felt unprepared or strongly unprepared expressed that it is a challenge to establish equity as a focus in a predominantly white district and community. One participant summarized these sentiments by commenting:

I feel I have an understanding of what equity is and isn't and I have become some of the checks and balances our school needs. However, I tend to get push back from staff because as they say, “we are talking about a small student population.” I just keep pushing forward but there is not a lot of training in this work.

Requests for “collaboration and guidance as to best support the growth of colleagues” was a theme that emerged among those that felt unprepared. Their interpretation is that there are not many people working in equity in a rural setting and that made professional development tough to find.

Areas of equity work. As stated in chapter two, The Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC), formerly Great Lakes Equity Center, asserts equity work be done in five critical areas: personal identity, power and privilege, the role of culture, professional learning, and institutional bias ("Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012). Professional learning consists of leadership practices, intercultural communication, and culturally responsive instruction. MAP EAC recommends exploring the areas of equity in the following order: personal identity, power and privilege, the role of culture, professional learning, and institutional bias. The rationale being that personal identity is the basis for more complex systemic exploration.

The survey asked participants to report training they have experienced in these areas of equity work, reported in Figure 9; and reflect on the impact of their experiences, reported in Figures 10 and 11. It is important to note that the survey design allowed participants to select all areas of training they have experienced, reported in Figure 9. Whereas Figures 10 and 11 asked participants to reflect and report the areas they felt they received the most training, Figure 10; and the areas they felt they would like more training, Figure 11. This means that a participant simply reports if they have been to a training in any of the areas in Figure 9, but Figure 10 asks participants to reflect on their training in terms of quantity and limit their selections, resulting in a larger data set

represented by Figure 9. For example, power and privilege was the largest area reported to have training experience with 27 of the 32 participants having selected this checkbox. However, in terms of feeling which area participants felt they had the most (quantity) of training, power and privilege was reported as the third largest area of experience, tied with leadership practices. This points to the conclusion that the largest number of participants have experienced some training in ideas around power and privilege, but they felt that two other areas represented the most training they have received over power and privilege. Each critical area of equity work is analyzed in a similar fashion following chart 11.

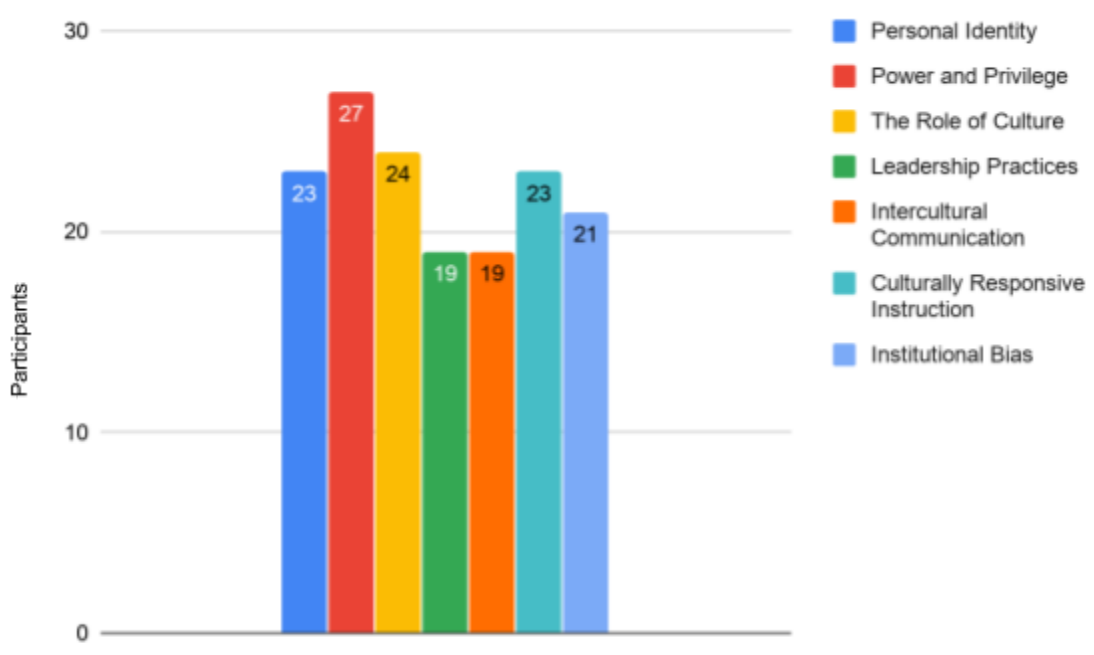


Figure 9. Check the boxes that apply to training sessions you have experienced related to educational equity.

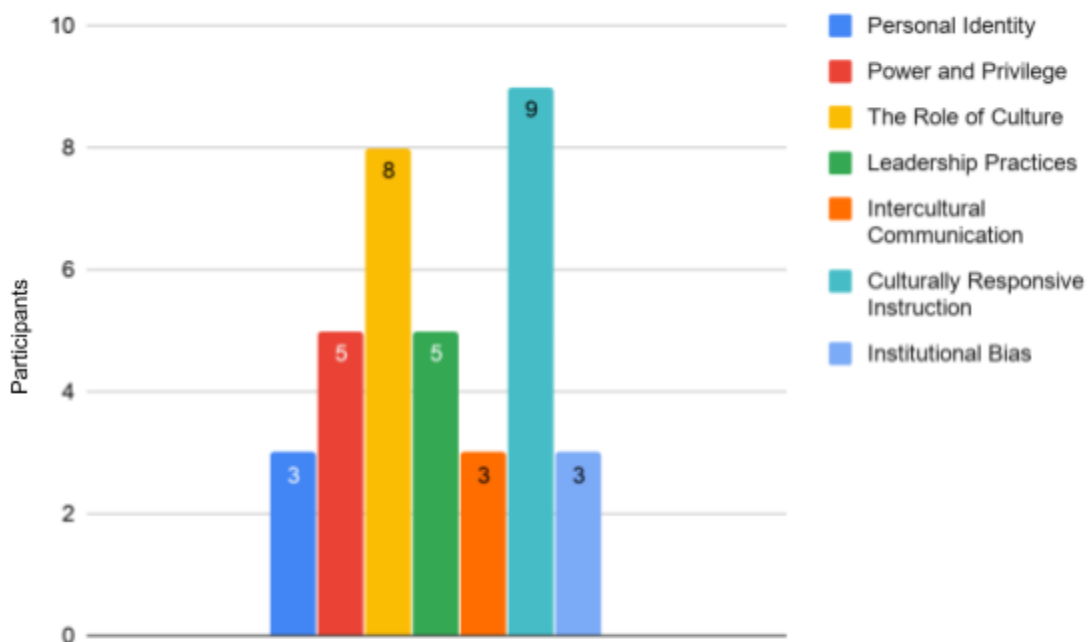


Figure 10. Which areas do you feel you have received the most training?

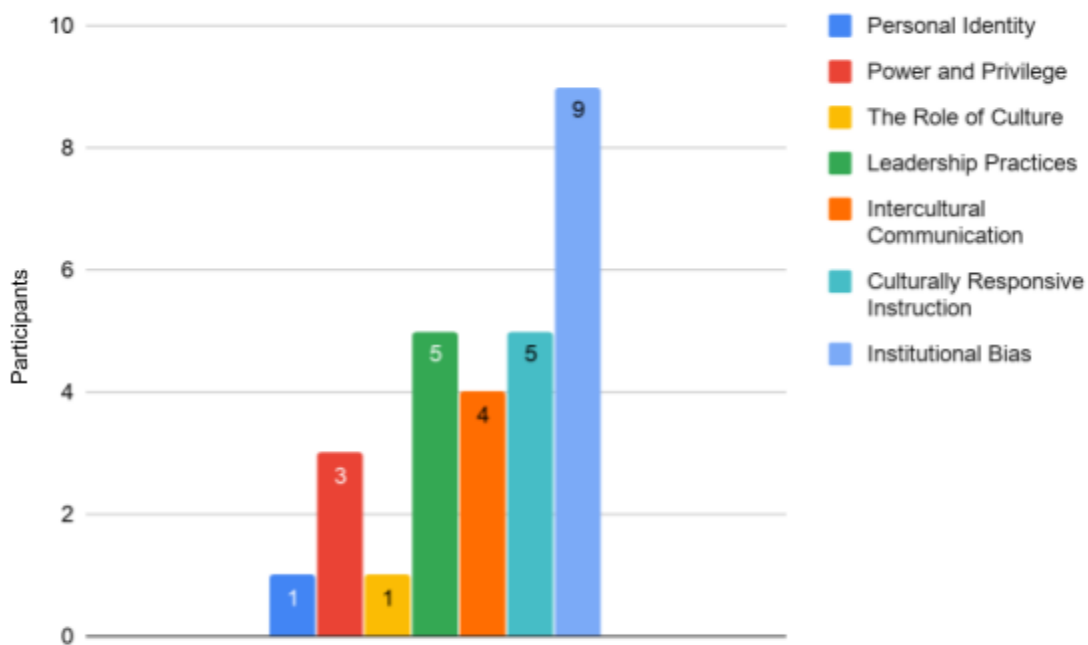


Figure 11. List any areas you would like more training.

Personal identity. Tatum (2007) asserts “Identity is shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts” (p. 99). According to research in chapter two, The Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center recommends equity work begin with the area of personal identity (“Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity”, 2012). Twenty-three participants reported experience in this, as shown in Figure 9. However, only 3 participants reported personal identity as the area they have received the most training, as shown in Figure 10. Additionally, only one participant chose personal identity as the area they would like more training, as shown in Figure 11. These findings are in contrast to the research for this study.

Power and privilege. Howard (1999) defines power and privilege as “Social arrangements of dominance cause privileges to flow to certain groups whether or not those privileges are earned. Likewise, penalties, punishments, and inequalities flow to other groups through no fault of their own other than their group membership” (p. 33). As stated above, power and privilege was the largest area reported to have training experience with 27 of the 32 participants having selected this checkbox. However, in terms of feeling which area participants felt they had the most (quantity) training, power and privilege was reported as the third largest area of experience, tied with leadership practices. This points to the conclusion that the largest number of participants have experienced some training in ideas around power and privilege, but they felt that two other areas represented the most training they have received over power and privilege.

The role of culture. The Great Lakes Equity Center explains that the role of culture is “Engaging in ongoing conversations with colleagues about the role culture has in teaching and learning” (“Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity”, 2012, Educate section, para. 10). From the survey data, the role of culture is the second largest area reported to have training experience with 24 of 32 participants having selected this checkbox, as shown in Figure 9. It is also the second largest area that participants felt they had received the most training, as shown in Figure 10, and only one participant chose the role of culture as the area they would like more training, as shown in Figure 11. One conclusion may be that participants feel they have the most training in this area, thus feel other areas have a greater need for training.

Professional learning. Again, professional learning consists of leadership practices, intercultural communication, and culturally responsive instruction. This area of equity work is reported to have the least amount of training in the areas of leadership practices and intercultural communication. Moore et al. (2016) assert leadership practices should “Support leaders in their pursuit of leveraging equity oriented professional development to prepare culturally responsive and sustaining educators. Establish an equity vision, be a critical consumer of professional development, commit to continual learning” (For Equity Now section, para. 1). Intercultural communication, as suggested by Sue et al. (as cited in Dagli et al., 2017) specifies that “educators should be mindful of word choice, gesture, tone of voice, and treatment during content delivery regardless of instructional methods, which may be positive messages (micro-affirmations) or negative messages (micro-inequities) conveyed to learners” (For Equity Now section, para. 10).

Nineteen participants reported experiencing training in these two categories, as reported in Figure 9. However, participants reported they feel that they have experienced the most training in culturally responsive instruction, as shown in Figure 10, and still want more training in this area, as shown in Figure 11. Culturally responsive instruction is “The validation and affirmation of the home (indigenous) culture and home language for the purposes of building and bridging the student to success in the culture of academia and mainstream society” (Hollie, 2012, p. 23).

Institutional bias. Institutional bias is the fifth critical category of equity work as recommended by MAP EAC. The other four areas build understanding toward the exploration of ideas in this category. Oxford Reference defines institutional bias as “a tendency for the procedures and practices of particular institutions to operate in ways which result in certain social groups being advantaged or favoured and others being disadvantaged or devalued. (“Institutional Bias”, 2020). Twenty-one participants reported training experience in institutional bias, as shown in Figure 9. Three participants reported this as the area they have the most training, Figure 10; and nine participants would like more training in the area of institutional bias, Figure 11. I conclude that since training in the other four areas is critical to work through this area, there is less experience with institutional bias and a larger desire to gain training in institutional bias.

Qualitative Interview

The final question on the survey asked if the participant was willing to participate further in an interview and if so, provide their contact information. Seven total interviews were conducted in April and May of 2019. In order to create a database for the

autoethnography reflection statements reported later in this chapter, I participated as one of the interviewees. My colleague who is also attaining an educational doctorate conducted the interview. The results reported are reflective of the themes found among all other interviews. In total, there were 3 hours and 13 minutes of interviews resulting in 55 pages of transcribed data. Responses were sorted to determine themes in the following categories: skills, content knowledge, and disposition.

Participants. The majority of equity specialists in rural Minnesota participating in this study were white (90.6%; Figure 2), females (68.8%; Figure 3), with more than 10 years of experience in education (71.9%; Figure 4). Thus, the interviewee pool reflects that trend. The following chart provides demographic data representing the participants.

Table 3
Interviewee demographic data, n=6

Interviewee Pseudonym	Identified Gender	Identified Race	Years working to promote educational equity in a formal capacity	Current job title
Kelly	Female	White	11-15 years	Integration Coordinator
Kim	Female	White	1-5 years	Student and Family Advocate
Lisa	Female	White	6-10 years	District Assessment & Integration Coordinator
Maggie	Female	White	11-15 years	Educational Equity Coordinator
Martin	Male	White	Unspecified	Superintendent
Stephanie	Female	More than one race	6-10 years	EL Teacher/Coordinator/Family Liaison

Responses from the six qualitative interviews were analyzed to find intersectionality among their responses that articulated skills, dispositions, and content knowledge they utilize in their work. The patterns found in these three areas are articulated in the remainder of this section.

Skills. For the purpose of this study, skills are defined as tasks or things equity specialists do in their job. Four themes emerged from coded interviews around the skills employed by equity specialists: 1) facilitating courageous conversations, 2) supervise district equity groups, 3) serve as an advocate for students and families, and 4) provide equity training for staff. In this section, each theme is defined and further illustrated in the form of quotes taken from interviewees. To conclude this section is an autoethnographic reflection of my experience developing skills as an equity specialist. The intention is to provide context alongside analysis.

Facilitating courageous conversations. Courageous conversations (Singleton, 2015) is a strategy for breaking down racial tensions to have interracial conversations that allow those who are knowledgeable to share their truth and for others to learn. Maggie (personal communication, April 19, 2019) explains that her role is to conduct courageous conversations with staff so they are aware of their own motivation for decision making: “When I’m talking about equity, I’m really asking from what stance are you trying to uncover some pieces? Is it more within yourself or is it within your program or your curriculum?”

All six interviewees offered similar instances when they engaged staff in

reflective conversation. Kim (personal communication, April 13, 2019) highlights the need to be patient as staff work through their own understandings around equity:

... you can't just jump all in, and whip up all this stuff, and start handing out curriculum. It's OK to have your viewpoint and mine. And let's start using different lenses to help our students know things.

Interviewees reported much of their interaction with staff are in the form of conversations, primarily around race and building cultural awareness of their white colleagues.

Supervise district equity groups. One concrete way interviewees reported organizing equity work was to create groups within the district to promote and manage equity initiatives. Some of these groups consisted of students serving as leaders to help their peers navigate culture. Others are groups of adults employed by the district and tasked with serving as a support network for families. Interviewees named these groups different things, such as cultural liaisons, success coaches, and diversity inclusion groups. Kelly (personal communication, April 12, 2019) explains the “role of success coaches are community liaisons that are bilingual, bicultural, or multilingual who do a number of things to open communication between school and families.” Interviewees shared that part of their job was to provide oversight for groups such as this.

Serve as an advocate for students and families. Three categories emerged in the area of advocacy skills among interviewees. 1) Community outreach and education. 2) Ensuring equitable access to talent development opportunities for students. 3) Assist families with communication, registration, and access to support systems.

Community outreach and education. This area draws on the skills needed to facilitate courageous conversations and extends to the community setting. The forms of community outreach ranged from casual conversations to partnering with local churches and industries to craft events designed to get participants talking. Maggie (personal communication, April 19, 2019) shared an experience facilitating a World Cafe (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) style discussion with teachers and community members. For this to be successful, she had an honest conversation with her superintendent first:

I said, I can't ask superficial questions at this thing, I need to ask about ways and I need to ask about hate. And I said, I need you to be OK with this. And he said yes. We actually had a powerful World Cafe' moment. And now we are replicating that for students.

Ensure equitable access to talent development opportunities for students. Talent development refers to opportunities for students to learn outside the traditional curriculum. These might be enrichment courses, advanced placement courses, field trips, or any other opportunities to develop student talent in unique ways. When asked to provide examples of enrichment programs, Kelly (personal communication, April 12, 2019) listed: Young Scholars, Project E-Cubed (an environment and science STEM program), AVID, internship programs, and summer college experiences. She commented further on her approach to extend invitations for the E-Cubed program:

I will have our success coaches make phone calls to the kids who speak their languages, and intentionally reach out to them to encourage them to apply.

Because I know if I send that letter home, I'm going to get 95% white kids who

apply. But if we have somebody call, we will have a diverse group of kids. We are constantly kind of working at seeking kids out and hand picking them and finding ways to get them connected.

Assist families with communication, registration, and access to support systems.

Interviewees shared ways to communicate with families who do not speak English or are unfamiliar with the school system. A common theme among interviewees was to provide equitable access to information. This came in the form of adding a tab to school websites that translated information and helping families navigate protocols for community education registration courses.

Stephanie (personal communication, April 9, 2019) helps families navigate the protocols for community education class registration, particularly the Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) courses. Some families miss registration deadlines and Stephanie has established a working relationship with the community education staff, helping them to create some leniency in registration. She comments on her experience supporting early childhood education:

I've had the experience to assist with some home visits and facilitate some things with our special ed staff that works with early childhood, and I think I'm starting to realize there's a big gap there, and it's just really difficult to expect kids could be starting at the same level when they're coming into kindergarten.

Provide equity training for staff. Interviewees mentioned a number of ways in which they provide training for both administration and staff. This task for equity specialists varied greatly, but was present in each interview. Some spoke about designing

district-wide training sessions while others shared their frustration with the limited opportunity to present professional development in the area of equity. To circumvent this frustration, interviewees resorted to providing resources such as articles and book recommendations. Stephanie (personal communication, April 9, 2019) shares her experience in disseminating a newsletter to staff: “Whenever I can do something where you put that educator in that kid’s shoes and you understand what they’re experiencing or what they’re going through or what the school day is like for them, I feel like that can be really powerful.”

Equity training topics mentioned among interviewees were: clarifying and defining equity work, implicit bias and microaggressions, culturally and linguistically responsive instructional strategies, and courageous leadership. A common desire among interviewees was to create conditions for staff to be responsive to their own understanding and extend this understanding to their classrooms.

Autoethnographic reflection. As I reflect on my skills as an equity specialist, I have learned to recognize my privilege and continue to use it to leverage change while honoring there is still much for me to learn. A search through the transcript of my interview found that my comments highlighted three of the skills from these findings: facilitating courageous conversations, providing equity training for staff, and advocacy. In the first few years as an equity specialist, I was apprehensive when participating in discussions around race, not wanting to offend others or misrepresent something I felt I did not know much about. It became clear to me that I needed to gain experience, skills, and insight if I were tasked to lead others through their understanding of race and equity.

Growing into my leadership abilities has been rewarding yet frustrating. A greater understanding of equity has highlighted systemic biases and resistance of the predominantly white culture I am a part of. At times I find my interpretation of my role differs from what district leadership and fellow colleagues interpret my role to be.

My skill set acquisition began with Dr. Hollie's foundational training in culturally and linguistically responsive instruction. This is where I learned about the rings of culture, the importance of both mindset and skill set, and analyzed how my identity shows up in my work. I worked through feelings of discomfort and discovered new ways to frame my thinking that moved me forward instead of frozen in uncertainty. For example, when I recognize my biased thinking, I am comfortable letting that be my first thought, honoring the bias that comes from my lived experience, but not letting it be my last thought. I do some self-reflection on the spot to see where my thinking is coming from and then act responsively. I have come to rely on this model when working with staff in courageous conversation moments. Sometimes the courageous conversations are structured around topics of equity, but most often I find myself in one-on-one courageous conversations with staff as they work through frustrations. Dr. Hollie's work is a way to model thinking and talking about race and equity with fellow educators.

Providing equity training for staff has morphed over the past 11 years. It began with presenting equity topics through short videos or articles at a few staff meetings each year. This led to bringing a cohort of teachers to Dr. Hollie's training and providing a half-day professional development session of our learning back at our school. As stated in chapter two, CLR is "the validation and affirmation of the home (indigenous) culture and

home language for the purposes of building and bridging the student to success in the culture of academia and mainstream society” (Hollie, 2012, p. 23). Now, I send a few teachers to the CLR Summer Institute to gain insights themselves and I work with them the following year as an instructional coach to help them embed culturally responsive protocols in their classrooms. I also embed responsive protocols when I present at monthly staff meetings, intentionally pointing out how the protocol is responsive to students. My hope is to continue reminding teachers to be responsive to their students and provide alternative ways to deliver instruction. I have found that responsive protocols can be embedded alongside other professional topics administration wishes to cover. It is important to provide ongoing equity professional development as opposed to a one-and-done presentation.

The area of advocacy that I have done the most work with is ensuring equitable access to talent development opportunities for students. I work with our district gifted and talented coordinator to change policy for student selection to attend enrichment opportunities. We found that the same students were chosen throughout their education career, resulting in a select handful getting to attend a number of enrichment opportunities and only a few of them were historically marginalized students. I continue to recognize my privilege and try to use it to leverage change while honoring there is still much for us all to learn.

Disposition. The National Council for Accreditation and Teacher Education (NCATE) defined professional disposition as “professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors as educators interact with

students, families, colleagues, and communities” (Hanowar, 2008, para. 3). This definition guided the coding of interviews in this study. Four disposition attitudes were identified: 1) mindfulness, 2) empathy, 3) awareness of privilege/Whiteness, and 4) curiosity. Two belief categories were also identified: 1) creating an equity lens in all decisions and 2) the importance of leadership in equity work. To conclude this section is an autoethnographic reflection of the dispositions I possess as an equity specialist. The intention is to provide context alongside analysis.

Mindfulness. Mindfulness, as defined by Bishop et al. (2004), is “the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience... accompanied by a particular orientation toward one’s experiences in the present moment” (p. 232). Interviewees commented on their experience of being mindful when working with colleagues who are at different places in their understanding of equity. Lisa (personal communication, April 14, 2019) shares her approach:

You can’t lose track of your own journey. Because your peers are frequently in an earlier part of that journey and so I’ll get frustrated or it seems obvious to me and they’re not there yet. And you have to find a way to be forgiving of where people are because if you push too hard with the obvious truths people get so defensive that they can’t go forward.

Equity specialists in this study employ mindfulness as a barometer that helps dictate the degree of pressure or encouragement needed in all aspects of their work. Mindfulness is at work when having honest conversations with superintendents, when planning professional development sessions, and in casual conversation with colleagues. The focus

of this study is on equity work in rural Minnesota. Mindfulness surfaced across the data set as interviewees talked about being aware of the conservative communities they serve, resulting in the need to take small steps in their work.

Empathy. Related to mindfulness is the disposition of empathy. Where mindfulness is a focus on a person's awareness and experience in the present moment, empathy requires a person to shift their attention to the experience of others. Empathy, defined by The Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley (2019) as: "the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling" ("What is Empathy?", para. 1). Stephanie (personal communication, April 9, 2019) articulates the shift from mindfulness to empathy:

I think that I try to be mindful of the experiences that other people are going through and to kind of help others to begin to understand that. And for me, I feel like my experiences seeing some of these things has been as a white person viewing others being treated a different way, so I can empathize with it and try to help others understand, but I feel like I do still have that piece missing because I haven't actually experienced it myself.

Stephanie highlights a common sentiment across the data set calling for empathy for both students of color as well as the white staff working with them. A cornerstone of empathy is recognizing discomfort and working through that discomfort in a way that allows the person to maintain their integrity. The equity specialists in this study shared the need to be empathetic while working with white staff as they navigate feelings of fear and

defensiveness around the idea that anyone would think they are racist, or the anger that sometimes presents itself when questioning instructional practice.

Maggie (personal communication, April 19, 2019) articulates the process of decision making that is empathetic to communities of color in a school system that is predominantly white:

When you're coming from Whiteness, it's very self-driven, where our other communities are very collective... And they have power in their voice and their group together. We're [the school district] being responsive to that and trying to figure out how to get the voices at the table to work through whatever it might be.

Awareness of privilege/Whiteness. Being aware of privilege was a theme that spanned the entire data set. Interviewees discussed how they processed understanding their own privilege and the desire to usher others to recognize their own privilege as well. One interviewee shared an experience of being served with a civil rights investigation. Upon reflection, Lisa (personal communication, April 14, 2019) shared "I started to look at that incident again, it was huge for me because I had not known my privilege. I couldn't see it." Others credited their understanding of privilege to classes in college or friendships with people of other races.

Interviewees shared the awareness of the attitude fellow staff hold about being a hard-working white person that does not see white privilege. Evidence offered was the dismissal of our nation's complex history, and the unawareness of the history of politics and laws that suppress the abilities of groups of people to economically and socially enjoy the same privileges of white people. DiAngelo (2019) explains "when we try to

talk openly and honestly about race, white fragility quickly emerges as we are so often met with silence, defensiveness, argumentation, certitude, and other forms of pushback” (p. 8). To combat this, interviewees shared their perceived impact as a member of the dominant culture. Kim (personal communication, April 13, 2019) says “I believe that my work as a white female is that I can use my privilege to help those without it. And help those with it to realize how to look - just to teach how to look through a different lens.”

Curiosity. Curiosity is the strong desire to know something. Equity specialists exhibit curiosity in the form of learning content to increase their own cultural competency. As reported in chapter two, cultural competency is “having the knowledge, skills, and values to work effectively with diverse populations and to adapt institutional policies and professional practices to meet the unique needs of client populations” (Getha-Taylor et al., 2020, p. 59). They also exhibit curiosity in the form of learning about people, their truths, as well as their willingness to expand their equity practice. Kelly (personal communication, April 12, 2019) says:

I have an experience that transforms my understanding of equity every day, I think. I have an experience of learning something new and finding out, again, that I have so much to learn. I think it’s just that constant state of trying to remain humble and curious, that kind of propels my work forward.

Disposition encompasses attitudes and beliefs held by any one person. We have just covered a set of four attitudes held by equity specialists in this study. Now we turn to two beliefs that surfaced across the data set: 1) creating an equity lens in all decisions, and 2) the importance of leadership.

Creating an equity lens in all decisions. The working definition I have distilled through research is: educational equity ensures that all students, regardless of individual characteristics have access to supportive, high-quality learning experiences that develop their fullest potential (Dagli et al., 2017; "Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012; "Ten Minnesota Commitments to Equity", 2018). Each interviewee made mention of their belief that an equity lens be the primary focus in all decisions, districtwide. Maggie (personal communication, April 19, 2019) shared her stance that equity be the larger focus that other initiatives nestle under:

I need equity to be in everything we do, everything. I don't care if we are figuring out the newest bus or we're trying to design a new High School and going to order the new curriculum. We can't move forward unless we change this to be everything we do.

Superintendents and principals are more frequently at decision making tables than equity specialists.

Importance of leadership. Support from administration helps, as Kim (personal communication, April 13, 2019) states, "to create the platform to do equity work." This was a common message across the data set. The interviewees in this study commented on the impact leadership has to gain traction in equity work. Maggie (personal communication, April 19, 2019) calls it the "followership of your leadership." Superintendents and their administrative teams set the direction for staff, and it can be difficult to keep equity as a focus if administration does not stay the course.

One interviewee, who also serves as Superintendent, shared his perspective of the difficulty to keep equity as a focus. Martin (personal conversation, May 1st, 2019) reflected that “my problem probably is that we have a number of other focal points. I’ve got these other things that we - that are just as critical right now. But I can chip away at it, I think, with other processes.” This is evidence of the desire to to make equity part of all decisions while highlighting the difficulty to do so.

Autoethnographic reflection. As I searched through the transcript of my interview, I noted that my comments highlighted all six disposition traits that aligned with the findings from other participants: 1) mindfulness, 2) empathy, 3) awareness of privilege/Whiteness, 4) curiosity, 5) creating an equity lens in all decisions, and 6) the importance of leadership. One analysis I would like to offer is that the set of dispositions highlighted in this study tend to work together in symphony for me as an equity specialist.

Being mindful and empathetic are dispositions I try to employ when interacting with others. I find I do this both personally and professionally. As I reflect on the development of these two traits I notice that practicing them personally has helped me utilize them professionally. As mentioned in my autoethnographic reflection from the skills section of this chapter, much of my equity conversations happen while working with staff as an instructional coach. Suggestions I offer for classroom management and providing diverse perspectives within content areas are delivered in an empathetic manner. By actively listening to what the teacher is trying to achieve, I suggest protocols that support their desired outcome and are also responsive. I find being empathetic helps

to build trust and relationships with staff. Being mindful of my own perspective is critical when working alongside people as they move through their own equity understanding. Pushing my ideas onto others is not effective, so when I feel a strong reaction to someone else's bias I choose to ask questions to promote reflection. The last thing I want is to become an unsafe place for people to process their ideas. This approach also highlights the disposition of curiosity in the context of working with staff.

Learning to apply an equity lens in all decisions has required me to embrace the complexity of equity. For me, this means thinking about looking for who is not represented, whose voice is not being heard, who is benefiting and who is not, and wondering why we continue to do things the way we have always done things. I do not always know what to do with these thoughts, but I have come to learn this is the messiness of equity work.

When I set out to start this research, a primary goal was to gain a better understanding of my role in the equity world. A resounding message is the importance of being aware of my privilege and Whiteness. Through this, I have learned that my role is to help educate other white educators about equity work alongside People of Color. I can serve as an advocate but must do so along with historically marginalized people. In rural Minnesota, that means expanding my network to include more People of Color and continuing to be reflective. In my practice, I continue to read more about Whiteness as a culture, white fragility, and the history of oppression that has created white privilege. I do my best to lead by example, and offer what I know when in discussion with my family,

friends, and colleagues. Again, this requires me to use empathy when people are not ready to see their own privilege.

None of this work would be possible without the support of administration. It is my experience that if equity is not important at an administrative level, it will not be embraced as important across the teacher and classroom level so a critical part of my job as an equity specialist has been to teach up and teach out. Administrators have a lot on their plate, and equity can take a back seat in the business of the day. I teach up by inviting administrators to CLR training opportunities, calling meetings to discuss data and offering possible policy changes or professional development topics, and continue equity conversations with administrators. I teach out to staff through professional development sessions and my role as an instructional coach. In each context, I strive to provide a model for grappling through the discomfort inherent in equity work.

Content knowledge. Interviewees in this study highlighted six bodies of content knowledge utilized in their work: 1) an understanding of rural equity, 2) personal identity, 3) the role of culture, 4) institutional bias, 5) power and privilege, and 6) leadership practices. To conclude this section is an autoethnographic reflection of the content knowledge I have acquired as an equity specialist. The intention is to provide context alongside analysis.

Understanding rural equity. Since rural communities in Minnesota are predominantly white, interviewees discussed the continual work of framing staff understanding of equity. Martin (personal communication, May 1, 2019) reflected on his own understanding: “I realized equity transcends a lot more than just the very narrow

band of say, race... I had seen it narrowly, more on the side of students' cultural upbringing. So, I'm trying to become more informed." He provided examples of equity crossing access to athletics, special education services, and student access to information.

For rural communities whose racial demographics are quickly changing due to immigrant and refugee populations, equity understanding can be challenging. Interviewees who work in this context offered the observation that they have limited resources in comparison to the metro area. Across the data set was a common sentiment that students from a rural setting who move on to work and live in a more diverse setting will need to develop an understanding and appreciation of people from different cultures.

Personal identity. As discussed in chapter two, Tatum (2017) explains that identity is shaped by "individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts" (p. 99). Each interviewee reflected on, and shared how elements of their personal identity informed their understanding of equity. They made comments and shared stories about their personal identity in two arenas: one, as a reflection of self and two, assisting others to develop an understanding of personal identity. One common idea across the data set was that personal identity is an awareness that evolves over time.

Interviewees shared their struggle to find their role in equity since they are members of the dominant white culture. Maggie (personal communication, April 19, 2019) shared:

I'm european descent, a blond white lady, not sure I scream equity. I can't say that I've walked in the shoes of any of my students or their families or immigrants

or refugees. But I feel like I come from a different lens where we can be more responsive to that in infrastructure.

Martin (personal communication, May 1, 2019) shared “So I’m a white male. And I think you start to realize the advantages and privileges I have, that others don’t.” Both of these conversations, along with other participants, lead to reflections on the importance of understanding white identity within the work of equity.

Role of culture. Interviewees discussed the role of culture in the context of becoming aware that white culture is the dominant culture of their school system. Lisa (personal communication, April 14, 2019) explains the evolution of her awareness of white culture:

I felt a little bit “I have normal and other people have culture.” I didn’t get the places where my personal culture changed how I saw things. I hadn’t really thought about some of the things like we are hand raisers. We don’t interrupt. Some of those things that are cultural...

She explains further that becoming aware of the dominance of white culture gave her a new way of viewing different behaviors in her classroom: “... and then I think of things that were most irritating to me in the classroom and realized OK some of this is a cultural thing.”

The realization of responses being cultural also presented themselves among participants who have co-workers of color. White culture tends to focus on efficiency and progress at the expense of building relationships and experience. For example, one participant highlighted the feeling of irritation when a colleague insisted on hot food

being part of events and meetings within their equity work. Early on, this participant would tolerate this request, but came to realize that food is an important part of how people interact.

Institutional bias. Institutional bias, as defined in chapter two by Oxford Reference as:

A tendency for the procedures and practices of particular institutions to operate in ways which result in certain social groups being advantaged or favoured and others being disadvantaged or devalued. This need not be the result of any conscious prejudice or discrimination but rather of the majority simply following existing rules or norms. (“Institutional Bias”, 2020)

Evidence that equity specialists utilized their understanding of institutional bias was in their observation of hiring practices, infrastructure, and student selection processes.

Additionally, one participant added the use of discipline discrepancy data.

Interviewees across the data set mentioned a concern with current hiring practices. Kelly (personal communication, April 12, 2019) reflected “there’s a big cultural disconnect, I think, in terms of how we interview people and how we hire them.” She refers to the typical current practice of short interviews that rely heavily on the ability to summarize an answer in a short amount of time. She calls this “culturally super inappropriate” for a diverse candidate pool that may include candidates whose culture promotes humility. “I think some of those cultural styles are systemically keeping people out of the positions of influence because of the way our hiring practices work.”

Additionally, hiring options are limited by the candidate pool. Maggie (personal

communication, April 19, 2019) cautions the practice of hiring decisions based too heavily on the candidates skin color or bilingual abilities: “You probably need to be a little bit more mindful... to assume that they understand how our system works and not giving them opportunities to talk about this really feels like an injustice.”

Interviewees shared their work of reviewing policy and practice that change student selection processes for any number of educational opportunities. For some, it was making administration aware of barriers that exist for diverse families when they are new to the district, placement of these students, and instructional practice across the district.

Lisa (personal communication, April 14, 2019) offered her perspective about the need to work beyond just an academic focus in the area of educational equity and pay closer attention to patterns in which staff assign discipline to students:

As long as your discipline disparity is what it is. As long as we don't fix our role models, as long as we don't fix what it feels like day to day in our buildings, I don't know how a straight academic program can fix our gaps because people get burned out. They stop believing in themselves.

School infrastructure is predominantly built around white culture, thus creating an institutional bias that puts students outside white culture at a disadvantage.

Power and privilege. Interviewees shared their observations of and experiences with recognizing power and privilege in their educational settings. They framed their interpretations through their understanding of microaggressions, white privilege, and the varied histories of this country.

Interviewees shared the evolution of understanding they had with the honest history of the United States. Much of the history classes throughout k-12 education has been limited to the white perspective. Participants shared learning about the same timeline of our country from Chicano studies, college classes, trainings, and book recommendations and articles. The widening of historical understanding resulted in the realization that there is more to learn. Stephanie (personal communication, April 9, 2019) shared “I feel like there’s this whole depth and breadth of knowledge and I don’t really know where to start or know to kind of get people to understand.” The tactic a number of interviewees adopted to expand people’s understanding was to share stories from their personal history and the experiences of the migrant families they work with. A common thread among interviewees was the desire to continually learn about varied histories and better understand white privilege.

Recognition of their own privilege was part of multiple comments and stories throughout all interviews. Responses to questions began with phrases like “I am a white male...” or “As a member of the dominant culture...”. Beginning responses with this frame was an example of how equity specialists provide a model for others to create awareness of their own privilege. When asked what is getting in the way of progress, Lisa (personal communication, April 14, 2019) responded with “Lack of understanding of your own privileges. There’s still, and I’m not in any way perfect, they still stumble across privilege in a lot of ways.”

The term Microaggressions came up in multiple interviews. Microaggressions are defined by Sue (2010), as “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights,

snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (para. 2). Some interviewees overtly taught the concept of microaggressions to student groups as a way to understand their lived experiences. Other interviewees shared the concept in professional development opportunities with staff to highlight there is more to attend to than overt racism. The continual nature of microaggressions is challenging for those who are not white.

Leadership practices. The traction of equity work hinges on the commitment and dedication from school administrators. School superintendents and principals set the focus for each year and develop long-term plans. It is their role to communicate equity as a mainstay with staff. Equity specialists can help inform long-term plans, but messaging comes from leadership offices. Interviewees shared their experiences of keeping superintendents informed about the daily experiences of students and staff. They shared their interpretation that those working at the district office hold the big picture plan, and can lose touch with the daily experiences.

In rural Minnesota, the number of students of color is a small population. Equity work in this context requires leadership to be responsive to this group, even if it is small. In small districts equity work is often carried out by a principal or superintendent instead of an equity specialist. One interviewee worked in the dual capacity of superintendent and equity specialist. Martin (personal communication, May 1, 2019) shared “As superintendent now, I have other school leaders underneath me. And so, we can talk about their understanding and how they are going to communicate it down to their

teaching staff.” He went further to explain the value in revisiting equity conversations: “It will be a big fail if we do a one-and-done.” The challenge he shared is balancing equity work with other initiatives.

Autoethnographic reflection. The motivation for including content knowledge as a component of this research was to determine which areas of study I needed to develop as an equity specialist. As mentioned before, I came to this position with relatively little training. Reviewing the comments from my interview, it is clear that my content knowledge base is primarily in personal identity, culturally responsive pedagogy, and an understanding of rural equity derived from lived experience. My content knowledge base has been built through training opportunities that I have sought out, coursework in my doctoral program, and research meant for this dissertation.

I have participated in two equity-based training opportunities over the course of the past eleven years: 1) level 1 and level 2 CLR training, and 2) Equity Ed. Camp at Hamline University. Both series of CLR training opportunities have built the foundation of understanding of personal identity, culture, bias, and privilege. They have also given me a toolkit of protocols to use with students I teach, and suggestions for direct classroom application for staff. My participation in the Equity Ed. Camp put me in conversation with other equity-minded educators. We had candid conversations about power and privilege, how to work with staff, shared resources, and created a network that extended beyond the one day together. The more I learn about equity, the more I realize I have so much more to learn.

My district relies on me to continue evolving our Achievement Integration Plan, work with staff, and spearhead efforts to improve the educational equity of our students. At the same time, I do not hold very much positional power to incite change. Some of my colleagues defer to me when making decisions, rendering me the local expert in all things equity. Others steer clear of me, unwilling to examine their practice for a variety of reasons. I have needed to generate buy-in from administration across the district to bring equity efforts to all buildings; some are more willing than others. I share these insights as a way to highlight that my content knowledge of institutional bias, power and privilege, and leadership practices are applied to my job as an equity specialist. The more understanding I gain in these areas, the more clarity and confidence I have to continue this work.

Requests. Interviewees shared a variety of requests or desires they had to enhance or support the work they do. Lisa (personal communication, April 14, 2019) shares: “I would like to meet with a group of peers in similar job capacities more often.” She envisions a specific agenda with a focus for each meeting along with developing a safe space to talk about situations. Martin (personal communication, May 1, 2019) offers a similar request:

I would like to provide more examples for people to see, that they could follow, I guess. Be a better example of demonstrating ways that we can allow others to feel included, more inclusive. I want to be a good model for demonstrating that this can be done.

Stephanie (personal communication, April 9, 2019) says:

I would like allies. I think that with equity, we can feel really strongly about our beliefs and how much we want to help those students in our schools. But if we don't have some connections and help from different parts of the school, it can be the principal, but I think it can also be just even a para in the classroom and how they view the student and how they treat that student, I think just having kind of all those branches, so it's maybe a little piece of you, sort of that equity that kind of flows out to multiple people, I think can benefit the kids more.

Findings that blend skills, content knowledge, and disposition. Themes emerged from the data set that did not fit into the category of skills, content knowledge, or disposition alone. Rather, they are themes that blend the three elements of the guiding question for this research.

A desire to create perspective with resistant staff. Interviewees reflected on their desire to solicit others to see the world through an equity lens but circled around the challenges of working with resistant staff. To do this, the interviewees mentioned the importance of mindfulness as a means of shifting their own perspective of those they work with. To effect change in someone else's perspective, interviewees reflected on the need to foster relationships that are mutually beneficial among staff. They talked about meeting staff where they are in terms of their equity understanding as opposed to casting judgment upon their narrow world view. As Lisa (personal communication, April 14, 2019) points out, "If you see them as bigots then you can't get them anywhere. It's just like the kids in your class. You have to love them where they are." Some of the skills employed to do this is through conversations, sharing specific stories of particular

students and what they may be facing at home, and offer suggestions to make learning more equitable. In the end, the data pointed to a desire to help staff gain a better understanding of the different perspectives of students in their classrooms. However, this desire is laden with challenges. As Martin (personal communication, May 1, 2019) admits “I haven’t figured out how to effectively let people lower their defenses, and open their minds.”

Focus Group

Participants. The role of administrative support was a strong theme from my interviews, so I selected two superintendents to participate in the focus group. I invited 4 of my interviewees to participate in the focus group; two of them were able to commit to this additional data collection. I invited three additional equity specialists from my survey to participate in the focus group, one of which was able to commit. All equity specialists who were not also administrators, from my survey collection, were asked to participate in an interview and/or the focus group. I wanted to engage as many equity specialists as possible in this research.

Three days prior to the focus group, one participant needed to cancel due to family reasons. That left 4 participants that represented perspectives from three districts; two of the participants were superintendents, one an equity specialist, one a family liaison/EL teacher. Since all participants who identified themselves as an equity specialist were already invited to the focus group and had either accepted or denied the invitation, I employed the snowball sampling method (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) to gain additional participants. I emailed two members of my MDCC to see if they were

interested in participating. It was important to me to increase the number of people who are not working in an administrative capacity since I already had 2 superintendents in my focus group. In the end, the focus group remained at 4 participants. Descriptive details of focus group participants are in the chart below.

Table 4
Focus group participant demographic data, n=4

Gender	Race	Years working to promote educational equity in a formal capacity	Current job titles
Female	More than one race	6-10 years	Family Liaison/ EL Teacher
Female	White	1-5 years	Equity Specialist
Male	White	11-15 years	Superintendent
Male	White	1-5 years	Superintendent

Results. The focus group discussion defined equity work in a rural context. Additionally, three themes emerged from the discussion: 1) resistance to equity work, 2) the role of administrative support, and 3) capacity building. To conclude this section is an autoethnographic reflection of my experience as an equity specialist in these three theme areas. The intention is to provide context alongside analysis.

Equity in a rural context. Participants in the focus group described rural equity work as a focus on socioeconomic disparities, trauma, mental health stigma, and supporting multilingual learners and their families. Since rural Minnesota is predominantly white, participants talked about the importance of framing equity work in

contexts outside of race to generate staff buy-in. The two superintendents in the focus group shared that the percentage of students of color in their respective districts was 10% and 13%. It is important to note that the emphasis on educational equity for students of color was not disregarded nor minimized. The focus group framed equity to include elements other than race. Particular attention was given to the rise in trauma and mental health needs of our young elementary students across all race identifiers. One participant offered their observation that “trauma is becoming a diverse population that we don’t see.” Participants agreed that rural equity work is around features that we don’t see. They offered the idea that serving those with trauma is a form of equity work.

Additionally, there was conversation around the importance of distinguishing the difference between equity and equality. Equity in schools is ensuring students get what they need to succeed, whereas equality is ensuring all students get the same things in equal parts. Focus group participants highlighted the major differences of equity work in a rural setting versus an urban setting is that less funding, time, and attention is given to these efforts. One participant shared the conclusion that “we teach the white middle class well.”

Resistance to equity work. The discussion around teacher buy-in circled around managing resistance to efforts of equity work. One participant mentioned that “sometimes there needs to be an issue” before teachers will be motivated to pay attention to equity practices. The consensus among the focus group was that creating buy-in to adopt responsive instructional practice is often messaged as “these strategies help all

students.” Participants were in agreement that “teachers do want to do what’s good for kids but when people aren’t on board, it’s really had to move a district.”

Participants shared examples of what resistance looks like in their district. They shared observations of staff discomfort, heightened defense mechanisms, and evidence of white fragility. For example, one participant brought up the response some staff has to equity discussions is the notion that they don’t see color, become defensive because they feel that they are being accused of being racist, and need to be comforted at that point. “It’s really tough when you expect so much from these kids and expect them to be OK when you say something really offensive and now I’m comforting you.” A second participant agreed with this as an example of resistance, adding that the issue is not overt examples of racism, rather it is tricky getting staff to see the smaller things. Across all discussions of resistance, 100% of participants mentioned that the teachers they work with are “good people and they care about students.”

The focus group discussed the difficulty of getting equity initiatives started is due to teachers' lack of understanding of equity or interest in learning about it. One participant shared an example of discussing with teachers the possibility of teaching diversity to their students. The consensus from the staff was “we don’t teach diversity because kindergarteners are too young, don’t see color.” Another participant added that the challenge is when staff narrowly define equity to encompass race only and the argument among staff is that it is too small of a population to make instructional changes. These both circled back to the importance of generating teacher buy-in to get started.

Additionally, both superintendents pointed out that the danger is when equity is viewed as a fleeting initiative, and all participants agreed that “approach is everything.”

Administrative support. The focus group discussed the dynamic between the expertise of equity specialist and commitment to equity work from administration. The superintendents in the group shared that they rely on equity specialists to provide their expertise with staff. The equity specialists shared that they rely on administration to create validity of their work among staff. Participants discussed the impact an administrator has when they truly believe in the importance of educational equity and demonstrate their commitment through decision-making and policy review. Both superintendents made mention that “you have to believe in it and as the leader, you have to because there’s no way anybody else is if you don’t believe it.” This was followed up with an observation that when leaders are questioned about something and they do not believe in it, it shows. One participant summed this up by sharing “what you believe in, you put your resources and time and effort into. Teachers know that too and students.” One of the superintendents agreed with this analysis, following up with “we find the best people, and give them resources.”

The focus group discussed the role of power at various district levels. One participant is in a new district and shared the anxiety of pushing equity efforts while not tenured. Superintendents reflected on their experience as building administrators and recalled their power resides only in their building. They felt they could encourage fellow administrators to utilize the equity specialist and generate buy-in, but unless equity efforts were adopted district-wide, the suggestion was typically dismissed. One

superintendent referenced research by Brown (2018) and noted they could certainly use “power over” others, but prefers to utilize “power with, and learn and keep growing together.” The equity specialists in the group felt their power is limited to trying to empower those they work with.

Capacity building. The focus group circled back to ideas of capacity building as an approach for equity work in a rural setting. Capacity building is defined as “effort made to improve the abilities, skills, and expertise of educators” (“The Glossary of Education Reform”, 2014, Capacity section, para. 2). One superintendent offered “you empower people with knowledge, and then build capacity with their strengths and get them to go further and that helps them feel valued. While they are feeling valued you build them up and then you keep encouraging PD to get more knowledge and if they’re accepting both, that’s when capacity gets built.”

Participants shared their involvement in both receiving and giving professional development to expand their knowledge base. One superintendent shared that a highlight of equity work was watching staff respond to an embedded professional development session. I asked, “what components were helpful?” The superintendent shared:

Clearly defining the vocabulary around bias and understanding that they’re not good or bad, they just are. And then helping everybody have that equal starting point. And then learning more about it, but in the end, what can you go do, what can you take to your classroom, what protocols, instructional strategies can we all use? So I have some knowledge now and I have some content, but then how can I use that?

Another participant extended this list to include the value of modeling “how to have good discourse discussions” through professional development. Specifically, this participant was highlighting the passion of the equity specialist in their district and how that has helped “us talk about some of these things that just were never talked about.”

A consensus among participants was that reflective practice is a critical component to expanding the knowledge base and application of equity practices. This was discussed at two levels: reflective practice as a component of professional development to help staff expand their understanding, and reflective practice in their own role as district leaders and as equity specialists. Both superintendents agreed that their personal reflective practice has strengthened their commitment to “stick to it and do it right” in regards to educational equity. One superintendent reported the results of their reflective practice has created a more courageous, mindful, and sincere approach when working with families. One equity specialist reported the benefit of working through their own resistance while exploring white privilege has resulted in an understanding of resistance among colleagues, shifting their approach to professional development.

Identifying and utilizing strength areas of people across the district was discussed by the focus group. Primarily, the discussion circled around the importance of involving all personnel in equity work: all bus drivers, cooks, custodians, paraprofessionals, social workers, counselors, as well as teachers. Participants talked about empowering people to recognize their own strengths and leverage those to extend equity practices. For example, one participant was very comfortable delivering professional development, while another was much more comfortable working with staff one-on-one. A suggestion was to

maximize areas of expertise and have a point person for all student populations by asking “who else can be helping?” This suggestion was built on by another participant who re-framed it as a “two-pronged approach: how do you assess it? And we need to have training for all. Somehow lessen the anxiety and the pressures on all educators right from the top down.”

At the conclusion of the focus group discussion, I asked participants what motivates them to continue doing this work? Again, educational equity ensures that all students, regardless of individual characteristics have access to supportive, high-quality learning experiences that develop their fullest potential (Dagli et al., 2017; "Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012; "Ten Minnesota Commitments to Equity", 2018). One participant offered that growing their own understanding motivates them to continue in equity work. Another participant offered “the work isn’t done. It’s not meant to be that way forever. It’s meant to get us to a place where everyone is on an even footing. We’re here to break the cycle so that’s not meant to last forever.” The ideas of breaking the cycle and growing personal perspective was agreed upon by all participants as motivators.

Autoethnographic reflection. I served as facilitator of the focus group, so the transcript does not include my participation as an equity specialist so there is not a data set for me to dissect of my contributions. Instead, I will share my reflection on two themes: 1) the role of administrative support, and 2) capacity building.

I had the fortunate experience of starting my work as an equity specialist with an administrator who was supportive of my work and willing to learn along with me. We

began by presenting the efforts of our Achievement Integration plan together. He opened time during staff meetings for me to offer resources and deliver professional development in the area of equity. He frequently supported my work publically to give credibility and legitimacy to the exploration of equity professional development, our collaboration efforts with the racially isolated district, and partnership with MDE. Again, I do not have positional power, but with administrative support my position has developed credibility and can be influential. As administration has changed across the district, I find I need to call meetings more frequently to create relationships with our new leaders to place equity on their radar. To be honest, I have learned to leverage the parameters of the AI plan from MDE as an entry point with administration. In the early years, the AI plan process felt cumbersome and just another task for me to do. Now, it is a great way to keep equity in our district discussions. As the focus group pointed out, in rural Minnesota, equity efforts get lost or easily set aside due to resistant staff and a small population of marginalized students. I guess, a thank-you to the Office of Equity and Innovation at MDE would be appropriate.

The discussion around building capacity among staff was an ah-ha moment for me during the focus group discussion. I had not stopped to think about how I, as an equity specialist, build the capacity of others to advance this work in my district. I have gotten caught up in figuring out my own understanding of equity and looking for ways to remind teachers about the needs of our marginalized students. This conclusion from the focus group caused me to stop and think: *how do I build capacity in others? Do I look for their strengths first and then empower them to work in that capacity?* I have supported

the professional development and curricular changes of our intervention teachers that work with students struggling in math and reading. I have brought our family liaison, gifted and talented coordinator, and curriculum coordinator on board as our Achievement Integration Leadership Team. They have all embraced a journey to understand educational equity and leveraged their own networks to promote efforts in our plan. This has resulted in more voices talking about equity and making space for it in conversation, decision making, and policy. I guess I am not the sole *equity specialist* in the district, and that is empowering for me. I continue to use capacity building as an evaluation tool for extending my work: *Whose interests and talents can I highlight next?*

Preview of Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter five will begin with an overview of equity work in rural Minnesota followed by distilled conclusions that came from the research study. The chapter will continue with connections between research findings and information in the literature review of chapter two. Then the chapter will move into a discussion of the possible implications this research may have for equity specialists, noted biases and limitations to this study, followed by recommendations for future research. The chapter will conclude with plans for communicating these results and my final thoughts on the research findings.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Review of Research Topic and Research Question

As stated in chapter one, equity work in rural Minnesota looks different than equity work in an urban setting. But, disparities in achievement exist across the state. This study aims to provide clarity for equity work in a racially homogenous setting. Convincing teachers and administrators in predominantly white districts to participate in equity development is challenging. The work of educational equity is done by equity specialists, or positions with similar titles across districts. The research question for this study is: *What are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge that equity specialists in rural Minnesota describe as being effective to better prepare them in their work of educational equity?* This question helped determine the areas of research in the literature review of chapter two as well as choosing grounded theory methodologies in chapter three. The process of developing the data collection tools of survey, interviews, and a focus group are explained in chapter three. The final versions of these materials are available in the appendices at the end of this paper. Chapter four outlined and analyzed the findings in all three data collection methods used for this study.

This chapter will provide major learnings that emerged across data collection methods and tie these findings to the research offered in chapter two. The implications of these findings will be discussed as well as potential biases and limitations that exist while conducting this study. This chapter will conclude with recommendations for future research and final thoughts that emerged for me as the researcher throughout this study.

To begin, It is important to review the definition of educational equity I distilled from research for this study. As stated in chapter two, educational equity is: educational equity ensures that all students, regardless of individual characteristics have access to supportive, high-quality learning experiences that develop their fullest potential (Dagli et al., 2017; "Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012; "Ten Minnesota Commitments to Equity", 2018). This definition is confirmed by this study through the experiences and perspectives provided from rural equity specialists.

So, what are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge utilized by equity specialists in rural Minnesota? I want to provide a list, Table 5, that can simply answer this question. Keep in mind that this is not an exhaustive list, rather a list generated within the limitations of this study. This is also an appropriate place to note each of these elements include grappling with discomfort. Acquiring this set of skills, dispositions and content knowledge requires a person to navigate their own uncertainty, come to new understandings, and serve as a model for others to do the same.

Table 5
Skills, dispositions, and content knowledge of equity specialists in rural MN, n=32

Skills	Dispositions	Content Knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate courageous conversations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be compassionate & empathetic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding of rural equity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supervise district groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be aware of their own implicit bias and privilege/Whiteness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal identity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide equity training for staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be reflective & curious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serve as an advocate for students & families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be open-minded and possess a growth mindset 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Role of culture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific job duties listed in table 2 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be resilient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional bias
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Believe in all children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Power and privilege Culturally responsive pedagogy Intercultural communication

Major Learnings

In addition to directly answering the research question, there were five major learnings that emerged from this study. Each of which is explained in this section.

Equity work in rural Minnesota is primarily done by white females. This study confirmed an assumption I began with: equity specialists in rural Minnesota are predominantly white females. The role of equity specialist is to develop, support, and monitor their school Achievement Integration Plan aimed at addressing gaps in

educational equity. As reported in the survey data, 90.6% (Figure 2) of participants were white, and 68.8% (Figure 3) were female. These demographic details are important to note in order to clarify the impact of equity work in rural Minnesota. Interviewees shared variations of the idea that “it is a bit of a struggle to find my place in this work as a female member of the dominant culture.” Participants communicated the need to understand white identity and white culture in order to work within these contexts and work to expand the understanding of other white educators on behalf of historically marginalized students. These students are “individuals or social groups who, by virtue of their race, gender, geographical location (rural, township, or poor neighborhood), etc., have historically been placed on the margins or periphery of the mainstream social and economic hierarchy” (Cross, M., & Atinde, V., 2015, p. 308).

Create a culture of self-reflection. A continual message that emerged was the strong desire of equity specialists to get staff to question their own practice and expand the awareness of white privilege. They employ a combination of skills, dispositions and content knowledge to create a culture of self-reflection. Equity specialists describe what it looks like to expand the understanding of fellow white educators. Many expressed helping staff grapple with feelings of discomfort, defense mechanisms, and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). They also note that teachers they work with are good people that care about students. The dispositions of empathy and mindfulness were referenced frequently when working alongside staff through their equity journey. Participants mentioned “love them where they are” and focus on cultural awareness.

Participants in this study also shared the impact of their own self-reflection as a means of creating clarity for their work and sorting through the emotions tied to equity. Maggie (personal communication, April 19, 2019) shared that she has shifted her focus away from fighting against things to “fighting for access, opportunities and representation for people and having a positive approach. I guess that’s how my values have developed to really look at people from an asset-based lens, and then think about how we can use our resources.”

Building capacity so as to not work alone: Be an ally to find allies. Another major learning that emerged from the data was the importance of creating a network through capacity building. Most equity specialists in rural Minnesota do not have an equity department like metro areas have, thus they need to build capacity so as to not do this work alone. Capacity building is defined as “effort made to improve the abilities, skills, and expertise of educators” (“The Glossary of Education Reform”, 2014, Capacity section, para. 2). To do this, participants in this study talked about being allies to find allies. Participants reported developing affinity groups among students and families, engaging EL teachers who have strong family liaison skills, empowering behavior specialists, interventionists, and student services personnel, and engaging instructional coaches and administrators in developing cultural capacity.

Again, self-awareness was a critical component to this major learning. Some participants were comfortable conducting professional development sessions with staff, where others chose the one-on-one approach to help staff build equity capacity. The

common thread was to empower staff and overtly value their efforts in equity practices to bolster a desire to further engage in equity work alongside the equity specialist.

Gaining traction: Habits are hard to change. A common message I found myself dissecting through this study was that it is challenging to gain traction in equity work in a white community. Habits are hard to change, and slipping back to doing things the way they used to be done happens pretty easily.

A constant task reported by equity specialists in this study is to keep equity at the forefront of business. This begins with the commitment of leadership to infuse equity practices and messages throughout their work. Equity specialists mentioned the need to continually remind administration to do more than simply pay lip service to the idea of equity. Instead, equity specialists engage leadership in discussions of changing hiring practices, family outreach and community engagement, topics of professional development, use of student data, student placement and access to opportunities, as well as other policies and practices. Maggie (personal communication, April 19, 2019) shared her analysis that “the hardest thing about equity work is whether or not you have leadership that is willing to stay the course. Without it, unfortunately, it doesn’t get traction and we perpetuate what we’ve always had as a system of Whiteness.” The superintendents in this study shared the perspective that they see the value, but it is easy for equity to become a buzz term and get diluted in practice in an absence of commitment. They expressed their reliance on equity specialists to keep the work of educational equity in sight. For those that did not have an equity specialist, and the duties fell on their plate, expressed that equity easily gets set aside.

Working with staff to change practice was also a reported challenge. Equity specialists utilize a variety of avenues when working with staff (provide articles about equity, break down biases, define terminology and labels to reduce defense mechanisms, shared personal stories of microaggressions, and facilitate small group discussion or district-wide professional development). One participant talked about these avenues in the context of knowing when to “push in and let it be a little uncomfortable, and when to step back.” Equity specialists reported gaining the most traction by framing professional development in culturally responsive instruction as working for all students.

Equity specialists in this study report that a challenge to make lasting change is the lack of staff understanding and interest in equity. A conclusion from the focus group was that “if you don’t measure it [equity PD] in some way, they [teachers] don’t care. They might start to care once they start to see that it is beneficial and helps with all students, because they do care about that.” Participants shared their frustration that, at times, they did not feel like they were getting anywhere.

Equity work is increasingly important and expanding. When participants were asked to explain what motivates them to continue equity work, the consensus was that the work is not done yet. I return to the definition of educational equity distilled for this study: educational equity ensures that all students, regardless of individual characteristics have access to supportive, high-quality learning experiences that develop their fullest potential (Dagli et al., 2017; "Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012; "Ten Minnesota Commitments to Equity", 2018). There are still bodies of students for whom the current school system is failing to support, necessitating the work of equity

specialists and other school leaders to disrupt the cycle. Participants in this study mentioned working on behalf of all students: students of color, the LGBTQ community, students in poverty and those dealing with trauma. They shared their observation that there is an increase in students dealing with trauma and mental health issues either caused by historical inequities or other factors that requires a heightened awareness of educators.

Additionally, students who are members of the dominant white culture benefit from equity practices to broaden their cultural competency as well. As Martin (personal communication, May 1, 2019) points out, “these are kids that are not going to be living here - when they graduate, and move on, they’re going to jobs and working in a world where they have to learn and understand and appreciate people from all different cultures.”

My understanding of educational equity continues to evolve as I learn more about the context of its application. In the beginning of my journey, I narrowly understood equity as being race-based, then it expanded to include socioeconomic parameters, and as of late, I have amended my understanding to also include the impact of mental health and trauma. Some may argue that by expanding the umbrella of equity work is a disservice to students of color. I argue that expanding the umbrella to include more characteristics engages more educators in a rural setting to make changes to their practice. This will only benefit students of color.

Connections to Literature Review

The literature review used to build this study consists of five critical areas of equity: personal identity, power and privilege, the role of culture, professional learning,

and institutional bias. A full review of literature related to each of these topics is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, it is important to include an overview of each area in order to gain an understanding of the complex nature of the work needed to be done by equity specialists promoting educational equity. In the following section of this chapter, each area of equity is defined along with examples of its existence in the form of skills and dispositions of equity specialists reported in the data set.

Personal identity. Personal identity is shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts (Tatum, 2017, p. 99). The notion of personal identity surfaced as participants shared their advocacy on behalf of students, in self-reflective statements, and as a frame of reference when working with staff. Stephanie (personal communication, April 9, 2019) highlighted how personal identity influenced working with students:

I try to keep that in mind, that yes, I grew up in a household where there was some Spanish spoken and there was an immigrant, but I have not experienced the things that they experienced just based on the color of my skin, that I've always been treated differently.

Personal identity influences the disposition of each equity specialist and is present in each skill they bring to their work. A major learning from this study was that equity work in rural Minnesota is primarily done by white females. Evidence of this self-reflection was evidenced by responses being framed by phrases like “I think about my Whiteness...” and “From a very white self perspective...”

Power and privilege. Power and privilege is a social arrangement of dominance that privileges certain groups whether or not they are earned, and penalizes other groups through no fault of their own other than their group membership (Howard, 1999, p. 33). Equity specialists display their understanding of power and privilege through the dispositions of compassion and empathy as well as being reflective in their decision making styles. Survey responses directly named an awareness of privilege and Whiteness as necessary dispositions to have as an equity specialist. Interviews unearthed the lack of understanding among staff regarding the complex history of our country through politics and laws that have kept people from economically and socially progressing their livelihoods.

Psychological power can result from one's perceived ability to influence the norms of the group (Helms, 1990). Equity specialists had varied perceptions of their power and influence in their districts. Those with administrative roles honored the perceived power their positions held among the cultural norms of their schools. Martin (personal communication, May 1, 2019) articulated, "I was the obstacle to something that, if I didn't believe it, it wasn't going to happen." A clear message from participants was that educational equity requires support of administration. Participating Superintendents confirmed that they need to keep equity in the forefront.

Equity work in a rural setting requires working with staff with varying understanding of their own privilege. A common message among interviewees was that their perceived power had limitations requiring them to have the disposition of resiliency when working with staff with varying understandings of their own privilege. A major

learning was that gaining traction is challenging since habits are hard to change. Without a sense of urgency, there is not much motivation to make changes and it is simply more comfortable to stay where you are (Castagno & Hausman, 2016).

The role of culture. The role of culture is present in the skillset of equity specialists as they serve as advocates for students and families by conducting courageous conversations; a strategy for breaking down racial tensions to have interracial conversations that allow those who are knowledgeable to share their truth and for others to learn (Singleton, 2015). To do these well, participants reported the necessary dispositions of being open minded and engaging staff in reflective practice. Professional development sessions around the topic of culture was the most commonly reported avenue for equity specialists to engage staff in reflective practice.

White culture is the dominant culture in rural Minnesota. One participant in this study shared that “we do a good job of teaching the white middle class.” Howard (1999) asserts that leaders in the white community should take on the responsibility of undoing white ignorance. Every participant in this study shared their desire to engage white staff members in reflective practice to reduce white ignorance. The demographic data from this study affirms that equity specialists, serving as leaders in their white communities, are taking on the responsibility to undo white ignorance.

Professional learning. Professional learning is organized into three areas by Dagli et al. (2017): leadership practices that support equity, intercultural communication, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Each of these areas are defined below.

Leadership practices that support equity. Moore, et al. (2016) offer guidance to “support leaders in their pursuit of leveraging equity oriented professional development to prepare culturally responsive and sustaining educators. Establish an equity vision, be a critical consumer of professional development, commit to continual learning” (For Equity Now section). As stated before, interviewees expressed the importance of support from leadership to promote equity initiatives. This was confirmed by superintendents who participated as well.

Building capacity so as to not work alone was a major learning from this study. One superintendent in this study shared that capacity gets built through a clear vision paired with professional development and a commitment to continual learning. As educators gain a basic level of understanding in educational equity, there needs to be additional opportunities to dive deeper into the various nuances of the work. Learning into the areas of content knowledge explored in this dissertation may serve as a guide for such topics.

Intercultural communication. Sue et al. (as cited in Dagli et al., 2017) specifies that “educators should be mindful of word choice, gesture, tone of voice, and treatment during content delivery regardless of instructional methods, which may be positive messages (micro-affirmations) or negative messages (micro-inequities) conveyed to learners” (For Equity Now section, para. 10). The phrase intercultural communication skills was not directly mentioned by equity specialists in this study, suggesting this may be an area for professional development. However, this skill-set was evidenced in their responses and examples of how they interact with student, families, community

stakeholders, and staff. The superintendents in the focus group emphasized that “approach is everything” when working with families and staff. Two of the equity specialists that I interviewed mentioned creating lesson plans around microaggressions to give students of color as well as white students an understanding of messaging around them. Also, a reflection on the use of intercultural communication skills was part of professional development by equity specialists.

Culturally responsive pedagogy. Hollie (2012) defines Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) Pedagogy as “the validation and affirmation of the home (indigenous) culture and home language for the purposes of building and bridging the student to success in the culture of academia and mainstream society” (p. 23). Equity specialists in this study who work directly with students mentioned elements of a culturally responsive approach. Lessons and interactions shared in the interviews demonstrated the disposition that they believed in all children through reflection and curiosity. There was a clear emphasis on building and bridging student understanding. Additionally, the students have been a source of building and bridging for equity specialists to gain a better understanding of their students’ perspectives. Equity specialists shared this understanding in their professional development design as well as their advocacy roles.

Institutional bias. Oxford Reference defines institutional bias as:

A tendency for the procedures and practices of particular institutions to operate in ways which result in certain social groups being advantaged or favoured and others being disadvantaged or devalued. This need not be the result of any conscious prejudice or discrimination but rather of the majority simply following existing rules or norms. (“Institutional Bias”, 2020)

A major learning from this study is the consensus that equity work is increasingly important and expanding.

Equity specialists shared their job duties, listed in Table 2. A number of these duties question institutional bias. One area of duties is ensuring that students have equitable access to resources and teachers. Some of the duties in this category include policy writing and discourse analysis review to make more inclusive and culturally appropriate, determine equitable course placement and extracurricular programming, and serve on the student resource team to ensure students' needs are met. Another category of duties is ensuring staff is prepared and sensitive to the needs of all students. Some of the duties in this category include instructional coaching and facilitating professional development to expand staff understanding of equity. The category of support for families includes duties such as: translating and interpreting, making families aware of their rights and of the norms in our culture for parent/school relationships. The administrative duties that question institutional bias include: hiring practices, communication to promote equity, examine school and individual performance data, and

overseeing details of programs such as World's Best Workforce and the Achievement Integration Plan.

Study Implications

Throughout the research process, I found myself circling back to the purposes I set forth for this study: to clarify the work of educational equity in a rural setting for myself and others, and to determine what equity specialists need to make meaningful change in equity work. Equity specialists work to develop, support, and monitor their school Achievement Integration Plan aimed at addressing gaps in educational equity. These purposes guide the analysis of implications from this study.

To clarify the work of educational equity in a rural setting for myself and others. One implication of this study is that the findings can provide context for those new to equity work in a rural setting. It is my observation that equity specialist positions experience a frequent turn-over in personnel. The need for staff to manage the Achievement Integration plans in rural districts remains a necessity to gain access to funding, thus equity specialist positions still exist. With this in mind, those that are new to equity work can access this body of research as a starting point for their work. Table 5 provides a summary of skills, dispositions, and content knowledge for educators to reference as a starting point. Each element listed in Table 5 is explained in more detail throughout this dissertation. Chapter two provides an overview of areas of equity work to create a body of knowledge from which to develop a local approach to educational equity. Chapter four provides explanations of skills and dispositions for equity specialists to review for new ideas and self-reflection.

For those who continue evolving their work in educational equity, this is a reminder to examine the commitment of administration and the structure of professional development. Have district leaders embedded an equity lens or are they paying lip service to educational equity? To what degree is the equity specialist's talents being utilized? As we learned, capacity building evolves from areas of strength. The working relationship between equity specialist and administration is co-dependent; be sure both parties are managing this dynamic.

To determine what equity specialists need to make meaningful change in equity work. In addition to clarity around educational equity, this research highlights the need to support professionals working in rural Minnesota to grow the capacity of all staff. To make meaningful change, the equity specialists in this study asked for allies, a safe space to connect with others doing this work, and support from administration.

I propose one way to address these requests is through the development of an equity certification program. The current salary schedule for k-12 educators is the steps-and-lanes model. To move ahead in the schedule, teachers need to attain graduate credits as they accrue years of service. Each district dictates what they deem acceptable credits; often teachers elect to attain an additional certification in areas such as curriculum and instruction, gifted and talented, and literacy. I suggest capitalizing on the motivation for salary increase and offer another certification area that can be applicable to any educator at any level. An equity certificate program has the potential to engage more educators in reflective practice and create an avenue for equity specialists to gain training.

Potential Biases Towards Study

I come to this study as a white, middle class, heterosexual woman working as an equity specialist for the past 11 years in rural Minnesota. Prior to my professional career, my lived experience has primarily been in rural white communities of varying sizes. I honor that my positionality and privilege impacts the design and analysis of the results of this study. It is impossible to remove myself from the comfort of my privilege, rather my hope was to use that awareness as an avenue to better understand and report the findings. As intentional as I may have been to minimize by known bias, there is always potential for misrepresentation due to my own mental models and implicit bias.

I designed this study keeping my assumptions in mind. These assumptions are based on the evolution of my own experience as an equity specialist. I assume that most equity specialist in rural Minnesota are white females that find themselves in these positions by being assigned the duties of managing their district's Achievement Integration plan. I also assume that they come to these positions with little training in what educational equity might look like, building their understanding over time. These assumptions impact the design of data collection tools. I crafted questions to minimize these assumptions, and honor that my analysis may still have these themes present. Themes and connections may have been missed, and narratives misinterpreted due to the assumptions and positionality I bring to analyzing the data sets.

Limitations of Methods

One limitation of this study is in its scope. The results reported are from the sample size of 32 survey participants, seven interviews, and a focus group comprising of

four people that represented three districts. The analysis of results come from the limitation of my identity and biases as a white, heterosexual, middle-class, woman.

Another limitation is in thematic coding. The intention of coding for themes is to capture broad messages across the data collected. However, the analysis of themes poses a limitation by potentially disregarding important ideas that may be overshadowed or absorbed by the chosen themes. This becomes prevalent when analyzing a rich and in-depth topic of study such as educational equity. Each of the areas of equity presented in chapter two could serve as a stand-alone dissertation topic on their own. Therefore, selecting research upon which I built my study is also limited. To minimize this limitation, each piece of data was sorted in multiple stages.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are four areas of research I recommend extending for further research based on this study. Through this development of this study, I realize there are improvements to be made to include more perspectives, and unearth additional expertise. Where there may be more areas to consider, I offer the following list of suggestions to further inform practitioners in the field of educational equity.

Defining equity in the context of a rural setting. As I conducted interviews and have been in conversation about the topic of this dissertation, a common response has been that equity in a rural setting is an area that could use more research. I failed to probe deeper into what participants meant by this comment, thus creating a space for future research. In an effort to focus my study, I tried to keep discussions geared toward the guiding question. Given the opportunity to explore this, I suggest developing an interview

protocol to focus on defining equity in a rural setting. Perhaps include a component of historical demographic data to show population changes in the areas of race, socioeconomic status, and indicators of trauma in rural settings.

Develop a reflective tool for districts to conduct an equity audit. Another interesting study would be to create and conduct an audit to determine which areas of equity need to be developed with staff in a rural setting. The research from chapter two of this dissertation was organized into five critical areas of equity: personal identity, power and privilege, the role of culture, professional learning, and institutional bias. Professional learning consists of leadership practices, intercultural communication and culturally responsive instruction. My suggestion is to create an equity audit tool framed by these areas. Through the analysis of survey data around the understanding and implementation of these areas, I was left with additional curiosities in each area to pursue. For example, research recommends equity work begin by exploring personal identity and 72% of participants in this study reported experiencing training in personal identity, but only one participant expressed interest in additional training in this area. I am curious about why so little interest exists in this area. Is it because participants feel confident in the area of personal identity, or is it because they are more interested in other areas of equity? I recommend a closer examination of the survey results to inform the development of an equity audit tool.

The relationship between educational equity and trauma. The focus group in this study unearthed a possible intersectionality between educational equity and trauma informed pedagogy. This proposed research study would need to include ways in which

trauma is created and exhibited across various rings of culture. I would need to do additional research on trauma informed instruction to explore this relationship. A limitation is the only place the topic of trauma was present was in the focus group discussion. I suggest crafting a research question set around the major learnings of this study since they all hint at the impact of trauma.

Development of an equity certification program. As stated earlier in this chapter, one implication of this study is my suggestion to develop an equity certification program as a way to pursue meaningful change in equity work. An equity certificate program has the potential to engage more educators in reflective practice and create an avenue for equity specialists to gain training. I would like to partner with those in higher education to conduct further interviews and craft the components of this program.

Plans for Communicating Results

Cultural competency presentations. Cultural competency is an additional area teachers will need to fulfill when applying for license renewal beginning in 2020. Again, cultural competency is “having the knowledge, skills, and values to work effectively with diverse populations and to adapt institutional policies and professional practices to meet the unique needs of client populations” (Getha-Taylor et al., 2020, p. 59). Together with the curriculum coordinator in my district, we are designing a professional development series to fulfill the cultural competency requirement for our staff. Much of the content for this series comes from this dissertation study. The first year consists of activities to reflect on research in the areas of personal identity, and the role of culture. I have woven in a number of CLR protocols from Dr. Hollie as a way of processing information and

providing direct classroom application ideas for teachers. We are currently in conversation with administration to allocate more professional development time next year to expand the cultural competency series to add an exploration of power and privilege and institutional bias.

Once I firm up the details of the expanded cultural competency series, I intend to submit the details in a proposal to MDE's Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) to be added to their vetted list of cultural competency trainers. This would allow me to extend my findings beyond my own district and appeal to other rural districts across Minnesota. I believe it is important to support those that participated in this study by sharing my findings with other districts across rural Minnesota while also building capacity for educational equity.

Conference presentations. Another avenue to share the findings of my research is through conference presentations. I would like to explore different conferences that hold equity as a theme. For example, I know that the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse hosts an annual Hate/Bias Response Symposium that I would love to try to present this research. Additionally, I would like to present my findings at leadership conferences such as the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP). Since one of the major findings of my research is the co-dependent nature of leadership and equity specialists, this is a primary audience to solicit for meaningful change.

Paper publications. I would like to submit the results of this research for publication in a variety of journals. There are two primary audiences that may be interested in my findings: administrators and equity specialists. To appeal to

administrators, I will seek publication in leadership journals such as *Principal Leadership*, *Middle School Journal*, and *American Education Research Journal*. To reach my fellow equity specialists, I will seek publication with one of the primary sources of this dissertation: Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC). I would also try to publish in practitioner publications to reach more professionals in the field such as: *Responsive Classroom Newsletter* and *Teaching Tolerance*.

Final Thoughts

This qualitative study looked to answer the question: *What are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge that equity specialists in rural Minnesota describe as being effective to better prepare them in their work toward achieving educational equity?*

The literature review created a body of content knowledge to frame inquiry through interviews and a focus group discussion. The professionals that participated in this study spoke to the level of understanding they have in the areas of content knowledge identified. This group of professionals generated a data set to create a list of skills and dispositions that are present in equity specialists today, found in Table 5. In addition to directly answering the research question, two insights came to me as I contemplated messages from the data. First, equity needs to become part of the fabric in all we do. Second, there are fellow advocates within each district that are willing to extend their talents for educational equity and the role of an equity specialist is to build their capacity.

One message from participants is that equity needs to be part of everything we do. To make change, it must begin with the dominant white culture engaging in reflective practice at all decision-making junctures. The working dynamic between equity

specialists and district leadership is an entry point to considering an equity lens in district policy and practice. Another place to begin weaving equity into the fabric of how a district conducts business is by layering culturally responsive pedagogy along with professional development initiatives so equity is not simply “another thing we do.” Across all decisions it is helpful to consider whose perspective is missing from the decision-making table.

Sifting through transcripts of my peers, It is clear that equity specialists must spot fellow advocates of educational equity within their working environment. Together, we must continue expanding our content knowledge to better advocate among the context of rural Minnesota. I found myself getting caught up in comparing the work I am doing with those in this study and wrestling with feelings of inadequacy at times. Turning to the equity-minded colleagues in my district helped remind me of our local context and that we are taking steps forward and my comparative thoughts are actually generating a list of possible things to try in the future.

Personally, I have gained a clearer understanding of my role in the work of equity. As a white, middle class, female equity specialist, I offer an example of choosing to lean into my discomfort instead of sitting comfortably in my privilege. Mind you, it is a choice I get to make each day. I choose to share my content knowledge through the professional development platform my district has created. I choose to reach out to administration with data, observations, and questions to elevate the experience our historically marginalized students have. I choose to embed CLR protocols in my work as an instructional coach. I choose to reach out to those I have shied away from and look for

their strengths that can be leveraged in this work. They may not be open to making equitable changes today, but I need to know that instead of making the assumption as a first step to building their capacity. The work of educational equity is not done and there is much to learn, and in the words of Maya Angelou “When you know better, you do better.”

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APPENDIX A

EQUITY SPECIALIST SURVEY QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to examine the skills, content knowledge, and disposition of equity specialists in rural Minnesota. Your involvement will provide key insight into clarifying the work of educational equity in a racially homogenous (predominantly white) setting. Survey participation should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. The survey settings are set so they will not be tracking personal information. This means your answers will be confidential. The survey is divided into five sections: demographic data, training, and content knowledge, disposition, skills, and further research involvement. Questions are formatted as check-box options or open-ended questions. Please be aware that some of these may be used as examples of written or oral descriptions. When answering the open-ended questions please be specific, but also answer in a way that you would be comfortable having shared widely.

The definition of educational equity used in this study is: educational equity ensures that all students, regardless of individual characteristics have access to supportive, high-quality learning experiences that develop their fullest potential (Dagli et al., 2017; "Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity", 2012; "Ten Minnesota Commitments to Equity", 2018).

Thank you for your contributions to extend the understanding of educational equity work.

Are you willing to participate in this study?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Demographic data:

- A. Select the option that most accurately describes your race
 - a. More than one race
 - b. African American or Black
 - c. Asian/Pacific Islander
 - d. Hispanic, Latino, Latina, or Latinx
 - e. Native American or American Indian
 - f. White
 - g. Other
- B. Which gender do you identify with?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Prefer not to say
 - d. Other
- C. What is your job title(s)?
- D. How many years have you been working in education?
 - a. 1-5
 - b. 6-10
 - c. 11-15

- d. 16-20
 - e. 21-25
 - f. 26-30
 - g. 30 years or more
- E. How many years have you been working to promote educational equity in a formal capacity? This may mean you have a leadership position or title related to equity work. For example: equity specialist, director of equity services, achievement integration staff, Etc.
- F. How many years have you been working to promote educational equity in an informal capacity? This may mean you apply your understanding of equity in decisions you make as a teacher, principal, or superintendent.

Training & Content Knowledge:

- A. Check the boxes that apply to training sessions you have experienced related to educational equity:
- a. Personal Identity - defined as: “Identity is shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts” (Tatum, 2007, p. 99).
 - b. Power and Privilege - defined as: Howard (1999) compiled research from McIntosh, 1988, Nieto, 1998, and M. Weinberg, 1991 to define power and privilege as “Social arrangements of dominance cause privileges to flow to certain groups whether or not those privileges are earned. Likewise,

penalties, punishments, and inequalities flow to other groups through no fault of their own other than their group membership” (p. 33).

- c. The Role of Culture - defined as: “Engaging in ongoing conversations with colleagues about the role culture has in teaching and learning” (“Impact: Educate, Engage, Empower - For Equity”, 2012, Educate section, para. 10).
- d. Leadership practices - “Support leaders in their pursuit of leveraging equity oriented professional development to prepare culturally responsive and sustaining educators. Establish an equity vision, be a critical consumer of professional development, commit to continual learning” (Moore et al., 2016, For Equity Now section, para. 1).
- e. Intercultural Communication - Sue et al. (as cited in Dagli et al., 2017) specifies that “educators should be mindful of word choice, gesture, tone of voice, and treatment during content delivery regardless of instructional methods, which may be positive messages (micro-affirmations) or negative messages (micro-inequities) conveyed to learners” (For Equity Now section, para. 10).
- f. Culturally Responsive Instruction - defined as: “The validation and affirmation of the home (indigenous) culture and home language for the purposes of building and bridging the student to success in the culture of academia and mainstream society” (Hollie, 2012, p. 23).

g. Institutional Bias - Oxford Reference defines institutional bias as: A tendency for the procedures and practices of particular institutions to operate in ways which result in certain social groups being advantaged or favoured and others being disadvantaged or devalued. This need not be the result of any conscious prejudice or discrimination but rather of the majority simply following existing rules or norms. (“Institutional Bias”, 2020)

h. Other

B. Of the categories listed above, which areas do you feel you have received the most training?

C. List any categories, from the list above, that you would like more training.

D. To what level do you feel prepared for your work in educational equity?

a. 1=strongly prepared

b. 2

c. 3

d. 4=strongly unprepared

e. Explain your reasoning.

Disposition: The National Council for Accreditation and Teacher Education (NCATE) defined professional disposition as “professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities” (Honawar, 2008, para. 3). Consider this

definition when answering the following question. It is open-ended, so be as specific as possible.

- A. What dispositions do you believe people need to possess to be successful in the world of equity work?

Skills: Consider the variety of situations, roles, and job duties you find yourself in while working to promote equity when answering the following question. It is open-ended, so be as specific and descriptive as possible.

- A. Describe your job duties and skills as they relate to your work in equity.

Further Research Involvement: There are two other data collection methods in this study: interviews and a focus group discussion. Please consider participating in either or both of these additional methods. Further involvement in this study is completely voluntary and you may decline participation in further methods without affecting your relationship with Hamline University. All additional methods have protocols in place to keep your information confidential. As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to examine the skills, content knowledge, and disposition of equity specialists in rural Minnesota. Your involvement will provide key insight into clarifying the work of educational equity in a racially homogenous (predominantly white) setting. Thank you in advance for your consideration as you answer the final two questions. If you choose to participate further, please provide your name and email address when prompted. If you do not wish to participate further, simply select no.

- A. Are you willing to participate in an interview? The interview will be 30 minutes in length, and I will meet you in a location that is most comfortable for you.

- a. Yes
- b. No

B. Are you willing to participate in a focus group discussion around educational equity? This discussion will last between 60-90 minutes; I will reserve a space and a meal for all participants.

C. If you are willing to participate further, please provide your first and last name.

D. If you are willing to participate further, please provide your email address.

E. If you are unwilling to participate, but know of someone who may be willing, please provide their first and last name as well as their email address.

APPENDIX B

EQUITY SPECIALIST QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introductory Questions

1. How is your week going?
2. Do you have any questions for me based on the letter of consent I sent you?

Content Questions

1. Has there been an experience that has transformed your understanding of equity?
 - a. Tell me more about how your beliefs were shaped by this experience
2. Describe your racial identity, and how has it impacted your equity work?
3. In your work in equity, what do you feel you need to do the work?
 - a. Finish this sentence: In my work today, I would like...
4. A common theme from my survey results was that equity specialists work to bridge gaps and guide others to better understand equity.
 - a. Has this been part of your experience?
 - b. If yes, tell me about your approach to bridging gaps and guiding others.
5. Another theme from my survey results was the work of “analyzing Whiteness and privilege to challenge the status quo.”
 - a. What has been your experience with analyzing Whiteness and privilege, either personally, or as a guide for others to explore these topics?
6. One final question: Is there one question you wish I would have asked you about your experience working in educational equity? If so, what would it be and how would you answer it?

APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Introductory Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to the group.
 - a. Share your name and role/experience with educational equity

Facilitation Questions

1. A working definition of educational equity I have distilled through research is: educational equity ensures that all students, regardless of individual characteristics have access to supportive, high-quality learning experiences that develop their fullest potential.
 - a. What additions or clarifications would any of you like to add for our shared discussion today?
2. What is the nature of diversity in your rural setting?
 - a. What does it look like?
 - b. How do you assess the needs of diverse groups in your community?
3. In your work with equity, what have been some of the highlights, or high points of your work?
4. In the work of equity, what is getting in the way?
5. What supports do you see as necessary in your current work?
6. Administrative support is a common theme from interviews, tell me about approaches to involve administrators in the importance of equity work.
 - a. How has it shown up? Evolved? Does it get forgotten?

7. What topics of professional development have you explored with staff?
8. What brought you to the work of educational equity?
 - a. What motivates you to continue the work?

APPENDIX D

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

Waking Up White, and Finding Myself in the Story of Race

By Debbie Irving

For twenty-five years, Debby Irving sensed inexplicable racial tensions in her personal and professional relationships. As a colleague and neighbor, she worried about offending people she dearly wanted to befriend. As an arts administrator, she didn't understand why her diversity efforts lacked traction. As a teacher, she found her best efforts to reach out to students and families of color left her wondering what she was missing.

White Fragility: Why it's so hard for White People to Talk About Racism

By Robin DiAngelo

Antiracist educator Robin DiAngelo deftly illuminates the phenomenon of white fragility and “allows us to understand racism as a practice not restricted to ‘bad people’ (Claudia Rankine). Referring to the defensive moves that white people make when challenged racially, white fragility is characterized by emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and by behaviors including argumentation and silence. In this in-depth exploration, DiAngelo examines how white fragility develops, how it protects racial inequality, and what we can do to engage more constructively.

Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?

By Beverly Daniel Tatum

Walk into any racially mixed high school and you will see Black, White, and Latino youth clustered in their own groups. Is this self-segregation a problem to address or a coping strategy? Beverly Daniel Tatum, a renowned authority on the psychology of racism, argues that straight talk about our racial identities is essential if we are serious about enabling communication across racial and ethnic divides. These topics have only become more urgent as the national conversation about race is increasingly acrimonious. This fully revised edition is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the dynamics of race in America.

Between the World and Me

By Ta-Nehisi Coates

Ta-Nehisi Coates offers a powerful new framework for understanding our nation's history and current crisis. What is it like to inhabit a black body and find a way to live within it? And how can we all honestly reckon with this fraught history and free ourselves from its burden? He attempts to answer these questions in a letter to his adolescent son. Coates shares with his son—and readers—the story of his awakening to the truth about his place in the world

Additional recommendations on my “need to read” list...

Alexander, M. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.

With dazzling candor, legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues that "we have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it." By targeting black men through the War on Drugs and decimating communities of color, the U.S. criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control—relegating millions to a permanent second-class status—even as it formally adheres to the principle of colorblindness.

Delpit, L. (2013). *Multiplication is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People’s Children*.

Delpit presents a striking picture of the elements of contemporary public education that conspire against the prospects for poor children of color, creating a persistent gap in achievement during the school years that has eluded several decades of reform.

Hammond, Z. (2014). *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*.

To close the achievement gap, diverse classrooms need a proven framework for optimizing student engagement. Culturally responsive instruction has shown promise, but many teachers have struggled with its implementation. In this book, Zaretta Hammond draws on cutting edge neuroscience research to offer an innovative approach for designing and implementing brain-compatible culturally responsive instruction.

Kendi, I. (2019). *How to be an Antiracist*.

Antiracism is a transformative concept that reorients and re-energizes the conversation about racism—and, even more fundamentally, points us toward liberating new ways of thinking about ourselves and each other. Racism intersects with class and culture and geography and even changes the way we see and value ourselves. Kendi takes readers through a widening circle of antiracist ideas—from the most basic concepts to visionary possibilities—that will help readers see all forms of racism clearly, understand their consequences, and work to oppose them in our systems and in ourselves. Kendi weaves an electrifying combination of ethics, history, law, and science with his own personal story of awakening to antiracism.

Love, B. (2019). *We Want to do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*.

Drawing on her life’s work of teaching and researching in urban schools, Bettina Love argues that the US educational system is maintained by and profits from the suffering of children of color. Instead of trying to repair a flawed system, educational reformers offer survival tactics in the forms of test-taking skills, acronyms, grit labs, and character education, which Love calls the educational survival complex. *We Want to Do More*

Than Survive introduces an alternative to traditional modes of educational reform and expands our ideas of civic engagement and intersectional justice.

Noguera, P. (2009). *The Trouble with Black Boys... and Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education*.

For many of us race will continue to shape where we live, pray, go to school, and socialize. Educators, who should be committed to helping young people realize their intellectual potential as they make their way toward adulthood, have a responsibility to help them find ways to expand identities related to race so that they can experience the fullest possibility of all that they may become. In this brutally honest—yet ultimately hopeful—book Pedro Noguera examines the many facets of race in schools and society and reveals what it will take to improve outcomes for all students. From achievement gaps to immigration, Noguera offers a rich and compelling picture of a complex issue that affects all of us.

APPENDIX E

FIVE FINGER SHARE AND NORMS

The five-finger share poses 5 questions or topics for people to think about and share out to the group they are with. For this study, the following prompts were used in the focus group:

- What helps you get rid of a “case of the Mondays”?
- Favorite book or movie.
- What is on your “bucket list”?
- What is your pet peeve?
- What is one thing you learned this week?

Norms for this focus group:

- We will assume positive intent and kindness; we are all at different places in our own understandings of equity.
- We will expect and appreciate absolute candor. Just showing up is not enough.
- We have the right to respectfully challenge or disagree with one another.
- We have a responsibility to respect and build on the strength that diversity provides.
- Take care of yourself - snacks, water, bathroom.

APPENDIX F
CONSENT FORM



Informed Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The student researcher or faculty researcher (Principal Investigator) will provide you with a copy of this form to keep for your reference, and will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions.

This form provides important information about what you will be asked to do during the study, about the risks and benefits of the study, and about your rights as a research participant.

- If you have any questions about or do not understand something in this form, you should ask the research team for more information.
- You should feel free to discuss your potential participation with anyone you choose, such as family or friends, before you decide to participate.
- Do not agree to participate in this study unless the research team has answered your questions and you decide that you want to be part of this study.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time.

Title of Research Study: Searching for a Vision: Understanding Education Equity in

Rural Minnesota

Student Researcher: Jessica Murphy; jmurphy20@hamline.edu

Faculty Advisor: Michael Reynolds, CLA Dean's Office and English, Hamline University; 651-523-2641, mreynolds@hamline.edu

1. What is the research topic, the purpose of the research, and the rationale for why this study is being conducted?

The achievement gap is a state-wide issue, and much of rural Minnesota is White. Getting teachers and administrators in predominantly white districts on board to participate in equity development is challenging. The willingness to see value in this work is limited by the lived experiences in a racially homogenous environment. Much of this work is facilitated by equity specialists, or people with similar titles across the state. This collective group holds valuable insight through the work they do. This study aims to gather these insights and answer the primary question of: *What are the skills, dispositions, and content knowledge that equity specialists describe as being useful to better prepare them in their work of educational equity?*

2. What will you be asked to do if you decide to participate in this research study?

Interview Participant:

- Interviewer, Jessica Murphy, will travel to a location that is most comfortable and private for the interviewee. This may be the place where the interviewee works.
- The interview will last 30 minutes and take place at a time that is convenient for the interviewee.

- Interview questions will be emailed to the interviewee ahead of time.
- The interview will be recorded. The interviewee's name and other identifiers will be given pseudonyms in the transcript of the interview to protect the interviewee's identity.
- A copy of the transcript will be offered to the interviewee prior to the completion of the dissertation.

Focus Group Participant:

- Facilitator, Jessica Murphy, will send out a Doodle Poll to determine the most common time for participants to take part in the focus group discussion. Participants are asked to fill out the Doodle Poll in a timely manner
- Once a common time is determined, the facilitator will send details of the meeting (time and location).
- The focus group session will begin with 20 minutes of mingling while everyone arrives; appetizers and snacks will be provided.
- Once everyone has arrived, the one-hour discussion will begin.
 - o A resource of common definitions and discussion questions will be provided.
 - o Participants are asked to actively listen to one another and engage in the discussion as it unfolds. This may be sharing personal or professional experiences, insights, or their own questions.
- The discussion will be recorded and transcribed. Names and other identifiers will be given pseudonyms in the transcript to protect all participants identities

3. What will be your time commitment to the study if you participate?

Interviews: 30 minutes

Focus Group: 1.5 hours plus travel time.

4. Who is funding this study?

This study is not a funded study.

5. What are the possible discomforts and risks of participating in this research

study? By participating in this study, there is a small chance of personal discomfort since we will be talking about topics surrounding equity. Answering pointed questions about educational equity always carries a possibility of feeling uncomfortable and is often a risk. This may result in loss of confidentiality. Steps will be taken to minimize those risks as outlined in the next section. In addition, there may be risks that are currently unknown or unforeseeable. Please contact me at jmurphy20@hamline.edu or 320-492-4257 or my faculty advisor: Michael Reynolds at mreynolds@hamline.edu or 651-523-2641 to discuss this if you wish.

6. How will your privacy and the confidentiality of your data and research records be protected?

- Recordings and transcripts of interviews and the focus group discussion will be stored on Hamline's secure Google Drive.
- Names and other identifying information (schools, districts, program names, etc.) will be changed to pseudonyms to protect the identity of all involved in the study.
- Participants will be offered a copy of transcripts of interviews for their review if they would like to ensure all pseudonyms are appropriate for their privacy.
- Transcripts of the focus group will not be shared with anyone. Only the researcher

will have access to this documentation.

- Upon completion of the dissertation process all files (electronic and paper copies of transcripts) will be destroyed.

7. How many people will most likely be participating in this study, and how long is the entire study expected to last?

The duration of this entire study will take place from March 2019-November 2019, with data collection happening March through May of 2019.

Survey: 87 surveys will be sent out

Interviews: 6-8 people will be selected as interview participants

Focus group: 6-8 people will be selected to participate in the focus group

8. What are the possible benefits to you and/or to others form your participation in this research study?

Equity specialists in rural Minnesota tend to work in isolation or with a very small committee of people. Those engaging in the focus group may experience the benefit of shared excitement and passion generated by discussion among others that work in a similar capacity. Participating in this study may provide a larger network of equity contacts to support the work participants are doing. This could result in sharing resources and ideas to extend educational equity. A clear benefit is that participants may learn something new through reflective practice; be it a new understanding, a shift in how they see a situation or a new concept.

9. **If you choose to participate in this study, will it cost you anything?**

The only cost incurred would be travel cost to join the focus group discussion.

10. **Will you receive any compensation for participating in this study?**

Participants will not receive compensation. However, those involved in the focus group will be provided food and beverages during the focus group session.

11. **What if you decide that you do not want to take part in this study? What other options are available to you if you decide not to participate or to withdraw?**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate in the study, and your refusal will not influence your current or future relationships with Hamline University. In addition, if significant new findings develop during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to continue participation, we will provide that information to you.

12. **How can you withdraw from this research study, and who should you contact if you have any questions or concerns?**

You are free to withdraw your consent and stop participation in this research study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits for which you may be entitled. If you wish to stop your participation in this research study for any reason, you should tell me, or contact me at jmurphy20@hamline.edu or 320-492-4257, or my faculty advisor, Michael Reynolds at mreynolds@hamline.edu or 651-523-2641. You should also call or email the Faculty Advisor for any questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints about the research and your experience as a participant in the study. In addition, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional

Review Board at Hamline University at IRB@hamline.edu.

13. Are there any anticipated circumstances under which your participation may be terminated by the researcher(s) without your consent?

None anticipated

14. Will the researchers benefit from your participation in this study?

The researchers will gain no benefit from your participation in this study beyond the publication and/or presentation of the results obtained from the study, and the invaluable research experience and hands-on learning that the students will gain as a part of their educational experience.

15. Where will this research be made available once the study is completed?

This research is public scholarship and the abstract and final product will be cataloged in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository. Potential future publication could take the shape of publication in research journals or a presented at professional conferences.

PARTICIPANT COPY

Signatures:

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

Printed name of person obtaining consent _____ Date _____

Signature of person obtaining consent _____ Date _____

Title of person obtaining consent _____ Date _____

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this Form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

Printed Name of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature of Faculty Advisor _____ Date _____

Video Consent:

As a part of your participation as a volunteer in this scientific research study, you may be videotaped during the focus group as a means of data collection. This video footage will not be shown to any audience, it is simply to capture the discussion with the intent of being transcribed for analysis. If you have any questions about this consent, you can contact Jessica Murphy at jmurphy20@hamline.edu, or the Faculty Advisor: Michael Reynolds at mreynolds@hamline.edu or 612-523-2641. By signing below, you hereby

give permission for any videotapes made during the course of this research study to be also used for data collection purposes only. Your identity and face will be blurred or not shown/revealed if videos are used for any of the above purposes.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature of Faculty Advisor _____ Date _____

INVESTIGATOR COPY

(Duplicate signature page for researcher's records)

Signatures:

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

Printed name of person obtaining consent _____ Date _____

Signature of person obtaining consent _____ Date _____

Title of person obtaining consent _____ Date _____

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this Form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

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Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

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Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature of Faculty Advisor _____ Date _____