

Teachers and school leaders' deficit thinking and dysconsciousness as hindrances to educational equity: A multi-method exploration
by

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Critical Consciousness, Critically Conscious Leadership, Deficit Thinking, Education, Equity
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Abstract

Providing a high-quality rigorous educational experience for all students should be the goal of all schools. However, the determination of quality and rigor varies widely as it is interpreted and applied from school to school. Additionally, Schools are inequitable spaces. Tools to identify inequity and aid in the creation of action plans for school improvement are insufficiently utilized. Perceptions about the problem of inequity and the need for equity in schools vary greatly. The following dissertation examined the perceptions of educators in schools in the Deep South, seeking to better understand the ways in which teachers and school leaders perceive of equity and inequity in schools and create inequitable spaces where only some students thrive. The narratives and experiences of participants, including educators, educational leaders, and central office educational personnel, were analyzed and interpreted to inform recommendations for policy and praxis.

Schools are as complex and multifaceted as the individuals within their walls. However, collective goals that all schools share, such as successful outcomes for all students, are frequently studied in the literature; measured by commonly used meritocratic means such as passing standardized test scores, high performance in grading outcomes, or graduation rates. Assessing equity though is less salient, likely because equity includes many aspects of schooling which are rarely measured in a standardized way. For example, equitable programming includes access to materials, curriculum, advanced coursework, and highly-qualified instructors; opportunities for growth and advancement beyond passing from one grade level to the next; instruction in first languages; diverse representation of the faculty and leadership as mirrored by the community of service; and other demonstrations of care for all persons as explored within this text.

The following works are a compilation of three articles, complimentary to several aspects of schooling, serving as a lens for looking deeper into the ways in which some schools make claims for equity while simultaneously replicating inequity. Beginning with a first-person autoethnographic account of the routine injustices of inequity, deficit thinking, maintenance of the status quo, and racism, “Gross Moments in Public Education” critically examines the perspective of an educator in multiple elementary schools in the Deep South. Next, “Equity Audits as Tools for School Improvement: Educators' Experiences and Perceptions” is an exploration of equity audits as a potential tool for better identification of inequity in schools and a starting point for creating actionable plans for school change, as experienced by educators using equity audits within their schools and districts. Lastly, ““Eye-opening” Doesn’t Equate to Consciousness: A Case Study Exploring the Potential of Social Justice Programming for Equity Awareness in School Leadership” questions the impact of critical graduate coursework on an aspiring school leader and the potential continuing equity conscious practices. Finally, recommendations for further equity-minded policies and praxis for school improvement for all students are made.

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The dissertation journey is truly a perilous adventure, rife with both terrors and triumphs, thrills and chills, lurking around every corner. As challenging as the process may be, however, it is also a highly fulfilling exercise in flexibility, vulnerability, and ultimately growth. There are many persons whom contributed directly to my growth throughout this, at times seemingly endless, endeavor; who ensured (gratefully) that the adventure would come to a successful end.

Thank you Dr. Kamden Strunk, the start of our work together was the catalyst for all future critical and equity studies. Dr. Strunk introduced me to the innerworkings of the world of academia and ignited my desire for membership. It was through our research and publication that I learned to develop the processes for inquiry and study that I will value and use throughout my career. When working together, I felt like someone with potential, not only a graduate student, but a colleague with insight.

When I took my first course with Dr. Lisa Kensler, I felt like she was my person. I was equal parts intimidated, awed, impressed, inspired, and challenged. She has a firm yet supportive way that lets you know that you will work for and earn everything you achieve, but that you will achieve. I loved that Dr. Kensler found the “sweet spot” in her life and helped me to identify which way to turn to find mine. Thank you Dr. Kensler for demanding rigor and for leading by example in all that you do.

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Dr. Carey Andrzejewski welcomed and guided me at a time when my thoughts, interests, needs, and goals were constantly evolving. My dissertation process was long, in part because I was interested in so many things but struggled to name *the* thing that was going to take me to the next step in my understanding and career. I began with wellness and serving the whole students' life with healthy school and home practices. Moved into building relationships and developing trust to support learning and growth in students. Then, thanks to Dr. Andrzejewski, uncovered that it was equity at the root of all things that had my interests and captured my desires for the improvement of schooling for all. Thank you Dr. A. for helping me to develop my scholarship, find my "sweet spot" and create something complex and genuine to me.

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Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my students and all young students of the world. We, your teachers and leaders, owe you our greatest debt of gratitude. You only want to feel loved, nurtured, seen, and valuable and you deserve so much more than you often receive. You settle for less than our best each day and sometimes get the worst. This dissertation is the first of many steps towards serving you better.

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Introduction

Purpose

Each fall, students from around the country prepare themselves for their new school year. Some, ready themselves early, carefully choosing clothing and supplies and laying it out the night before the big first day. Others dread the end of summer and yearn for more days of sleeping in late and playing in the sunshine. The moment, while shared with 56 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020) other youth all over the United States, however, is not anticipated nor experienced in the exact same way. Similarly, the process of schooling varies from moment to moment, student to student, even within the same classroom. An effortless triumph for one student may present considerable challenge and struggle for another. In this way, it is the craft of the teacher and the resolve of the leader that guides each student to their success. Yet, every student doesn't always matriculate to the next grade, every student doesn't pass each test, every student doesn't feel worthy and successful, and every student doesn't graduate. While the reasons for the variation in student experiences and outcomes may vary, one way to ensure that all students receive access to high quality educational opportunities and advancement is to provide and account for equity in schooling (Hawley & Nieto, 2010). Equitability in schools can be determined through auditing, one such tool being the equity audit. Equity audits are detailed reporting tools that guide educational leaders and administrators through questioning the intended and realistic delivery of services, programs, and personnel to meet the diverse needs of all students (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Dodman et al., 2019; Groenke, 2010). However, auditing is only one tool for determining equity and a number of other factors can also impact equitable instructional practices, such as the beliefs and perceptions of the educators and leaders within schools (Sailes, 2008).

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the facets of educational equity by better understanding the perceptions of school leaders, aspiring school leaders, and current educational practitioners whose actions and inactions support and hinder the advancement of equity in schools.

Organization

This work is organized into three articles. The first article, “Gross Moments in Public Education: An Autobiography”, critically questions schooling in the Deep South from the perspective of an educator serving multiple populations across multiple schools within the same district. This educator, an aspiring school leader, described frustrations in navigating daily inequities and injustices within the school environments and grappling with the simultaneous tugs of advocacy and self-preservation. The second article, “Equity Audits as Tools for School Improvement: Educators' Experiences and Perceptions” in press Fall 2020 in Bending the Arc Towards Justice: Equity-Focused Practices for Educational Leaders edited by Rajni Shankar-Brown and published by Information Age Publishing, seeks to better understand the equity audit process from aspiring teacher leaders who engaged in the process, as part of a university graduate program, utilizing their schools of employment. The third article, ““Eye-Opening” Doesn’t Equate to Consciousness: A Case Study Exploring the Potential of Social Justice Programming for Equity Awareness in School Leadership”, examines participant Emory’s (pseudonym) account of a graduate level university course, specifically Emory’s experiences in conducting an equity audit and their intentions for determining and maintaining equitable practices within their school.

The first article also serves as an acknowledgement of self-reflection, a key component to equity work and mentioned throughout the equity literature. “Gross Moments in Public

Education” is a personal account, autoethnographic analysis presenting artifacts, journaling, and field notes from experiences in the public education system as a teacher in the Deep South over the course of a University graduate program. Specifically, the article includes memoing, journaling and notes taken while attending an Equity for Leadership university course as a participant observer (Glesne, 2011; Van Maanen, 1988); as well as emails, notes from meetings, and conversations as an educator in the local school system from 2016-2021 analyzed using the a priori codes established within article two, as well as emergent open-coding. Using an emic perspective (Harris, 1976) inclusion of this article was chosen to examine the reflexivity (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Foley 2002) of the lead researcher and author as well as to explore the difficult and often strained balance of social justice work and self-preservation. The goal for this article is to make a connection between the equity literature, recommendations for equitable practices in schools, other educators’ accounts, and insider experiences to better understand the disparity between the availability of information about equity and tools such as equity audits for school improvement, and the evidenced lack of equity or concern for equitability within public schools.

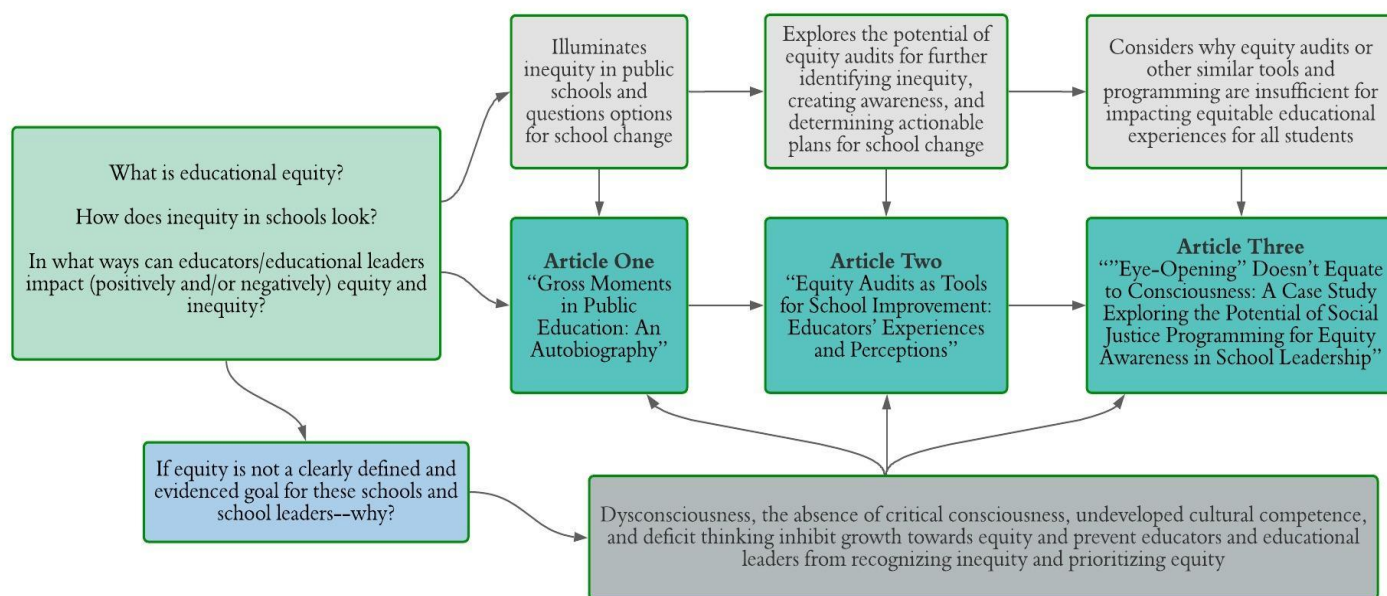
The second article explores equity audits as a viable tool for educators and school leaders to better identify the inequities in their schools often missed, as illustrated by the first article, and means for creating actionable plans for school improvement. Equity audits are frameworks for collecting data about the composition of schools, services, faculty, and programming for the purposes of analyzing equitable balance and representation therein. The equity audit is inexpensive, accessible, and flexible as it can be modified to meet the particular needs of schools, programs, or individual classrooms. However, equity audits are limited by the constraints of pedagogical ideologies of persons wielding the tool in addition to the climate, culture, and beliefs held by teachers and leaders within schools.

The third article, a case study and further analysis of the interview with Emory from article two, was analyzed using open coding and narrative analysis (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) for themes within the descriptions of Emory's experiences in attending an Equity for Leadership course, to better understand the impacts of social justice programming as interpreted by the critically and culturally unaware. Throughout the interview, Emory switched frequently from dialogue reflective of having a newly acquired open cognizance towards inequity within their program, school, and district, to that of stereotypical, racially charged, sexist, and offensive language. In this section, Emory's transcript was reviewed as illustrative of the themes found throughout all other interviews within the study and presented in article two. Additionally, Emory described recognition of disparities and needs within their school setting, but a reluctance towards action for a number of reasons. This acknowledgement of injustice yet conscious maintenance of the status quo is replicated in the other participant interviews as well as established within the literature. For example, McIntosh, Smolkowski, Gion, Witherspoon, Bastable, & Girvan (2020) found that regular and consistent presentation of equity data specifically highlighting disproportionality in disciplinary practices did not elicit an actionable response from school leaders. Singleton (2015), in presenting a comprehensive guide for school leaders to engage in "courageous conversations", shares experiences and guidance in which individuals work towards maintenance of the status quo to avoid discomfort in challenging dialogue that questions existing practices, and which may result in policy or procedural changes. Theoharis (2009) in a study of successful socially just leaders in equitable schooling environments posits that in environments such as that described in Emory's narrative, educators do not necessarily believe that all students can be successful in the first place, evident in the language Emory used to describe student body groups. Further, Emory's disconnect between

academic pedagogy and practice are illustrative of dysconsciousness (King, 1991) and act as a barrier to the development of critical consciousness necessary for transformative leadership. Emory’s account, along with the analyses in articles one and two, are complimentary in further understanding the complexities of what should conceptually be simple, that all students deserve the access to and opportunity for high-quality rigorous schooling, thus educational equity. However, as illustrated by figure one below, many factors influence the prioritization of, concern for, and understanding about equity.

Figure 1

Teachers and School Leaders’ Deficit Thinking and Dysconsciousness as Hindrances to Educational Equity: A Multi-Method Exploration Concept Map



Note: This figure demonstrates the concept mapping linking each of the three articles and smaller studies comprising the whole of this dissertation.

The following provides an overview of the concepts pertinent to equity, equity audits, and the findings of this dissertation.

Equity

Educational equity is defined by numerous scholars and school leaders in various ways (Theoharis, 2009; Theoharis & Scanlon, 2015; Linton, 2011; Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009;). However, the central tenet of equity in education being that it is the intentional practice of delivering to all students high quality educational opportunities while also recognizing their unique individual needs. Equity is often recognized by its antithesis, inequity, because it is inequity that elicits a response for action and can be more visible in school settings, although inequity is rarely identified as the catalyst for unfavorable learning outcomes. For example, in 2002, the US experienced a shift in accountability practices and assessment expectations with the No Child Left Behind Act. This legislation marked a pivotal moment for our educational system in that for the first time the expectations for the regular use and application of student data would drive school and district outcomes. Before this period, schools were largely free to decide what worked best for their students, teachers, and communities without unifying policies maintaining consistency. The act required schools to collect annual achievement scores from all students in grades 3-8 and to disaggregate the annual student performance data by race, socioeconomic status, and gender. This level of measurement was reported to be a response to the widening “achievement gaps” (later explored as opportunity gaps) in the country, or the recognition that students of color and students living in poverty were not performing as well in schools as their white middle class peers (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Common responses to this legislation included standardization of delivery of instruction and testing to track progress towards those shared standards, in favor of improving equality in schools.

Equity is frequently confused with equality, with equality being given deference in schools as it is in some ways easier to deliver (Miller & Martin, 2015). For example, equality

requires that everything be the same. All students would receive the same textbook, all students would use the same pencils, all students read the same text. For large organizations that adhere to factory models (Serafini, 2011) such as American public schools do, the same is much easier to deliver than different or individual. Equity, however, requires understanding that students enter schools with varied educational experiences, backgrounds, needs, assets and expectations; identifying those nuanced aspects crucial to the growth and development of each student, delivering upon those goals, and monitoring for the maintenance of those goals over time.

As Poston (1992) asserts, “Given appropriate use of people, resources, and time by any school system, appropriate results should be achieved” (p. 236). However, we know that this is not the case in schools as the opportunity gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2013) persists and inequities abound. “Equity results from providing different educational environments, services, and programs to those who have different need for them” (Poston, 1992, p. 236). In this case the use of the term “different” being meant to imply specifically intended for that individual, which varies as individuals and their needs vary. Students in educational systems do currently experience “different” educational realities, those realities being the intended and unintended outcomes from pushing standardization in the form of equality rather than equity in response to a system was never intended to benefit all students in the first place. Equitable educational experiences, potentially possible with action plans in response to conducting equity audits or similar tools, aide in real equality—equal outcomes for students across all groups. The goal then should be for all students to receive the support and services that they uniquely require to perform at high levels and achieve similar successful outcomes.

Equity Traps

McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) developed the construct of equity traps in response to a qualitative study in which the participants described and demonstrated habits of thinking that served to excuse inequity and justify inaction. The reasoning for the preservation of inequity functioned as more than barriers, as the participants did not seek to overcome them, but rather traps that prevented teachers and school leaders from creating equitable learning environments that benefitted all students. As such, McKenzie and Scheurich termed the thinking and assumptions as equity traps; manifesting as the deficit view, racial erasure, employment and avoidance of the gaze, and paralogic beliefs and behaviors. McKenzie and Scheurich appropriately termed these attitudes and actions as equity traps because they trap equity and prevent schools from moving towards creating more equitable learning environments.

A deficit view (Miller & Martin, 2015) includes the blaming of low student performance on that of their community, upbringing, family, or level of poverty. For example, a teacher demonstrating deficit thinking describing a student failing in class may attribute that failure to poverty, family life, the community in which they live, lack of parent supervision or guidance, etc. resulting in the blaming of the student and situation for that failure, resulting in lower expectations for that student's performance and ultimately success. Racial erasure, another equity trap, includes the intentional overlooking of indicators of race or the performance of colorblindness in order to erase race from the equation, again resulting in the blaming of the student or their living environment for lack of success. Racial erasure is often practiced by White educators as an effort to avoid being positioned as racist or their actions as racism. Avoidance and employment of the gaze refers to teachers simultaneously seeking to avoid attention from administrators for their actions and also using the gaze to reinforce cultural expectations within the school. For example, a new teacher who challenges the status quo may find their comments

and actions under the gaze of more seasoned teachers looking to continue to justify their own actions and limit the chance for discomfort or change from new thinking. Effectively used, the gaze includes both hiding from questioning and keeping the noncompliant in line. Finally, paralogic beliefs and behaviors are those in which the thinking does not logically arrive at the conclusion being presented, but is upheld, nonetheless. McKenzie and Scheurich provide an example of a teacher yelling at students and behaving negatively towards students, justifying their behavior as required to match the students' own behaviors, interpreted as a result of their home lives. The actions of one do not account for the other, and upon further review of the thinking the logic is faulty, however still used to justify inequity and poor teaching practices.

Particularly concerning is that equity traps are sanctioned and replicated by both individual teachers and teacher leaders as well as the collective of a group or even the whole school. This mindset then becomes embedded within the culture and climate of the school and further prevents equity from even being an actionable goal.

McKenzie and Scheurich also refer to King's (2004) work on dysconsciousness and recognize that equity traps are indicative of the individual's inability to recognize the potential of some students in favor of deficit views, racist thinking, or maintenance of the status quo. Together then, equity traps and dysconsciousness not only prevent equity in education, but without critical consciousness to raise awareness of imbalances of power and privilege, schools and school systems will not change. The resulting outcome is not that students will not succeed, White middle-class students are served well by the system, rather, not all students will be successful. This conundrum further illustrates the necessity of this study and similar work in the advancement of equity studies in schools, so that no matter the level of consciousness of the

educators and administrators, performance indicators are measured and reveal the disparities that exist even when they are unseen or unrecognized.

Dysconsciousness

Educational leaders, administrators, and teachers resisting equitability and change are not necessarily intentional nor completely unconscious about their actions, but rather as Joyce E. King suggests (2004, 2006, 2017) dysconscious. Dysconsciousness is not the antithesis of critical consciousness, but rather presents itself as a refusal, a block, and an inability to acknowledge and accept forms of inequity even when presented with reasoning and logic. King describes this, in part, to an individual's positionality and the things in which they have embraced as truth and their acceptance of normative thinking. Therefore, deductive reasoning about inequity is challenged and rejected by a dysconscious person in favor of the status quo. The process is not unconscious or without thought, it is carefully considered and instead thought to be faulty. Equity Traps, therefore, are illustrative of dysconsciousness as they defer to blaming and excuses to make sense of variations in student achievement.

Miller & Martin (2015) in a case study exploring school leadership preparation programs and the incorporation of social justice training, found that of the four principals participants who used the rhetoric surrounding equity and social justice, and wanted to improve upon or better serve their schools, their practice did not match their language. In other words, there was a discrepancy between their perceptions and their actions or claims. For example, principals frequently described a colorblind approach to delivery of fairness and thought it equitable to treat everyone the same, refusing to allow the conversation to be about race, several of the principals described the students/children as being without a racial identity because they were youth. The contradictions in statements and claims for epistemology illustrate further the deeply rooted bias

and misconceptions that the participants had about students of color and/or living in poverty (Milner, 2013). Additionally, when discussing student data, the lack of growth or perceived lack of ability of students was placed upon the students themselves; and the teachers, administrators, school culture, and system were overlooked. In one example a principal boasted about the great ways in which faculty surpassed diversity and taught to the child, “I don’t care what color they are. Let me have your child that is respectful and responsible, and we can teach them... We can teach them because all kids can learn but at their own ability level” (Miller & Martin, 2015, p. 136). This attempt is troubling in that it inadvertently implied that race isn’t an issue, implied that only children whom are well-behaved according to this administration’s standards are worthy and capable of learning, and there is a certain level to which some students can learn and that level is where they should receive instruction. Further, all principal participants in Miller & Martin’s (2015) study described not having had exposure to concepts of diversity, inclusion, or equity in their leadership preparation programs, creating greater challenge for engaging with these needs within their schools.

Critical Consciousness

Being critically conscious involves a deeper understanding beyond social issues about how an individual’s own position within environments and the values and beliefs that they carry can also further impact that environment and hinder or strengthen their response to inequity and injustice. Being unaware of issues of inequity, as well as not being willing to explore issues of inequity, perpetuates systems of oppression towards marginalized student populations.

The development of critical consciousness happens with intentionality and reflection over time, it is not simply a knowledge or awareness. Skousen & Domangue (2020) describe the development over time that “...should be framed as a continuum” (p. 104). Critical

consciousness questions context and power, challenges power and privilege, and works to develop awareness through reflexivity and interaction (McDonough, 2009). Critical consciousness means being equity aware, maintaining a willingness to recognize and address inequitable conditions and requires regular reflection or seeing self as an integral part of the system with the ability to influence change.

According to Bradley-Levine's (2012) study examining the development of critical consciousness in graduate students attending a university leadership program, the process is difficult and filled with many smaller moments of changes in thinking but happens over time. Bradley-Levine's participants described struggling with finding new awareness for injustices within the school setting, as well as those coming from fellow teachers' views of student families, but also within their own beliefs, some stopping short of embracing the concept that student outcomes are the responsibility of teacher and leader efforts. Bradley-Levine additionally asserts that critical consciousness requires a combination of awareness, self-reflection, and action, all elements being a required balance for growth and understanding. Although the participants were supported by university program leaders and received regular feedback and guidance throughout the course, "The findings also show that dialogue alone does not necessarily move teacher leaders to become more critically aware" (Bradley-Levine, 2012, p. 767). This finding aligns with those in aforementioned studies wherein school and teacher leaders were provided with the data and tools to recognize disparities in student outcomes and responded that the experiences were "eye opening" yet did not act further upon the new awareness nor move towards actionable school improvement. Further, the detachment from need for action is indicative of disconnecting from the responsibility and representative of dysconsciousness as well as blaming behaviors supported by deficit thinking.

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence suggests an awareness for the unique life occurrences and exposures that an individual experiences being specific to that individual's relationship with their family, community, schooling, opportunity, etc. and that these experiences vary for all people. Therefore, by embracing culturally competent leadership, school leaders embrace the understanding that all students come to school with different cultural experiences, expectations, and needs and those needs must be uniquely met and responsive instructional opportunities delivered; not as what is best or more convenient for the facilitator, but what is best by what allows for the growth, learning, and advancement of the student. The combination of critical consciousness, cultural competence, and self-reflection are essential components for an equity-minded and socially just educational leader (Theoharis, 2007; Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006). Equity audits, then support leaders and facilitate the collection and analysis of disaggregated data to assess the effectiveness of the school in delivering an effective high-quality instruction for all students (Groenke, 2010).

Equity Audits

Equity audits are a malleable tool in which educators, schools, and/or districts can assess their current effectiveness in providing equitable services in all educational areas. Often, equity audits are conducted at the school-wide level in order to identify areas in which the school is adequately or inadequately meeting the needs of their population. Originating in the areas of civil rights enforcement, curriculum, and state accountability, equity audits in schools today typically follow a common format presented by Poston (1992) or Skrla et al. (2004). Because the equity audit itself can be adjusted to meet the application needs of the user, there is no one model that is utilized by all schools. However, most often equity audits, since the intent is to audit or assess

levels of equity, include the following areas for consideration: performance outcomes, programs, and personnel. Skrla et al. (2004) examined previous research on equity audits and re-conceptualized the equity audit into three main areas: teacher quality, educational programs, and student achievement. The actual data collected for each disaggregated category is compared to the school or local community demographics overall in order to analyze for accuracy and demonstrate disparities. For example, if a student population in a school system is 78% Black, but the faculty in that school system is 8% Black, the faculty in that system is not representative of the student population. The greater the divide or the wider the spread in the figures the likely greater the problem for providing fair and socially just services that recognize all peoples and cultures.

Equity audits, therefore, can be a valuable tool for school leaders who want to develop plans for best meeting the needs of all students within their population. This identification of adequate or inadequate services can aide in the informative practices for the allocation of funds, personnel, professional development, or attention to areas that are being underserved or overlooked. As such, a tool that is easily malleable to meet every schools' needs and one that can present informative data to school leaders with transformative results, should be readily and widely applied throughout schools across the United States. If the goal in our educational system is to reach and teach all students, then all really needs to mean all, and this data illustrates whether or not no child is indeed being left behind (Dodman et al., 2019; Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2011).

Despite the research demonstrating the effectiveness of equity audits in school success, very little research exists on the breadth or frequency of use of equity audits in general. Additionally, there is little to suggest that equity audits are being used by most, all, or even many

schools in the United States. The disparity between having an effective and universally malleable and applicable tool that can immediately identify areas of need leading to a plan and benefit of all students versus the actual use of that tool is unsettling. Considering how often districts and leaders embrace new promising programs, strategies, textbook adoptions, and fad educational miracle pills, an empirically derived and no cost way to assess the current state of school performance should be demanded if not at least prevalent.

Ultimately, educators whom have used equity audits reflected favorably about the equity audit process, as it provided for them a baseline from which to begin to look at inequities in their schools and to develop better practices for their craft (View et al., 2016). Within the parameters of a curriculum audit, Poston (1992) developed an equity audit consisting of the following: administrative and supervisory practices, course offerings and access, financial and funding resources, individual differences considerations, materials and facilities, special programs and services delivery, student management practices, class size practices, demographic distribution, grouping practices and procedures, instructional time utilization, promotion and retention practices, staff development and training, support services provision, and teacher assignment and workload. Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, and Nolly's (2001) version is an attempt to further simplify the process for greater use reducing the audited areas to three main categories: teacher quality, educational programs, and student achievement.

Research Questions

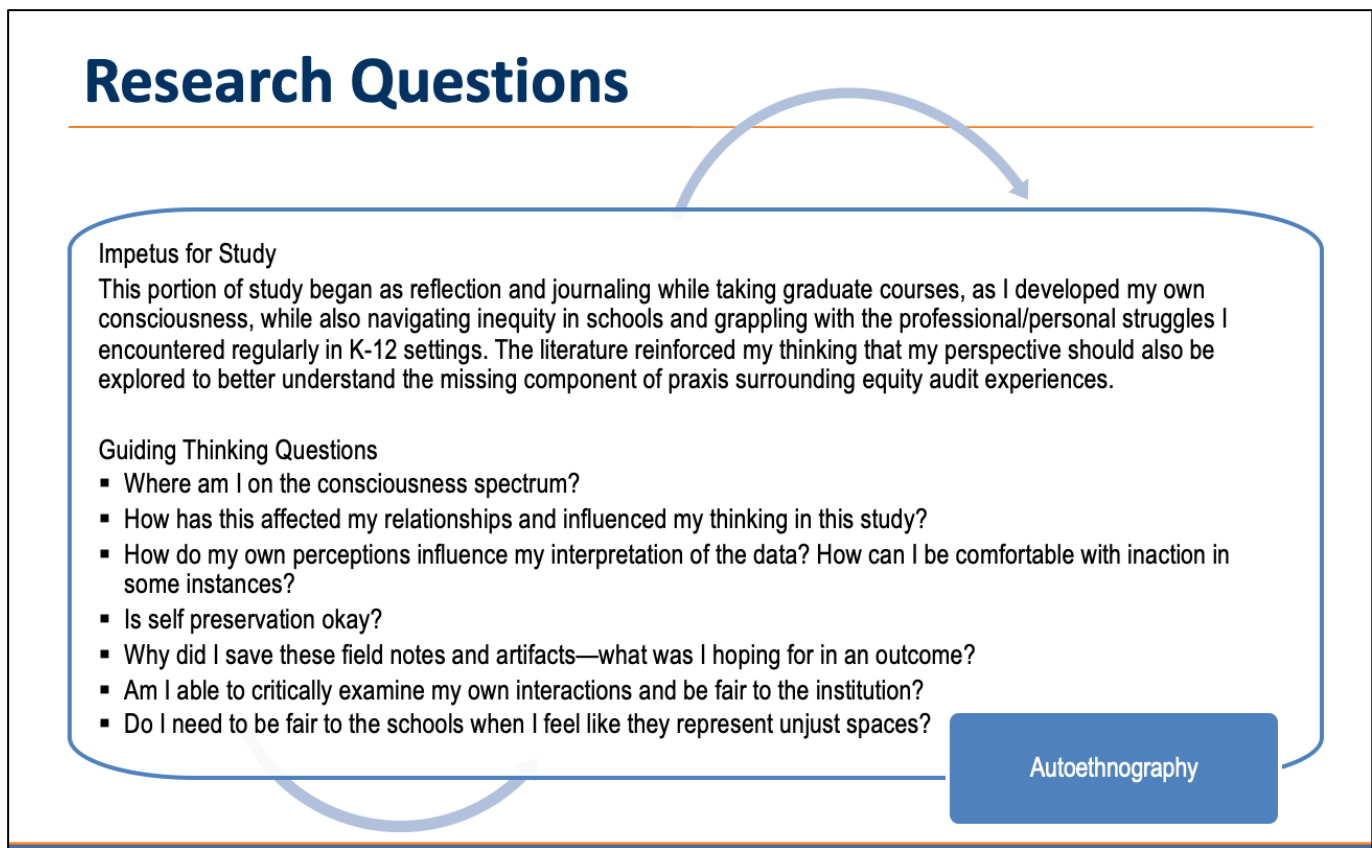
While this study began by wondering about the use and effectiveness of equity audits as tools for guiding school improvement, it evolved into an exploration of the broader consideration of equity in education. The questions, *What is educational equity?*, *How does inequity in schools look?*, and *In what ways can educators/educational leaders impact (positively*

and negatively) equity and inequity?, were asked throughout the development of each article to ground the work within the overall purpose for study. Below, each of the further guiding questions for each article are listed.

Article One: Autoethnography

Figure 2

Autoethnographic Research Questions



Additionally, the autoethnographic research article overall was an exercise in reflexivity and critical self-analysis, therefore, there are numerous questions asked of the researcher throughout the investigation as to the culpability of the researcher continuing employment in openly inequitable schools, succumbing to a feeling of powerlessness in fighting oppressive

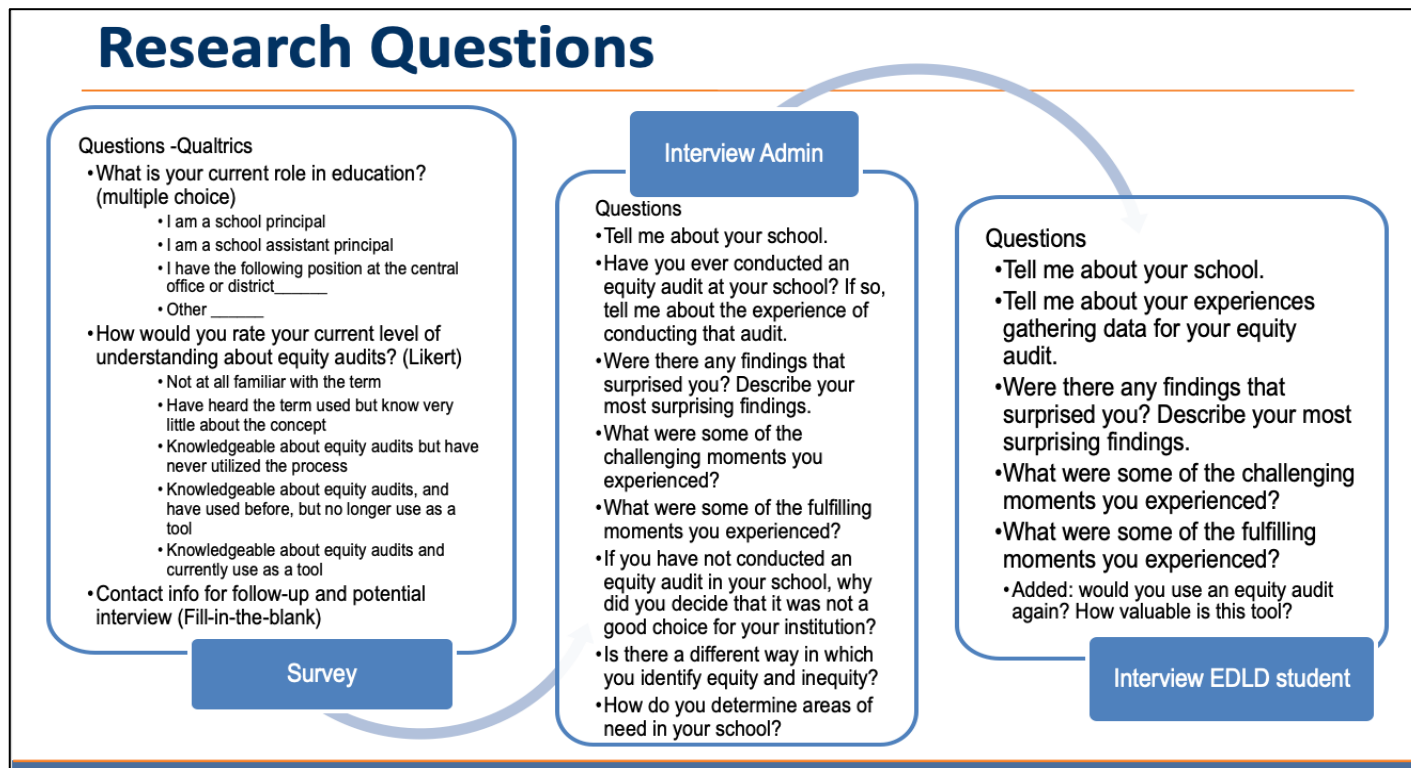
normative systems, and working in a position that further marginalizes and overlooks underrepresented populations.

Article Two: Equity Audit Interviews

Review of the literature and initial conversations with educational leaders and colleagues illuminated some of the noticeable gaps between equity theory and praxis. From initial probing surveys and requests for research participation in this study, only those educational professionals whom had or were taking a course centered around equity audits had knowledge of the terminology. Even recent graduates of educational leadership programs at respectable universities had no knowledge of equity audits nor could they define the concept for the purposes of our conversation or further discussion. Specifically, because equity audits are touted within the literature as highly regarded, effective, and widely available for use, it is odd and troubling that they are not commonplace among all educational institutions. The guiding question of, why aren't equity audits being used regularly in schools?, served as the impetus for the further inquiry into equity audits found in article two. That thinking led to the inclusion of graduate students who were required to adjust and utilize equity audits within their current places of employment as part of their educational leadership course of study. The rationalization being, individuals required to learn about and use equity audits may be able to share their experiences and insights to better understand the nuances of application, and perhaps to help unpack what is contributing to the disconnect between theory and practice.

Figure 3

Research and Guiding Questions Article Two: Equity Audits



Article Three: Case Study

The third article, a case study, further analyzing the interview responses of participant Emory, was provoked by the surprising ways in which Emory responded to the interview questions and to the ways in which Emory illicit feelings of frustration and offense by the researcher. Although surprising, however, Emory's responses were indicative of a person not yet having developed critical consciousness and mirrors that of many other educators as supported by the literature demonstrating that social justice coursework alone cannot change deeply held beliefs. Therefore, the research questions guiding this article of the dissertation, include *How were Emory's perceptions about equity in their school impacted by social justice coursework and conducting an equity audit?* And, *In what ways did Emory's plans and goals for the creation*

of equity in their school change as a result of social justice coursework and conducting an equity audit?

Emory, as well as the participants in article two's equity audit study and article one's autoethnography represent current practicing or aspiring school leaders. Each were solicited through their participation in graduate-level educational leadership coursework; therefore, the following section explores the role of equity through the position of educational leadership.

Educational Leadership

Issues of equity are directly impacted by the many facets of educational leadership expectations and outcomes, as well as the individual style and pedagogy of the leader. Educational leaders and administrators balance various responsibilities and make daily decisions that affect the climate and culture of their schools. While there is an understanding in academia that social justice leaders demand equitable change in their schools, equity is the deliberate creation of high-quality learning opportunities for all students, and therefore all educators must be concerned with equity in their schools. In addition to equity traps, there are numerous challenges within the profession that influence the attention and decision-making of the leader, those challenges often used as excuses for not conducting equity audits or prioritizing equity in schools (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Green, 2017; Miller & Martin, 2015).

Accountability

Schools and their leaders are held accountable for performance and their success measured in a variety of ways including state testing data, graduation rates, and public opinion/perception. Answering to all stakeholders creates pressure within the position and scrutiny in decisions. Unfortunately, the pressure and accountability to maintain the status quo

and those of normative systems that benefit some and disadvantage others is greater than that of the pressure to develop schools in which all students are successful (Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008).

While the regulations set forth by NCLB, and renewed by the Obama administration with ESSA, require the collection of performance data, the analysis and interpretation of that data is faulty, and the raw figures alone do not necessarily lead to an actionable response (McIntosh et al., 2020). Administrators and educators need training (Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, 2018) to better understand and interpret the data, and in some cases additional support for the collection of data, especially in states where streamlined statewide systems do not exist. Further, to hold school leaders accountable for social justice issues without the prerequisite training and continuous support in the development of critical consciousness, and enforcing measures of standardization over equitability, confuses the expectations of society for systems of schooling. Additionally, teachers also need training and better supports for understanding how they are being held accountable, and what they are enforcing in their classrooms when adhering to standards-based performance outcomes that often include high-stakes testing. “In an educational environment driven by data, widespread misunderstanding and misuse are problematic. At the same time that teachers face data use challenges, there is evidence that they also face challenges in recognizing inequitable schooling conditions” (Dodman et al., 2019, p. 4).

Imbalance of power present in relationships between administration and teachers, the power to control the message in schools, the power that some privileged parents exert over the school, and the powerlessness felt by those marginalized and not benefitting from schooling all further compound leadership accountability (Méndez, 2013). The influence that forms of accountability have on school outcomes are another reason in support for widespread

implementation of equity audits. Equity audits, when used properly, provide for a less subjective assessment of school success where accountability is necessary yet flawed.

Role, Responsibility, and Reflection

Organizational hierarchies determine the role and responsibilities of the members as well as to whom and how those members report. Schools are complex communities in which trusting relationships must be formed throughout to develop a positive climate, however power influences create tenuous structures that impact the ways in which members choose to interact. Teachers report to administrators, as well as to parents and to their students, and often find themselves in positions where their choices for action must be weighed against self-preservation (Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, 2018). Similarly, participants in Dodman's 2019 study grappled with their roles as teachers, requiring reflection and support to feel like they could impact inequities within their schools, and even then, struggling with how to go about change in unfriendly environments with normalization dictating the narrative. The teachers also expressed having felt "pushback from colleagues and administration" in addition to a number of other challenges surrounding their actions against inequities, compounding strains experienced in an already challenging career (Dodman et al., 2019).

The Demands of the Profession

Teaching, teacher leadership, administration, and education are a work of heart. Anecdotes abound with references to educators who did not enter into the profession for the great pay and public recognition. The profession is demanding and faculty within a school building find themselves answering to central office figures, politics, the community, parents, and more for decisions and actions within the classroom, at times on a daily basis. The intensity involved is by design, as educators are responsible for the care and well-being of human lives.

Additionally, equity work requires sustained efforts, and many who engage in an equity audit don't move past creating an action plan, nor to maintaining the work overtime. Unless, of course, in those few instances in which the teachers and leaders consider themselves social justice leaders and have made equity their driving purpose and force in their careers. The profession is demanding, making even a tool for simplification and ease of use feel overwhelming and daunting. As View et al. found in their 2016 study with teacher leaders, "In the typical classroom and school, our teachers report that they struggle to find time for reflection, let alone engage in the labor-intensive task of collecting data for a school-wide equity audit; it was largely through the imperative of a graduate school assignment that most teachers took on the task" (p. 383). View and colleagues also describe teachers as continuing to struggle when trying to maintain the work initially conducted in the action plan as early as a year after development.

Miller and Martin (2015) found that "...there is a significant disconnect between a leader's perceived responsibility... and their lack of awareness and inability to identify the biases, assumptions, and inequities..." (p. 146). Reflection is a key component to the development of critical consciousness and to creating equitable learning environments that benefit all students. Unfortunately, the disconnect also exists between the realization for educators that the success of every student, to the highest possible level, regardless of any other factors, *is* the role of the educator, the administrator, and the school. Compounded by expectations and demands on time before and after school hours, monetary investments where funds are lacking, lack of leadership or communication, as well as emotional strain, educators overlook equity in favor of the ease of normativity and the maintenance of reinforced systems such as the status quo.

Social Justice Leadership Vs Great School Leadership

“Social justice-minded leaders need knowledge of the ways in which schools can intentionally or unintentionally further marginalize Students of Color, [sic] those who live in poverty, and other marginalized groups” (Skousen & Domangue, 2019, p. 102). Theoharis (2007) also connected equity work with the distinction of the social justice leader, distinguishing them as persons whom have an agenda in their school leadership focused upon matters of “race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalized conditions in the United States...” (p. 223). However, it is the duty of the school to provide an education to all students within its walls, therefore every leader should also be a social justice leader. Not advocating for marginalized students means not advocating for entire populations within schools and failing students based upon factors out of their control and other than their ability or capacity to learn. Further, teachers also should be held accountable to and responsible for educating and advancing all students within their schools. This requires exposure to the concepts of social justice and a shift in the areas in which educators receive professional development and training for identifying and understanding inequities as well as strategies for change (Harris & Hopson, 2008).

The equity audit is a tool that can assist in this goal, but it is only a tool. Equity audits are a start in the identification of disparities in the learning opportunities for students within the school, and therefore should be commonplace within all schools everywhere. Combined with a goal towards critical consciousness, a social justice agenda, and the confidence and investment in all students as valuable individuals worthy and capable of high-quality educational opportunities, equity audits have the potential to bridge the divide between pedagogy and praxis and to make

all leadership social justice leadership (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Hernandez & Marshall, 2017).

The Missing Conversation

Equity encompasses so much more than serving students of color and students in poverty, yet, the available literature focuses mostly and almost solely on these areas. It is important to note here conversations about identity, gender, and sexuality orientations as well as (dis)abilities are also essential components of discussions of equity (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006). Given that in much of the literature teachers also vehemently tried to avoid conversations of race (such as with colorblind ideologies and praxis) it is especially perplexing that race is also the area receiving the most attention, negative or otherwise (Miller & Martin, 2015; Javius, 2017; Singleton, 2015; Hawley & Nieto, 2010).

The missing conversation(s), in the literature as well as the research within this study, is explored in greater detail in each article, as well as in the discussion section.

Conclusion

Historically, equity audits have been used for civil rights enforcement, curriculum auditing, state accountability, and math/science reform (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011). The application of equity audits to educational outcomes derived as response for the necessity to collect and disaggregate data to assess the success of a school as measured by performance outcomes, programs, and personnel adapted by Skrla (2004) as teacher quality, educational programs, and student achievement beyond that of standardized tests. Disaggregating the data highlights areas of need that may otherwise go unseen. Further, understanding the inadequacies in providing services to groups of students, aides in developing actionable plans to serve

individual student needs. Equity audits were developed as an easy-to-use tool that can be applied annually to continuously adapt and improve the myriad ways in which the school serves all students equitably.

However, despite the overwhelmingly positive reviews of equity audits and the potential impact on schools in having a way to systematically review services, personnel, and performance annually, equity audits are not commonplace nor even widely used in schools. Some of the reasons for this disconnect include: teacher leadership/administration coursework at the university level not including critical studies such as equity in program requirements; equity interpreted as the work of social justice leaders; dysconsciousness (King, 2006) prohibiting greater systemic change in favor of the status quo; embrace of meritocracy (Freire, 1971) and adherence to standardization as measurement of student success; and the complex and challenging facets inherent in education as a profession.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the various aspects influencing equity in schools today and to better understand the space between pedagogy and praxis. Thus, the following sections, while seemingly independent of one another, serve to be collaborative and complementary in representation of the larger concept of equity. This is provided with the acknowledgment that equity requires critical consciousness, support, and reflection to achieve its tenants. Therefore, each article presented attempts to provide another lens through which to unpack the complexities of equity work in schools that were never intended to be equitable.

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Transitional Statement

The following section utilizes reflection and critical analysis to question the ways in which equity and social justice minded teachers navigate inequitable school spaces. Through autoethnography, the researcher examines journaling and artifacts, seeking to understand the tensions created by “Gross Moments” in which the educator chooses self-preservation over fighting a system designed to discriminate and oppress some while meritocratically rewarding others.

Even culturally conscious teachers with socially just practices in mind, still look to test score data as indicators of the measurement of success, knowing that the tests themselves are inequitably constructed. Additionally, the most experienced teachers with the highest degrees are assigned to the highest performing classrooms and schools with the least experienced and least qualified teachers more likely to be in the lowest performing classrooms and schools (Kumashiro, 2012). The following study was conducted within a district considered as top performing in the region. At the school sites where the data was collected, practices mirror the literature; those teachers with the most seniority and tenure receive the most choice and autonomy and function largely above reproach. If “Gross Moments” represents the best that our schools have to offer, what then does that say about the potential for equitable learning environments in other less privileged school systems? Further, how can the narrative be changed to prioritize equity for all schools and create systems truly benefitting all students?

“Indeed, it is ironic that policies and practices that are particularly responsive to the needs of students of color are likely to be the best things we could do to enhance the learning of all students” (Hawley & Nieto, 2010, p. 71).

Gross Moments in Public Education: An Autoethnography

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Why is it gross?

Gross moments are those in which the experiences feel disgusting and uncomfortable and wrong, but also part of a system that prevents dismantling. The following is an autoethnographic reflection upon the gross moments in which I allowed inaction, masking of expression, and silence take hold for self-preservation. Those gross moments in which I replayed events in my head for weeks and felt shame and disappointment for not standing up to injustice, inequity, marginalization, and cruelty. The collection includes data in the form of journal entries, notes from meetings, reflections from encounters and other interactions within school settings, emails, field notes, and correspondence saved for the purposes of study.

Working towards becoming a critical scholar, considering myself an ally to marginalized groups, exploring my own intersectionality, developing my academic portfolio, are all processes that get carried to work with me each day. Having spent the last approximately thirteen years in some capacity of the field of education, teaching, and learning, *schooling* is not for the faint of heart. While my White, cisgender, seemingly heteronormative appearance allows me to navigate the system with greater ease than some, it isn't completely without encounters that leave lasting impressions.

The following manuscript is an exploration of the journey of just one educator in public schools. It is a pouring out of concern, frustration, and some celebration for times when my positionality, morality, and pedagogical beliefs clashed with my 'job'. It is written, in some ways, to be a cathartic cleansing of just some of that which has been held guarded deep inside for

fear of reprisal, and in other ways to further develop my critical consciousness. It is both the culmination and inauguration of a journaling and documentation process started in May of 2017, entitled “Gross Moments in Public Education”.

Methods

The second year into my graduate studies program, after taking a qualitative research design course, I decided to start documenting and organizing notes from meetings and emails to use for another study at a later date. Initially, I had wanted to conduct a postdoctoral autoethnography in order to publicly illustrate my struggles and perhaps find support and change in a larger audience. I was trying to understand my frustrations, explore why more colleagues weren’t also frustrated, and do something about all of the times where I felt that I wasn’t able to do much of anything. Additionally, the development of my professional practices and learning over the years has also been a development of my critical consciousness, the conceptual framework embedded here and within other publications related to this study (Beall & Andrzejewski, 2021).

It is significant to further note here that this autobiographical account only focused upon the years experienced as a teacher in the Deep South and does not include reflections of my professional experiences in other states. Although those experiences also shaped my pedagogy and informed my epistemology, I was not collecting documentation nor journaling for the express purposes of writing an autoethnography during those years in schools. In the last eight years as a teacher in a school system in the Deep South I have only directly witnessed one account in which racial and property lines were ignored in order to acquiesce to the needs of a family.

Sources of Data

Journaling

Eleven web-based journal entries written using Penzu.com starting the fall of 2017 to the spring of 2021 were recorded. Additionally, a dozen penned entries in response to faculty meetings, trainings, and encounters with faculty and families were also recorded, dated, and stored in my home for future analysis.

Field Notes During Course Facilitation --notes in meetings and documentation of interactions

The field notes are a consolidation of many of the jottings that I collected over the years in response to moments within the field where I felt compelled to speak up, but in most cases chose otherwise, for a variety of reasons. The context in which the notes were recorded, relevant background information, and my reflections are included with the analysis of each annotation. Where recorded, the dates and people included are listed, and the notes are organized in chronological sequence within subheadings. The field notes were recorded mostly in my planner during meetings, on sticky notes, or electronically in “notes” on my personal laptop. I then compiled these and stored at my home office to be used later for the purposes of this autoethnography.

Artifacts

The artifacts included in this autoethnographic analysis are authentic emails, pamphlets, handouts, and other documentation that I received throughout the course of my daily expectations as an educator. Each was specifically flagged and set aside for further analysis due to the response that they evoked in me upon their receipt. For example, Figure 4 is an email sent to all faculty, staff, and personnel at a school site with the intention of informing everyone to additional persons being on campus. However, I interpreted the message as an alert for all to

beware that men were present around our school and men, specifically men who are laborers, posed a threat to women (teachers) and children on our campus. Faculty often received messages when work was being performed on campus and a standard for school safety is to be aware of everyone present at all times, however the wording specific to this particular email felt troubled and fearful. We have had landscaping crews, comprised entirely of men, on site each month and did not receive an email warning. We have not received a message when a throng of White women PTO mothers ascended campus, actively wander the hallways, checked on their kiddos, then meet in the basement; and made an equally grand procession when leaving over an hour later.

Formatting for Analysis

The conversational and descriptive data has been deidentified using gender-neutral pronouns and regional locations. Journaling, annotations, and notes collected for analysis appear in italics; analyses and interpretations of the data appear in parentheses; and direct quote of persons appear in quotation marks.

Disclosure

The events recorded and critically analyzed within this article are depictions of my own thoughts, feelings, and perspective in response to personal and professional relationships and occurrences in my life. My goal was to critically analyze the experiences teaching at public schools in the Deep South in an effort to further develop my critical consciousness, improve my practice, and inform recommendations to school leaders. I did not intend to be hurtful or damaging in this research, as I'm describing many existing relationships that I have with family, friends, and colleagues. Additionally, I am placing myself at risk for reproach and potentially professional consequences for depicting school practices negatively. However, I have carefully

considered and believe my accounts to be significant, truthful, and the potential for future improvement far outweighing possibilities for harm. The harmful situations described herein have already occurred and someone suffered in some way as a result, whether or not I later talk about them again doesn't change that they happened. I believe the greatest risk to be for myself as both the instrument as well as the subject, revealing more about myself and my practice than any of my coworkers or the public know. There is the potential risk that my colleagues, upon reading these accounts and perspectives, may feel unfavorably about the ways in which their actions were interpreted affecting our relationship and in some cases friendship. Additionally, my questioning of the ways in which the school system I serve handles situations in racial, gendered, and culturally biased ways positions me for workplace scrutiny by my leaders, perhaps creating a tenuous work environment at best or cause for termination of my employment at worst. Protected somewhat by earned tenure, by being a White cisgender highly educated woman, by being well-liked by students and families, by having only positive performance reviews and no negative administrative action, I believe the outcome to be worth my risk. Further, that perceived risk and potential for harm is considerably far less than that of the harm and risk that marginalized and nonconforming persons experience daily and without the choice of risk and/or reprisal.

Theoretical Lens

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is the theoretical lens used to analyze my experiences as a public-school teacher due to its alignment with questioning of privilege and power applicable to school culture, inequities, and social justice. In an effort to create more emancipatory practices for the success of all students. Through critical pedagogy, the social context of the relationships between

myself and the families, faculty, fellow graduate students, and administration described herein were analyzed to better understand the ways in which a normative system prevents critical praxis and inhibits critical consciousness. “Critical praxis asks about the origins of inequities in classrooms and schools and what can be done about them” (Schubert, 1986, p. 315).

Specific terminology originating with Giroux’s 1983 *Theory and Resistance in Education*, critical pedagogy is an amalgamation of the works of critical theorists and educators seeking to inform critical praxis for social justice. Dewey, DuBois, Woodson, Green, Freire, Gramsci, Foucault, and Habermas have all been credited as contributing to the development of critical pedagogy, sharing a commonality of questioning the power and privilege within normative systems and advocating transformative action. Culture, oppression, and the formation of knowledge and truths enforced within schools are critically analyzed by the critical pedagogue, asking whose stories are told in schools and who is privileged by the systems and regulations in places of education (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). Critical pedagogy then has tenants in critical theory and seeks to question and understand critically the systems and processes for schooling.

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness functions as a fluid spectrum along which individuals find themselves employing critical awareness in order to question social structures and normative systems. A complete consciousness includes the disruption of inequity and the application of social justice not only to schooling, but in all facets of life. The development of critical consciousness requires continuous questioning, reflection, discussion, and transformation of practice (McDonough, 2009). Therefore, critical consciousnesses is an aspect of critical pedagogy, critical pedagogues are critically conscious and aware of the inequities around them

and actively seek to disrupt the systems that only privilege some (Sandoval, van Es, Campbell, & Santagata, 2020; Bianchini & Brenner, 2009).

Excerpt from journal entry during the Spring of 2018 while engaging in a teaching internship in an educational leadership graduate course entitled Multiprofessional Leadership for Equity:

[In] the breakout sessions... I was a little shocked at how easy it was for people to blame educational inequalities on any number of individuals other than the school, especially families. I heard long heated diatribes about how grandparents are raising students, parents are too young and permissive, and adults are modeling outrageous behaviors that students merely copy. I was not sure how to frame a rebuttal without sounding condescending or rude. Instead, I stated that although those could be factors of students' lives, parents and grandparents are not those handing down the punishments in schools. I asked then, why they thought that consequences such as suspension and expulsion were more likely for some students as opposed to other students. The answer I received shocked me more than the initial conversations, which was that it was because those students cannot read...

(The graduate students in this educational leadership course directly linked illiteracy with school consequences, specifically, in this discussion the participants expressed that because some students cannot read, those students are more often receiving consequences in school. The students avoided the topic of race as being a factor in school punishment and placed all of the blame both for school outcomes as well as illiteracy completely on the students themselves.)

...I am also reminded, however, that for many people they have never questioned their own positionality and perhaps are completely unaware that it (questioning power and privilege within the educational system) isn't an option for marginalized groups. Overall, I was disappointed in the initial promise of these future leaders, they didn't seem to be at all interested in being open and willing to consider, and I felt like I do pushing back at meetings at work. Like I am speaking a completely different language and no one around me wants to share in my glass of water. Again, this is very unfair to [these] students, I know them not at all, and is solely reflective of me thinking a whole lot rather quickly and being particularly passionate about human rights and equity.

(My questioning of the presented perspectives about students during the course of this conversation informed my thinking that these graduate students were not critically conscious, had deficit views of their and perhaps all students, in turn creating my deficit view of their potential for openness and change. This frustration contributed to the ways in which I spoke to and interacted with these

students, just as their frustrations in dealing with discipline issues in their schools along with their own bias contributed to their views about illiteracy, behavior, and consequence.)

Dysconsciousness

A lack of critical consciousness and the active maintenance of the status quo and protection for imbalance and injustice is conceptualized as dysconsciousness (King, 1991, 2006).

Dysconsciousness in schools includes deficit thinking and oppression.

Critical pedagogy, critical consciousness, and dysconsciousness are all further explored within data analysis and serve as the foundation for interpreting the significance of the journaling, memoing, and artifacts presented in this study.

Dysconsciousness in My Schools.

February 2017

"We are all going to sit indian-style and sing kumbaya"

"Wait-you mean criss-cross applesauce right?! Yeah, don't say that"

(Conversation during a grade-level meeting, making jokes about a new policy directive that was perceived by this educator as being too emotional and caring therefore trivial.)

While educational spaces are increasing in diversity and representation, dysconscious educators, whether consciously or unconsciously, work to maintain and preserve the status quo and construct their classrooms as White spaces comfortable to them as White teachers and giving little notice to the comforts of the students of color (Theoharis & Scanlon, 2015; Miller & Martin, 2015; Hawley & Nieto, 2010). At the start of a school year, teachers collaborate and share resources for students they are passing on to new teachers at the next grade level. In such an exchange in the Fall of 2017, a colleague discussed my new roster looking to share insight

about their past students, "I don't know how to say her last name, even though I had her 2 years... who else is on your list?", the name that they were describing was a last name of Mexican decent, and this teacher had also asked me before when I read student names accurately or with an accent if I had any "normal names like Smith or Jones". More often than not these initially well-intentioned moments quickly transition into gossip and stories about families that are completely unrelated to schooling.

This particular educator had also been teacher of the year, a grade-level leader, and had received an award and been featured on the local news (twice) for "developing relationships" with their students. They emphatically believed that some students are not capable of learning and had shared this sentiment on more than one occasion. For many years they had taught our old science standards because they refused to adopt the new ones, even though I did a new curriculum map, scope and sequence, and planned several of the lessons to aide in the adoption and acceptance. This teacher had used the same exact lessons and materials throughout their career modifying only the dates before submission. Over several years, I had slowly gotten them to accept a little change, but the first year I started working with this teacher they complained about me to our principal after our first grade-level meeting. Subsequently, I was reprimanded for questioning how we were supposed to do things and not acknowledging the expertise of this teacher and their like-minded colleagues. This teacher had shown that they were less likely to work as hard with some groups of students because of the difficulty this teacher may have in pronouncing the students' names. Their thinking and actions demonstrated they were resistant to the consideration of things that were different from their perceptions of "normal" and also that which they had done in their practice for many years. Their comments are "gross" because they demonstrate the damage that deficit thinking, cultural bias, and dysconsciousness can do to

prevent the development of supportive relationships between students and teachers thereby introducing more barriers to access and opportunity for already underserved populations.

Deficit Thinking. Children in schools are often described by their families, their address, their siblings, their discipline records, or their services. Often these conversations begin with the words, “well you know...” and result in something that more closely resembles a pilot for a dramatic daytime television show than a constructive conversation about how to support students eagerly awaiting our instruction and guidance. Teachers, like all people, enter into this profession carrying with them all of their experiences, assumptions, beliefs, and unique ways of interpreting the world. Unfortunately, many educators believe some students are more predisposed to or capable of learning and achievement than other students (Hernandez & Marshall, 2017; McDonough, 2009; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Shields, 2010; Valencia, 1997). This thinking extends to the expectations that teachers hold for their students and influences the content and manner in which they instruct some students when compared to other students. The perceived deficit may also encompass characteristics in addition to academics, such as behavior and character traits, as illustrated in this sentiment from a teacher in the Fall of 2017, “we can work with a hard-worker, I’ll take them all day long”, or this from a different instructor during the same meeting, “he’s the IEP and he’s lazy”.

The supporting literature refers to this phenomenon as deficit thinking and defines it as looking at negative influences outside of the student’s control, such as biological or environmental factors or socially ascribed factors such as race, as justification of their lack of need for high quality challenging educational experiences, rather than finding positive aspects of that student’s experiences that may help them to adapt to the normative expectations of modern schooling. Deficit thinking permeates all educational systems and has nothing to do with the

student themselves and everything to do with the perceptions of the adults responsible for those students' successful futures (King, 1991; Maxwell, Locke, & Scheurich, 2013; Miller & Martin, 2015).

Particularly troubling, deficit thinking remains largely unchanged despite interventions, such as direct social justice and critical consciousness coursework or professional development. In their 2018 study of teacher candidates in a social justice program Cross, Behizadeh, and Holihan found that critical programming did not impact the perceptions of teacher candidates once in the school setting. Overall the researchers were disappointed to find that the teacher candidates did not make progress in developing their critical consciousness, rather they were also actively engaging in setbacks to that development by routinely sharing deficit thinking, maintaining the status quo, and demonstrating dysconsciousness. This is especially disconcerting given that these teacher candidates engaged in and were participants of programming specifically designed for social justice and yet experienced this outcome. It is a stretch then to think that teachers graduating from general educator training programs would be in any position to understand and implement critically conscious pedagogy and social justice praxis. Ironically, the teacher candidates in this study were most concerned with self in their reporting, not self-reflection or analysis, but preservation, wellness, balance, and challenges to perceived authority. "Our results remind us of the continued disconnect between theory and practice and between what is discussed in courses and what plays out in schools" (Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, 2018, p. 143).

Deficit thinking has consequences for students and directly contributes to placement in classes, the number of opportunities for growth they experience throughout their schooling, and dropout rates. Cleveland, Powell, Saddler, and Tyler's 2009 study illustrates that students whose

tracks had them in lower level courses were more likely to experience lowered expectations from teachers and lowered response or delivery of instruction. This was reinforced by a shared belief expressed by some of the teachers that some students were not able to learn at high levels. As demonstrated by fieldnotes from the Fall of 2016, "Well, with their home life they are still happy and giving effort..." during a meeting about student performance data and interventions, discussing a student who was not passing third grade classes and already being pulled out of the classroom for reading interventions. And again, reinforced by an administrator when analyzing overall lower standardized test scores in the Spring of 2017, "But remember, we have 25% poverty". While the sentiments in both examples may be well-intentioned, the first is problematic, projecting sympathy for the student and not expecting the student to even try. The second is also problematic in that not only are the lower expectations for performance dismissed, but the scores are justified by the expectation that students living in poverty would underperform on testing and lower overall school performance data.

Additionally problematic, is the navigation of systems and deficit-minded individuals for critically conscious educators sharing the same spaces. Schools have been compared to factories and businesses (Serafini, 2002), but I have experienced them with an additional layer of complication similar to an intricately choreographed dance. The performers in some groups only know their own routines and are unaware of the overall production. There's always an understudy waiting in the wings should someone require replacement. Producers pull the strings and hold all the cards for decision-making. It is difficult to navigate the system when you are not versed in the performance and I find the balance of self-preservation and morality to be my delicate dance. Families experience the extension of deficit thinking, placing them at a greater

disadvantage when trying to advocate for their children (Sandoval, van Es, Campbell, & Santagata, 2020).

More often than not I have challenged deficit thinking carefully and questioned to bring attention to imbalance and unfairness. However, I have also bitten my tongue and twirled away to prepare for the next act and not disrupt something that I felt I could not ultimately change in that moment, returning home that day grappling with my choice and wondering what more could have been done. Changing the perceptions of others feels like an overwhelming and impossible task when this type of thinking permeates every understanding and interpretation of individuals and their needs in schools. Even seemingly benign conversations about families and support are indicative of beliefs about the capabilities of others, “Mom seems like she’s educated too...she (the child) came in street smart” (Fall, 2018).

Medication. Analysis of field notes, artifacts, and journal entries also revealed many instances in which a deficit was assumed that seemingly could be remedied by the use of medication, but would not be overcome otherwise. In my experiences, educators not being medical professionals, we are still often questioned about medical recommendations for students, including opinions about focus, attention, and mood-altering medicines, "If we give him a pill can he do?" recorded during a data meeting discussing a student’s performance outcomes, completing assignments, and the possibility of this educator suggesting medication during the late Spring/early Summer of 2017. Some educators freely and openly offer their personal opinions not only when asked, but comfortably within the course of conversation just as though discussing curriculum or lesson plans such as with this exchange and journal entry in the Fall of 2017,

"can't focus, needs meds; like will be on the table, out of chair, try to tell stories, ask questions constantly" --*this one really got to me as sharing connections and asking questions are linked to actual learning. Therefore, this particular teacher is identifying traits that would also be listed of an attentive high-achiever, but [here] these are considered negative characteristics.* (Through this comment, this teacher is demonstrating their beliefs that well-behaved students do not require medication; well-behaved students sit in their chairs and passively receive information; and because this student is unable to conform the teacher believes that medication would remedy their misbehaviors and make them a better student.)

The decision whether or not to medicate a child is also scrutinized and the family judged for deciding against the opinions of educators, early Fall 2017, "mom says she knows lots of kids who need help don't have medicine...thinks the teacher should help" *discussion about a student educators were suggesting needed medication and talked to parents about the assertion.* As well as in this entry from a different meeting that same Fall, "dad said he will not put ___ on meds" other person, "yep, that's what they always say". The first entry in which the parent expressed to the educator that they felt it was their responsibility to meet the student's needs in the classroom, rather than turning to medicine, was promptly dismissed so that the blame for inadequate performance rested solely within the family's refusal and the student's inability.

Despite personal views about the merits or deficiencies of physician prescribed medications for children, these educators should wholeheartedly believe in their students' potential to learn regardless of health factors and their own abilities to teach to all students meeting their unique individual needs (Mills, Villegas, & Cochran-Smith, 2020; Wade, Fauske,

& Thompson, 2008). Similarly, my own beliefs about the capabilities of all students is subject for scrutiny.

Pedagogical Lens: Brief Philosophy of Education

I believe that ALL students can learn at high levels and deserve a rigorous and challenging curriculum consisting of real world applicable and interesting thematic inquiry delivered by a highly qualified and highly motivated teacher. I believe that all students should learn how to conduct research, navigate finding information from a variety of reputable sources, and analyze the validity of the information they are presented in and out of school. I believe in differentiation for students, but not based upon ability, rather based upon interest and scaffolded for current level expecting that student will continue to thrive and surpass that level. I believe that all students should be supported through graduation and encouraged to attend higher education and presented with a wide array of options for future education and/or career pathways. I believe that all students should be taught together through inclusion, benefiting from interactions with their peers. I believe that students deserve cultural celebration, access to instruction in their home language, within a welcoming school environment. I believe that schools should be places where families can share a love for learning and feel connected with their community. I believe that teachers should be held accountable and led with open communication. I believe that school should be full of passion, trust, mindfulness, and wellness that extends beyond the school day and the school building.

Pedagogical Contradictions: Conflict Between Beliefs and Assertions

Referenced in the table below as well as within the following section, my current instructional position directly conflicts with my beliefs that all students should receive rigorous, challenging, and thought-provoking instructional opportunities in that I teach a program only

accessible to approximately twenty-five percent of top-performing middle elementary students. Although some efforts are made to recognize a diverse range of skills and aptitudes for program qualification, the unique and specialized instruction within the program is only offered to an elite population. Additionally, I acknowledge that the questioning, exploration, problem-solving, socioemotional, and creative interactive units experienced through the program would not only be beneficial to all students in all classrooms, but also students not served recognize that their peers are getting to leave the room for this elite function and they are not only excluded but prohibited from access and participation. I sought this position outside of the general education classroom because I felt that the program was inadequately serving students by providing them additional work at advanced levels rather than challenging their understanding and providing opportunities for exploration and growth based upon interests. In my program proposal I also advocated for the expansion of the learning space to be open to all students and for the instructional practices and materials to be incorporated into all general education classrooms for overall school improvement. However, at the time of this publication, expansion and inclusion efforts have been limited.

Positionality

Career History

See the table below, charting position, relative location, brief description of position, and years of experience in each educational experience.

Table 1

Researcher Career History

Position	Description	Location	Years
Student Teacher	I participated in a one-year post-graduate teacher education program called TeachNow that allowed candidates to take online education courses for credit while working in the classroom twenty-four hours	Western US; public elementary school, substitute	1

	weekly, resulting in certification upon completion. Because I already had my bachelor's degree, I was able to work as a substitute teacher the additional two days/week and gain experience in more classrooms as well access to a wider range of materials and resources.	in K-12 classrooms	
Substitute Teacher	There wasn't an available position when I completed my program, so I spent one-year subbing (most of the time at least four days/week) and then working as a Family Literacy Instructor)	Western US; public schools K-12 classrooms	1
Family Literacy Instructor	The Family Literacy program was provided for students and families at the elementary level intended to build a stronger relationship between non-English speaking families and the school. In this role, I tutored students new to the US after school each day for an hour and a half, then worked on homework help and reading with their parents as well for another hour each day. The parents were in an English language course offered by the school previous to our time with their children.	Western US; public elementary school	1
Instructional Lead Teacher	This school was a startup public elementary charter expeditionary learning school serving students in grades K-5. The training was extensive, and the pedagogy partnered with Outward Bound. There was not textbook adoption and teachers incorporated PE, music, and art into their daily lessons. Expeditions were taught for eight to ten weeks before changing to another topic and included Reading, Math, Social Studies, and Science based around that expedition. The school segregated students by gender, required uniforms, and mandated that parents commit to volunteer hours each year. I taught fourth grade boys and then looped to fifth grade with the same boys.	Western US; large inner-city public charter elementary (approx. 4 hours from previous location)	2
Substitute Teacher	I had my son the summer of my fifth-grade year at the charter school. I decided that I wanted to spend the first year of his life at home with him, so we moved back to the small town where family and relatives were located, as well as the community in which I had previously taught. While there, I worked on my master's degree online and substitute taught.	Western US; public schools K-12 classrooms	2
Elementary Teacher	In this position I taught third grade at a public elementary school in the Deep South. It was my first time using traditional curriculum materials such as textbooks and teacher manuals. I had experience working with single-gender classrooms, specifically with boys, therefore some students designated as having the most significant needs were added to my roster, two of which had 1:1 aides.	Southern US; public elementary school	1
Elementary Teacher	The school system rezoned the year after I arrived. Teachers were moved based upon need and input on preference. The elementary schools also switched from one K serving all students and individual 1-5 schools, to K-2 and "sister" 3-5 schools. In the new school, I taught 4 th grade Language Arts, then 4 th grade Language Arts and Social Studies, then 3 rd grade for 4 years, then 5 th grade Social Studies and Reading.	Southern US; public elementary school	7
Enrichment Specialist	Instructional position at the time of initial dissertation completion in which I taught students identified as gifted in grades 3-5 at two schools and then consult at another K-2 school. In this position I also administered creativity batteries, measures of intelligence, and facilitated the testing of all second-grade students for enrichment or gifted identification.	Southern US; public elementary schools	2, current as of publication

Current Position Disclosure

The position of Enrichment Specialist itself encompasses additional layers of inclusion that privilege some students while excluding other students. The process by which students are selected for consideration of eligibility includes multiple criteria determined by both the state as well as the local governing agencies. Initially, all students are screened in second grade for their potential to participate in the programming beginning in their third-grade year. Enrichment is similar to gifted school programs, but with screeners not requiring a full-scale IQ test. Students qualifying for the program receive three hours of pull-out services focused upon their unique creative, problem-solving, quantitative, expressive, and reasoning strengths often not expressly cultivated within the general education setting. Program delivery varies as instructors vary; however, I incorporated a hands-on project-based exploratory model integrating play and inquiry. Due to the perceived excellence of the students receiving services and the additional individualized attention for participants, the program is coveted by many students and families, however some students are referred and tested each year and never qualify. Students may be referred to be tested for eligibility by teachers or parents in addition to qualifying via the second-grade terms, providing that one term has passed since their last assessment.

While the policy for testing all second-grade students appears inclusive because all second graders are included in the process, the selection of students for the program as well as the program application is not equitable. For example, one aspect of the eligibility criteria includes a subjective teacher portion that requires teachers to rate characteristics of student performance and potential. Students must score highly on this criterion in order to be eligible for the program and often this particular aspect of eligibility is what prevents a student from qualifying. At times, the specialist administering the screeners may see greater potential than the

teacher recorded and confer with them about adjusting their initial scores. Teachers very rarely agree to do so and have a multitude of justifications, but those reasonings are informed by the beliefs that instructor holds about that student, their family, and their ability to perform in school; potentially introducing deficit thinking, racism, and additional cultural bias that could prevent some students and favor other students. Likewise, the specialist conducting eligibility may subjectively alter points based upon their interpretation of student work samples, allowing for the placement of some students and preventing the participation of other students. Additionally, the system rewards parents whom are privileged, in the sense that families who feel connected to the school and are more inclined to inquire learn more readily about the eligibility process and are more often aware that they can request to have their students tested again or tested in the first place if, for example, they did not attend that school system during their second grade year.

Intersectionality

Unpacking My Whiteness

I recognize that while my life has not been without some minor challenges, I am privileged as a White cisgender woman in a monogamous straight relationship and of middle-class status. I am afforded unearned and unfair opportunities for advancement in ways that others are not by virtue of my skin color, passingly normative appearance, education, and professional connections. While I cannot prevent this social imbalance from occurring and favoring me, I can fight to create more equitable experiences for all persons through my work and scholarship. I am not without fault and still unlearning the miseducation of my past. The journey of unpacking my Whiteness is one in which I am always at work critically analyzing who am I and what that means through education and reflection. Understanding my White identity as a socially ascribed racial identity has involved reading, participating in coursework and group discussions,

recognizing my privilege, and questioning my assumptions and attitudes about people who don't look like me. I have caught myself engaging in racist actions such as assuming that Black men are dangerous and walking faster or crossing to the other side of the street so as not to be alone in close proximity. Replicating bias and stereotype when I describe a Black student as "lazy" in their work, rather than seeking other ways to discuss their study habits. I have been called out by critical colleagues when I unintentionally speak in a disparaging way about an individual, because questioning privilege that has been a part of me and unquestioned my entire life takes consciousness, acknowledgement, and constant work. I find myself spending more time cultivating relationships with Black friends and asserting my awareness and aligning myself as an ally throughout the course of our regular engagement whereas I don't often discuss race with White friends and peers. I am grateful that my Whiteness was something I questioned from a young age, but also ashamed that I readily accepted so many privileges of that Whiteness and that I am not further in my journey having been on this road for so long. In some ways, I believe that my pull towards social justice is a call to understanding my Whiteness and atoning for its presence in my life when I wasn't as aware, informed, or questioning and participated in the segregation, oppression, and othering of people and groups I didn't understand.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

I am a cisgender bisexual woman married to a cisgender straight man in a monogamous lifetime committed relationship. I include this brief description here as an acknowledgement that bisexuality is an aspect of my identity, and that I do not nor have I ever experienced any discrimination for representation of this facet of my identity. Unlike other persons who identify as LGBTQ I can function daily in life without anyone questioning my gender or sexual orientation and lead a normative passing lifestyle. When in relationships with women I chose to

keep those relationships private, further adding to the privilege I experience. Finally, I find it necessary to include, albeit briefly, mention of sexual and gender identity here as it was a topic void of discussion during the interviews from the study in which this autoethnography is a derivative (Beall & Andrzejewski, 2021). Many students in schools do not have the luxury of going unquestioned, unnoticed, nor choosing to avoid this topic and neither should their educators or administrators.

Gender, Identity, and Homophobia in My Schools. In an undated (year) entry during a professional development and reading workshop on the first teacher workday after a winter break, I recorded comments to me by another teacher. At the time, I had attempted to push back on the conversation and was met with shock because this teacher felt so emphatically their analysis to be true. The presenter was wearing an exaggeratingly tiny gold glittered party hat, such as those worn for New Year's celebrations. Fitting considering it was the start of January. After listening for a while, the teacher said, "I'm so glad he took his hat off. I feel sorry for him" this fellow educator appeared sad and distraught. They went on to explain, "He is clearly trapped and thinks the world around him won't accept him; so clearly gay, oh he tries so hard, but it's obvious". This instructor was referring to the manner in which this administrator behaved in ways that she and most others have deemed to be feminine and therefore in conflict with his presented gender as a man. The sentiments about the LGBTQ+ community vary by individual, however, the messages to students, faculty, staff, and families range from confusion to open hostility with tolerance and acceptance being the rare exception. The dichotomous gender binaries of girl or boy, man or woman, are always strictly enforced.

Teachers, administrators, all faculty enforce gender binaries in subtle and overt ways on a daily basis. Everything from lining up for travel, grouping for learning, to projected academic

and behavioral abilities are viewed from the lens of rigid tightly held gender norms. Sentiments regularly shared include this assertions from several occasions during the Spring of 2017, "It's hard to get boys to want to read", or "I don't let my boys do that, too much responsibility, and they would break it" on using specific learning tools in the classroom as a part of a center rotation, or "I do girls and boys" answer in response to a question asked about how this educator differentiates instruction and creates small groups. The behavioral expectations of the ways in which boys act extends to men as aggressors or a threat as displayed in this email sent schoolwide in the Spring of 2018:

Figure 4

Email Correspondence from Administrative Professional to Whole School Email Group

Email
Teachers, We have 4 male roofers on campus today until about 12:00. Please monitor your students closely while out at recess and PE.

Note: Listed here as figure 4 due to the sequential inclusion in the dissertation.

Even confusion and uncertainty about LGBTQ+ terminology and concepts are turned into instances for mockery and sanctioning, such as in this schoolwide email sent the Fall of 2020 in response to teachers streaming entertainment while students eat lunch in their classrooms:

Figure 5

Email Correspondence from Media Specialist to Whole School Email Group

Email

Sweet Friends,

Just a gentle reminder to preview any video content you are pushing out to our kiddoes. The new “Babysitters Club” on Netflix has a transgender character and a character that identifies as a “horse.” These characters were not in the original series and I know you would not expect them to be in the tv series, but they are. [☺] It is always a good idea to watch what you are going to show whether it be for entertainment or instruction before you show it to your class. Let me know if you need any help finding content for any subject you are teaching: books, videos etc.

During the Fall of 2017, dropping off items and making copies, I encountered a casual conversation teachers and administrators were having about a student. The teacher was sharing that there had been problems in class and that they were unable to get the parent in for conference. Administrator, "Well, you know she has a 'partner'." Teacher, "Oh, okay" and the response was accepted as satisfactory explanation. The implication not spoken aloud during this interaction was that non heteronormative families have students whom struggle in class and are resistant to working within the expectations of the dominant school culture. Additionally, this interaction shared the assumption that same sex couples are unresponsive to the needs of the school and of their students within the school, demonstrative of a perception of the LGBTQ+ community and parenting.

Another entry recorded from later on the same day discussing a different student also demonstrated teachers’ enforcement of cisheteronormative expectations, blaming, and demanding assimilation rather than working to create a welcoming and accepting school culture. The student was described as struggling with third grade in general and challenged with communicating and relating to other students on top of the coursework. I helped this student find

their way on the first day of school, they didn't know who their teacher was, and we had found that teacher together. Since then we had always stopped to talk with one another. Their teacher was explaining the student's list of problems to us, "I mean come on, he carries a girl's lunchbox." Other teacher, "Can we get him a boy's?" Me, "Maybe he likes it and wants to carry that one." His teacher, "I think that it was just given to him that's all. It doesn't help him fit in any better and there has been some teasing and that doesn't help." The teachers' comments reflect attribution of the problem to both the student and objects that to which they gendered, overlooking the potential problems with the norms themselves, the supports in place, and the actions of peers in isolating and othering this student.

Any identity attributes that deviate from the norm are subjected to cruel scrutiny and judgement of overall character and ability which extends to the way in which teachers responded to that student or family not only socially but also academically. As illustrated by this exchange in the winter of 2017:

...“Why did she move classes?” Asked of me by a colleague nearing retirement who just completed their PhD. I responded with, “because she didn't have any like-minded peers or close friends and I teach with a more expeditionary learning style.” The teacher walked away then moments later came all the way back up the hall to say...“Well, when your hair is fifteen different colors each week it's no wonder no one wants to go near you or talk to you.” Earlier in the week, I overheard this same educator loudly ask a colleague, “Do you have any African Americans I can have?” their current gifted roster being comprised of mostly White students, they were looking to broaden their student base. This teacher had

not long before received honors and recognition for their work with Systems Thinking and innovation.

(The procedures in which this educator used for identification of students to their program did not adhere to policy with fidelity, greater attention and effort having been applied when seeking to qualify some students, such as those of teachers of affluent community members. These interactions and actions demonstrate the problematic nature of unquestioned assumptions, bias, and deficit thinking in caring educators who otherwise intend to serve and support students.)

Religion. Early Spring of 2018, I recorded an exchange that happened in the front office that unsettled me. Upon entering the building, a large group of my colleagues were all standing together with the principal and staff discussing something about which they were trying to assess. I lingered to see if this also pertained to me as I was teaching with that grade level at the time. I was informed that an anonymous letter was given to our principal issuing a complaint against a classroom and the school that this parent's child wanted to lay on the floor in stillness when they got upset. The parent believed and asserted that, "we are Christians and not Buddhist and should be teaching Christian fundamentals". In this instance, the educators present did not vocalize whether or not they supported the assertion, nor did they analyze the position of the parent, but rather were frustrated by the questioning of their classroom practices. However, sometime after this letter was received there was also an order issued to all of the schools from the central office that Mindfulness is not to be taught. An email artifact from the Fall of that same year reminds faculty and staff to not inquire about "mindfulness or yoga" when using BrainPop, a website in which kids search words for meanings and examples in a cartoon format from an informative robot, a website in which we pay for licensing each year as an information

resource. Students also utilized this website and searched for conceptual key words of interest or assigned by study, therefore, the mandate required that faculty limit students' searches as well.

Figure 6

Email Correspondence from Media Specialist to Whole School Group

Email
Friends, Please make sure when you use BrainPop you are not using information about mindfulness or yoga. If you have any questions please let me know.

Note: At the time of this correspondence and the mandates described above, there was also state legislation in place prohibiting the teaching of mindfulness and yoga in schools.

Social Class

While I wasn't raised in a wealthy household, we were certainly comfortably upper-middle class. I wasn't privy to our expenses and not aware of my parents' incomes, but some aspects of our living experiences led me to believe that we had more than my peers. For example, we took several vacations each year, one of those to a somewhat pricy and less populated beach destination for at least a full week at a time. We had a larger single-story home with a fully finished basement that had several rooms, an oversized yard on an extended lot, and an inground swimming pool complete with diving board and waterslide. In Michigan, just outside of Detroit, at least in my experience, social class was described by the street intersections at which you live. That understanding told me I lived few blocks north of poverty and we didn't struggle to pay bills or put food on the table. We always had everything for school and never had a creditor calling the house. As a member of a law enforcement family, it was always made clear

that we weren't working class, but a different class, better than those who were on the other side of the law, yet not quite as esteemed as the Gross Pointe elite.

As an adult, my husband and I both work two full-time jobs in order to support our lifestyle. Largely, because those jobs are considered socially acceptable and sanctioned positions, we experience a middle-class categorization. However, given higher levels of education and that we are working towards paying off debts, we have upward mobility in that social class ranking and could very well be upper-middle before long and without much effort. Notable here that we have access to resources to support our family and finances, and that we are accepted in a variety of social circles and experience mostly acceptance by our community and society. However, there is also another social class present within the Deep South amongst women; an expectation that certain brands of clothing will be worn, hair and makeup looking flawless and professional, monogrammed everything, matching children's outfits, and coordinated everything revolving around friends and football. This class level sits in between and within wealthy, upper, and upper-middle classes. I do not experience entrance to those circles and there are times my position as an outsider is made apparent and reinforced, but I could seemingly pass in those groups as well if chosen to conform and apply my capital, connections, and resources in other ways. In other words, my social class has not been predetermined by factors such as race or systemic poverty and I experience power, privilege, and choice.

Formative Youth

My parents were both police officers as were my aunt and uncle and nearly every other adult not related to me whom I idolized. Everyone else was military or retired military of some sort, my father having served on a special forces team in the army, my Opa a marine, and my uncle the same. Their occupations being significant in that growing up in the police force directly

impacted the way in which I viewed the world. I can remember riding in the backseat of a squad car, playing in jail cells, going through impounded items, celebrating the Fourth of July with confiscated fireworks, and learning about which freezers had various body parts in the basement carport storage of the police department. My father worked midnights, so he slept all day and was absent all night. My mother worked days, so she was gone all day and slept during the evenings. I spent most of my time alone or caring for my younger siblings. I found my own way around from the time that I was in the first grade, told time from cartoons, and fed my siblings and I by experimenting with pantry goods. In my experiences, cop families spent a lot of time with other cop families. There were regular massive picnics, gatherings, holiday parties, and even vacations all within the same groupings of the department. I knew men who beat their wives and children each night, alcoholics, ones who were sent to prison themselves for on-the-job related offenses, were routinely investigated by internal affairs, a man who was shot in the head on a traffic stop, nearly died, and was forever paralyzed, and several who died.

We lived in Warren which, according to my influencers, was far enough north to be better than Detroit and I thought that the methadone clinic on our block was comparable to today's urgent care facilities. I didn't need to fear walking the city alone, still my father taught martial arts in our basement several nights a week and I was required to attend every class. I could wield weapons or defend myself unarmed, whichever the situation warranted. As a teenager I was expected to carry and provided with a small baton keychain used to manipulate pressure points and a can of mace that was illegal for civilian use. I was taught to be aware, offensive, and aggressive is necessary. Also, in the basement was a storage room that was full of weapons taken off of 'criminals' my parents arrested, a deep freezer, a bar that was never used, and my father's office. He never really worked down there but kept items special to him and a

giant recliner that I envied. The office smelled like him and was off limits, so naturally I frequented the space and looked through every possible possession that was never meant for my eyes. Police officers tell stories, elaborately detailed and slightly exaggerated stories, but always based upon their truths. I'd come to realize that it was their way of coping with difficult situations and relieving the tensions from a demanding and draining job, although they did not describe storytelling in that way and shared their stories like badges of honor. In my youth I learned to try to unhear those stories. One day, while looking through forbidden desk drawers, I found the stories in the form of stacks upon stacks of Polaroids. All of the literally naked and raw death, dismemberment, and pain of the human condition described over drinks or dinners were real. I can still vividly recall detailed aspects of many of the photographs. I never went into that office again. I wondered why he had the photographs in the first place, but also why and for what purpose would he keep them in his home, or at all. I did not ask for fear of reprisal. I knew that he had conducted trainings for other officers, but could not fathom how the ghastly images could be educational tools.

Racism embedded

In those early years I struggled with my place in the world being clearly reinforced as above and better than others, specifically others who didn't look like me or lived in neighborhoods south of mine. As an adult, I have continued to unpack those things that were unsettling to me and now recognize them to be influences of White supremacy and racism. My questioning of these systems in my youth created constant conflict, argument, isolation among my family and their social circles and earned me the moniker of "the liberal". I was shamed for my rebelliousness, but what was really shameful was that it was blatant even to a child and teenager indoctrinated into this community that these thoughts and actions were unsettling—

even if I didn't know that they were racist. For example, I learned language that I never used, but took many years to learn the reason it felt uncomfortable was that it was undeniably racist. Every time we ate or were around mixed nuts a specific kind was referred to as "N—toes"; later, I learned they are called Brazil nuts, but for years I did not know that they had another name. Racial slurs and stereotypes were so commonplace that I did not recognize them as hateful speech.

There was also overt racism, such as not being permitted to accept calls, friendships, or interest from other children living in certain area and zip codes. In one instance, although the boy calling on me was White, his area code on the caller id was from a Black neighborhood and I was not permitted to answer or speak to him again. At the time I thought that it meant inner-city kids were troublemakers, I was certainly subjected to the criminalization of their families. I did not yet realize that my parents were establishing and reinforcing a color line. In high school, I had given my phone number to a very handsome young man who left a message on our answering machine. He ended the call with "peace" which, somehow to my parents, translated as an indication of his skin color. I was angry that they discovered he was Black and that they had openly forbade me from seeing or even speaking to him again. At the time, I thought my anger, frustration, and confusion over blatant hatred for human life to be purely rebellious. My parents and I already had a tumultuous relationship and my taking a stand on issues that surrounded every aspect of our lives was my standing against my parents before it was ever standing against racism, hatred, and injustice.

I cried and argued and insisted that my parents explain their views, their opinions, and their hatred and judgment of others. I was never satisfied with the few answers I received, most of the time being told that things were the way they were or that some people were just criminals

and bad people. It was ironic that my father was teaching schools of aspiring karate kids that “bad guys” don’t look like bad guys, they look “normal”, but he was teaching my siblings and I that they were also Black. I was told that the numbers do not lie, we are not racist, those are just the people who are committing the crimes, we are arresting them because they are guilty, they are different from us and we are better. While I’m glad that it was unsettling, the messages that I received and my indoctrination into White culture were intentional even if to a younger version of myself they were not always clear. I’m grateful for those experiences, they have allowed me a perspective that continues to support my questioning of the world around me, even though that questioning requires that I recognize and accept ownership that I have acted and thought in racist and marginalizing ways in my lifetime. I am still working to undo that cultural learning that was reinforced by societal norms that value Whiteness.

Racism in My Schools. In the Fall of 2012, I was riding along with a colleague to a professional development session for our grade level located in another city. I had barely arrived in the south only about a month prior and was still getting my bearings, so they offered to carpool. Talking on the way to the venue, the teacher discussed the possibility of lunch options and the area in general. They explained to me that the area was “dark” and therefore they did not frequent the location. I did not understand the reference and thought perhaps the location was high in crime or had a historical significance of a mysterious or dangerous event. I got confused and my questioning for clarification only confused my colleague too, so much so that they moved on to another topic. I recorded the exchange with the intent to ask another colleague with which I felt more comfortable. The other colleague I asked, explained that “dark” in this context and about this city in the south meant Black. I was aghast that the teacher had described a location in such a way and even more disturbed that everyone knew what they meant when I brought up the

conversation later with other area professionals. I remember feeling upset and frustrated that this coworker thought that I too would not only understand their use of terminology but also that it was sufficient explanation for why they did not know as much about the retail, commercial, and hospitality of that location to share with me as other cities. More importantly, that in this instance it was expected that I would be in agreement and understanding since I was White and the area was Black.

In another entry that Fall, a teacher was talking with a group of us while we monitored students at recess before dismissal. A student in our group got called to the office to check out early. As the student headed inside, the parent pulled through and caught our attention. Their teacher started talking about how that parent never contributed anything to the classroom for parties or supplies, the student received free/reduced lunch, and yet the parent was driving a Lexus. The teacher then went on to speculate that the parent must have done something dishonest or illegal to have obtained the vehicle. The statement was met by laughter and agreement by the other teachers in the group. I walked away to swing with my students and heard the woman comment about my weight and start a new conversation about me as their words faded into the distance. I felt like walking away was the only way to show my disdain for their behavior and that questioning or arguing was futile. However, it is in gross moments like these that I have also felt disgust with myself for not pushing back, for not making my perception known beyond disagreement, for not fighting for students and families.

The same page of field notes from the Fall of 2012 included a quick jotting about an exchange between an instructional coach and a teacher during dismissal. The teacher had commented about how one bus in particular arrived and left so loudly and had more disciplinary actions with students than other buses. The instructional coach responded by sharing that the bus

contained “inner city type kids”. In this example, the coach’s description of students was intended to indicate race, demonstrating a belief that Black students were loud and disruptive, but also illustrated another facet of deficit view: the educator’s attitude of them was dismissive—believing that their behavior was justified by their environment and that they were not expected to behave on the bus. Additionally, what does our shared normative cultural expectation of students sitting quietly on the way to and from school say about how students who talk, sing, or share stories are perceived? (Javius, 2017).

Fall 2020, journal entry recorded amidst the start of teaching both in-person as well as virtually during the height of a global pandemic:

We had a virtual meeting/training for remote learning today...Towards the end of the session there was some talk about the high online class numbers and if there was a cap on [the number of] students [permitted in one class before another teacher would be assigned]. Some mention was made about a teacher having 35 as a lot (I have 46) and how we would all just share resources and work together to support that person. The assistant superintendent cracked jokes and never would say a number. Then, said [to] expect the classes to keep getting bigger and we would just keep doing our part. Finally, they said that in response to the large class sizes we were actively conducting home visits to ensure that students were really in-district and that we could perhaps reduce numbers that way. Not hiring another person, or assigning more support, targeting (likely poor and marginalized) students to kick out of our schools.

Days later, I recorded this moment:

This morning, during car line duty, a mother and daughter pulled out of the line and parked their car. I watched as they got the child's backpack on and affixed masks. Our principal was radioed by the person directing cars that a parent was coming up to the office. She responded that she saw her and continued to watch outside with me, where the AP was also located. Being the last person in the line, the parent reached me first. I welcomed them to campus and smiled and continued my duty. The woman stopped and asked me about where to go because it was her child's first day. I even more excitedly welcomed the family and asked if she knew her teacher. She said no, so I informed them to follow me to the office so we could look up the information and I could walk the child to class as parents are not permitted [inside the building] due to COVID-19. On route, the parent asked me if it was too late to get school supplies. I responded that the order for one's delivered to the classroom were already closed, but that I would be happy to grab her a supply list when we got into the office. In the office I introduced the family to our

front office person and asked if we could look up their information. The office person spoke to me as if the family were not standing there and said that she (referring to the woman) wasn't registered and couldn't start today. Then, she turned to the family and asked the woman if she had been to the central office. She said that she had dropped off the paperwork. The office woman argued and said that no, she submitted an affidavit and actually needed to register, like she told her before, and to do it online, and she couldn't help her. I awkwardly started to walk away and continue helping other families. After car line, I dropped off papers in the office. The [front office person] told me that the woman had been trying to register many times before and that she (the employee) had done everything short of doing it for her and that she refused to do it for her. She said that she wasn't going to allow her into our building to use our computers and internet and she needed to figure it out. She said that she told her the same thing last week. I responded that I felt terrible for the child who was clearly dressed and ready for her first day, backpack and all, and already a day behind her peers, who had to watch and listen and go home without school. She said that well that parent has had since February and this hasn't changed and they haven't registered so it's on them.

The following journal entry from the Spring of 2018 depicted the reaction of a White educator when confronted with accusations of racism and unfairness. The teacher went through a range of emotions and actions; starting with defensiveness, arguing, pleading, retaliation, denial, and seeking validation and justification of their being a good person and therefore not racist. This teacher vehemently refused to allow the conversation about race to occur and instead transferred frustration onto the student, the student's family, and the student's cultural attitudes and behaviors. The encounter resulted in anger and rejection.

Today was Science Olympiad competition day...I arrived at 8:00, with a bag full of snacks and treat for the other team coach and supplies for our participants. I spent all day breaking my body for families and am now a puddle of a person on the couch. There were many wonderful moments, but also many that broke my heart. After returning from an event I found [the]other coach all upset outside of our team room. They said that they were apparently racist. They then went on to explain that while they were handing out pizza a Black boy belonging to our group asked if his mom had paid. They told him no, but said then tried to hand him pizza, but he left. The teacher was upset because the mother had, according to them, tried to pay her for pizza throughout the day at inconvenient times. The first time the teacher was busy and doing opening ceremonies and told the parent to meet us in the team room. Then the woman came back to interrupt them again asking if the teacher had seen her younger toddler child, the younger brother of the boy. Back in the team room

when the mother tried to pay again, she was again turned away for yet another reason.

(The coach's description of their interaction was troubling because they questioned if this student had paid for food but had not openly questioned other families and students while withholding pizza. Additionally, while this family had not paid in advance, they were actively trying to work with the coach and interact in numerous ways to meet the coach's expectations only to be met with repeated rejection.)

I watched my colleague [the coach] pay for pizza, pretty much for everyone. Many said they would have some, but not all, and a few gave her cash, but not most. When the pizzas had arrived, and the students lined up my colleague made a face and a comment about how this was more people than said they would eat pizza and hopefully there would be enough. They didn't question any of those White kids if their parents had paid or not [and had] a napkin and pizza already ready for them. I wasn't in the room when the event that they described did happen, but I do believe that [this teacher was] unfair and racist to that family. The mother and her son left, and the mother told [the teacher they] were being racist--according to the colleague. Later, at the awards ceremony the colleague looked around specifically for that student and parent and made a comment about how they left and oh well. The student ended up coming in later just before it started, and the teacher was surprised and noticed them in the crowd of our students right away. The teacher then looked around and commented that the mom was probably out waiting in the car [since] she had already lost another kid that day and was late and that was for the best. That student was also late being picked up [from practices] most of the time. I stayed with them on those days so that colleague wouldn't have to and [therefore] not have a reason to complain. The teacher does have a good heart and cares about kids, but not unconditionally, not all kids, and not if their parents upset them. I walked away from several moments throughout the day. The teams were predominantly White and many of the schools competing were private academies and/or magnet schools. Students of color are often not given the chance to compete at such levels, and when they do, we treat them differently and are surprised if they are capable.

Hidden/Covered Racism. Navigating school systems can be difficult for families.

Although schools serve all students in every population everywhere across the country, there are many unspoken expectations and nuances involved within the system that create barriers for some families (Brandon & King, 2006; Ishimaru, 2019; Javius, 2017; Theoharis, 2009; Woods & Hauser, 2013).

A common response to “difficult” parents, or those who demanded answers and time from administration, if they are families of color, was to conduct a home visit. The intention of home visits by the school’s social worker to be to determine wellness, however, it was also wielded to identify zoning violations, hence turning away those problematic parents and their issues to burden other schools or systems. In my career I have experienced administrators requesting home visits with students whom were frequently tardy (because they must be driving from somewhere outside of our zone), parents whom were insisting in an IEP for their child/children, and families where administration and front office staff were aware of complex relationships with many siblings and relatives (assuming they must be transient students as a result of dramatic home lives and likely not living in our zone).

Paperwork, internet access, and documentation are also used as barriers to educational opportunities directly aimed at families of color and especially families of color living in poverty (Skousen & Domangue, 2020; Cleveland et al., 2011). There had been only one exception that I witnessed to this covertly racist practice of exclusion and barriers to access in my schools. The family informed the teacher(s) and front office staff that indeed they had recently moved but didn’t originally say anything because the new home was zoned for a different school. This information came to us in February of that school year. School policy dictated that students zoned for another school due to a move must attend the zoned school, and administrators strictly and immediately enforced this policy. However, this family was headed by a prominent coach for the local college football team and they were known contributors to our PTO and supporters of the school. The students were permitted to complete the school year with their friends. That same week, I had a student in my class in which front office learned had also recently moved and was now zoned elsewhere. My student, a sweet Black boy, was also being evaluated for an IEP

as requested by his parent. The family was informed that they could not return to school the next day. He did not get to say goodbye to his friends or even finish out the week, despite my protests. Unfortunately, his case is only one of many that have happened throughout my career.

More significant than the sad feelings and the severed relationships is the damage that forced transience inflicts upon already vulnerable students (Branch & Leigh, 2017). And yet, comments like this were commonplace in strategic meetings about data and services, "we'll put in a residency check in January, because I know she's not in my zone", during the Winter of 2016, principal discussing a student of color receiving interventions and described as having difficult behaviors in the classroom. Or this sentiment also shared by an administrator in the Spring of 2017, "Well aren't they moving, maybe it's time for a home visit" when discussing needs for a student who was not passing and would require additional supports.

May 2017

This morning I was at school early for a parent conference. I went up to the office to make copies and overheard a conversation from three staff members. The whole group was in an uproar about something, one of the group members went on about a German woman that they knew who was 95 and not okay with people making excuses and coming to the country illegally and if she could do it they could do it too. This person was using this example to say the same and holding her as the pillar, she can so they can, and there is no excuse if they have not. Then, the conversation turned to some of our parents coming in and how one "acts like she doesn't know more than she does". She came in to try and register using our internet and computer (the school's). The colleague telling the story went on about how they just couldn't understand her and finally, exasperated, asked to write it down, (because if you can't speak a language of course you can write in that language, right?) and she wrote down "info snack" instead of info snap. All three had a great big laugh and I turned and left just as quickly as I had entered. Moments like these suck. I want to say so very many things to each of those superior jerks, but I also have to pay my bills and support my kids. Sure, I could get another job, but then I wouldn't be able to be home with them during breaks and summers and we have five total so a nanny would be incredibly expensive. Not to mention that I want to be an academic leader so I have to do my time in the trenches too...

February 2018

Colleague tells me about the local high school debate team state competition in which, for the first time, an “all Black” team was present. The educator shared how surprised they were that the team was actually pretty good and that they even had matching jackets. They shared these same sentiments with the team’s coach at the event.

The Profession

Physical and Emotional Demands

Teacher education programs often focus upon the how to teach content and the logistics of what happens in the classroom. However, often overlooked are the nuances that further complicate aspects of the role that make an already challenging occupation even more mentally and physically draining. Educators have long heard the chiding remarks from the general public about how their complaints are unjustified due to their long weekends, holiday breaks, and summers “off”. Teaching is a unique profession that demands an emotional, mental, and physical investment that is challenging to maintain. The hours are long and do not include simple and often overlooked “luxuries” such as unsanctioned bathroom breaks, eating a complete meal in more than ten minutes alongside students who need things opened, and having a break during the day that affords enough time for more than a trip to the restroom and a few copies. Afterhours, teachers usually bring the work home with them, spending evenings planning and grading papers on their couches so that they can attend to their own families or their sanity. Educators are always “on” and we promote attention, excitement, and enthusiasm all day. The socioemotional needs of students, the expectations and demands of parents, the constant changes to and challenges added to the profession, and the relationships with administration and colleagues are some aspects that elevate this position to more than a meager paycheck.

The burnout rate in education is high (Chang, 2009) and I have looked at job boards every year of my career. There are days that I just want out of the classroom and to be able to

leave things at work and go home unscathed like ‘regular’ people with a nine-to-five job. I’ve wanted to quit and only stayed because my own children are in my school and I wouldn’t want to have to put them in daycare during breaks and summers. I also value the benefits afforded me that allow me to manipulate the system as needed for my own children. Although, those benefits have also had their setbacks over the years, limited by administrators in other schools or central office personnel. Still, being on the inside is better than being on the outside. I always grapple with considering myself a leader for social justice and then wanting out of the system when things are tough. I do have a passion for students, families, and education and do not only stay for the aforementioned reasons, but sometimes the exhaustion takes hold of my thinking. Chang (2020) posits that in order to help teachers deal with their emotions and in turn affect burnout, it is important to understand what teachers believe about the display of their emotions within the context of their profession. For me, it was a daily consideration and piece of self-reflection, does my desire for moving into academia conflict with my goals for social justice? Can I lead future teachers and impact enough administrators to influence systemic change?

Parents

Parents want the best for their children. Regardless of the ways in which they may convey that message or how teachers may hear that message, families want their students to love school and to succeed. But the relationship between parent and teacher is complex and extends beyond that of a direct to consumer relationship in other industries. Families are often the source of blame as external factors, rather than internal factors, when assessing problematic school outcomes such as poor grades or failures (Hernandez & Marshall, 2017; Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, 2018; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004) Miscommunication, stressors within the field, and misunderstanding of educational systems not truly meant to serve families in the first place can

create exhausting and draining relationships. I've had parents call me at home at night demanding answers about grades, parents corner me and question me about students at the grocery store, parents email me repeatedly all night wanting me to immediately respond, parents yell and scream at me with expletives, and even one parent lunge over a table at me and threaten my life over a misunderstanding and an event that never happened. There were parents who made my day harder and challenged my ability to separate work from personal, and I did avoid too much interaction with those parents where possible. As a parent myself though, I cannot say that my responses to school situations are better than those of other parents not in the system.

The difference is that I know, for the most part, how to navigate and manipulate the system to get what I want for my children without my family ending up on the “difficult” parent list. Once parents are deemed to be challenging to administrators, that view also in many cases extends to their children, changing the ways in which teachers choose to respond to those students. For example, the relationship between student and teacher may suffer as a result of the teacher lessening interactions with that student so as to stay under the radar of the parent. I have certainly been more careful with some students as a result of my relationship with their parents, despite my desires to be fair and caring towards that child. Through a critical lens, educators and administrators should not be questioning the values and motives of the parents, rather we need to be asking why does this system need navigation in the first place? Do families feel welcomed in schools? Most importantly, do our school leaders want for families to have a place and presence in our schools? These questions are explored in greater depth subsequently in examination of artifacts and field notes involving interactions with parents.

Further, the challenges to complex adult relationships, made more tenuous when teachers are in control of the wellbeing of other people's children, are harder to navigate accounting for

cultural diversity in the nation that is not replicated in classrooms. As a White parent and teacher, I understand best the expectations and norms of other White middle-class families. I have to intentionally work at developing relationships with people different from me and I have to want to understand their expectations and norms to best meet the needs of their students. Anything short of efforts for understanding, often result in deficit thinking rather than recognition of assets, and directly affect the success of the student and the interactions of the family with the school community (Delpit, 1995; Howard 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2006, 2014).

Colleagues and Administration

Playing the Game. For me, when I started in education, I didn't know that there was a game to be played. In my student teaching, I was sheltered from the politics and many of the frustrations that some teachers experienced, and honestly there was much less of the game to be played during those formative years. I learned quickly that I needed to earn the recognition, respect, and trust of my colleagues, but once I established myself as a serious educator, we were a tightly supportive group who worked cooperatively for the improvement of all students, faculty, and staff. Reflecting now, I think that was largely an outcome of a small-town school system, with only one each elementary, middle, and high school. There was a clear connection to community through the eyes of our students. We knew their families intimately, eat at their restaurants, shop in their boutiques, and are treated in their clinics. It is also important to note that those schools served mostly White populations with many immigrant and Spanish-speaking populations and no African American students.

Although my next couple of years teaching was in an urban environment in an area known for high levels of crime, poverty, and dropout rates; I still felt close and connected to my families and colleagues. The student population was diverse and representative of the

surrounding community and demonstrated the same level of dedication to their children and care and commitment for their education. I learned that small-town schooling communities can operate as a mutually beneficial genuinely caring group, and so can large diverse city schooling communities. However, present in eight years of teaching in the Deep South, I was consistently made aware of the fact that there was a game and politics in play and participation was not optional.

I spent the first-year teaching in this new environment in somewhat of a survival mode. Although it was not my first-year teaching, it was my first in a traditional public-school setting. I had not before been in a situation where teachers used textbooks, teacher's manuals, and answer keys. Even though my student-teaching was in that environment, my mentor teachers embraced project-based and individualized experiences at a level that positioned teacher texts as supportive rather than driving instruction. However, at my new school, there was an emphasis on "the curriculum" that really translated into following along in teacher guides evidenced by walking across the hallway from one third grade classroom to another and hearing teachers almost complete each other's sentences. I found it really challenging and stifling to be expected to be doing a specific task on a specific day of the week and time, each and every week just because that is what everyone did and had always done. I did not make many friends, kept my head down, and worked like crazy to find a balance so that I would not get fired but I could also do the things that I knew were supported by research to truly impact learning. It was exhausting, I started going through a divorce halfway through the year and learned at some low points that the game was being played, my piece was being moved for me, and everyone was watching and weighing in on my progress. Living in the South and working in a public position has, at least for me, felt like living under a microscope.

I found the whole thing to be nauseating and over eight years later little has changed. I am much more aware than I was before, but I still experience shocking revelations in those times that I forget to also consider how my actions may hinder my advancement or be damaging to my position. Long gone are the days where open communication thrived, trust in this space is superficial and tenuous, and professional adults ignore things that are blatantly obvious to everyone to protect their status quo (Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008; Chang, 2020; Brown, 2010). There are things here that cannot be said, questions that cannot be asked, and feelings that cannot be shared. It's lonely, frustrating, and confusing.

Thankfully, I have had at least one willing administrator and a handful of colleagues who offered refuge and aide in navigating this system for me. Those alliances do not reduce fear and frustration, nor do they assist in disrupting cisheteronormative, racist, and oppressive systems. I do not feel protected or confident in my position and believe that I will be cast aside if it means protecting this system or caring for me as an employee. However, I am also not a victim, I still experience power and privilege that allow me the choice to engage the system and to take risks at will. Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, (2006) discuss having to choose when to engage in social justice work as it involves taking a risk in which I am not safe from reprisal, asserting that throughout school systems there needs to be a sense of "emotional safety" in order to "take risks toward social justice ends" (p. 212).

For example, in this community, connections and management of those relationship(s) matter. There are teachers whom always arrive early to work, stay late, make home visits to genuinely develop relationships with students, show deep care and compassion for their students, and spend evenings planning elaboratively creative and dynamic learning experiences for their students. Then, there are teachers who are frequently late, leave randomly during the day to grab

coffee, rely upon worksheets and anything with an answer key that requires the least amount of effort, and sit behind their computers while their students work silently alone. The latter is the teacher who often has student teachers, not because they will demonstrate groundbreaking habits and examples, but rather because it will further lessen that teachers' performance expectations. Both types of teachers sustain in the same school but being within that school for the most years and/or being friends with administration speaks louder than education, expertise, and quality of instruction.

Nastiness. Unfortunately, I cannot find a better term to describe some personalities and relationships that exist in my school experiences than nastiness. I have found nastiness at every school and every level in each position I've held in the Deep South. While I write and reflect as an insider who has worked in these schools for the last eight years, in many ways I am still considered to be an outsider. Coming to the South from the West and growing up in the North meant that I was not familiar with many cultural nuances of the area. Not having ever eaten grits (I had no clue what they were) or participated in a tailgate or visited Chick-fil-A (still have not and will not for many reasons) were viewed as deficits by my new colleagues. As a result, I was placed into a category for my peers to try and understand how to interact with me. I was deemed the hippie health nut who wanted all of her students to learn outside and "play" all day and refused to use soda and candy as "rewards". In some ways I was good with this assessment because it provided me a grace to be myself and my colleagues a way to attempt to understand me better.

However, there are people in life and definitely in schools, who are not interested in understanding others better. It is vicious sometimes in school politics and feels like everyone is out for themselves at the expense of others. I have been 'told on' to my administration because

another teacher thought that I was out of dress code. This teacher saw me in ripped jeans, a t-shirt (MTV), a flannel around my waist, and large black combat boots. I was dressed this way in celebration of decades spirit day (hello eighties baby who loves nineties grunge) at another school site where I had taught all day only to return to still do duty at my homeschool site. This teacher was both aghast at my appearance, but also used this opportunity to request that they too get to wear their cuter ripped jeans, since our jeans may not have holes. My administration pulled me aside at the end of the day and I had to justify my look and explain myself as well as apologize for creating a problem with other staff since apparently more than one had raised concerns.

In another incident, serving many schools, I accidentally put the wrong school mascot in a closing on an email, my words included, “I’m so proud to be a [school mascot]!” My efforts to connect with a group whom I did not see often because I was more frequently at other campuses was received as my being offensive and showing off my love for other schools, rather than a simple error. Instead of addressing this concern with me, the offended colleagues went to my principal at that school site. Again, instead of addressing this oversight with me, that principal logged it and later used it as a complaint to the principal at my home school site as to how I was not a team player. After being blindsided by grievances, I confronted the principal questioning my service and asked how I could improve. I was informed that they were not upset or disappointed, just thought that I was not successful at making friends and even though they acknowledged that I did not have any planning or break times during the day, I should be working on fellowship with my colleagues. This expectation for fellowship included participation in the ‘optional’ annual Christmas party. I was then acutely aware that doing my job

well and supporting students and families was not enough, that my working across several school sites or doing the job intended for multiple specialists was secondary to my conformity to norms.

On another occasion, as I was leaving a school site on a Friday to head to another school and finish working at that location, I told the front office staff to “have a great weekend” as I dropped off materials and headed towards the door. The staff present looked at me, then at their wrists, then laughed to each other and made comments of which I only heard, “must be nice...” and assumed the rest considering I was departing before our required service time.

For me, nastiness is when adults actively choose to be negative towards one another when there is the option to act positively or with kindness, creating hostile environments. These attitudes permeate everything in schools and add to the climate as well. In my experiences, those whom were nasty to me were often also nasty to students and families (Blankstein & Houston, 2011; Green, 2017; Maxwell, Locke, & Scheurich, 2013). While the few incidents depicted here were minor, they are representative also of how schools can be places of discomfort and frustration even for insiders. Also, these few incidents are actually not few, and these behaviors demonstrated regularly have had an effect on me over time. Further, critically conscious teachers concerned with social justice need to feel that they are in a safe space in order to take risks and challenge inequities in the system (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006). While I do not believe that only social justice-minded leaders should be responsible for conducting this work, I do believe and the literature supports that in order for leaders to disrupt injustices they must feel like they can have an impact in doing so and that they are safe from sanctions as a result of their actions (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006).

Nastiness Does Not Spare Students and Families. I’m still learning about the game each day and I work to avoid it as much as possible. When I smile and bite my tongue rather than

challenging a situation, I am playing the game, preserving self, and allowing for the replication of the status quo. Although I do feel that those handful of people with whom I have trusting relationships do know my heart and passion for children and schooling, they still expect me to play the game as well and have even asked that I maintain silence on more than one occasion.

Spring 2018 journal entry:

In a grade level meeting yesterday, we briefly discussed students whom are, at this time, expected to fail third grade based upon their performance trends. The first thing that my colleagues do is to blame families, the second is [to blame] the ability of the students, and the third is to look at their physical address and probe about whether or not they are actually residing at that location--as zoning could require that student to move and no longer be an issue at our school. This intentional shifting of students happens constantly. Especially students of color and in poverty, they get questioned about their lives to determine if they actually do live with grandma or mom and then a home visit is scheduled and there isn't even a chance to say goodbye to friends, those students just disappear. This has happened more times than I can count since I began working in [this school system]. I have never been subjected to this practice in the past in my career, and it has always been unsettling and disturbing to me.

At this meeting, it was revealed that the little girl in question is actually not living at that residence because she is in a safe location with a distant aunt. She would have otherwise had to go into foster care because her grandmother who was trying to care for her has too many DHR judgements against her and her mother just got out of jail and she is violent, father unknown. As such, our administration said there is nothing that we can do to them when DHR is involved or they are homeless, we just have to keep on teaching.

This week a teacher at my school...was interviewed on the news broadcast and talked about how their main priority is to build a relationship with their students and that's why they have so much success. Two days before [the interview] they were singing to a fellow teacher and I, "it's called...don't be stupid, don't be stupid" again and again as we were discussing students being confused by Canada and Mexico not being states in the US, but different countries...Last week this teacher led the charge to change a reading test deciding that it was too difficult even though those skills are ones that are a deficit in their classroom and were identified at another meeting as needing greater attention. We are supposed to have common grade level assessments (which has gotten me into trouble more than once) and they did this without notifying three of us, myself and two of my colleagues on the team. We actually found out [about the change] by accident, and I know that this isn't the first time. It was dishonest and wrong not to mention bad for students.

Professional Development

At the beginning of the year, as policies and expectations for staff are established, the administration sets aside at least one day of each month that faculty will stay late for meetings or professional development. Everyone is explicitly and emphatically informed that they are not to make other appointments on those days. During one late (at least twenty minutes past our normal departure time but less than an hour at most) development session during the Spring of 2017, I recorded the following, “I don't need this; I don't teach this grade.” “I need to get out of here...I have to go...oh, well, guess I'll get fired.” “I didn't think it would take this long.” Combined with the message of “...we already do this” professional development is often largely viewed as a tick mark on a to-do list rather than an opportunity for advancement of practice.

Professional Learning Communities and small group opportunities for advancement were most often *voluntold*—hand selected and specifically chosen participation required as assigned by administration. The annual self-improvement goals were chosen ahead of time by administration and all faculty work on the same goals regardless of their self-assessment of proficiency. However, the data throughout this article demonstrates a tremendous need for development. Further, professional development alone is not sufficient to change the minds, attitudes, and beliefs of educators already exercising exhibiting deficit thinking about the needs and abilities of all students.

Compassion

Students are Unemployed Children. Tardies are an interesting means of tracking in school systems, especially at the elementary level. Given that the students in elementary schools are not in control of the ways in which they arrive to school, they also should not be the representatives with whom we speak when they are chronically late to school. From a critical

perspective, instead, the questioning should involve removing barriers to arriving on time and providing supports to ensure success. The student, again not being responsible, should be met with care, concern, and compassion. Tardies for me have been an area of frustration working in my recent school placements as I have witnessed students looked down upon and treated poorly for being late. Responses such as, “Oh, well you missed ____ hurry to ____” abound rather than, “Welcome, we are so glad that you’re here today”. Seeking to understand the lives of students outside of the classroom means trying to understand lateness. Sadly, the response for administration is often to check on the home listed on registration to see if the student is even living there and perhaps should be rezoned, the issue passed along to another school in the same district.

Nourishment. I have chosen to include food in this study because food and water are requirements that everyone needs for basic functioning and survival and they are also highly regulated in schools and classrooms. Teachers decide when, where, and how students may eat and drink as they do all other procedural tasks in their classroom. The difference between eating a snack or drinking water and for example, sharpening a pencil, is that food represents a basic human need that has greater impacts for the success of the student.

Food. Snacks are judged by their content, size, and number. I have heard teachers lament students bringing in too many snacks and acting as though school and their desk was “an all-you-can-eat buffet” and telling students/families they may only bring and eat one snack. Likewise, the quality of the snack is assessed and only ‘healthy’ items in many cases permitted, determined by teachers that it will have an adverse effect on the students’ attention and energy. The healthiness of the snack is also a subjective category as teachers suck back soda, sugary coffees, and the latest sweets from the break room. This practice of sanctioning certain foods threatens

the security and nourishment of high poverty students who may have limited access to higher quality foods either due to cost or availability. Further, as discussed in students being unemployed children, elementary and middle school aged children are not purchasing their own groceries or snacks and have limited to no control over what they are sent with to consume at school.

I take issue with the notion that students living in poverty should be happy with whatever they get because it's better than nothing. I have heard and argued against this notion on many occasions and the occurrences have not lessened over the years. The conversation begins with a teacher heatedly exclaiming that if the student(s) truly were hungry they would eat the banana, raisins, or fruit cup discarded by the wealthier therefore rightfully pickier students, that were deposited into the shared community bin or at the end of the breakfast/lunch line. This thinking is not limited to teachers, but also includes administrators and the counselors responsible for obtaining resources for students in need. It is similar to deficit thinking, yet different in that the deficit being questioned is the level of preference and number of options poor students deserve.

The option and details for snacks during the day is also relegated to the discretion of the classroom teacher. Some teachers permit snack time and build it into their schedules. Other teachers do not structure food consumption but allow it to be at the discretion and hunger of the student, although in my experience this option is infrequent. Within the school system that I served in the deep south, snack time ended by fifth grade, as though older students were less hungry. I personally love to snack during the day and eat whenever I am hungry, but I too am subjected to the stringent mandates of the system as I am provided with a time and manner in which I may eat. Along these same lines, teachers may also choose whether or not to provide snacks for their students. I always purchased my classroom an abundance of snacks and gave to

anyone in line at snack time, regardless of the length of that line. Snacks for my classroom were a regular staple on my grocery list and they needed replenishing often. The same teachers who (again heatedly—not sure why they choose this debate to be so passionate and outspoken) are in favor of students eating the unwanted food of their classmates are the teachers whom have stringent rules about whether they provide snack and who gets to partake. Several such teachers would not purchase or offer, stating that they already did enough for their classrooms and students and there were services in place for their support, and once again pointing out the discarded snack option. Frequently, when pushing back in these conversations, I'd learned that the teachers I've worked with stopped providing snacks because students were "taking it when they didn't need a snack" or that they "just wanted my snack instead of the one they brought from home". In these cases, I offered that those teachers send students to me and I would provide. The counselor used to be an option for getting a snack, but "frequent fliers" were called into question, so this option was to be used sparingly and the door to the counselor's room started getting locked. There were days that I didn't make it to the grocery store the night before or didn't have time to stop before work that morning. Saying I did not have snack that day broke me a little each time. Teachers have said that I'm "too nice" and I will learn. I have not learned that lesson. Instead, I have gone to the vending machine with any change that I could find and pilfered from the afterschool program's stash on numerous occasions. Not feeding students is not a lesson that I want to learn. Students should not have to worry about whether or not they will eat that day and perhaps if their teacher will fuss if they ask for food.

January 2021

Conversation in front office with teachers and administrators after dismissal. A student was described as loud, rude, and mean towards other students. After the one teacher shared their story an administrator commented on how that's better than having to deal with that student "stealing". The administrator went on to

explain that no matter how many snacks were left out for the student they kept taking more and were going through another specialist's personal effects "stealing" more food and snacks. The counselor in the group concurred that the "stealing" is a problem and that's why they now keep their room locked when they leave the classroom. No discussion about why this student may be needing additional food, attempts to understand the behavior, nor a strategy to create a successful interaction for student and teachers alike was shared. I interjected about something that I needed to do and left the group.

Lunch was also a sensitive subject in schools even though some students' lunches are provided, and they don't have to worry about gatekeepers and their policies. In this district, students were required to maintain enough money in their accounts to cover all meal purchases. When accounts got low, families were notified that they need to replenish the funds. However, the most common practice was telling the students, very loudly while in line holding a tray of food, surrounded by their peers that, "you need to bring lunch money". As aforementioned, students are unemployed, and should not be positioned to be the messengers with their families. Further, I have heard this sentiment shouted down the hallway, told to other classmates to tell that student, and yelled into car windows during pickup/drop-off. Worse yet, I've watched students told they get a "cold cheese sandwich" in place of the regular lunch options because there was not enough money in their account for a meal valued at less than two dollars. In my direct experiences, I have objected and put that students' meal on my personal account. I've also provided students with my number to enter if they are confronted with low funds again. When voicing my concerns about this matter I've been told that we cannot change policies because they are state mandated, and we are just following procedures. I've been told that I cannot just pay everyone's bills and someday when I'm in administration I'll understand.

Water. Too many trips to the water fountain are limited for some students because it is deemed a way to get out of class above and beyond the need for hydration. Ironically, those same

students are often the ones constantly “pulled out” to meet in small remedial groups which also results in the regulated daily loss of whole group class time. Drinking water is also another heavily regulated function in classrooms with preference given towards water bottles for many teachers. Even then, water bottles require refilling, and I’ve been walking past the fountains on countless occasions hearing teacher tell their students that they only need to put in a little water, the full amount isn’t required, and there isn’t time to wait for them to get more.

The artifacts, journaling, field notes, and emails explored in this study all include, at some level, an example of the game being played out around me. My administrators and colleagues at one school location know well my agenda for social justice and equity and it influences their responses to and interactions with me, but for the most part does not change their actions to be more equitable knowing that I will push otherwise. Blankstein and Houston, in their 2011 study of equity-oriented change agents (EOCA), the authors explored the characteristics of EOCA leaders and the commonalities that may be replicated for school success. The article posits that those who wish to ensure equity-mindedness amongst their colleagues/faculty must consistently demonstrate their own equity-oriented attitudes and expectations in daily exchanges. However, this extension of equitability cannot be limited to only student/child exchanges and must also be the standard for practice amongst interactions and expectations with all other adults as well. “If in an equity-oriented school, we want to foster all adults treating all children with respect, appreciation, and care, then we must treat all adults the very same way” (Blankstein & Houston, 2011, p. 47). The words respect, appreciation, and care are repeated throughout as being the pinnacle of encounters with all persons, even those whom are the most difficult or we know are not being open or are even practicing racist or harmful views towards others. This too is an example of why the standard for teachers and teacher leaders demands that we all practice

equitability, not only those whom are social justice oriented. There simply is not enough impact to the deeply entrenched injustices of schooling without disrupting the praxis at all levels. Further, educators not supported by their colleagues and administrators in trusting working relationships are less likely to take risks, fearing their own safety in the system (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006).

Discussion

Applying the lens of Critical Pedagogy and Critical Consciousness as a theoretical framework; the contents of journaling, field notes, and artifacts collected were analyzed for evidence of actions that directly inhibited social justice and equity in education. Additionally, instances of dysconsciousness (King, 1991, 2000, 2006) were illuminated and considered as examples of deficit thinking and racism. Each entry was reread, initial thinking recorded, similarities to the extant literature considered, and then interpretation of the entry completed as a critical pedagogue. Further, areas specifically disruptive of equity in education annotated and included within the discussion to recommend changes to practice for educational leaders and teachers. The journaling, field notes, and artifacts compiled here depict the raw sentiments of educators and myself during the course of our daily professional responsibilities and have not been altered aside from where noted to protect identities.

My goals in this study and examination of my position(s) in a public elementary school in the Deep South were to critique systems that hurt children instead of helping, to challenge policies that do not produce positive results, and to question my own culpability within that same system. It is not my intention to damage the feelings or reputations of persons within the schools described herein or the school(s) themselves, although I do acknowledge that my depictions are

not flattering, and I've even titled the collection "gross". However, positioning myself as a critical scholar for this autoethnography also requires that I do carefully question the experiences I've had in this role and not avoid topics due to the results that may follow. I believe that I have included raw personal details of my work and exposed myself within this piece to be open to disciplinary action should someone in a position of power over me find my accounts to be unfavorable. While I was careful not to describe persons or places to specific detail in which they may be identified, my own position within this study includes risk for identification by association.

Recommendations for School Leaders

Achieving and maintaining equity in schools should not only be the top priority for all systems, it shouldn't require a discussion beyond immediate consensus. It is gross that all schools are not welcoming spaces to all students, that all teachers are not champions for all students, that all faculty are not demanding equity of their systems. Grosser still is the evolution of my awareness that many schools, including those in which I teach, are not equitable spaces, they are not actively working towards achieving equity, and there is greater effort in maintaining the status quo and comfort levels of educators with the most seniority/experience and/or power.

As summarized by this Spring 2018 excerpt from a journal entry during a graduate study teaching internship:

This session had me making several realizations:

- 1. The content of equity in general requires quite a bit of buy-in from students/participants for it to be sought, understood, and replicated. Those who seem to be having difficulty with the coursework are perhaps having difficulty with the overall concepts.*
- 2. Discussion moments away from the instructor(s) are away from the instructor and therefore may be comprised of just about anything. I have had to lever many of the ones in which I participated, and they were unsure of what to do, showing off their pets, or talking about life in general. Having a task with a specific evidenced outcome is helpful to combat distraction.*

I am a White woman (cisgender, in a hetero marriage, with children in the system) highly qualified educator with proven experience, having trouble navigating this system, and finding at least weekly if not daily practices offensive. What does that say about our other populations served? School leaders have the duty and responsibility of serving all students within their school population and that service needs to drive all decisions, policies, and practices within their buildings and communities. Leadership must be relentless in demanding that every student is served equitably by every facet of the school.

Conclusion

I love education, teaching, academia, and my many incredible relationships students, teachers, families, and even leaders. This piece was difficult for me, but the discomfort that I experienced in the moments described here, as well as the compilation of this research, are not a comparison to the discomfort, frustration, oppression, and consequences that many students and families experience by spaces that should be nurturing, supporting, encouraging, and teaching. I am not suggesting or implying that all teachers are racists who do not care about students and actively work to create barriers to education rather than to teach. Teachers have many barriers to their own success and obstacles to the profession such as those explored in this article. There are many things that make this an exhausting, thankless, and unkind profession. But teachers also chose this career for myriad reasons knowing that it was both demanding and unsupportive of that demand via pay and/or other means. Many of the individuals depicted here are wonderful people in many ways who do genuinely love and care about me and/or students. However, as illustrated through their words and actions, they do not genuinely love and care about *all*

students, and that is a problem that overshadows their other numerous accomplishments. Who chooses which is the student left out? Your child or mine? Etc.

If It Walks Like a Duck

I cannot fully remember the numerous contexts in which this saying was used as justification for some argument with my father, but I have heard it enough in enough ways for it to have stuck. I do recall being frustrated over the very dichotomous way of thinking that the sentiment represented and wanting to scream that not everything fit so neatly into one of two prefabricated boxes. In some ways, the purpose behind such rhetoric is applicable to public education. I can see the parallels with the “way things are” mentality that has us all knowing exactly which teachers are just coasting along igniting and spreading gossip instead of sharing research-based strategies for collaboration (Marshall, 2014).

This past year and a half I have stopped being proud to be the person who comes in first and stays late, the one who tries to balance their expectations against my own needs to build relationships, the one who volunteers for everything and runs herself ragged doing what I think a model teacher does as an aspiring leader. I have instead questioned deeply why I was prideful of those things in the first place. They brought me joy because I felt like I was demonstrating outwardly the inward care and love I have for education, my students, my families, and my community. However, this year I succumbed to the thinking that those things impacted nothing but my mental and physical health. I do not receive anything different from the teachers with gross practices and deficit views who work alongside me. No one stops to acknowledge those things, they just come to expect them from me and not from others, and then I am asked to give and do even more. The burden of the work and the guilt for not doing it the same way linger. It is uncomfortable for me to not put my everything into demonstrating these small measures of

dedication, but at the same time I feel more like where it counts my efforts do not matter.

Chang's (2020) study of emotional display and teacher burnout discusses displacing feelings in order to deal with situations in the classroom as tasks to accomplish as expressive suppression.

Chang suggests that teaching is different from other professions or life events and teachers develop different ways to suppress emotional reactions and deal with stressors in the setting to maintain the work needing to be accomplished (Chang, 2020).

There are some spaces in which the culture is infested with gross moments. It feels defeating and impossible to remain but imperative that I do so at the same time. I could find another position tomorrow and things in this space would be exactly the way they were the day, week, month, or year before. It is my responsibility to disrupt the system as a critically conscious educator, identify inequity, create equity and advocate for students and families. Yet, I still actively seek other opportunities for leadership and advancement that would allow me to leave this space behind.

There are also some glorious changes and growth moments that happen each day and provide light and hope in new ways. Perhaps not in the earth-shattering ways that I want, but they are there and they need to be sought after and cultivated. There are incredibly passionate teachers who provide solace within their classrooms and ensure that their students feel loved, welcomed, and challenged each and every day. I recognize that I have not chosen to highlight those moments and people here and that they also exist in the same places I have described. I wonder, however, if it is enough to try and look for one or two great examples amidst such damage. Do we have to acknowledge that there are great teachers in order to accept that there are horrible teachers and practices, to demand accountability and improvement? If all students

matter to us, then why would we allow some to continue to suffer only to recognize that some are enjoying success?

“It is in their classrooms that teachers enact their most deeply held beliefs” (Nieto, 2001, p. 10). It is these beliefs that empower and promote some while neglecting and remediating others. When you come to know a teacher’s heart, you can well envision what is happening behind those closed doors, and often times it is the stuff of magic. But, as depicted here, when the “deeply held beliefs” that are on display are poisoned with deficit thinking, racism, and dysconsciousness, it is no wonder why some students thrive and others falter.

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Transitional Statement

The next two articles explore the potential as well as one result of conducting equity audits in schools. Equitability requires that students in all areas within schools are provided opportunities for challenging, consistent, and rigorous programs. The equity audit is one tool proposed to measure equity in schools. Revisiting the questioning, *Are schools equitable spaces?* and *Do we care?* the proceeding article wonders about the potential of such a tool in identifying need, targeting improvement, and changing schools. The final article examines what is changed by utilizing a tool such as an equity audit. Do such tools supersede deficit thinking, racism, and dysconsciousness, or are those “deeply held beliefs” too much the formidable match?

Equity audit literature suggests that the audits are easy to use, provide valuable results, and help faculty to identify a clear need and purpose within their schools (Brown, 2010; Dodman et al., 2019; Groenke, 2010; Linton, 2011; McKenzie & Skrla, 2011; Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009; View et al., 2016). As the goal for all schools should be to provide a high-quality education for all students, then all schools should use equity audits to assist them in achieving this goal. However, equity audits are thus far not commonplace, and when used are done so by social justice leaders, equity-oriented change agents, or graduate students taking university leadership courses (Fleig, 2016; Harris & Hopson, 2008; Hernandez & Marshall, 2017).

The literature reviewed and varied research conducted herein illustrate commonalities experienced when conducting equity audits, whether those shared experiences resulted in celebrations and school improvement, or failures and avoidance of changes to policy and/or practice. Throughout the body of work mentioning equity audits, albeit rather minimal, scholars share key concepts that aide in the accomplishment of successful equity audit processing leading

towards better and more equitable schools for all students. Among those concepts are stakeholder support, critical consciousness, and self-reflection; which are explored in-depth within the subsequent articles and sections. Because equity audits seek to explore the success of the school as a whole, at meeting the needs of the individual, this dissertation is similarly wholly about equity audits but individually interested in the aspects of their justification, application, and current lack of proliferation in schools.

Equity Audits as Tools for School Improvement: Educators' Experiences and Perceptions

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Equity Audits as Tools for School Improvement: Educators' Experiences and Perceptions

Introduction: Providing a Quality Instructional Experience to ALL Students

Creating equitable learning spaces for all students was not the historical intention of our educational systems. Schools were developed in order to guide a very specific targeted population in conforming to the political and religious beliefs of the time (Giroux, 1981; Howard, 2006). White protestant views and patriotism were the backbone of daily classroom lessons, often a Bible being the only textbook (Marshall, 2014; Spring, 2016). While schools have certainly evolved over time, the deeply entrenched foundations of education remain inseparable from institutional history. Gillborn (2016) in his article, *Education Policy as an Act of White Supremacy: Whiteness, Critical Race Theory and Education Reform* discusses the so-called evolution of educational policy in the US and England being reflective of “white-washed” practices that maintain power for the white majority while labeling change as beneficial to all. Examining, “First, the question of priorities: who or what is driving education policy? Second, the question of beneficiaries: who wins and who loses as a result of education policy priorities? And finally, the question of outcomes: what are the effects of policy?” (Gillborn, 2016, p. 49). Therefore, schooling often maintains and replicates the Christian, cis-heteronormative, white, middle-class ideals upon which it was formed, producing schools that are more welcoming and effective for some students than for others. (Javius, 2017). “As a result, these students often fall into a predetermined mold designed for academic failure and social inequity” (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio, & Urban, 2011, p. 58). That is, schools are rarely equitable spaces.

Understanding educational equity necessitates understanding that to ensure similar outcomes and opportunities for students often requires diversifying the materials and practices of schooling. It must be acknowledged that not all students require and/or have access to the same educational experiences, and even if students did, providing identical curriculum and pedagogy

to all students would not produce equitable schools. Equity largely means being okay with no longer giving every student the same resources, something that itself isn't truly happening in schools anyhow, in recognition that the system is often, rather implicitly or explicitly, overlooking some students and rewarding others. It also requires acknowledging that no curriculum is neutral, so it is just to diversify the curriculum so that all students see themselves and their families in it. Equitable learning opportunities then are those in which the diverse needs of a student are considered when thinking about how educators, administrators, and schools create their cultures, develop their curriculums, design their lessons, assess knowledge and performance, and determine ideal student outcomes.

Equity audits are tools that allow educational professionals to identify areas of strength and need with regard to these domains. Equity audits facilitate the creation of improvement goals as well as action plans. They are systematic means of discerning whether school practices are proportional to the student body in their application, and they are also designed to capture whether the material resources available in a school are representative of the student body. The following chapter is a synopsis of a research study about the use of audits to assess equity in schools. The goals of this study are: to explore the perceptions of teachers and administrators about equity audits as tools for creating better learning environments for all students, to understand the scope of the application of equity audits, and to inform recommendations for the improvement of educational leadership and guidance as it relates to creating equitable spaces for all students.

Equality and Equity

Today's schools often conflate equity and equality, merging the concepts into one. Equality means providing the same education to all students. Equity means providing the same

educational opportunity to all students. For example, requiring that all students in a classroom take the same test ensures equality. Understanding that the same test may not be appropriate for all students and then modifying aspects of the test from the design, delivery, and assessment may address equity. Likewise, when schools do not ensure that all students are represented within the curriculum and benefiting from programs within the school, they may be overlooking entire populations within and among their student body (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015); they may be achieving equality, not equity. The assumption that all students require the same tool, strategy, or intervention suggests that all students respond to learning in the same way. Great teachers already know this not to be true, which is why they create responsive experiences such as small group instruction, interventions, and student interest surveys. Great teachers and school leaders recognize that all students arrive to schools with varying background experiences and foundational knowledge. Great teachers and school leaders recognize that not all students enjoy learning in the same ways and are identically prepared to listen, interpret, understand, and extend within lessons. Schools that value students' needs above all policies, practices, and politics recognize that it is equity, and not equality, that will create a fair and responsive system for all. Educational equality focuses upon all things being equal or the same in all ways. Equity focuses upon identifying variances in access, opportunity, understanding, and need, then creating curriculum guides and lessons that are also varied. Equity conscious school practices are student-driven rather than adult-centered.

Equity Audits

The origins of auditing processes are found within the business sector in assessing the function and efficiency of corporate systems. "In the US education arena specifically equity audits have a history in at least three areas: (a) civil rights enforcement, (b) curriculum auditing

and math/science reforms, and (c) state accountability” (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009, p. 16). The idea of auditing educational settings is similar in that it seeks to identify areas of strength and weakness within the organization to improve functionality, in this case improve the learning opportunities and outcomes for every student. Equity audits disaggregate the student body along many identity markers and then disaggregate participation and representation in school opportunities and resources along the same markers. They make clear areas where student groups are under- and over-represented. Equity audits are frequently invoked as a response to an identified need for systemic change: the realization, for example, that children who speak English at home are outperforming their peers for whom English is a second language, that boys participate in leadership more than girls, or that white students are overrepresented in gifted and advanced classes whereas their peers of color are overrepresented in remedial courses and special education.

Use of Equity Audits in Schools

Equity audits are a process for critically assessing categories of disaggregated information in which districts, schools, or even individual classrooms collect data about every aspect of the operations of their educational programming. These data are then analyzed and assessed to look for disparities or equity issues at every level as part of a school improvement or instructional improvement goal (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011; Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009). The exact formatting for equity audits varies, as needs vary, because it is a malleable tool that can be tailored to any educator’s circumstances.

Regardless of format, the purpose of equity audits for schools is to explore the current representation and proportionality within all facets of operations; most models are derivatives of that developed by McKenzie, Skrla, and Scheurich (2009). Regardless of specific categories and

questions, "...these audits are designed to provide insight into, discussion of, and practical responses to systemic patterns of inequity in schools and school districts" (McKenzie, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2009, p. 6). The equity audit does so by focusing on three main areas inclusive of all school performance: teacher quality equity, programmatic equity, and achievement equity (McKenzie, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2009). Further explanation of the indicators in each of these areas is found below in the discussions of the audits used by participants in this study.

"The desired 'what' of equity is developing a system that is more reflective and takes immediate action of the situational and institutional barriers within the system that greatly impact the adults'/educators' ability to reach and teach all students" (Javius, 2017, p. 20). The initiation of an equity audit is often in response to a catalyst in which school leaders and administrators are made aware of disparities in their schools' student outcomes in comparison to other schools, such as in national and state report card publications. Frequently, the equity audit is started as part of efforts in "closing the achievement gap," or what Capper and Young (2015) refer to as the *opportunity gap* and Ladson-Billings (2006) has termed as *education debt*. While the equity audit may begin as a transformative approach to school turnaround, the tool itself structures the collection of data and questioning of policies. If it is to be useful for and an indication of transformation, it can and should be used routinely.

Facets of the Equity Audit

In their edited book, *Leadership for Increasingly Diverse Schools* (2015) published as part of the Educational Leadership for Equity and Diversity Series, Theoharis and Scanlan organize their chapters in correspondence to dimensions of diversity that are also explored within equity audits. In the final chapter of the edited volume titled The Equity Audit as the Core of Leading Increasingly Diverse Schools and Districts, Capper and Young also utilize the body of

work presented by McKenzie, Skrla, and Scheurich (2009) as a lens for considering the use of equity audits as tools for school leaders. The authors discuss the evolution of equity audits in schools as well as break down each step of the process into phases: “Phase 1: Identifying integrated/inclusive practices as measured by proportional representation as the anchoring philosophy of the equity audit, Phase 2: Establishing the team to conduct the equity audit, Phase 3: Designing the audit, Phase 4: Collecting and analyzing the data, Phase 5: Setting and prioritizing goals based on the data, and Phase 6: Developing an implementation plan” (pp. 18-197). We draw primarily here on this model, as it was developed by Capper and colleagues, based upon the aforementioned three areas for demonstration of equity: teacher quality equity, programmatic equity, and achievement equity (McKenzie, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2009). These texts also align with those read by participants in this study as a part of their course requirements and each indicator is listed below in the methods section. Each facet of the equity audit then provides a method for inquiring about representation and proportion in schools, making it highly valuable in responding to ever-changing societal needs.

Extant Literature on Equity Audits in Schools

Given the great pressure faced by school administrators in meeting the goals, expectations, and needs of an increasingly diverse student body, equity audits should be a widely utilized tool and process for school improvement. McKenzie and Skrla (2011) as well as Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009) offer the equity-minded school leader conceptual guidelines for prioritizing equity and conducting equity audits in their school. The conceptual texts developed by Linton (2011) and Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) also detail the process as a realistically attainable assessment of the state of a classroom, school, or even district in which any person or group can gather, analyze, and assess data with relative ease following a detailed format. Given

that there are specific and clear models that provide step-by-step guidance about the conduct of equity audits, the work itself lies, not in conceptualizing *how* to conduct the audit but in gathering, analyzing, and interpreting the relevant data. Given the thoroughness and availability of these conceptual models, and the current emphasis on data-driven practices in education, it is unclear why more schools do not routinely conduct equity audits.

Even with the conceptual clarity and guidance available in the literature, research detailing equity audit application is minimal and the handful of leadership studies available look only at how a few select schools utilized the equity audit, in some cases highlighting shortcomings and errors rather than successes (Ishimaru, 2009). The available articles discuss school systems falling within a vast spectrum of equity development. As Ishimaru (2009) described in her work examining equity building with community involvement, some schools are beginning to work on their own definitions of equity, still grappling with equity-focused agendas that upend the status quo. Other school systems having fully completed the auditing process fell short of follow-through, attributable, in part, to the time required to cultivate and maintain relationships once the work has begun (Brown et al., 2011). Maxwell, Locke, and Scheurich (2013) found a range of comfort, application, and accountability when looking at superintendents in Texas. Using the work of Skrla et al. (2009) and the Equity Oriented Change Agent [EOCA] framework, the authors explored how each superintendent identified themselves as advocates and agents of change. A significant discovery within this study was that the level of equity acceptance and equitable practices of each of the three participants varied on a scale from being a strong equity oriented change agent to being aware of the concepts yet not actively applying them to daily academic practices and policies. Each varying level depended also upon the individual's willingness to push boundaries in a system in which every decision would be

questioned and challenged, like many equity-minded administrators and educators face with regularity. In the insightful analysis of one participant, “By his own admission, he considers himself as still learning about and wrestling through his own perceptions of equity” (Maxwell, Locke, & Scheurich, 2013, p.18).

While examining equity more closely has many educational administrators and leaders interested in reducing inequity within schools, the discrepancies between thinking and practice are vast. “If even one aspect of the system is inequitable, a school cannot have systemic equity” (Brown, 2010). Well-intentioned professionals within the field find themselves in a range from denial to acceptance to application. The arena for teaching and learning has never been without complication and educators find themselves overwhelmed by a multitude of requirements that strain their resolve and drain their time and other resources. However, the equity audit processes have been developed in ways that argue for their necessity and are straightforward enough to address the concerns of educators related to time and energy. Therefore, it is unclear why equity audits are not more widely and repeatedly used. The purpose of this study is to better understand the perceptions of school leaders, who have conducted an equity audit as a course requirement, about their ongoing use within their districts, schools, and classrooms.

Methods

Research on equity audits in schools is limited, however, all current evidence is in favor of conducting equity audits in schools as a means to identify areas of needed improvement when utilized completely and intentionally. Regardless of variations in experiences and outcomes, the process is valuable and informative (Skrla, et al., 2004; Linton, 2011; Theoharis & Scanlon, 2015). Even so, many administrators choose not to act upon the findings from the audits, or not to conduct equity audits in the first place. Thus, we were interested in understanding why more

schools were not utilizing equity audits. To do so, we explored the experiences of pre-service school administrators who conducted equity audits of their schools as a course requirement. We wanted to learn if the schools in which the participants worked were receptive to the results of the equity audits, how effective the participants felt the audits were in identifying areas of need within their schools, whether the process will result in action and change within their schools, and whether they intend to implement equity audits as a standard part of their professional practice when they are hired into an administrator role.

Context

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of graduate students at a southeastern university in a required graduate level educational administration course, Multiprofessional Leadership for Equity. Prior students enrolled in this course were chosen as the participant pool to further explore the experiences of data gathering for equity audits as students enrolled in the course were school leaders, educators, and other professionals in the field who were required to conduct an equity audit at their schools of employment as the project component of the course and their knowledge and experiences contained insight not readily present across the literature.. Upon approval from the institutional review board, we actively recruited students enrolled in the course, via email with the assistance of their course professors, to participate in in-depth interviews. We also solicited survey participation, again with institutional approval, using emails and professional listservs targeting practicing school leaders.

Participants

Five participants participated in interviews about their equity auditing experiences. Participants have been recruited from the Multiprofessional Leadership for Equity course across four terms and three instructors. The lack of response to requests for interviews about required

work that was already completed may signify that participants recruited are actively working within demanding school settings. It may also signify an ongoing lack of comfort with discussions of issues of equity about their current places of employment or discomfort discussing the ways in which their audits have, or haven't, been used in their work environments. We posit that students who worked to conduct the audits but who did not act on their findings may be less likely to discuss their experiences.

Each of the five participants (see Table 1) worked in a different capacity within a school/district organization: instructional coach, elementary teacher, ESL instructional coach, technical school instructor, and central office district-level leadership coach. None of the participants were from the same schools nor did they associate outside of the university setting. Only one pair were in the same cohort. Additionally, given the timeframe over which the courses were taken, three different professors taught the five participant's courses. All five of the participants were white, four presented as women and one as a man. Two different southeastern states are represented by the five participants. As none of the participants were directly asked how they identify their gender presentations are used in the descriptions above and gender-neutral pronouns are used for the description of findings. A gender-neutral first name only is assigned to each participant as their pseudonym expressly for the purposes of organization of narratives.

Table 2

Overview Participant Demographics and Characteristics

Participant Pseudonym	Current Educational Position	Professional Context
Alex	District-level ESOL Instructional Coach	Urban, high-poverty district, approximately 8,500 students, majority marginalized student groups, all

		students qualify for free and reduced meals—located in the same state as Drew
Bayley	Instructional coach; was previously a fourth-grade teacher and media-aide prior to that—conducted equity audit during fourth-grade teacher year and second year at this school	Top performing district of approximately 8,800 students; growing suburban area with 13 campuses including one middle, junior-high, and high-school for all students. Currently building additional facilities.
Casey	Third Grade Teacher	Top performing district of approximately 8,800 students; growing suburban area with 13 campuses including one middle, junior-high, and high-school for all students. Currently building additional facilities.
Drew	Central Office Employee; Coordinator for Social Studies	District serves mostly marginalized student groups; 11 out of 12 schools in the district qualify for Title I funding; serves approximately 8,500-9,500 students; smaller urban area just outside of a major city—located in the same state as Alex
Emory	Automotive Technology Teacher	Technical School serving high school students from many schools within one county; students rotate in and out of the programs, serving approximately 500 annually; elective courses, but students have to apply; mostly juniors and seniors in attendance

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews

The following questions were discussed in semi-structured interviews of approximately 30 to 40 minutes in length with each participant (Berg & Lune, 2012; Creswell, 2015):

1. Tell me about your school.
2. Tell me about your experiences gathering data for your equity audit.
3. Were there any findings that surprised you? Describe your most surprising findings.
4. What were some of the challenging moments you experienced?
5. What were some of the fulfilling moments you experienced?

Participants engaged with the lead researcher in an interactive dialogue including follow-up questions for clarification or probes pertaining to the supporting literature. Additionally, the lead researcher asked all participants about the degree to which they felt that the equity audit was valuable, if at all, and if they would conduct an equity audit again in the future.

Interviews ranged in length from 30 to 40 minutes, were recorded, transcribed, then coded using both a priori and emergent coding techniques to identify themes (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Schwandt, 2015). We established in vivo codes because of similarities across multiple participant responses that were best described using the participants' verbatim quotes (Saldaña, 2016). We first analyzed transcripts for content, seeking to understand the broader perception of each participant. Next, we analyzed each transcript in comparison to the supporting literature, looking for areas in which the participants may be favorable of the audits, express challenges in the process, or illustrate the disparities that prompted some of their initial research questions. Finally, we analyzed each transcript for nuances that may point toward educational leadership recommendations for future practice (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

Educational Leaders Survey

In addition to the individual narratives specific to a required university course, a quick survey of two questions was sent out to approximately seventy-five local area principals and assistant principals across five different school districts. The anonymous survey link was sent via email at three different points in the school year in an effort to find a moment when school leaders may be receptive to response. To date, only three surveys have been completed, each stating that the respondent had little to no knowledge of equity audits; one survey respondent asked to be removed from the contact list. An additional direct email was also received from a local area principal working within the same district as the lead researcher that offered assistance

but prefaced it that this individual didn't know anything about the topic. The questions on the survey were:

1. What is your current role in education? (open text response)
2. How would you rate your current level of understanding about equity audits?
(Likert scale)
3. A section to include contact information if willing to potentially participate in an interview about equity audits. (open text response)

The survey design was included to gain insight into whether educational leaders not currently enrolled in the university level course were aware of and/or utilizing an equity audit in their schools. The recruitment email and link to the survey identified the lead researcher, provided a brief background for the study, and emphasized the brevity of the survey itself. The lack of responses is significant. Given the literature, this could be because the principals and assistant principals solicited felt they are too overwhelmed in daily tasks to prioritize responding to a survey (Theoharis, 2009; Bleyaert, 2011; National Research Council, 2013). Perhaps, given the minimal research on equity audits, they were not familiar with equity or equity audits, and have not prioritized understanding of the concept of equity. Discussion and recommendations for practice will consider the lack of responses here to be significant in that more work is needed to make equity work and equity audits commonplace in PreK-12 schools.

Findings

We organized our findings from the five interviews into four themes: "I mean, it's a lot...I was just trying to get it done", "People didn't know where to get the information", "...more or less what I expected" and "yeah...if you were an administrator". Our descriptions of the themes as well as supporting data follow:

“I mean, it’s a lot...I was just trying to get it done...”

Each participant described very different experiences in conducting the audits. Overall, the narratives were split as to whether the equity audit was a worthwhile use of time and whether the amount of effort was equivalent to the benefit of the results. For example, all participants felt that the questions contained within the audit were thought provoking, or “eye opening” (Bayley, Casey, Drew, & Emory), and that the outcome was valuable and useful in numerous settings, but that it was a lot more time and effort than they felt reasonable for their work expectations outside of the graduate coursework. “I would say, overall, I felt like it was a ton of work” (Bayley). Emory described, “...I was always just trying to figure out with computer technology why isn’t there just a button that we can hit to see all this stuff and it’d compile it for us. But it’s just not there, you have to go in and do it by hand, every year, every time the numbers change. And it, it becomes a lot of work.” All five participants stated that they would not likely conduct the audit again in their current job roles and since completion of the university requirements. Two participants also attributed their amount of effort in the project to the amount of work required in the audit, expressing that “I was just trying to get it done” (Bayley). Bayley justified that statement by explaining that teachers are already overwhelmed and that if they were in an administrative capacity or on a team, the amount of work would have been more reasonable. Emory described something similar, “human beings are human beings they don’t...like to do extra work you know unless there’s some serious motivational drive behind it...to the average teacher, or counselor, or someone...just trying to do their job and go home... that’s a lot of extra burden on them...”.

Drew described instances in which individuals in their school setting may do smaller portions of data gathering briefly, but “not necessarily that huge, large amount of data”. For the

equity audit to continue to be relevant, it would also need regular updating, at least each year with new student populations, but also as faculty and programs may change. Drew felt that while the results of the audit were useful right now and shared scenarios in which they were able to present the data quickly and professionally to other audiences, it would not be worthwhile to maintain the product. “I don’t think I would update the form and use it, but I do think as I need data I know where to get it, so no, I don’t see myself updating that form...but for the district I don’t need all that data all the time so I would just do the data as I need it”.

Bayley’s account of their experience reflected feeling overwhelmed and exhausted,

...knowing where to get the information, how to get the information. I mean, if somebody would have been like, ‘here, here’s the information’ and you need...to put it in a spreadsheet and talk about it and analyze it, I think, I would have been like, ‘oh okay’. And...probably dug deeper and wanted to you know understand more. By the time I got to that point, I was so tired, I was like no”.

For clarification, the lead researcher asked if it was worth it and Bayley responding with a firm and final “no”.

The prevalence with which each participant felt that the gathering of data and work required to conduct an equity audit was not equivalent to the benefit of the patterns it revealed is troubling: “But in terms am I gonna go punch an equity audit on my school and spend six , seven hours pulling files, I’m probably not gonna do it again” (Emory). Participants felt that not only was the undertaking too much in everyday school settings, but also that finding the raw data required to complete the audit and analyze practices within their schools was too difficult and potentially skewed their figures. “I would question myself or question were those numbers actually accurate again” (Bayley). Two of the five participants were not confident that the numbers they gathered or the way in which they interpreted them were “right” given the challenges they faced in finding the data: “I didn’t put as much as I could’ve in it, but I managed

to get the basic information. It probably took me five to seven sitting hours crunching numbers to really get all that stuff fleshed out and it probably wasn't perfect" (Emory). Two participants who worked in the same state praised their state's system for publishing school data and said that they were able to get almost all the required information easily. For some of the data, however, participants had to go directly to the source, held in records at a central office, and touch documentation in search of the numbers due to the protections in place against sharing some identifying data online or publicly. Despite the efforts required in finding the data, participant Casey reflected on the experience as an opportunity to interact with key personnel and learn more about their student population: "I like numbers and I'm a math person so maybe that's why. 'Cause I liked finding the data". Casey also appreciated that the search for data led them to a state reporting tool, something to which they weren't previously exposed, "'Cause honestly I had never used...the state website before this".

"People didn't know where to get the information..."

Although the participants all attended the same university program, their school sites were in two different states. A commonly shared challenge in one state over the other was the availability of the data. One state's system for reporting their school's performance was publicly updated via a state-operated website, much of the needed figures were available for the previous school year. Even in that state, where the participants were grateful for a convenient reporting system, some of the data were unavailable without being at the school site, physically touching students' files, and in some cases requesting access. Drew, who works in a school district's central office, described this because of FERPA laws surrounding privacy of student information and felt like it would make the equity audit process measurably more difficult for classroom teachers.

A lot of where it's kept, and you know as part of FERPA we can't um, we can't just put the full data files on a place like even an internal drive, like a T-drive we wouldn't do that because it, it could easily lead to FERPA violations...So, for example, if I run a report for teachers about domain data for an end-of-unit course test for example, that data is linked to student id, identification numbers, anything that could identify a student cannot be transmitted through like an email, or something like that. So, the access to the full data reports are kept in our student information system and only certain people have full access to everything. (Drew)

When asked to provide anything that may have been challenging about conducting the equity audit Bayley felt that aside from being a lot of work, the most challenging aspect of the process was knowing how to find the data. "...really knowing where to look...I would say that was probably the hardest part". Bayley credits their principal and assistant principal with telling them who to talk to, introducing them to colleagues who could help, and even pulling numbers and reports from their district's identification database for Bayley, since they didn't know how to get the reports. However, Bayley recognized that the principal's abilities for data acquisition were also hindered, "I mean, my principal didn't even know it. I mean, [they] just did the best [they] could and got me the information [they] had."

Emory also explained that even though the tool itself may be valuable, the data collection hinders the process and deters the user from wanting to continue its application. "So, but I think they're a good tool, I think they just need a computer program to go with it so it's easy to get the info". Like Bayley, for this participant, even their district's identification database was an area in which they felt unprepared for gathering the reports. "Either there was no way to just pull that information individually by class, by school, you know or nobody that I knew of was trained well enough in the program to be able to do it". Emory also shared that before they had decided to use their own school site alone, they were going to include their partner school from within the district but encountered a gatekeeper problem to accessing data.

...they weren't as...obliged to give me that information...Even though I was a teacher in

the system and taught at the other school, they were kind of uh, they weren't like, 'come in here and look at all the files', it was kind of like, 'well, this is what I can get you'. And I don't really kind a, you know, trust that to an extent how thorough they were on compiling that information.

Rather than including a larger population from a more rural area of the district and impacting both schools, Emory decided to conduct the audit at their main school site for easier access and greater support.

All participants reported that they, as well as their classmates, found the endeavor of knowing where to look, identifying the source, requesting help as needed, pulling the information, analyzing the data, interpreting the data via the equity audit matrix tool, and then creating goals and a plan was overwhelming. For many teachers, understanding how to read and analyze data is not a skill set nor a requirement for which they were trained during their careers (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Dodman et al., 2019). Each of the participants divulged that the amount of work needed to perform the audit was exceedingly large given the already very demanding schedules of classroom teachers. Throughout the interview with the participant who presently works as an instructional coach, they felt that the amount of time and expectation was so great that it was a deterrent to producing quality results. "I was so exhausted by the end of it...from compiling it um I think I just felt like okay done, check, let's move on" (Bayley). The purpose of the design of the equity audit is to provide an accessible application for identifying inequities within a classroom, school, or district so that those needs can be addressed, and all students better served. However, if this design, already simplified, is a barrier it seems unlikely that many educators would still choose this process outside of the requirements of college course or professional development.

...more or less what I expected"

Three participants shared that they already knew the data, or they knew where to find the data should they want to know more in the future; therefore, another audit would be, in their opinions, unnecessary. Each felt that their current working knowledge of their schools matched the outcomes of the analysis of specific figures enough that they would not need to do so in the future given that they understood the general concept of the process and of equity.

Alex explained that in the course of their work as an instructional coach they felt like they already had a good enough understanding of their data before the equity audit, “Uh, well it just kind of reinforced what I already suspected as far as numbers and enrollment in certain programs and stuff like that”. This was discussed at length probing whether anything stood out as particularly surprising that was discovered during the equity audit process. After some thought Alex felt that when compiled in one place the number of students with some sort of label was to be acknowledged. “I was not surprised by any of it, but it just, when you added it all together, it was just like, good gracious. Like none of the kids are just normal, everybody’s got something. ‘Cause they were either in RTI, or they had been retained, you know there’s always something.” Alex did not develop a plan to explore further the labeling of students or continue to disaggregate the data, as they felt it was both common knowledge working in their school and also not something that would fall under the parameters of their job description.

Drew described a similar experience, “I mean for me a lot of it was just not beneficial because I already knew a lot of the data...but you know I just felt like it was a lot of work for something that didn’t really benefit my learning because I already knew most of it”. Alex and Drew were the two participants who praised their state’s reporting system and had the least amount of difficulty in compiling the data. However, even when positioned with adequate access

and describing the tool itself favorably, neither participant discussed feeling like the equity audit benefitted their practice.

Bayley, having worked at their school for only a year, previously serving as a media aide, felt like they already knew the student body well enough to negate the need for gathering and disaggregating student data. “I definitely know that our school is an equitable environment...nothing’s really standing out...it’s pretty good across the board. So, given the numbers, not given the numbers, like I would say that that is an accurate portrayal that our school is equitable for all populations”.

For Alex, Drew, and Bayley, the disaggregated data from the equity audit was something that they already knew.

“...yeah if you were an administrator...”

Another commonly expressed sentiment that is concerning for the progress of social justice and equity is the notion that equity work is beyond the scope of some job descriptions. For example, all of the participants shared that they did complete what was expected for the course, but when asked about whether or not they would apply their learning actively within their school sites, each felt that it wasn’t the place of their position to do so. Given that each participant is representative of a different aspect of schooling this is particularly discouraging. Further, this illustrates the necessity for teachers and educational leaders to be introduced to the equity audit during academic course work and/or professional development opportunities. Each participant shared that “if I were in charge”, “if I were a principal”, or “if that were my job” and even, “if someone asked me” only then would they continue working towards the goals they submitted for the course or consider updating and collecting subsequent data.

All but one participant were amicable to conducting an annual auditing process to determine if their goals were being met, however they also included the caveat that this would only be if they were in a leadership position and would not do so in their current educational stakeholder role. Of the participants whom said they wouldn't want or need to conduct further equity audits, one added that if they were in a position of power they would actually mandate for all principals in their district to conduct equity audits in their schools and insisted that they would need to do so every year. "Now, if I was running my own school I would definitely update that form every single year for *my* school...if I was a principal or an assistant principal in the building I would want that data in one document where I could pull it anytime" (Drew).

Casey was in favor of the equity audit experience, but still did not connect the work to that of a classroom teacher, their current role. When speaking, Casey reflected on how the audit was inspiring to their aspirations for a leadership role but maintained that it would be work continued if and when they were in that role. "And, if I become an administrator one day...[equity is] something that now is the first thing that I think about a lot of times....I really didn't think about it much before this class". Further, when discussing the audit outside of the realm of graduate work, Casey still spoke only in terms of administration and not individual teachers: "I think for administrators it is a lot of like, you have to give your staff the right knowledge and tools and these can be tools."

Emory also found that the volume of work required for the equity audit warranted a leadership role, "I don't think I would do another...full-blown equity audit of our school...unless you got some type of administrative capacity". Emory was still figuring out their own future aspirations, but felt strongly that an equity audit would be beneficial, but also may need the additional help of support staff: "I feel like when I become an administrator, if I become it at our

school, a similar trade school, I would probably do an equity audit yearly, or have someone help me do it, me and the counselor”.

Discussion and Recommendations for Leaders

Change Happens Over Time and Requires Deliberate Collaborative Effort

In their book, *Leadership for Social Justice and Democracy in our Schools*, Blankstein and Houston (2011) include a chapter from Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich entitled Becoming and Equity-Oriented Change Agent in which the authors make several recommendations for school leaders interested in creating an equitable schooling experience for all students starting with the cultural and climate within their school leadership and faculty. Specifically, they suggest that, “If you want your colleagues to have an equity attitude toward their students, you need to have an equity attitude toward your colleagues...”. Further, that this can be done if all school participants and especially administrators, “treat *everyone* with respect, appreciation, and care –no exceptions”. Although this appears at face value to be something that all leaders would say that they already do, it is challenging to employ this active attitude in every circumstance despite challenges to the relationship or when differences in belief systems create a barrier to agreements and effective communication. The authors further stress that creating and maintaining that equity attitude throughout every situation within and surrounding the school requires deliberate effort over time. Learning how to unlearn cultural practices that segregate, isolate, and marginalize others takes time and effort that begins with the recognition of the need for equity-based practices in the first place. The authors suggest that persons who desire to achieve an equity-oriented change agent status need to be persistent and recognize that the current state of affairs in our schools and nation did not happen quickly and neither will their

undoing. Patience is also a key aspect of equity work, “One of the hardest parts of doing equity work is maintaining commitment and patience” (Blankstein & Houston, 2011, p. 53).

Equity Requires Recognition

All participants in this research stated that while there were instances in which their equity audit data illustrated higher or lower numbers than they had anticipated, nothing was particularly shocking or surprising, and they all believed that their schools created equitable learning experiences for all students. One participant explained, “We do a very good job of knowing our students and reaching everyone and their needs.” When asked about students’ religious practices or gender identity this participant stated that they were, “not sure, but we know families and backgrounds well and no one is excluded or getting overlooked in our school.” Given the research about the necessity and benefit of equity audits in the first place and the responses of the participants in this study, providing equitable schooling environments requires the recognition that inequity exists even when things seem “normal” or “fair”. Equity isn’t equality, it doesn’t look for how each student can get the same experience, but rather equitable practices are those in which all possible experiences are recognized in an effort to combat disparities in educational narratives of all students. Whether or not a student receives attention from faculty and staff does not negate their need to also be presented with literature that depicts characters similar to their own identification or access to support to participate in after school events. Equity oriented leaders actively seek out barriers to student engagement.

Equity Must be a Priority for All

In their examination of effective leadership practices and the use of equity audits, Brown, Bankovitz, Muttillio, and Urban (2011) compared the strategies and achievement outcomes of 24 small gap (SG) schools and large gap (LG) schools. Among some of the most significant

findings of their study was that in successful schools the faculty maintained genuine trusting relationships with one another that mirrored their expectations and relationships with students. Efficacy, a component of equity, was also a contributing factor to increased performance outcomes: “Unfortunately, data from the LG schools sometimes refuted their belief in the notion that all children can and will be successful” (p. 81). Schools must be places in which all students are taught according to their uniquely tailored educational needs; the identification of those needs begins with the implementation of equity audits and the belief in the futures and success of all students.

Producing quality transformational work in schools requires the support and efforts of all faculty and staff within the school. A social justice agenda that is equity-focused cannot be achieved without caring professional who believe this work to not only be absolutely necessary, but also completely deserving of their time and dedication. The discrepancy then, between scholars that champion equity audits and real-world application appears to be, at least in part, pedagogical and requiring some thoughtful consideration. *Do we believe that schools may not serve each and every student to the best of their abilities? Do we believe that diversity in our schools warrants a diverse approach to teaching and learning worthy of the time and efforts of our already exhausted educational professionals?*

Equity Audits Require Supportive Data Practices

Two of the five participants worked within a state in which they had access to publicly accessible, annually updated, individual school reporting data. Of those two narratives describing the most ideal circumstances, they were still not without their flaws, given the barriers to data such as protections to students. While some of the factors that make data collection difficult, such as those protections, are very necessary, the participants in this study shared that they

experienced egregious levels of strain in locating, accessing, and/or requesting data. Accurate, accessible, and easily navigated practices for the collection and analysis of school data are essential for conducting equity work. Even in the most ideal conditions, participants suggested that the obstacles in obtaining data were a hindrance to the auditing process, but also a factor in their consideration for further application.

Conclusion

Complications to daily operations such as the burdens of standardized testing, vast amounts of curriculum expectations over limited amounts of time, professional development, and instructional interventions all also require the dutiful attention of educators and administrators alike; contributing to growing opportunity gaps, as evidenced by disparities in access and opportunities for all children to be academically supported and successful (Groenke, 2010; View et al., 2016). The result, schooling that meets the needs of some and not all.

Despite the fact that none of the five participants planned to conduct an equity audit again, all felt that schools should use the tool and that leaders other than themselves should be responsible for doing so. Participants ultimately valued the experience and outcome, but not enough to take it upon themselves to conduct again outside the requirements of a course or without a leadership position. This disconnect to the necessity of gathering current data that depict how well a school is meeting the diverse needs of the students mirrors the disconnect between the advantageous tenants of the practice and the scant prevalence of examples in the literature.

All of the participants recounted instances in which the experience of conducting the equity audit challenged their current understanding about some topics and in which they gained new understanding about the picture of their schools. Three of the five expressed concern over at

least one aspect of the revelations of the equity audit, resulting in the creation of specific goals to impact and initiate change within their educational settings. For example, one participant shared that they discovered their passion for working with ESL students when looking at the data, finding gaps in delivery of service and instruction, and then reflecting upon their relationships with ESL students in her classroom. “I think after I graduate I want to do the add-on and do the ESL Praxis so that I can, potentially. Because I just started to see like how much I enjoyed doing that...literally that project is what made it to where I saw that” (Casey). Another participant described the excitement at being able to respond to their superiors with data when in a meeting about schools in the district, “I was like, ‘oh, I already have all of that’ and I was able to give them this graphic. So, that was good because like I said we, I already had the data” (Drew). This respondent also experienced satisfaction in knowing that her work was not just an aspect of one course, but that it was applicable to their current job expectations and the needs within their district. They also discussed being able to present the data in leadership trainings that were already taking place in their district as part of an equity-oriented agenda that their system adopted this year.

Educators and school administrators have the crucial and at times difficult task of delivering individualized, equitable, quality instruction to all students within their buildings. The reasons for the struggle are myriad including varying abilities, access to resources at school and at home, variation in professional development opportunities, pressures of standardized testing, and even pressures from the leadership board and surrounding community (Dodman et al., 2019; Miller & Martin, 2015).

In addition to the many challenging circumstances PreK-12 institutions face, is the necessity to tailor instructional opportunities to diverse learners and communities.

Individualization of instruction requires that teachers and administrators also acknowledge the unique social and lived experiences each student has in response to the curriculum and overall learning community. This endeavor is made further difficult upon recognition students' diverse cultures, backgrounds, experiences, and needs. Students are diverse and have multifaceted lives. The approaches to teaching them should be cognizant of biases towards different identities (i.e. race, gender, sexuality, religion, (dis)ability, socioeconomic status, and/or language).

Given the constraints upon delivering quality educational opportunities for all students and the necessity to do so, constantly evolving diverse educational settings require equally evolving practices. Equity audits can satisfy this need and should be considered for standard practice in today's schools.

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Transitional Statement

In a publication for Educational Leadership, Hawley & Nieto (2010) discuss how teachers often believe that lowering academic standards and expectations for some students helps them, such as in confidence or overall perception of abilities. However, the opposite occurs when performance expectations are lowered, deficit thinking seeps in, and students' opportunities for rigor, challenge, and growth diminish. "School structures, processes, and cultures affect student dispositions and their opportunities to learn" (Hawley & Nieto, 2010, p. 68). Hawley and Nieto discuss schools having *race and ethnicity-responsive school cultures* as those in which, "targeted and flexible grouping for instruction; access and support for high-level content (such as advanced placement courses); inclusive and affirming curriculums; and fair disciplinary rules and processes" (2010, pp. 68-69) are present. However, the research supports those same practices as not only affirming cultural differences and providing for greater equity, but also as praxis that benefits all students. Likewise, equity or social justice minded school leaders should not be the only educational professionals expected to employ fair policies that create access, opportunity, and growth for all students.

The following case study questions the potential and effectiveness of social justice coursework and use of an equity tool to not only identify inequity, but to aide in recognizing and changing deficit beliefs held by a practicing educator and aspiring teacher leader. This study seeks to better understand the ways in which this educational professional was influenced by professional development and learning experiences aimed at improving cultural competence resulting in school improvement.

“Eye-opening” Doesn’t Equate to Consciousness: A Case Study Exploring the Potential of Social Justice Programming for Equity Awareness in School Leadership

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Introduction

Teachers and teacher leaders navigate daily in culturally complex, as well as emotionally, mentally, and physically exhaustive spaces. Educators at all Pk-12 levels respond to social situations in the course of their jobs that many individuals would never imagine in their own work or even personal lives. While the demands are great, the need to meet those demands is even greater. As schools continue to become more culturally diverse, the ways in which educators respond to that diversity are significant (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; McDonough, 2009; Bleyaert, 2011; Hernandez & Marshall, 2017). Though the student body is diverse, the faculty often does not mirror that representation, with the vast majority of teachers in the country today being White women and administrative leaders being White men (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). While King and Howard (2000) do not assert that White teachers can only effectively instruct white students, there is concern that educators without critical consciousness, or worse yet those whom are dysconscious (King, 1991, 2004, 2017) are not properly equipped to actively embrace a culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) to best support the individual needs of each and every student. Further, all teachers, not just those in specialized areas, should be developed in the instruction of diversity, multicultural, and social justice education (Nieto, 2000).

The assumptions, attitudes, and perceptions of teachers and teacher leaders influence the ways in which they respond to students and families, as well as the decisions that they make for

their schools (Sandoval, van Es, Campbell, & Santagata, 2020; Miller & Martin, 2015; Maxwell, Locke, & Scheurich, 2013). These perceptions are at times unrealized, making a case for reflection and questioning, support by the development of critical consciousness (Bradley-Levine, 2012; Nieto, 2000). So significant and deeply held are these influences on thinking and practice, that even when presented with data illustrating disparity and inequity in schools, leaders are not immediately compelled to respond (Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, 2018) for myriad reasons further explored within the literature of this article.

Equity audits are a tool that provide educators and educational leaders with a means in which to assess the teacher quality equity, programmatic equity, and achievement equity (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011) of their schools in order to create actionable plans for improvement, beyond the influence of those assumptions, attitudes, and perceptions. However, equity audits are merely a tool, as are many other tools applied in schools, a tool that is intended to be simplistic enough to be applied by anyone and maintained annually. Equity audits and similar tools do not require fluency with equity or social justice concepts in order to collect the data and insert the figures for comparison. On the contrary, equity audits are intended to be adapted and simplified for ease and applicability of use. Therefore, a tool designed to surpass knowledge of equity and make school assessment and improvement accessible for all is limited and perhaps inhibited by the individual wielding such a tool. Understanding concepts of inequity alone is not significant enough to uproot deeply held beliefs about culture, gender, and race no to completely change thinking, as illustrated by the participant interview in this case study.

Purpose

The following article is a descriptive case study analyzing one interview conducted as part of a larger research study exploring the experiences of the application of equity audits in Pk-

12 schools. The purpose of this research was to better understand the experiences of graduate students, taking a leadership and equity course as part of graduation requirements, and implementing an equity audit at the school sites in which they were employed. Participants from this course were solicited for interview as they had the most knowledge and experience with equity audits as well as educational roles. Of the five interviews, this particular account was identified for further analysis, as the encounter was significantly different when compared to the other interviews conducted and also elicited an unexpected response in the researcher. Specifically, racist and offensive language, as well as stereotyping, alerted the researcher to flag this interview for further in-depth analysis.

Emory (pseudonym) is a White teacher of Automotive Science at a public technical school in the Deep South. A gender-neutral pseudonym and pronouns are used for describing this participant in order to deidentify their data as well as to honor the fact that this participant was not directly asked how they would identify themselves. Emory contacted the researcher to share their story when a colleague reached out to Emory's cohort through a graduate studies program at a local University. Emory's school and the University they attended are several hours away from one another geographically. The referring colleague worked in another school site closer to the University and their connection was exclusively through sharing a cohort. The colleague also interviewed, and their data was used in other publications from the same exploratory study.

The following is an examination of the ways in which Emory described their experience, given Emory's previous coursework in equity and social justice studies as part of an educational leadership program for aspiring administrators, and the surprising ways in which Emory spoke. Emory, however, appeared to be choosing their terminology and descriptions cautiously in their responses and spoke of an understanding for and acceptance of equitable practices. While Emory

was explaining the ways in which they saw that their school could improve to be a more equitable space, Emory themselves also demonstrated dysconsciousness (King, 1991).

“Dysconsciousness is a uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (King, 1991, p. 135). For example, when describing noticing disparities in the compiled audit data for Emory’s school demographics versus the surrounding community, Emory questioned distribution while simultaneously reinforcing racial stereotypes:

“I’m still trying to put a pin on why we have so many females in one spot or so many African Americans in one spot or so many Spanish Americans in another you know, not speaking not to sound stupid but you know construction has a lot of Spanish kids in it. Why are there so many Spanish kids in construction? And I get it, you go to any job site you know, and you have a ton of Hispanics...why ain’t they taking auto, they can work on auto just as much, but I tend to get the, the redneck dipstick crew from the high school if you know what I mean”.

The purpose of this case study is to illustrate the problematic nature of dysconsciousness in schools and demonstrate that stand alone equity courses are not sufficient for developing a critical consciousness or even general critical awareness for educational leaders. Rather, a combination of education of current diversity research, self-reflection, and praxis including annual actionable goals (Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, 2018; McDonough, 2009; Hernandez & Marshall, 2017; Sailes, 2008; View et al., 2016) must take place, over time, in order to eradicate dysconsciousness, develop critical consciousness, and support educational leaders in creating equitable learning environments that demand high-quality experiences resulting in the success of all students.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness questions context and power, challenges power and privilege, and works to develop awareness through reflexivity and interaction (McDonough, 2009). Being critically conscious involves a deeper understanding beyond social issues about how an individual's own position within environments and the values and beliefs that they carry can also further impact that environment and hinder or strengthen their response to inequity and injustice. The development of critical consciousness happens with intentionality and reflection over time, it is not simply a knowledge or awareness. Skousen and Domangue (2020) described this development that happens over time as a conceptual understanding that "...should be framed as a continuum" (p. 104), in other words, individuals find themselves within various stages of critical consciousness development. Further, the authors recommend that educators receive training to support this development.

Critical consciousness encompasses an awareness of the societal issues surrounding power, privilege, and the marginalization of some groups including people of color, people living in poverty, and people who identify as LGBTQ. A facet for the development and maintenance of critical consciousness is regular reflection and critical dialogue. This is also essential within educational systems and teacher and educational leadership programs. Bradley-Levin's (2012) examination of critical consciousness in teacher leadership programming expressed that consciousness development includes regular reflection to question and change perceived attitudes and assumptions, as well as engaging in that sharing of personal experiences for growth,

and also having the support of guidance of critically conscious others. Indicative of critical consciousness, “Prospective teachers need both an intellectual understanding of schooling and inequity as well as self-reflective, transformative emotional growth experiences” (King, 1991, p. 134). Woods and Hauser’s (2013) research exploring the social justice content within university educational programs leading to the California Preliminary Administrative Services Credential, found that even embedded within socially just coursework, critically conscious conceptual frameworks were lacking. Surveys of the university professors about the incorporation of social justice curriculum found that 97.1% rated social justice education as being highly important to their instruction and instructional design. However, the concept of critical consciousness was explored less often and, in less courses, than that of social justice. Critical dialogue was also found to be lacking, with survey results indicating that critical conversations were not intentional nor formally structured within courses when they did occur. Researchers attributed these issues to the barriers they found toward social justice curriculum which were: “institutional support of the curriculum, academic freedom and the curriculum, student push-back to the curriculum, and the hidden social justice curriculum”. Social justice curriculum was perceived as something extra that took time away from other areas and as such was burdensome. Thus, for the instructors, support, large class sizes, and trying to teach critical coursework as a class/lesson rather than “embedding principles across the curriculum” (Woods & Hauser, 2013, p. 30).

Another imperative facet to the development and maintenance of critical consciousness is training and opportunities for application, dialogue, and further reflection. In their 2018 study of teacher candidates attending a social justice education preparation program and practicing in student teacher roles, researchers Cross, Behizadeh, and Holihan examined blog reflections throughout the student teaching experience to determine the level of critical pedagogy,

suggestive of developed critical consciousness, carried over from the training program. The researchers found a disconnect between experiences in educator training programs and experiences in real-world everyday application. “Thus, there appears to be a crisis of praxis; in other words, a failure for critical pedagogies taught in teacher preparation (if taught at all) to transfer into *application* in student teaching” (Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, 2018, p. 128). To be fair, the participants in this study were teacher candidates and not in fulltime positions so they may have experienced challenges and barriers that fulltime teachers may or may not also experience. Further, student teaching positions the educator in a different role and relationship in some ways to their students. However, the candidates in this study were also students of a program specifically designed to develop their social justice leadership and critical consciousness. Similarly, explored within this case study, Emory was also presented with critical texts, experiences, and background knowledge to inform decisions within the practice, but didn’t transfer this learning as evidenced throughout the dialogue.

Developing critical consciousness requires sustained efforts over time with continuous questioning and self-reflection. Given the pressures of annual reviews and standardization of outcomes, schools are not necessarily places welcome to concepts the benefits of which won’t be seen immediately or even within a year or two. Additionally, critical consciousness development is “cyclical” in that the process of questioning, reflection, discussion, and reflection happens continuously over time (Bradley-Levin, 2012). Further, Bradley-Levin (2012) posits that discussion alone is not sufficient for critical consciousness. King (2016) also described having her students engage in a lot of journal writing, which is consistent with the literature requiring self-reflection for the development of critical consciousness. Capper, Theoharis, and Sebastian (2006) in their work on social justice leadership posit that critical consciousness is a required

element for engaging in equity work and further recognize the without critically conscious awareness, other equity and justice outcomes are not possible. Ladson-Billings (1995) also theorizes that critical consciousness, along with cultural competence, are necessary components in culturally relevant pedagogy for the success of all students.

Therefore, critical consciousness is an investment in the development of the faculty and should be combined with equity audits to assess levels of equity in all areas of the school. King (1991) explains that in her educational experience, students from “economically privileged, culturally homogenous backgrounds” aren’t aware of their biases. Further reason to incorporate critical pedagogy and equity-based learning into all teacher and school leader preparatory programs and not only those slated for social justice leadership. Self-reflection is required to develop a critical consciousness and educators need mentors and influences that help them continue to question their understandings and misconceptions as they grow and develop within the practice. “The real challenge of diversity is to develop a sound liberatory praxis of teacher education which offers relatively privileged students’ freedom to choose critical multicultural consciousness over dysconsciousness” (King, 1991, pp. 143-144).

Conceptual Framework

Dysconsciousness

King (Brandon & King, 2006) defines dysconsciousness not as a lack of consciousness, but as the inability to see, think, and reason in certain ways due to the misinformation and beliefs that someone without critical consciousness exhibits. King is careful to make the distinction that dysconsciousness isn’t unconscious, thinking and awareness are involved, but the blocks inhibit following certain rationalities or deductive thought processes, preventing the person from making connections to a new socially just line of thinking in deference to their normative

thinking. It is also unwavering and unquestioning, hence opposing to that of criticality. Whereas critical consciousness encompasses an open questioning, dialogue, and reflection, dysconsciousness rigidly adheres to the status quo, rejecting other possibilities so stringently as to accept injustice.

Dysconsciousness is particularly dangerous to educators at all academic levels, as it frames patterns of thinking and directly affects the equity outcomes and success of students. In her 1991 article, *Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity, and the Miseducation of Teachers*, King describes dysconsciousness as a barrier prohibiting individuals from developing understanding about cultural diversity and equity in the first place, further reducing their ability to act in favor of equity in the classroom, and making the educators role as advocates for social justice virtually impossible. Brandon and King's 2006 interview on dysconsciousness discussed how dysconsciousness not only reinforces the status quo and replicates normative structures, but it also, "is a powerful thought process whose effects often times enable racism, sexism, and classism to persist" (p. 207).

Woods and Hauser's (2013) study of social justice concepts within teacher leadership coursework not only uncovered a deficient amount of critical consciousness, but also a considerable amount of dysconsciousness among the faculty as well as the graduate students participating in the program. The researchers' finding of "student push-back" is analogous to dysconsciousness, in that the students appeared to be resisting critical conversations surrounding social justice in favor of maintenance of the status quo. "Multiple instructors described students' lack of courage, reluctance to lead change, and students' fearful attitudes about losing jobs if they take on the social justice agenda" (Woods & Hauser, 2013, p. 30). This assessment of the instructors on students is also unfair in that further findings evidenced that very few assignments

(12) across many courses (38) actually specifically addressed concepts of social justice. The expectation that graduate students and principal leaders are self-reflective and critically conscious should also be supported by the appropriate instruction, leaderships, and opportunities for application within a trusting environment. Clearly, these principals did not feel safe within their professional positions to further develop critical consciousness and were not being supported by the university in doing so either. This shifting of blame to the students mirrors the lower academic levels in which classroom teachers blame their young students for failing rather than looking for areas to improve the delivery of instruction and content consistent with an equity trap (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Unfortunately, for dysconscious individuals, as one instructor stated, “Words like social justice and critical consciousness, they make a lot of people nervous” (Woods & Hauser, 2013, p. 31).

Critical consciousness and dysconsciousness are used as theoretical and conceptual frameworks within this article to guide analysis of Emory’s interview to better understand their apparent disparity between deeply rooted dysconsciousness juxtaposed with the critically conscious teachings of equity-minded graduate coursework.

Methods

This exploratory case study of a semi-structured interview is a derivative of a larger qualitative research study design exploring the perceptions and use of equity audits by university graduate students within their schools of employment. Participant Emory’s interview was selected for further case study analysis because the dialogue appeared illustrative of similar research studies in which participants with social justice coursework or training do not employ those concepts within the field, embracing instead the status quo and mirroring the normative conditions of their school placements (Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, 2018; Woods & Hauser,

2013; Maxwell, Locke, & Scheurich, 2013; Miller & Martin, 2015; McDonough, 2009).

Additionally, there were times throughout the interview in which Emory's comments were racist, stereotypical, and sexist, including even the way in which the participant addressed the researcher. As such, Emory's transcript was chosen for further review in order to better understand the disparity between receiving critically conscious coursework based in equity and the application of those concepts to current real-world PK-12 positions.

Participant

Emory was an automotive technology teacher at a technical school serving junior and senior high school students feeding from several different traditional high schools within one county in the Deep South. Programs at the technical school included a wide range of skillsets, some of which, like the automotive program, may result in certification in addition to course credit. The students must apply to take the courses and maintain a certain GPA threshold, "...I believe it's a 1.5", is considered for admittance and continued enrollment. Students may be considered as early as their sophomore year. Additionally, "...they can have discipline issues...but they can't...have a bunch of fights. We take into account if they've been into a bunch of physical altercations...since we're dealing with heavy machinery and saws". There are approximately 500 students served throughout the course of a school year, with students revolving in and out of the school as they complete a course or a term, as schedules vary by school served with some following period and some following block scheduling. Emory had been in this position for several years, with aspirations for administration. Emory was fond of their school and program and described functioning within some leadership roles, including presentation of equity data as a result of equity coursework and an equity audit, but had not yet decided upon next steps for their career. While Emory presented as a White man, the course of

the interview did not include questioning about preferred pronouns or orientation, therefore gender-neutral pronouns were used throughout this case study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interview

The following questions were discussed in a semi-structured interview of approximately 40 minutes in length (Berg & Lune, 2012; Creswell, 2015):

1. Tell me about your school.
2. Tell me about your experiences gathering data for your equity audit.
3. Were there any findings that surprised you? Describe your most surprising findings.
4. What were some of the challenging moments you experienced?
5. What were some of the fulfilling moments you experienced?

The semi-structured interview was led in a conversational manner and additional follow-up questions were asked for clarification or at times when the participant's response resonated as consistent with findings in the literature. The interview was recorded, transcribed, then coded using both a priori and emergent coding techniques to identify themes (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Schwandt, 2015). This initial coding and first round of themes included in vivo codes (Saldaña, 2016) matching those from other participant data presented in another qualitative study exploring equity audits in which Emory participated (Beall & Andrzejewski, 2021). A second round of coding identified evidence aligned with critical consciousness and dysconsciousness, a priori themes established from the literature. Additionally, memoing and reflection were used during the interview and immediately following transcription, to capture the raw reactions and

emotional responses experienced by the researcher during the interview for later analysis and validation.

Findings

Descriptive Case Study/data analysis

In their 2018 study of teacher candidates attending a social justice education preparation program and practicing in student teacher roles, researchers Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan examined blog reflections throughout the student teaching experience to determine the level of critical pedagogy carried over from the training program. The researchers found that, like Emory demonstrated, there is a disconnect between experiences in educator training programs and that in real world everyday application. “Thus, there appears to be a crisis of praxis; in other words, a failure for critical pedagogies taught in teacher preparation (if taught at all) to transfer into *application* in student teaching” (Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, 2018, p. 128). To be fair, the participants in the Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan study were teacher candidates and not in fulltime positions and they may have experienced challenges and barriers that fulltime teachers may or may not also experience. Further, student teaching positions the educator in a different role and relationship in some ways to their students. However, the candidates in this study were also students of a program specifically designed to develop their social justice leadership and critical consciousness. Emory, in their experience, was also presented with critical texts, experiences, and background knowledge to inform decisions within the practice, and also didn’t appear to transfer this learning as evidenced throughout the dialogue. The authors used critical consciousness to frame their conceptual framework and used this lens to illustrate that educators must first have developed their own critical consciousness before they can be expected to incorporate social justice pedagogy or pass the tenants of critical consciousness on to their

students. In fact, participants in this study often demonstrated not a lack of critical consciousness, but a dysconsciousness when describing their experiences, “In many ways opposite of critical consciousness, dysconsciousness is characterized by a lack of ability to critically analyze the social realities of classrooms” (Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, 2018, p. 129). Even more problematic, the researchers found that when in the classroom setting, the teacher candidates reverted to methods and techniques aligned with a traditional instructional design that more resembled the status quo than a social justice aware setting. I take from this that the reality is that the inequities within the system are so deeply embedded into operational aspects that they cannot be separated, rather teachers feel the need to assimilate for numerous reasons. In many instances, teacher candidates resorted to blaming students themselves for various inadequacies in performance and other concerns, indicative of a deficit view not as educator who is critically aware. And this is within a course specifically geared towards social justice throughout all levels and classes in this program. These students were reading critically conscious texts and engaging in lessons and discussions intended to develop their consciousness and build equitable praxis. The interview with Emory also demonstrated that there is much work to be done to develop critical consciousness and that it does not happen as a result of one or even several courses alone (Cross, Behizadeh, & Holihan, 2018).

Discussion

Racist Dialogue

During the course of the interview, Emory lamented that they found the time required to compile the data daunting and a deterrent to the “average teacher”. They spoke at length about the expectations of teachers and leaders and shared frustration that technological advancements

did not benefit this type of inquiry in that school databases are not built in a way to “press a button” and receive disaggregated school data.

In response to the question inquiring about experiencing any challenges during the equity study and application of the equity audit, Emory described with greater fervor irritation over the racial categories listed in the school database not “matching” that which Emory thought was indicative of the student. For example, they described how students and families identified race within their paperwork on file with the school system versus the physical appearance of the socially ascribed racial attributes this participant came to expect of a particular group of people, such as the lighter or darker tone of their skin. Emory depicted instances in which the information in a student file listed the student as “Black” but Emory felt that to be in error. “I would actually run across...a lot of people...a lot of students would consider themselves a certain racial or ethnic group, but you wouldn’t know it visually”. Emory spoke rather passionately during this portion of their recount and changes to voice inflection and emphasis were also annotated during interview notes.

“I remember there’s a couple of students that I’m in their file and I’d be like, ‘Black?!’ [*changes and inflects at a higher tone and voice to emphasize*] you know and I’d look at it and I’d be like, uh, I think this kid’s White. Turn out you know they they’re actually mixed you know but they considered themselves Black and not White. But visually they were, they were you know Caucasian as all get out”.

Emory shared being conflicted about whether or not they should check every student’s file, considering how much work and the number of hours already invested, and wondered about the apparent “error”.

“...there were some little flubs like that I noticed that just made it difficult...I was like, is this...a check box by accident, do you go ask this person and question their, do you question the student’s uh you know what they checked. I mean what would that entail? Or do you just accept it as, you know. There were just some small things like that that I noticed and there was like do you clarify, or do you just assume that this is the correct, correct information? And, when you’re dealing with smaller numbers, you know when you have one or two African Americans in the class, you know...a blip like that is a large percentage of your class population.”

In this questioning aloud, Emory assumed that the student’s themselves were the ones whom completed the registration paperwork on file with the school, that there were likely to be many similar instances given the few that captured Emory’s attention, that the instances were “flubs” that required identification and correction, and that the “correct” information had something to do with the visual appearance of socially ascribed race. It is concerning that Emory referred to the situation as a “flub” further indicating that the resolution provided to them of a student identifying as multiracial and selecting one race to most accurately represent them did not register with Emory as an acceptable solution.

Furthermore, prior to this moment, the participant described dwindling stamina for collecting and analyzing the data and that the resulting equity audit was not completely accurate, but rather, “probably eighty to ninety percent” accurate. However, given this realization framed as a discrepancy, Emory considered investing greater energy into examining “all” student files for “accuracy”. While the purpose of conducting an equity audit was an exercise in identifying inequity in local schools, connecting future teacher leaders to the realities of their school site,

one equity course during a graduate certificate program is not sufficient for building critical consciousness and eradicating deficit thinking. Nieto's (2000) article, *Placing Equity Front and Center: Some Thoughts on Transforming Teacher Education for a New Century* discusses teacher education programs as lacking instruction about critically conscious concepts such as access and equity, many promoting and replicating deficit views about marginalized populations and multicultural education, deferring instead to assimilation.

Mansplaining

Conversationally, Emory used the phrase "you know" often. Over the course of a twenty-six-minute interview, the phrase was used sixty-six times. Initially, the statement was interpreted as a brief check for clarification, not having a prior dialogue with the participant for a baseline. Further analysis maintained that the wording was likely conversational and perhaps even unconscious, however, the phrase did not appear within the context of the interview until Emory was asked for their opinions or perceptions. In the opening minutes of the interview, Emory was asked to describe their school and research data. In those segments, Emory was direct and without the "you know" terminology. When asked about interpretation of the data, Emory began to take on not only a more conversational tone, but also struggled to find the appropriate word choice in their descriptions, even commenting in one instance, "...not to sound stupid...". Emory both fumbled with the dialogue and was more relaxed in tone when speaking in ways that a developed critical consciousness would have alerted them as offensive, stereotypical, and racist. Instead, Emory continued the remarks, and reinforced the faulty logic by seeking reassurance and solidarity through the use of "you know". While the researcher did not affirm, disconfirm, or interject to the dysconscious language, the researcher's decision to maintain ease and comfort to illicit data was interpreted as friendly in nature by the participant.

The comforting phrase “you know” was replaced with, “if that makes sense to you” when Emory was describing processes or policies within their school. For example, they overly explained an automotive certification, providing a simple example for evidence of the certification, and then continued responding to the initial question. Additionally, “if that makes sense to you” was used after explaining the process of collecting demographic figures from a database used statewide, also used by the researcher, and required for conducting the equity audit. This further explanation seemed unnecessary given that the researcher presented as knowledgeable with and a practitioner of equity audits and of that same database when asked.

“If that makes sense” was also used to confirm understanding when discussing the frustration that Emory felt for trying to secure “accurate” data when racial descriptions in the database did not match the socially ascribed physical markers of race, specifically that of skin color. Combined with referring throughout the interview to young women and girl students as “females” and the data showing the need for more “female participation” the researcher interpreted instances of checking for understanding to be disparaging speech that was intended, consciously or subconsciously, to position Emory in power and the researcher in subordination.

Emory began the interview in an overall formal tone and addressed the researcher as “ma’am” and remained in that space for approximately the first fourth of the interview. Over the course of twenty-six minutes, they reverted to their own status quo, relaxed to present themselves more naturally, and addressed the researcher as “girl”. Given how quickly the deterioration of careful respect for choosing critical language morphed into hegemony, it is not surprising that similar research found pre-service and in-service teachers reverting to the status quo or oppressive practices under the pressures of their peers, their school placements, and that of normative systems.

Deficit Thinking

Throughout the interview, Emory exhibiting instances of deficit thinking, or the belief that some individuals are disadvantaged in some way(s) and therefore will underperform and/or underachieve. Interestingly, Emory perceived all persons around them in a deficit way, not limiting this view to only students and families, but extending it to include colleagues and educators in general. This deficit view affected the expectations that Emory held for students and faculty alike and further inhibited their perceptions about the need for the creation and maintenance of equity in their school and system. By deeming students and faculty as deficient, Emory displaced the responsibility for equity, and placed blame upon the equity audit tool itself for the burden of task, dismissing the creation of inequity by persons within the system.

Deficit Thinking About Educators and Education. For example, Emory attributed their own lack of willingness to conduct annual audits “The average teacher, counselor, or someone that’s just going there you know just trying to do their job and go home.” Additionally, educators often encounter barriers to accessing the data, and in the instances where data is readily available, educators are often not training in data interpretation (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Dodman et al., 2019).

“Where they can get that, get that stuff it took me seven, eight hours to do they can get it within you know five or ten minutes. Pushing a button.”

“And, it is it’s usually a yearly process it’s not like something you can do and it’s, it’s got a shelf life of five years (Beall: Right) uh you know it’s got a one year shelf life at a school and to be honest with you with the way schools, you know you have thirty, forty, fifty different kids at a big high school come and go all year

long you know it's really not a shelf life the longest you know until a kid changes or leaves the school.

While King's (1991, 2002) work in the recognition, identification, and remediation of dysconsciousness focuses on preservice teachers, the data presented here demonstrate concern for the apparent dysconsciousness present in practicing educators and administrators despite critical consciousness and equity-specific coursework and the completion of an equity audit to reveal disparities in their programs.

Conclusion

Equity cannot be established quickly, simply, nor by changing figures to reflect a more even balance. It is not comparable to that of modifying a recipe or purchasing additional equipment. "We need to try to spread this out a little bit quit giving me just like these generalized social groups in every one of our classes. You know like if we can move someone somewhere that would kind of make the school more equitable...", however, Emory also justified their classroom composition in that many students were drawn to particular classes for the certification they would receive after course completion and testing. Equity concepts and inequity affect each and every life in the school, human lives, not figures on a chart from compiling "seven eight hours" of demographic and compositional data. Further, awareness of equity and even academic programming including equity and critical concepts are not singularly sufficient to significantly impact the deeply held perceptions and beliefs that have developed over a lifetime of influence for some.

This is further illustrated by Emory's reflections about fulfillment experienced during or by conducting the equity audit. This participant measured the success of the equity audit by

having a body of work that they were able to present to administrators and receive accolades for compiling such a massive amount with “graphs and charts”:

“I mean fulfillment...in just being able to present it to my administrator and you know other professionals and they’re gonna look at it...it was fulfilling to see that you know to open someone’s eyes to kind of like you know, ‘look you do something like an equity audit like this you know like it gives you so much more of a wealth of information like what your school really is...just to see it...on a piece of paper and see the graphs and everything’. You know it was fulfilling to see...other professionals see my work that I had done and appreciate it. You know...also fulfilling just to know just to have that that knowing that I did something that’s gonna help students, it’s gonna help get our school more. Serving a more broad population um just fulfilling that maybe that would happen because of it.”

Emory’s school did not create actionable goals from the data that Emory collected, compiled, and presented. Emory’s findings illustrated inequitable representation in gender demographics in all programs as well as disproportionality of racial representation in programs and representation of faculty and staff. However, Emory espoused pride over having presented something to their administration that hadn’t been done before, in at least the “sixteen or seventeen” years under the current leadership and a desire to “open someone’s eyes”. Despite the newfound awareness of the disparities in services provided Emory was also certain that they would not gather this type of information again, unless a time came when they were a principal and had the assistance of the school counselor. Deficit thinking and attitudes about students, their cultural contributions to learning, and the effects of situations beyond their control prevent

ownership of a shared ability and responsibility for the actions needed by educators and educational leaders for school improvement. They also spoke of not intending to do anything more than had been completed throughout the expectations of the course and expressed satisfaction with an overall awareness.

There did not appear to be much awareness in Emory's account in this interview.

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Conclusion

The purpose of this endeavor was to explore the many facets of equity in schools, particularly the ways in which schools are inequitable spaces and whether or not that is a priority of schools, specifically those in the Deep South. Each article represents a part to better understanding equity in education as a whole.

The autoethnography illuminates the struggles experienced by a critically conscious educator amidst practices and perceptions that are dysconscious, oppressive, racist, and harmful. The fieldnotes, artifacts, and journaling depicted are not exhaustive of all such possible data but rather those pieces that were kept with the intention of unpacking at a later date. They are representational moments and glimpses into the life in schools for this educator and unfortunately many others could have been included. Likewise, there were many wonderful and successful moments throughout the school years that are not depicted within the article. There also exist a handful of teachers whom work tirelessly to break down barriers and support all children and their triumphs were not shared.

Revisiting the guiding questions, *Are schools equitable spaces?* and *Do we care?* the autoethnography also challenged, What is an acceptable amount of equity? The experiences are snapshots of inequitable exchanges throughout days, weeks, months, and years in schools and it could be argued that there are also fair exchanges within that same capacity. However, if schools do truly care about equity and understand that all students deserve equitable educational experiences and success in schools, and that all within the school are responsible for equity, then the threshold and tolerance for the events described within the autoethnography should be none and zero. Just one child who feels that their needs are not being met, one family who feels marginalized, one groups who feels unrepresented or underrepresented, even one offensive

encounter are too much. Equity demands perfection, adequacy is not achievable when aiming for equity, and most disturbing is the lack of aim or effort to achieve that perfection in the first place. Coaches try and win every game despite the odds that a perfect season will likely be unrealized, but they still arrive to every encounter working towards victory. The schools, school leaders, and educators represented in this study, in the literature applicable to this study, and those experiencing similar circumstances across the country are not striving for a win, they aren't even showing up to the game.

The examination of the use of equity audits as tools to identify areas of equity and inequity in schools in order to inform the creation of goals and actionable plans was utilized to better understand the potential of such tools. While equity audits are adaptable to the needs of schools, systems, and educators, ultimately, they cannot be successful where the persons implementing the tool maintain deficit attitudes about some students and families within the school community. Any such tools are limited by deficit thinking, critical consciousness, and belief that all students are capable and deserving of high-quality instructional experiences.

Discussion

The disruption of inequity as well as the development of critical consciousness and equitable practices is essential in creating equitable learning experiences and outcomes for all students. Equitable schooling is not possible where a single aspect of schooling is inequitable. However, deeply held realized and unrealized beliefs such as deficit thinking, blaming, and dysconsciousness permeate all facets of schooling and prevent progress towards equity as these beliefs are entrenched, protected, and enforced.

Recommendations

Preservice and Teacher Induction Programming

Understanding the necessity for equitable learning experiences for all students in all schools requires the development of critical consciousness in order for questioning of inequity and the recognition that equity must be created and maintained. Educators guide and instruct students from varying cultural backgrounds and often experience their first time interacting with people different from themselves in the classroom through their interactions with students, parents, and colleagues (Sailes, 2008; Miller & Martin, 2015). At present, preservice and teacher education programming at the University level provides few, if any, opportunities to learn about cultural competencies (Bianchini & Brenner, 2009; Jez, 2020). In the instances in which equity focused coursework is offered, participants describe gaining very little from the course when compared to the influences they experience in their intern and job placements (Sandoval, van Es, Campbell, & Santagata, 2020). For example, Bianchini & Brenner's 2009 study examining the influences of equity instruction in new teachers found the participants attributed their experiences and working environments as the key contributors to their practice despite the direct efforts of the additional equity training. Further, as demonstrated by the autoethnography, those influences are strong factors consistently placing strain upon the decisions that an educator makes about not only the ways in which they teach, but also how they look upon the students and families they serve. Furthermore, the deeply held beliefs about students that educators carry with them to the profession, remain largely unaltered by taking a critically conscious course or using a tool to identify inequity such as illustrated by the application of equity audits in the second article and with Emory's case study. Throughout the research and literature depicted here, creating awareness for inequity and illuminating the potential areas necessary for school change were not sufficient enough to initiate actionable steps towards change or even plans for continued assessment of inequity. Rather, educators reverted back to the status quo or embraced

the normative oppressive cultural settings, preferring to place blame for the clear disparities in educational outcomes upon many factors including environmental, social, and even inanimate objects. As in the instances of othering, gendering, and bullying illustrated within the autoethnography, all responsive actions were aimed at assimilation and providing justification for the unfair treatment of students not representative of a White heteronormative cisgender cultural expectation.

Preservice teacher education programming must include the development of critical consciousness in order for practicing teachers to be advocates for equity and social justice. Single course requirements or add-ons are not adequate for combatting dysconsciousness, racism, homophobia, and oppression. Wade, Fauske, & Thompson (2008) explored the ways in which future teachers navigated the challenges of meeting English Language Learners' needs while engaging in culturally competent coursework. The researchers found that throughout the course, pre-service teachers "almost never" questioned their previous beliefs and views about students, reflected, made changes to those assumptions, or reported new thinking. The participants in this study had already experienced student teaching and were taking the final teacher-education course requirement, a course specific to teaching diverse student populations. The participants, despite the information presented within their coursework, ranged in their opinions of how to teach diverse students in schools, with most embracing the status quo of their school placements and replicating deficit views. Several advocated for English language learners to be taught solely in isolation with other ELL students, others advocated for "sink or swim" approaches in which language and cultural differences would be ignored completely. In a debrief about teaching the course and collecting the data, one researcher lamented, "And it goes beyond just what's lacking in the curriculum. It's lacking in society and the schools, and it's very

threatening to them to challenge that. They don't do it, and it's not surprising they don't. So how can we create a situation in which it's *possible* to be critically reflective?" (Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008, p. 416). Further demonstrating that coursework in multicultural education alone is not sufficient in combatting deficit thinking. The researchers felt, in part, that this was indicative of the nature of teacher education programs in that multicultural and/or diversity courses are often singular and viewed as additional or elective rather than core to teaching practices.

Educational Practitioners

Equity is not only the responsibility of social justice leaders. All school personnel influence the messages delivered about the efficacy of students and the relevancy of their families.

School leaders and current educational practitioners also require critical consciousness and equity development in order to disrupt systemic dysconsciousness and deficit thinking that permeates all facets of schooling. Continuous improvement requires critically examining the ways in which educators think and feel about their students and therefore questioning the ways in which they serve those students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). For example, general education teachers seldomly receive any preparation, whether preservice or practicing, on how to teach specifically to the needs of English Language Learners. Culturally, the socialization of White teachers results in assumptions about some learners being deficient in ability, interest, and desire required to succeed in school (Mills, Villegas, & Cochran-Smith, 2020). Khalifa & Marshall (2018) extend that culturally responsive practices not only need be modeled by educational administrators, but that teachers, coaches, and other school personnel should understand the ways in which culturally responsive pedagogy can impact the success and equity in schools.

Instructors need to be aware of their own biases and deficit thinking about people different from them so that they may be able to improve upon the ways in which they understand and serve all persons. “Our analysis revealed limited programmatic coherence, evidenced by the lack of alignment between candidates’ conceptualizations of equity and the ways in which candidates attempted to enact equity in their instructional practice” (Sandoval, van Es, Campbell, & Santagata, 2020, p. 18). The limited social justice and/or equity efforts of teacher education programs fall short of influencing praxis; evidenced by disconnect in the teachings and the interactions of practicing teachers with their students, resulting in disparities between intention and action. Jez’s (2020) article *Examining Equitable Practices Within Teacher Preparation* calls upon teacher education programs to question and examine what they propose is an outcome of their programming and what is actually happening outside of completion of those programs, not only for those systems to improve, but also to improve social justice outcomes for all schools and communities in which their graduates will serve. “Equally important for teacher preparation programs is to explicitly define what they are doing to prepare teachers with skills to disrupt and dismantle systemic oppression” (Jez, 2020, p. 104).

In the classroom, all must mean all.

Schooling

Schools cannot provide for the growth and development of only some students, schools must be concerned with the support, investment, and advancement of all students. Equity is the provision of access to and opportunities for, responsive and inclusive high-quality instructional experiences, and therefore required for all students. Schools unconcerned with equity demonstrate a lack of concern for all students. When schools place blame upon families, environmental factors, and the students themselves, they also position the problem within those

contributors and therefore the expectation for a solution rests upon the individuals rather than the system. A common response then to lower student performance is increased testing frequency, monitoring, switching to more remedial curriculum, and choosing narrowed standards for a smaller scope of mastery. Identified as struggling and/or underperforming, students receive more interventions that equate to time out of class, more frequent testing, remedial time with unqualified teachers such as those in work study or internship, less time with trained experienced teachers, and work alone or in smaller groups without influential peers (Kumashiro, 2012).

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