CRITICAL CASE STUDIES OF
DISTRICT-LEVEL EQUITY LEADERS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Meredith L. Maier: Critical Case Studies of District Level Equity Leaders in Public Schools
(Under the direction of Brian C. Gibbs)

A collection of three case studies on District-level Equity Leaders (DELs), this study aims to fill the current void in the research on DELs and equity work at the district level in public schools, using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens. The study’s primary focus is to document the lived experiences of individuals in this work and how they understand and fulfill their roles - especially in the context of current educational, social, and political spheres. This includes 1) how they define their positions and implement their vision for their positions, 2) how they respond to barriers and/or setbacks they encounter, 3) how their experiences are similar or different across districts, and 4) how the CRT tenets most commonly found in education – permanence of racism, interest convergence, Whiteness as property, counternarratives versus majoritarian narratives, critique of liberalism, and intersectionality (Capper, 2015) – manifest in and/or impact district level equity leadership roles.

This study concludes that DELs featured in the research all operationalize a CRT framework that manifests both implicitly and explicitly in the work they do each day to further their visions for their districts and to mobilize a response to the barriers and setbacks they encounter. The participants all bring passion, personal motivation, and a strong connection to equity related work in their districts. Their job descriptions, daily responsibilities, and duties are impactful only because each of these men is tied deeply to the importance of equity, grounded in
their foundations in academic research, their own lived experiences, and their desire to end inequity in schools.

Despite differences in district, years of experience, personality, and personal approach to the work, these DELs are remarkably similar in the implementation of their vision for their roles, the barriers and challenges they experience, and regarding the impacts of CRT within their district-level equity work. The design of professional development, specialized programming, policy creation and reform, and emphasis on engaging their district communities are cornerstones of their work, but these efforts do not always mitigate the pervasive nature of bias, politics and power dynamics, changes in leadership, and the emotional toll these leaders experience.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................. vii

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ................................................................................................. viii

CHAPTER 1 ........................................................................................................................................ 1

Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 1

Problem Statement and Importance ......................................................................................... 9

Purpose ..................................................................................................................................... 10

Research Questions .................................................................................................................... 10

Theoretical Framework .............................................................................................................. 11

Methodology ............................................................................................................................. 15

Positionality .............................................................................................................................. 17

Limitations ................................................................................................................................. 18

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................................... 20

Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 20

Organization ............................................................................................................................... 21

Content ..................................................................................................................................... 21

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 51

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ............................................................................................. 52

Purpose ..................................................................................................................................... 52

Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................................ 52

Research Questions .................................................................................................................. 53

Study Design ........................................................................................................................... 54

Internal and External Threats ................................................................................................. 61

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 63
## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsection</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of Vision Through a CRT Lens</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to Barriers and Setbacks</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How CRT Manifests in DEL Roles</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsection</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## APPENDIX A: ONE PAGER DISTRIBUTED TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS DURING RECRUITMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE OUTLINE, INTERVIEW 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW ELICITATION DEVICES AND QUESTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## APPENDIX D: HOW CRT MANIFESTS IN DELS’ SCHOOL DISTRICTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## REFERENCES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table

1. Previous Scholarship on Equity Leaders in Public Schools ........................................ 22
2. Equity Leadership in Education .................................................................................. 32
3. Critical Race Theory in Education Leadership .......................................................... 43
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCS</td>
<td>Cambridge City Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPS</td>
<td>Canterbury Public Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRT</td>
<td>Critical Race Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEL(s)</td>
<td>District-level Equity Leader(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCS</td>
<td>Manchester County Schools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

We are a country divided.

Rifts along socioeconomic class, race, and political lines have paved the way for the election of the 45th president. Donald Trump ran a divisive campaign aiming to elevate America’s (White) working class and represent the “forgotten” populations of middle America (BBC News, 2016; Baker, 2017; Langer, 2017), leveraging simmering anger for an election win.

Emboldened by the changes in the political and social landscape, involvement in White supremacist and other hate groups rose over the 2016 election season, and these groups have become more visible and publicly active (Struyk & Mullery, 2017). A young counter-protester lost her life during a White supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and President Trump hesitated to condemn White supremacy on the national stage (Bradner, 2017). He received not only heavy backlash and harsh criticism from those that disagreed, but also staunch support from his constituents (Bradner, 2017).

Also contributing to our nation’s current political and social landscape, are the multiple instances of police brutality and violence against Black and Brown people; images and video of these incidents continue to circulate the Internet and news outlets on repeat, with justice rarely found (Morrison, 2017; Chermak, McGarrell, & Gruenewald, 2006). National campaigns, community organizers, and others rallying in protest of this violence assert simply that Black Lives Matter, and still meet vicious contention on social media and in the streets where they demonstrate (Black Lives Matter, 2017; CBS News, n.d).
Additionally, anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiment has compounded since Trump’s election, and racially motivated hate crimes have also increased (Struyk & Mullery, 2017). Immigration policy continues to be hotly contested, as well as national healthcare, women’s reproductive rights, and gun control (Associated Press, 2016). Party lines are harshly drawn, and fierce policy debates are commonplace in the news media, in Washington D.C, and around dinner tables.

As we grapple nationally with issues of race, class, immigration, and violence, these issues trickle down to directly affect the climates in schools and school districts. Students in all levels (K-12) were found to have effects from political trauma after the 2016 presidential election (Sondel, Baggett, & Dunn, 2018), and schools also saw increases in anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment (Costello, 2016). In high schools, there were reports from teachers across the nation of increased stress in students, primarily in schools with larger populations of students of color, as well as growing hostile environments for racial, ethnic, and/or religious minorities and stark polarization among students in schools with majority White student populations (Rogers, Franke, Yun, Ishimoto, Diera, Geller, Berryman & Brenes, 2017).

Cohen, McCabe, Michelli and Pickeral state that researchers collectively agree on four major factors that influence and shape school climate, including “…safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the (external) environment” (2009, p. 182). Systemic conflict continues to permeate throughout our society and has been ever-present in our institutions, manifesting in all aspects of our country given current and historical contexts. Because “the nature of school life is naturally affected by the district and community (local, state, and national) that it operates within”, this divide is particularly prominent in education where the problems of socio-economic and racial disparities have long been brewing; these issues are
becoming increasingly harder to willfully ignore because of their intersections with the current social and political landscape of our nation (Cohen et al, 2009, p. 182).

The population of the United States is changing and growing rapidly, as reflected in the shifting demographics of our classrooms and neighborhoods; growth in populations of racial and ethnic minorities continue to rise across the nation, and simultaneously neighborhoods, communities and schools are increasingly racially and ethnically segregated (Thompson-Dorsey, 2013; NCES, 2017; NEA, 2017). Even with overall growth in populations of students of racial and ethnic minority, most districts are still starkly divided from the effects of de facto segregation (Thompson-Dorsey, 2013; NCES, 2017; NEA, 2017). Many students of color and low socio-economic class are separated from resources and opportunity because of where they live, inextricably tying the socio-economic status and historical discrimination in housing to the quality of education available for our students (Thompson-Dorsey, 2013; Rothstein, 2014).

As student populations become increasingly more diverse as well as segregated, the ability of districts to adequately and equitably serve all students proves difficult. Yet and still, the overwhelming majority of our nation’s teachers remain White, middle class, and female (Deruy, 2013; NCES, 2017; NEA, 2017). Average teacher pay is still low (NEA, 2017), and even within the realm of education, political and social arenas are inflamed and polarized (Sondel et al, 2018; Rogers et al, 2017; Costello, 2016). State accountability standards continue to push standardized testing and results-oriented outcomes for students, yet large achievement and opportunity gaps persist – particularly between children of color and their White peers (NAEP, 2015; Au, 2009). The “school to prison pipeline” is fed by zero-tolerance disciplinary policies that funnel children into the criminal justice system – disproportionately students who are poor, of racial and/or ethnic minority, those with learning disabilities, and/or histories of abuse (ACLU, 2017).
The harsh truth is that our school systems and school climates reflect our social and political landscape; they are often not equitable, and the educational experiences of our students are widely disparate. Marginalized students are not being served in our schools by curriculum, pedagogy, or by dominant school cultures that reinforce the status quo within our current political and social realities.

The educational leaders and teachers in today’s schools should embody a sense of agency, be driven by a social justice vision, maintain a global perspective, and consciously work to honor all students’ cultures and identities within academic content and students’ overall educational experience (Theoharis and Causton-Theoharis, 2008; Marshall, 2006). They are responsible for looking closely at the system’s own role in perpetuating this inequity and committing their districts to work to disband practices that both implicitly and explicitly support disparity among students.

By creating and maintaining a focus on equity and social justice in education, districts can be united under a common vision and mission to create an inclusive educational environment under leaders who challenge problematic normed behavior, recognize the power dynamics produced by current socio-political contexts, and understand how to navigate and make change in systems that continue the marginalization of many subgroups.

For the purposes of this study, equity in education will be defined per Jordan (2010), where he considered both the previous definitions from Nieto (2009) and de Valenzuela et al (2006), adding implications related to culture, society, learning targets, and expectations. Additionally, Jordan added a new measurement of student success to redefine equity in education in a more holistic way (2010). Because Jordan finds defining equity within education to be complicated and sometimes problematic, he situates “the issue of equity within an analysis of
broader social forces that cultivate inequality throughout society—in employment, housing, criminal justice, and so forth—so that educational inequality is part and parcel of overarching social ills” (2010, p. 173).

He argues that:

Equity is not about providing the same education to all students regardless of race, social class, or gender. In fact, because of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity it is advantageous to define educational equity in terms of providing knowledge, skills, and worldviews which would enable social mobility. Therefore, contexts shape our views of equity, and it takes on different meanings among different populations (Jordan, 2010, p. 148).

Ultimately his research “…directly and indirectly connects equity in education to race relations, class struggle, and broader social stratification in society” (Jordan, 2010, p. 156-157).

He offers that central to equity in education, is the “context within which students are nurtured socially and intellectually and given real opportunities to learn high-content, standards-based material…” and that it in the future, equity in education could be measured in “quality of care’ and rigor, as well as via individual achievement indicators” (Jordan, 2010, p. 174).

The good news is that more and more school districts are beginning to work to normalize equity as a necessary reform. Nationally, select districts (in North Carolina, Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Washington, and California, and Oregon among others) are leading this effort by creating specific equity plans and policies that focus on the challenges that their own district faces with regard to creating, maintaining and supporting equity in schools (Alexandria Public Schools, 2016; Asheville City Schools Foundation, 2010; Beaverton School District, 2014; Castro Valley Unified School District, 2012; Catawba County Schools, 2017; Cincinnati Public Schools, 2016; Highline Public Schools, 2015; Metropolitan School District of Washington County, 2015; Norfolk Public Schools, 2016; Portland Public Schools, 2011; Roanoke City Public Schools, 2016; Seattle Public Schools, 2012). Commonalities among these policies
reinforce these districts’ commitment to equity in schools and school systems, delineate action items and practices to impact change, and include mandates for accountability. Districts pledge to increase outcomes in achievement in order to narrow gaps among subgroups, erase barriers, and reconsider reallocation of resources, as well as create inclusive school cultures and eliminate systemic bias.

Equity-focused ideas and policy intersect with the concept of creating culturally responsive school systems, as districts are understanding their role in the achievement and opportunity gaps that persist in our society due to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, religion, and ability. Culturally relevant teaching and leadership practices are becoming increasingly accepted and expected, as building equitable schools and learning environments have taken precedence in recent years (Howard, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008).

For the purposes of this study, culturally relevant pedagogy will be defined as it was developed by Ladson-Billings (1995), “…a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate”. (p 469). In the second edition of The Dream Keepers, Ladson-Billings explains the basics of culturally relevant teaching as practiced by teachers who have a high self-esteem and a high regard for others, who see themselves as part of the community and teaching as a way to give back to that community, perceive teaching as an art, and who believe all students can excel and succeed (2009). They also help students make connections to their own community and expect them to give back and contribute as well, while they make further connections to national and global landscapes (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally relevant teaching “uses student culture in
order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 19), and “…empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 20).

Increasingly, schools are committed to the implementation of relevant professional development for culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy, hiring practices that promote equity, the revision of materials, policies and procedures to ensure they are not biased, and to build their school’s community with local partnerships in effort to build more equitable schools and address gaps created primarily by race and socio-economic class. By assessing concrete experiences in classrooms, schools, and districts, engaging in productive dialogue that is inclusive of all students, prioritizing and nurturing academic success, and developing a critical consciousness, we can understand the ethics of care required for culturally relevant pedagogy and leadership, and how social, political, and cultural knowledge contribute to valuing cultural competencies in schools (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Equitable schools, per Darling-Hammond and Friedlaender (2008), have an emphasis on personalization, rigorous and relevant instruction, professional learning and collaboration, and policy changes that center organization, funding, resources, hiring and curriculum. Aguado, Ballesteros and Malik (2003) add to this, finding that assessment and evaluation practices, strong links from schools to families and community stakeholders, and awareness of cultural diversity all impact the educational climate of a school or district in pursuit of equity. Directly addressing inequity, appreciating diversity, and understanding how students may be affected by implicit bias and/or held back by the dominating school culture and status quo are also crucial to the foundation of building equitable schools (Aguado, Ballesteros & Malik, 2003).
Even with these new policy adaptations and pedagogical shifts, accountability structures at the district level lie primarily with the superintendent, who is charged with developing metrics measuring the success of implementation of equity efforts (such as regular progress reports), creating equity task forces, and/or otherwise operationalizing equity on a larger, more generalizable scale in districts. To distribute this responsibility, some districts are creating specific positions for district-level equity leaders in their central offices, making space in already tight budgets for a role dedicated explicitly to creating and fostering equitable schools. Some districts create these positions as a way of responding to issues of equity and cultural relevancy in schools - especially in effort to reduce gaps in opportunity, achievement and resources. Additionally, some districts are also finding themselves in need of a strong response to specific racial and cultural instances taking place in their school environments.

These positions, and the District-level Equity Leaders (DELs) who hold them, are the focus of this research. DELs are defined as individuals who hold equity-specific positions at the district office or central service level in public school systems. DELs may have the word “equity” in their official job title, but titles also may carry diversity, inclusion, equality, or other similar verbiage. Regardless, all their job descriptions reflect an emphasis of equity for the entire district that focuses on outcomes and development for students and staff, with the goal of creating more equitable school environments. These positions can be at the director, executive director, or assistant superintendent level, and typically report directly to the superintendent of the district, although specific organizational structure varies from district to district.

Districts seem to prioritize the position differently, as evident in the level of position assigned to the DELs – the roles vary in title and scope, in supervisory nature, and are often connected to other departments, responsibilities, and aspects of district leadership. The work of
these positions has also been distributed to the work of a district level equity team, or a collection of equity coaches, rather than be designated as the responsibility of one sole DEL position. The variance among positions is significant, and indicative of the importance each district places on the challenges of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, etc., as they are perceived to present in their schools. In addition to a district’s individual emphasis on equity, DELs’ specific job descriptions are also largely dependent upon the district size, leadership philosophy, student demographics, overall challenges, and goals. These positions are materializing across the United States in many regions, in many forms, and with broad variance in scope, purpose, and authority.

Social and political contexts in our world manifest in our public schools with real consequences and implications, and the current climate has carved out an interesting space in the landscape of district leadership, with many constituents and stakeholders in public schools echoing a country-wide call for a specific focus on equity. Equitable and socially just schooling is required to meet the needs of all our students, and positions like DELs are being created and funded across the nation amidst a brighter spotlight on an increasing and obvious need for fundamental change in public schooling.

Problem Statement and Importance

DELs are relatively new additions in our nation’s school districts, with many positions only emerging within the last few years. Consequently, there is an absence of research and scholarship on district level equity positions, the experiences of the professionals that hold these positions, or the differences in how districts approach this work, why the positions were created, and the expectations they have for the individuals in this role. Although research discussing equity at a district level exists and varies in focus, a study crafted to define DELs, and understand trends and differences among these positions does not. By centering the experiences
of individuals who hold equity-specific roles, we can understand how different districts prioritize and implement equity on a larger scale.

**Purpose**

This dissertation is a collection of case studies on DELs and aims to fill the current void in the research on equity work at the district level in public schools, and to do so with a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens. The study’s primary focus is to document the lived experiences of individuals in this work, including challenges they encounter, implementation strategies they utilize, and how they understand and fulfill their roles - especially in the context of the current educational, social, and political spheres.

By studying individuals already in district-level equity leadership roles, their strengths, successes, weaknesses and challenges, we can compare these experiences across districts with different demographics and of differing sizes to reveal the nuances of equity related work at the district level. Commonalities, trends, and differences among districts and DELs can inform the work of all school districts in the pursuit of equity for students, faculty, and school communities. Although these positions are being created in states across the country, this study specifically centers DELs in the Southeastern United States, including the states of Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama and Mississippi, because of the strong influences of the social, cultural, and religious beliefs that are typical of this region; the goal is to give voice to the specific shades of struggle that may arise with equity work in areas that may be more entrenched in traditional systems.

**Research Questions**

This study uses CRT to understand how DELs in the Southeastern United States interact with colleagues, teachers, parents, students, and each other, how they are received in professional
settings, both formally and informally, how they feel they are perceived, and finally, how they compare across districts in mission, job description, implementation strategies and emotional experience. The primary research questions are as follows:

1. How do district-level equity leaders define and implement their vision for their position using a CRT lens?
2. How do these district-level equity leaders respond to barriers and setbacks to the implementation of their vision?
3. How are the experiences of these leaders similar or different across districts?
4. How do the CRT tenets most commonly found in education – the permanence of racism, interest convergence, Whiteness as property, counternarratives versus majoritarian narratives, critique of liberalism, and intersectionality (Capper, 2015) -- manifest in and/or impact district level equity leadership roles?

**Theoretical Framework**

This study utilizes a CRT framework. CRT assumes certain truths, including the recognition that racism is pervasive and institutional, endemic to the American experience, and is the cause of the marginalization of specific groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT challenges the societal status quo and is critical of claims of meritocracy, colorblindness, objectivity and neutrality, while affirming the experiences and value of people of color as agency to eventually eradicate all forms of racial oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

CRT is interdisciplinary, and within education its constructs include (but are not limited to): the permanence of racism, interest convergence, Whiteness as property, counternarratives and the existence/acknowledgment of majoritarian narratives, a critique of liberalism - especially the critique of colorblindness, and intersectionality (Capper, 2015).
A key component of CRT in education is interest convergence, which holds that any advancement that people of color have experienced against racist practices or racism only exists because the interests of people of color happened to align with those of White people, thereby ultimately reinforcing White supremacist power structures (Bell, 1980). Whiteness as property maintains that whiteness itself is treated as something of value and is therefore likened to property, grounded in the “…parallel systems of domination of Black and Native peoples out of which were created racially contingent forms of property and property rights” (Harris, 1993, p. 1714). This concept provides infinite protection of privilege, in a sense, and therefore the absolute right to exclude the “other” or that which is not White, because it assumes that Whiteness is the standard, or the neutral (Harris, 1993).

The concept of majoritarian narratives is another CRT tenet critical to this study. Linked to both interest convergence and Whiteness as property, majoritarian narratives are common assertions of fairness, objectivity, and meritocracy that actually work to maintain racialized power structures. Examples of prominent majoritarian narratives in schools include the concept of success for a person of color as being defined by their assimilation in to the status quo, the neutral, or the White (Solórzano, 1997). Additionally, majoritarian narratives commonly function as part of school curriculum and curricular structures, where curriculum itself is of Whites and White interactions with other groups, excluding the experiences of people of color or marginalized groups. Majoritarian narratives function as part of a deficit discourse, and perpetuate inequalities - students of color are socially, politically, and economically marginalized through curriculum while White students are prepared for power (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delpit, 1996, 2012). Majoritarian narratives are fought with the existence of counternarratives, which tell the truths of marginalized people and their experience in the world.
As Ladson-Billings argues, “CRT insists on a critique of liberalism” (1998, p. 12). Liberalism is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a political philosophy based on belief in progress, the essential goodness of the human race, and the autonomy of the individual”. The dictionary also mentions “government as a crucial instrument for amelioration of social inequities (such as those involving race, gender, or class)” (Merriam-Webster, 2017). In CRT, liberalism and meritocracy are often linked, and both receive critique because they represent the discourse of self-interest from the wealthy, powerful, and privileged (UCLA School of Public Affairs, 2009).

Being colorblind, or not seeing race, is a common manifestation of the critique of liberalism in education settings, as seemingly well-meaning educators try to appear non-racist, but instead racially neutralize settings by refusing to “see color”, or differences among students. “However, to claim colorblindness, or that race does not matter, or that educators need to treat all students the same…denies the atrocity of racial inequities in the past and the pervasive racial microaggressions, societal racism, and systemic racism that individuals of color experience on a daily basis” (Capper, 2015, p. 815). Ladson-Billings continues, articulating that liberalism and CRT are inherently in conflict, as “CRT argues that racism requires sweeping changes, but liberalism has no mechanism for such change” (1998, p.12).

Intersectionality, as it commonly manifests in education, is the understanding that all facets of one’s identity intersects with other facets, such as race, gender, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and national origin. Intersectionality reveals ways in which oppression may be compounded or nuanced, or ways in which racial identity may affect and appear in other aspects of one’s identity, and “…how their combination plays out in different settings” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 58). The concept can also be extended to how much and how often CRT scholars address aspects of racial identity across other races (Capper, 2015).
In education, one example of how intersectionality complicates the effort for equitable schooling is the disaggregation of data (testing, discipline, etc.) and the identification of subgroups who may be under performing and/or overly targeted. For instance, Black male students have widely disproportionate suspension and disciplinary rates, with higher occurrences of disciplinary action in schools and with harsher consequences than do any other subgroups, including Black girls, or boys of other ethnicities and/or races (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2016). When considering how points of identity combine to create unique (and unequitable) experiences for students in school settings, like the suspension rates for Black boys, intersectionality is a useful and important critical lens.

CRT has evolved from its beginnings and moved beyond the Black-White racial binary, and now encompasses several sub fields where intersectionality and critical theory combine to form the fields of Latino, Asian, and Indigenous critical thought (LatCrit, AsianCrit, and Tribal Crit respectively), critical feminist studies and critical race feminism, critical White studies, and LGBT critical theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These sub fields of CRT are ever-developing and often included in research with an overarching CRT framework, depending on relevance. For the purposes of this study, these sources are included as part of the literature review for their contributions to the field, but specific analysis using these subfields is limited, due to the data collected landing predominantly within the overarching framework of CRT.

All of these tenets are key to understanding educational leadership practices through a CRT lens. “As scholars who prepare future educational leaders, we have a duty to know and raise questions about race and racism in society, as well as an ethical responsibility to interrogate systems, organizational frameworks, and leadership theories that privilege certain groups and/or perspectives over others (Capper, 1993; Donmoyer, Imber & Scheurich, 1995)” (López, 2003, p.
A critical lens and CRT praxis “…can be helpful to educational leaders as a framework for understanding and, most importantly, anticipating resistance to change in order to be more effective in their efforts at implementing equity-focused change in their schools” (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013, p. 291). Additionally, a CRT lens contextualizes this qualitative study featuring three Black, male DELs, and grounds their personal truths, professional experiences, and lived realities in constructs that give name to their experiences and couch them in a larger body of scholarship.

**Methodology**

This qualitative study is structured and organized as a descriptive, time-bound, multi-case study with cross case analysis (Stake, 2013; Khan & VanWynsberge, 2008; Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010) to understand the contexts involved in the work of DELs. These contexts include any major trends, correspondences, patterns, commonalities and/or differences among participants, their individual roles, how they view and implement the vision of their job, and how they respond to barriers and setbacks related to their roles in their specific settings.

This approach is appropriate for this research because it employs a critical framework and CRT lens, explores the distinct experience of three different primary participants in three different districts, and compares these experiences through triangulation to extrapolate new knowledge and/or contributions to the field of research (Stake, 2013; Khan & VanWynsberge, 2008; Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). As a dissertation study, it is bounded by time, with data collection occurring only throughout the 2017-2018 academic school year (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). It is also bounded by the professional practice of the individuals participating, and how they personally experience and are received in their district environments. As Yazan (2015) details, the methodology of the case study in education leadership varies, including slightly
differing methods from Stake (2013), Yin (2009) and Merriam (2009). All three authors employ different approaches, but the similarities among their methods include interviews (individual and focus group), document review, and participant observation to ascertain and extract relevant data. Using a case study structure is important to this research because the methodology creates portraits of unique and individual experiences (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015) with which to understand the application of equity and the complex role of DELs in schools.

The three participants participated in three semi-structured interviews (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) to document their individual experiences. All three participants completed two focus groups (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) with other district equity leaders in the area in order to compare experiences and uncover similarities and differences in roles, and how they may respond to hypothetical situations and elicitation devices (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

The three participants also agreed to periodic on-site observation (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016), where they were shadowed in their day-to-day activities and/or observation of planned meetings, professional developments, etc. to better understand their interactions with colleagues, teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders in professional settings, both formal and informal.

A document analysis was also performed, including but not limited to their office’s vision and mission, their formal job description, district websites, district equity plans and strategic plans, PowerPoint presentations collected from observations, and handouts given during presentations. This data offers substantive evidence of interview data and observational data in practice and serves as a triangulation tool in reference to the corroboration of their experiences,
their priorities and implementation as expressed through the view of the district as well as through their own personal lens (Merriam, 2009).

Interviews and focus group interviews were audio-recorded. Direct observation and shadowing were documented mostly through field notes, analytic memos, and the coding of interactions, although when possible (e.g. when participants were presenting a professional development workshop) these interactions were audio recorded (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). All audio recordings were transcribed, and data were analyzed within a CRT framework for trends through initial coding, and the use of an electronic coding program, NVivo, to organize qualitative analysis. Specific details of the study design are described explicitly in Chapter 3.

**Positionality**

As the primary researcher, my own positionality, privileged biases, and assumptions need to be addressed. I identify and present as a White, cisgender female; I am heterosexual, was raised in the Christian church, and in a middle-class home. I am an educator, with a total of 10 years of experience in public schools, working in both New York City and North Carolina in urban, low-income environments with high percentages of racial/ethnic minorities. I have taught preschool, middle school, and at the university level, but the bulk of my experience is in high schools. I am highly educated, and from a small, mostly segregated southern town in North Carolina. I personally believe that racism and inequity persist, are endemic to the American experience, and that these inequities and their consequences manifest in public institutions, including public school systems, and elsewhere.

I understand that in my efforts to research and analyze experiences of people holding district-level equity positions in public schools, I am responsible for relaying the lived experiences and the personal truth of participants who do not share my race or gender. Telling
their stories accurately requires the recognition and consciousness of my own lens, biases and personal experiences, as well as intentional efforts in transparency and open dialogue with participants throughout data collection and transcription processes. By consulting with each participant after semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews with copies of the initial transcriptions, I solicited member-checking (Stake, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) to further ensure that the data collected fairly and accurately represents their views and personal experiences.

Ethical considerations are of the utmost importance regarding confidentiality, permissions, and in accurately and honestly representing the views, opinions and experiences of those who are being interviewed and giving data. With interviewing, there is a responsibility to capture the meaning and the unbiased truth of what is said. This includes maintaining transparency with interview subjects regarding the goals of the research, within the selection of content and data included in the study, and all interpretations, conclusions and analysis.

**Limitations**

Limitations to this study include time constraints, relying heavily on field notes for data collection during participant shadowing and observation, and small sample size. Time constraints limit this study because although it is a case study, it is also a dissertation project. This limits the data collection and analysis to one year because of the sequence of my personal coursework and estimated graduation. As such, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each primary participant, as well as two focus group interviews, and were scheduled over four months, between November 2017 and February 2018 (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This methodology provides an interesting and compelling snapshot of these
district level equity positions, the lived experiences of those who hold this role, and the nuances of this work, but the study will be unable to capture longevity in this iteration.

Although semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews have been audio-recorded and transcribed, I collected data using primarily using field notes and memos when conducting participant observation during their day-to-day activities on the job. By documenting major interactions, trends, and the more prominent relevant data, direct shadowing and participant observation provide important context for the data collected in focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. Unfortunately, there is no way to ensure during field observations that I accurately captured every aspect of our time together, and details could have gone unrecorded.

Lastly, this study only follows three district level equity professionals from the Southeastern United States. Without diminishing their experiences in these roles, it should be mentioned that the boundaries in geographic region and the low sample size may affect whether this work can yield generalizable findings and could therefore limit its broader impact. As with any case study, this research and/or findings cannot be replicated.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Problem statement and importance. DELs are relatively new additions in our nation’s school districts, with many positions only emerging within the last five years. Consequently, there is an absence of research and scholarship on district level equity positions, the experiences of the professionals that hold these positions, or the differences in how districts approach this work, why the positions were created, and the expectations they have for the individuals in this role. Although research discussing equity at a district level exists and varies in focus, a study crafted to define DELs, and understand trends and differences among these positions does not. By centering the experiences of individuals who hold equity-specific roles, we can understand how different districts prioritize and implement equity on a larger scale.

Range of literature included. This study has the unique potential to fill a significant void in the research and build upon previous scholarship, so it is imperative to understand the diverse facets of the research on equity work in public schools, as well as the scholastic environment that precedes this work in the field of educational leadership. With this in mind, this literature review covers previous scholarship on equity leaders in public schools, as well as research that centers equity-based leadership in education, and will finish with an in depth look at studies that have already combined a CRT framework with educational leadership topics. This gives context to this study, and further establishes its relevance and contribution to the current research in the field.
**Organization**

Pertinent literature is presented first by subtopic and is ordered chronologically by publication date within each category. As referenced above, subtopics include: 1) previous scholarship on equity leaders in public schools, 2) equity leadership in education, and 3) Critical Race Theory in education leadership. A table summarizing the articles and the findings for each subtopic begins each section, followed by more detailed descriptions of the studies, and their relevance to this research. A summary and any implications for further research conclude the chapter.

**Content**

**Previous scholarship on equity leaders in public schools.** Previous qualitative studies discussing equity and education leadership largely focus on teacher leadership, principal and building level leaders, and individuals at the superintendent level. None specifically address DELs. The following articles represent a summary of the existing research that does deal directly with equity and public-school leadership, necessary to build a timeline and a context for this study. By understanding previous scholarship, we can better articulate the void in the research as it relates to specific district level equity professionals, how they understand their roles, the challenges they face, and their lived experiences while working towards social justice in public schools. Table 1 summarizes the Previous Scholarship on Equity Leaders in Public Schools.
Table 1

**Previous Scholarship on Equity Leaders in Public Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year of Publication</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Key Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| *A Kernel of Hope: Educational Leadership and Racial Justice*        | 2004                | Pearlstein | • Case study on John Fischer, superintendent of Baltimore City Schools post *Brown* decision.  
• Leaders should work with community activists to further educational equity                                         |
| *School Leaders and Their Sensemaking About Race and Demographic Change* | 2007                | Evans      | • Uses interview and observational data from principals of 3 schools with changing demographics; uses a CRT lens.  
• Principals exhibited some combination of colorblindness, deficit thinking, and racial stereotyping, even those with cultural competency training.  
• Leaders must be self-reflective; their decisions are highly influenced by environment and school culture. |
| *“At Every Turn”: The Resistance That Principals Face in Their Pursuit of Equity and Social Justice* | 2008                | Theoharis  | • Study of 7 principals in Midwest with equity-based agendas.  
• Three commonalities between them and their work: resistance from school/community, resistance from district, and a significant emotional toll. |
• Uncovers experience of women school leaders, their leadership values, and challenges they face. |
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<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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| Collaborative Inquiry for Equity: Discipline and Discomfort          | 2008 | Winkelman          | • Study of a cohort in a principal preparation program, and how collaborative inquiry on equity plans changes their view of equity in schools.  
• Findings include a shift in their views of equity, appreciation for collaboration, developing their roles as advocates, and transitions from passivity to activity concerning social justice.                                                                                                                                         |
| Mixed Feelings About Mixed Schools: Superintendents on the Complex Legacy of School Desegregation | 2010 | Horsford           | • Uses a CRT framework; qualitative study on eight Black superintendents who attended segregated schools during their K-12 education.  
• Findings organized as counter stories to common majoritarian narratives.  
• Calls for educational professionals to re-examine race in schools - as leaders, and in practice.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Undermining Racism and a Whiteness Ideology: White Principals Living a Commitment to Equitable and Excellent Schools | 2011 | Theoharis & Haddix | • Qualitative study with autoethnographic components on six White principals who teach in urban, public school environments.  
• Addresses Whiteness through a CRT perspective.  
• Principals must have own understanding about race, talk openly about race, educate staff in race-based professional developments, use race to inform data-based decision making, connect with families of color, and understand intersectionality.                                                                                                   |
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<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Highlights</th>
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| Character in Action: A Case of Authentic Educational Leadership That Advanced Equity and Excellence | 2013 | Beard                | • Case study of a deputy superintendent who successfully closed the achievement gap in her district, uses framework of authentic leadership.  
• Findings reveal authentic leadership as effective leadership style for equitable education.  
• Truly authentic leaders are self-reflective and realistic. |
| Critical Change for the Greater Good: Multicultural Perceptions in Educational Leadership Toward Social Justice and Equity | 2014 | Santamaría           | • Uses culturally responsive case study methods and CRT framework to study 6 non-White school leaders in pursuit of equity and social justice in schools.  
• Finds 9 common characteristics among leaders: willingness to initiate/engage in critical conversations, a CRT lens, group consensus decision-making, guarded against stereotype threat, involved in academic discourse, respect for all voices in community, led by example, needed to prove trust to mainstream culture, identified with servant leadership. |
| How Contexts Matter: A Framework for Understanding the Role of Contexts in Equity-Focused Educational Leadership | 2017 | Roegman              | • Seven-year multi-case study of three superintendents working towards social justice.  
• Develops framework for understanding contexts in educational leadership, includes four sub contexts – organizational, personal, occupational and social – and their intersections. |

In *A Kernel of Hope: Educational Leadership and Racial Justice* (Pearlstein, 2004), the author discusses the realities of integration after the *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954, and specifically highlights the work of John Fischer, Baltimore City Schools superintendent during that time. Pearlstein analyzes Fischer’s role as a district leader in
Baltimore and his ability to ally himself with civil rights activists, ultimately suggesting that educational leaders possess the same openness to community-based activists to enhance the success of their equity efforts.

Pearlstein describes the history, context and aftermath of the *Brown v Board of Education* decision in detail, especially in Baltimore as compared to other districts. He also simultaneously tracks the career of Fischer, citing his ascendancy from teacher, to assistant principal, to principal, to director of special education. In 1945, Fischer was appointed to be the assistant superintendent, in 1952 he was promoted to deputy superintendent, and then finally in 1953 he assumed the superintendent position for the district, a position he held until he moved to work at Teachers College in 1959.

Fischer became known for his hard stance against segregation, and his work to desegregate Baltimore Public Schools efficiently and effectively during his tenure, a stance he continued to develop even after he had moved on from the district. While at Teachers College Fischer “…pressed for educational leaders to become much more militant in pressing for racial equality” (Pearlstein, 2004, p. 299). He argued that an absence of a supportive community climate “…can never be considered an excuse for the schools’ failure to stand for what is educationally sound and morally defensible” (Pearlstein, 2004, p. 299). Fischer also rejected the “kind of formal equality that had shaped desegregation in Baltimore”, and “…became convinced that what a ‘policy of simple and complete nondiscrimination…overlooks or attempts to evade is that the consequences of earlier discrimination cannot be ended merely by ceasing the practices that produced them. Without corrective action the earlier effects will inevitably persist” (Pearlstein, 2004, p. 299).
Evans (2007) uses existing data from a larger study to understand how school leaders make sense of race and demographic change in their schools. In a vignette-style study of three different high schools all with shifting demographics, Evans (2007) uses interview and observational data from the principals of these schools to look at their sense-making through a CRT lens. This study assumes that the way leaders make sense of race and other issues impacts their decision making at the school level, and the idea that sense-making draws from social, political and personal contexts that eventually form values, beliefs and assumptions of school leaders (Evans, 2007).

Findings include that principals (two White men and one Black woman) all exhibited some combination of colorblindness, deficit thinking, and racial stereotyping. Evans (2007) also finds that even though principals were trained in cultural competency, it did not necessarily influence the way they made sense of their school’s changing demographics. Evans (2007) says that “managing change, such as school demographic change, requires that leaders recognize their impact on the ways school members process and interpret events and happenings, specifically with regard to race” (p. 181). The principals also made decisions in ways they thought represented the school environment and school culture, suggesting that the environment itself has a significant role in what happens in decision making at a school level (Evans, 2007).

At the principal level, the study, “At Every Turn”: The Resistance That Principals Face in Their Pursuit of Equity and Social Justice, by George Theoharis (2008), is a qualitative, research-based piece that analyzes the experiences of seven principals in the Midwest as they endeavor to create and enact equity-based agendas and changes in their respective schools. Specifically, Theoharis identifies three separate categories of resistance that are representative of commonalities between each principal’s experiences: 1) resistance from within the
school/community in the form of the scope of the job, status quo, staff attitudes and beliefs, and parental expectations; 2) resistance from the district and beyond, including conflicts with central office administrators and other colleagues, lack of resources, regulations and bureaucracy, and principal preparation programs; and 3) consequences of resistance that include personal emotional tolls and a lasting sense of discouragement (Theoharis, 2008, p. 311).

Again, citing the experiences of principals, in *Leadership for Social Justice: An Agenda for 21st Century Schools* (2008), Jean-Marie discusses the experiences of four female principals facing “challenges of social justice, democracy, and equity in their schools” (Jean-Marie, 2008, p. 340). The qualitative study is based on demographic shifts and growth in minority and underserved populations, and seeks to explore the experiences of women school leaders, their background and leadership values, how they embrace and celebrate diversity in their schools, and challenges they encounter in their work (Jean-Marie, 2008).

Winkelman (2008) conducts a descriptive study which highlights the process and experiences of a cohort of emerging leaders in a principal preparation program for education leadership. These cohort members are required as part of their principal preparation program to create a project where they use collaborative inquiry, school-based demographics, and data to create an equity plan for their respective school sites. The study aims to understand the dispositions and actions that result from the creation of these equity plans because of these collaborative inquiries. Findings include four main themes that trended throughout analysis, including

(a) a movement from naïve beliefs that education inequities don’t exist in their schools to recognition and naming inequities at their own sites, (b) and appreciation of the importance of collaborating with others to identify inequities and to address root causes, (c) a developing vision of their role as advocates for the least-served students and families, and (d) a transition from passive bystander to active reformer, taking action on behalf of students and families (Winkelman, 2008, p. 286-287).
Winkelman highlights these trends in effort to track the progression of equity mindsets and focus among students in principal preparation programs. Moving principal preparation towards an equity framework is a reoccurring theme in the section that follows on equity leadership in education.

In a 2010 article, Horsford uses a CRT framework to interpret a qualitative study on eight Black superintendents who attended segregated schools during their K-12 education, and later became district leaders in integrated public schools. Horsford (2010) looks to understand the perceptions of these leaders, and how their lived experiences may affect their views on segregated schools, their opinions of the *Brown vs Board* decision, and how they lead in districts. Horsford (2007) first gives context and history of school segregation, and then explains her data and findings. Findings are organized as counter stories to common majoritarian narratives, and are listed in the paper as they are below,

(a) “There Is Nothing Wrong with Something Being All Black,” (b) Counter stories to Equal Education, Access, and Opportunity: “Sometimes I Feel Like the Problems Started with Desegregation,” and (c) Counter stories to Integration, Diversity, and Inclusion: “We’ve Never Truly Integrated” (Horsford, 2010, p. 298).

Ultimately, Horsford (2007) calls for educational professionals to reexamine race in schools, as leaders, and in practice.

Theoharis and Haddix (2011) conduct a qualitative study with autoethnographic components to research six White principals who teach in urban, public school environments. Authors aim to understand trends among these White principals, who lead specifically with social justice in mind, advocate for marginalized students, and center marginalizing conditions in their schools. Criteria for inclusion in this study also requires that these principals have evidence of their success in creating more equitable schools. Part of a larger study on how educational
leaders create more equitable schools, Theoharis and Haddix (2011) branch off to address Whiteness through a CRT perspective and use the framework to expose a definitive culture of Whiteness, along with a common discourse and performance within that culture and privilege. Implications and findings include that to effect social justice centered change in schools, White principals should be steeped in their own learning and understanding about race. They must talk openly about race in school environments, educate their staff on issues of race through professional developments, use race to inform data-based decision making, and create and maintain connections with families of color. Finally, they must understand intersectionality, recognizing that race does not exist in a vacuum, and that other identities, cultures and concepts affect student performance in combination (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011).

Beard (2013) evaluates the work of a deputy superintendent using the framework of the four components of authentic leadership: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective. This case study profile relied on structured interviews, surveys, and informal interviews to analyze the success the deputy superintendent had in closing the achievement gap in her district. Findings include that her colleagues rated the deputy superintendent highly in each of the four categories of authentic leadership. The deputy superintendent also self-reported her own perception of her leadership efficacy, and her results were congruent to the results reported by her colleagues, although sometimes lower than the ratings given by others. This evidence supports the framework that truly authentic leaders are self-reflective and have a realistic view of themselves and their impact. This case proves authentic leadership as an effective leadership style and offers a model of best practices for equitable educational leadership (Beard, 2013).
Santamaría (2014) conducts a qualitative, conceptual inquiry study with a critical lens, and uses culturally responsive case study methods and a CRT framework to understand the “...ways in which educational leaders of color in K-12 schools and higher education settings tap into positive attributes of their identities to address issues germane to social justice and educational equity” (Santamaría, 2014, p. 347). She finds nine characteristics common to these leaders taking action toward social justice in schools: (1) Leaders are willing to “initiate and engage in critical conversations”, despite group size, formality, or popularity of the topic at the given time (p. 367); (2) each leader chose to operate with a CRT lens; (3) these leaders actively used democratic values in building-level leadership, relying on group consensus for decision making; (4) they are all aware of, and guard against the phenomenon of stereotype threat; (5) all participants were involved in some sort of academic discourse, where they made contributions to existing research in the field of equity and/or underserved students/groups; (6) each felt it important to honor all their constituents and stakeholders in their community; (7) all largely led by example; (8) participants felt the need to build, win, and/or prove trust with the mainstream culture, groups, and/or partners in their work; (9) all felt a calling to their work, to leadership, in order to serve the greater good in some form of servant leadership (Santamaría, 2012).

Roegman (2017) details the importance of considering contexts in education leadership and outlines a framework for understanding the role of contexts in equity-focused work. In a seven-year multi-case study of three superintendents working towards social justice, Roegman (2017) filters their experiences through the four categories of her framework for understanding context. Built from a compilation of the existing literature on school leaders and how context matters, the categories in the framework include organizational, personal, occupational and
social spheres that may influence how superintendents approach equity in their respective districts.

Roegman (2017) emphasizes the importance of a leader’s self-awareness, specifically about how different contexts may overlap in their professional lives. She denies a one-size-fits-all approach to leadership, especially in equity-minded districts. Additional suggestions by the author include the need to develop strategies catered to the district in which the superintendents lead, “in-service leadership development” for those “…who may face organizational and social demands to maintain the status quo in their district” (p. 25) and utilizing federal and state policy to further the reach of equity work in areas resistant to change (Roegman, 2017).

The examples in this section largely focus on leadership at the principal and the superintendent level. All studies mention equity specifically, and even school leaders, but none cover DELs, or the experiences of people who hold these roles. This study not only fills a vacancy in the research but forms a distinct foundation for other analysis on district level equity work. Additionally, each of these studies provides a picture of how equity-based leadership has been accomplished in a variety of leadership positions in the past, with ideas, findings, and implications that are highly transferrable to the work of DELs and are building blocks that help to inform how the work has been approached in practice – even before the genesis of these DEL positions.

**Equity leadership in education.** The following collection of articles serves to represent the growing body of research on equity-based leadership in education. These articles are mostly theory based, with emphasis on improved equity-based school leader preparation programming and education, as well as the need for inclusive schools, and diverse school leaders. Also included are studies that emphasize frameworks and philosophies of leadership to promote equity in schools.
and districts from the top down, as well as tools and suggestions to improve schools and districts that are choosing to center social justice. These articles construct an overview of the past 16 years of research in equity leadership in education, starting in 2001 and ending with the most recently applicable studies from 2017. Table 2 summarizes the literature below on Equity Leadership in Education.

Table 2

*Equity Leadership in Education*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year of Publication</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Key Points</th>
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| *Displacing Deficit Thinking in School District Leadership* | 2001                | Skrla & Scheurich   | • Study of 4 Texas superintendents who were moved by data and accountability standards to displace deficit thinking in schools.  
• Five ways statewide accountability measures improve equity: provides data-driven proof that students were not being served equitably, requires improved performance from all groups, pushes development of teachers and staff, forces reversal of deficit views, increases expectations. |
• School leadership preparation programs have a responsibility to prepare students to lead with social justice lens. |
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<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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| African Americans and School Leadership: An Introduction              | 2005 | F. Brown                    | • Addresses the continued and increasing need for African Americans in public school leadership, and challenges/issues that face them.  
• Calls for leadership programs to focus on diversity and broader perspective that includes scholarship and knowledge of African Americans. |
| Educating School Leaders for Social Justice                          | 2005 | Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy   | • Addresses challenges school leadership programs face in preparing future leaders for social justice leadership in schools.  
• Pushes programs to readdress their standards, to think differently.  
• Challenges include: the standards movement, student selection, achievement gap and privatization of education. |
| As Diversity Grows, So Must We                                      | 2007 | Howard                      | • Argues for growth to create and maintain inclusive school systems.  
• Five phases of implementation for more inclusive schools: building trust, engaging cultural competence, confronting social dominance, transforming instructional practices, engaging entire community. |
| Oppressors or Emancipators: Critical Dispositions for Preparing Inclusive School Leaders | 2008 | Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis | • Studies educational leadership professors at university level.  
• Professors commonly identified the following dispositions as critical to develop and sustain inclusive schools: a global theoretical perspective, bold leadership vision, strong sense of agency. |
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<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Key Points</th>
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| Transformative Leadership: Working for Equity in Diverse Contexts    | 2010 | Shields              | • Distinguishes transformative leadership from other styles.  
• Studies two principals with social justice focus who use transformative leadership style and how they made equitable change in schools through use of a critical lens, strong positive vision, restructuring frameworks, acknowledging power and privilege, focusing on equity, and displaying moral courage. |
| The Politics of District Instructional Policy Formation: Compromising Equity and Rigor | 2012 | Trujillo             | • Studies one California school district and how they create, implement and keep educational policy.  
• Findings include nuances of policy formation, overall retraction of equity-based reform policies, and how equity leaders must mediate accountability and equity policies. |
| Centering Race in a Framework for Leadership Preparation              | 2012 | Gooden & Dantley     | • Creates a race-based framework to reframe leadership preparation programs in education.  
• The framework must be self-reflective, grounded in critical theory, and pragmatic, and include racial language and a call to action in the form of a prophetic voice. |
| When Race Enters the Room: Improving Leadership and Learning Through Racial Literacy | 2014 | Horsford             | • Explains the “pervasiveness of race” in educational settings (p. 125), and further explores the essential nature of understanding race in schools.  
• Builds case for how educational leadership can improve with increased racial literacy. |
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<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Key Points</th>
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| *Radical Recentering: Equity in Educational Leadership Standards*     | 2015 | Galloway & Ishimaru              | • Argues for a radical shift in leadership standards to explicitly frame social justice as core tenet.  
• Proposes 10 new standards for leaders with equity at their core. |
| *Culturally Responsive School Leadership: A Synthesis of the Literature* | 2016 | Khalifa, Gooden & Davis          | • Compilation of available research on culturally responsive school leadership.  
• Authors offer analysis of trends, highlight best practices and behaviors that maximize social justice in school settings – like critical self-awareness, culturally responsive curricula, teacher preparation, and school environments, and engaging community. |
| *Community- Equity Audits: A Practical Approach for Educational Leaders to Support Equitable Community-School Improvements* | 2017 | Green                            | • Uses Freirean dialogue framework to frame equity-based community audits.  
• Four phases of audits: disrupting deficit views of community and establishing new core beliefs, community inquiry with asset-mapping, developing community leadership team, collecting equity and asset-based data for action. |
| *The Tensions Between Shared Governance and Advancing Educational Equity* | 2017 | Castagno & Hausman               | • Looks at one school district in the Rocky Mountains in pursuit of equity-based change.  
• Authors conclude that top-down, direct leadership models are more effective in enacting equity-based change in school districts. |

To begin, Skrla & Scheurich (2001) discuss the use of accountability standards in Texas, and conduct a qualitative study exploring how four superintendents used the data and new accountability requirements to push the education of low-performing students (often students of low socio-economic class and/or racial or ethnic minorities) to the forefront, improving their
performance on standardized tests and effectively shrinking the achievement gaps between demographic groups in their school systems.

The authors identify and discuss five ways in which accountability helped to displace deficit-thinking in these school districts: (1) providing data-driven, accurate, and highly visible evidence that districts were not effectively serving students equally, (2) requiring improved performance from all groups, and shifting the political risk in discussing educational inequity from the district level to the state level, (3) pushing the superintendents to develop their teachers and staff professionally, including finding examples of districts, schools, and classrooms that were having success with under-performing, typically marginalized students, (4) effectively forcing the superintendents to reverse their deficit views of thinking and leading, and (5) increasing and maintaining high expectations to continue progress for all students once gains in achievement began to be made (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Although the authors make a point to delineate that these schools did not achieve utopia and overall equity in achievement data among disaggregated groups, their progress and the changes they made to yield that progress are still important contributions for research (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

Focusing on leadership styles and the educational programming for future school administrators and building leaders, Brown (2004) develops a metaphorical “loom” of transformative frameworks and learning theories. Successful education of future school leaders “weaves” adult learning theory, transformative learning and critical social theory together with critical reflection, rational discourse, and policy and praxis. This combination happens across world views, values and beliefs, as they relate to context and experience. She emphasizes the responsibility of school leadership preparation programs to groom students to lead with a lens of social justice. To do this, she suggests working toward a deeper understanding of the concepts of
access, power and privilege as they relate to education and school leadership by building strong relationships and challenging the beliefs and assumptions of future school leaders (Brown, 2004).

In an introduction to a special issue of *Educational Administration Quarterly* (2005), Brown addresses the continued and increasing need for African Americans in public school leadership, as well as the historical and current issues that affect the public sector of schools and the leadership of African Americans in these spaces. Brown calls for leadership programs that focus on diversity and “models of leadership that will address the racial, cultural, and ethnic makeup of the school community”, (2005, p. 585). He states that “a focus on diversity is particularly important in educational leadership given the rapidly increasing number of students of color in PK (prekindergarten) – 12 schools,” (2005, p. 585), and that “leadership theory, preparation, and practice must be approached from a broader perspective – a perspective that includes the scholarship and knowledge of African Americans” (Brown, 2005, p. 585).

Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy (2005) addressed the challenges that school leadership programs face in preparing future leaders for social justice leadership in schools. They first discuss the progress in the discourse around educational leadership and social justice, and push programs to reevaluate their preparation programs to encompass “more just schooling” (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005, p. 202). They then identify issues that affect social justice leadership in education, including the standards movement, the selection of leaders and cohort members, the achievement gap, and the gradual privatization of education. To conclude, they emphasize that true social justice leadership and education requires new school leaders to “think very differently about organizational structures and leadership roles” and encourages a critical perspective (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005, p. 215).
Centering the growing diversity in schools, Howard (2007) outlines the need for growth to create inclusive schools and school systems. Using five phases of implementation by which to trend towards more inclusive and accepting schools, Howard describes the importance of building trust among students, teachers, and other constituents and stakeholders, engaging and building educators’ cultural competence, confronting social dominance and social justice directly and honestly, transforming instructional practices, and striving to engage the entire school community in this work. He references culturally responsive teaching and policy making, as well as building capacity within districts to create specific equity policies and vision statements. He also suggests forming equity teams and engaging parental support to further ideas that generate inclusive and welcoming schools and school environments (Howard, 2007).

To uncover the critical dispositions required for preparing inclusive school leaders, Theoharis and Causton-Theoharis (2008) interview and analyze course materials from three university professors and experts on educational leadership preparation, leadership professional development and inclusive schooling, and diversity and curriculum. All three participants identified the following dispositions as crucial “to develop and sustain inclusive schools”: possessing a global theoretical perspective, having a bold and imaginative leadership vision, and having a strong sense of agency to do the work (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008, p. 236). To foster these dispositions, professors engage in common practices of assigned theoretical readings and discussion exercises, vision mapping using planning tools, and doing the “mental work” necessary to think through practical change in real-life settings (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). Although this study focuses on preparing school administrators and building leaders, it speaks to the processes of curriculum and understanding in efforts of social justice-based education.
Shields (2010) works to distinguish transformative leadership from transformational and transactional forms of leadership. Although these leadership styles have common roots, “transformative educational leadership begins by challenging inappropriate uses of privilege and power…that create or perpetuate inequity and injustice” (2010, p. 564). Shields cites the origins of transformative leadership and its growth as a concept, and applies the theory to the work of two principals who have successfully used transformative leadership to effect change in their schools by using a social justice focus. These principals made equitable change by balancing a critical lens with hope and strong positive vision for the school; they created new knowledge frameworks through restructuring class distributions and developing community ties, and they acknowledged power and privilege amongst themselves and brought awareness to their staffs by focusing on equity, democracy and justice, and they displayed moral courage and activism in their respective settings (Shields, 2010).

Trujillo (2012) describes one California school district and how it creates, implements, and keeps educational policy, what influences these processes, and how these policies are received and enacted (or not) throughout the district. Although largely based centrally on education policy, findings relevant to this study include the influence of politics and conflict in district-level policy making, and the nuances of how top-down change efforts interact with bottom-up resistance. Trujillo finds that much of this district’s policy making is congruent to the shift in policy-making for the rest of the country, and in line with trends at the state and federal levels for more conservative, accountability-based policy reform.

Trujillo states that “…these policies represent a retraction from equity-based reforms in that they promote exceedingly narrow purposes of education for districts that serve high numbers of children of color and poor children – the populations who traditionally score low on
standardized tests” (2012, p. 553). She goes on to explain that patterns like these teach us that “equity minded-district leaders” mediate policy messaging on a broad scale, but also “their district’s specific contextual conditions,” and that individuals “…conveyed by present accountability policies may be more apt to facilitate contextual conditions that favor more equitable, rigorous instructional policies” (Trujillo, 2012, p. 553).

Gooden and Dantley (2012), put forth a race-based framework to reframe leadership preparation program in education. They outline that the framework must be self-reflective, grounded in critical theory, and pragmatic, and that it must include racial language and a call to action in the form of a prophetic voice. This diversity responsive educational leadership preparation should also encourage leaders to engage in action for social justice, acknowledge privilege, and talk beyond the existence of race and explore the nuances of how racial constructs present themselves in schools and educational settings (Gooden & Dantley, 2012).

Horsford (2014), explains the “pervasiveness of race” in educational settings (p. 125), and further explores the essential nature of understanding race in schools, building a case for how educational leadership can improve with increased racial literacy. The author begins with an explanation of racial realism, and progresses towards racial reconstruction, and ultimately racial reconciliation, in a multi-step process necessary for schools and school leaders to be able to build equitable educational environments (Horsford, 2014). Horsford (2014) concludes her article by stating the importance of racial realism, racial reconstruction, and racial reconciliation in schools, student achievement, and leadership. Although not without its challenges,

Through developing racial literacy and by reframing race in ways that challenge individual assumptions and biases and institutionalized school policies and practices, educational leaders can begin to work intentionally to close the achievement gap. Better still, they will consider such gaps within the historical context of racial exclusion, segregation, and discrimination, and their implications for leadership and learning when they enter the room (Horsford, 2014, p. 129).
Galloway & Ishimaru (2015) critically evaluate current leadership standards and argue that a “radical shift” in these standards “…has the potential to change leader preparation and professional development, leadership policy and practice, and ultimately the persistent disparities in schools” (Galloway and Ishimaru, 2015, p. 376). Authors then propose ten equitable practices (a new set of reimagined standards) that would shape the responsibilities and expectations of school leaders towards a more just framework with social justice at its core. These ten standards include: engaging in self-reflection and growth for equity, developing organizational leadership for equity, constructing and enacting an equity vision, supervising for improvement of equitable teaching and learning, fostering an equitable school culture, collaborating with families and communities, influencing the sociopolitical context, (re)allocating resources, hiring and placing personnel, and modeling effective and equity-based leadership practices (Galloway and Ishimaru, 2015). Implications include large scale changes to school leader preparation programs to further institutionalize equity as a guiding philosophy, and cultivating atmospheres receptive to these changes for the betterment of our students and schools (Galloway and Ishimaru, 2015).

In a synthesis of the literature on culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL), Khalifa, Gooden & Davis (2016) compile the available research on CRSL, comment on its trends, and then extrapolate specific “behaviors” that maximize social justice in school settings. In the authors’ words, “…we highlight practices and action, mannerisms, policies, and discourses that influence school climate, school structure, teacher efficacy, or student outcomes” (Khalifa, Gooden & Davis, 2016, p. 1274). These behaviors include critical self-awareness, culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and engaging students and parents in community contexts (Khalifa, Gooden & Davis, 2016).
In this selection on equity audits in education leadership, Green (2017) puts forth the idea of community-based equity audits “as an instrument, strategy, process, and approach to guide educational leaders in supporting equitable school-community outcomes” (Green, 2017, p. 5). Using a framework of Freirean dialogue, and specifying that it is his intention that these equity audits be used in a flexible approach, Green delineates four phases of an equity-based community audit: disrupting deficit views of the community and establishing new equity-based core beliefs; conducting a community inquiry using asset mapping, and understanding shared community experiences; developing a community leadership team; and collecting equity and asset-based community data for action (Green, 2017).

Castagno and Hausman (2017) work to understand how different types of governance and leadership in school districts affect the equity policies and practice taking place in schools. Comparing site-based leadership models and shared governance to a more top-down approach, the authors conclude that top-down, direct leadership models are more effective in enacting equity-based change in school districts. By looking at one school district in the Rocky Mountains, the authors collect qualitative data that reflects both central office staff and school staff displace the responsibility for equity onto others and explain that this cycle is largely enabled by the looser form of site-based leadership in the district (Castagno & Hausman, 2017).

This study speaks to the Skrla & Scheurich study in 2001 (above) that identified federal and state accountability standards as an aid to displace deficit thinking in districts in Texas. Castagno & Hausman mention directly that “…NCLB, standards, and accountability had a clear impact on the likelihood of teachers pursuing an equity agenda” (2017, p. 104), and suggest that “…shared governance may need to be replaced by more centralized forms in order for real equity
to be achieved – at least until greater equity has been reached and shared models of governance can be enacted to institutionalize these changes” (2017, p. 108).

Not only detailing the evolution of the scholarship in equity leadership, this collection of studies also gives context to the climate in which the participants in this study were educated, as well as to the peers and colleagues they work with in the schools and districts where they fight for equity. This lens is particularly important when attempting to understand experiences, challenges, barriers, and successes of participants in this study as they engage in targeted district level equity work. These articles also address the importance of equity related work at the systems level, adding an additional layer of understanding in concert with the previous section that focused on the individual experiences of leaders with an equity lens.

**Critical Race Theory and educational leadership.** Lastly, the following articles reflect the available scholarship that directly engages the fields of both CRT and educational leadership. This collection of studies reviews the history and origin of CRT and how it relates to educational leadership and calls for more educational leadership research with a CRT lens. Additionally, the research offers explicit suggestions for creating culturally relevant and inclusive schools with CRT as a guiding framework. It also bridges CRT with critical pedagogy and synthesizes existing research on CRT in educational leadership. Table 3 summarizes the findings in the articles below.

Table 3

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<th>Study</th>
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<td>• Emphasizes awareness, questioning, and ownership of racial realities in our world.</td>
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| School Leader as Negotiator: Critical Race Theory, Praxis, and the   | 2004 | Stovall                     | • On engaging CRT praxis in schools, highlights need for CRT in education settings.  
• Suggestions include: race/class-centered professional development in schools, resource guides for families, and utilizing the school as community center. |
| Creation of Productive Space                                         |      |                             |                                                                                                                                        |
| Actions Following Words: Critical Race Theory Connects to Critical    | 2004 | Parker & Stovall            | • Discusses the intersections between CRT and critical pedagogy, asserts importance of explicit anti-racist pedagogy and commitment to social justice in schools. |
| Pedagogy                                                            |      |                             |                                                                                                                                        |
| Critical Race Studies in Education: Examining a Decade of Research    | 2006 | Lynn & Parker               | • Compilation of past 10 years of CRT research in education, findings use previous scholarship to define CRT’s relevance to education, education research and education leadership. |
| on U.S. Schools                                                      |      |                             |                                                                                                                                        |
| A Race(cialized) Perspective on Education Leadership: Critical Race   | 2007 | Parker & Villalpando        | • Introduction to CRT as fundamental lens for education research.  
• Five themes in education: centrality of race/racism, challenge to dominant ideologies, commitment to social justice, centrality of experiential knowledge, and historical/interdisciplinary context. |
| Theory in Educational Administration                                |      |                             |                                                                                                                                        |
| Negotiating the Contested Terrain of Equity-Focused Change Efforts    | 2013 | Pollack & Zirkel            | • Study on California high school with significant achievement gap, where an equity-based decision further marginalized the students it was designed to help.  
• Argues importance of schools to operate with CRT praxis to avoid unintended consequences, and to anticipate and defend against resistance to change from the status quo. |
| in Schools: Critical Race Theory as a Leadership Framework for        |      |                             |                                                                                                                                        |
| Creating More Equitable Schools                                      |      |                             |                                                                                                                                        |
| **Derrick Bell, CRT, and Educational Leadership 1995–Present** | 2013 | Khalifa, Dunbar & Douglas | • Applies CRT’s relevance to the existing climate of reform in education.  
• Describes and challenges the standardization of the field, how normed behaviors currently reflect neoliberal attitudes re: data-driven and social justice driven education leadership.  
• Explains a need for language and academic discourse that better serves the needs of children of color in schools. |
|---|---|---|---|
| **The 20th-Year Anniversary of Critical Race Theory in Education: Implications for Leading to Eliminate Racism** | 2015 | Capper | • Synthesis of last 20 years of education research with a CRT lens.  
• Six main tenets of CRT most commonly used in education research: permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, counter/majoritarian narratives, interest convergence, critique of liberalism, and intersectionality. |

López (2003) writes on the politics of education, and the holes (at the time of the scholarship) in the field of education politics and leadership in research containing CRT as a central theme and/or lens. Although largely centered on educational politics and policy, López attempts to break the silence on race and racialized structures in school policy and lay bare the field’s racially neutral, color-blind, largely White-serving constructs, shifting the conversation towards a CRT perspective.

He argues for the existence of racism and its continued influence on the way we shape our policies, systemic functions, institutions, personal outlooks, and how we interact with others in relationships. He encourages awareness, self-questioning, and ownership of the racial realities of our world, and argues that policy and politics are not the only ways to make progress in this work for social justice - it must be pervasive in the everyday work that we do (López, 2003).
In *Multicultural Education*, Stovall (2004) writes on engaging CRT in praxis in schools, explaining a brief introduction to CRT, its tenets, their relevance, and how they apply to education. He ends with three suggestions for educational administrators to create schools centered around social justice. The study focuses primarily on building leaders ( principals) and highlights the need for CRT as a “lens to unpack and address issues of race and racism internal and external to the school setting” (Stovall, 2004, p. 9). Stovall also emphasizes the importance of counternarratives in classrooms and schools, as well as placing the stories and experiences of students of color within historical context. Stovall’s suggestions for action include creating race and class-centered professional development opportunities in schools, creating and distributing resource guides for students and families as an alternative to calling state or federally sponsored agencies to report students for issues related to health care, nutrition, hygiene and clothing, and using the school as a community center after and before regular school hours (Stovall, 2004).

Parker & Stovall discuss the intersections between CRT and critical pedagogy, how they relate, and how CRT can be utilized to fill the gaps and limitations that exist within critical pedagogy regarding race studies and the “current color-blind ideology and discourse in education” (Parker & Stovall, 2004, p. 169). This study not only spotlights a need for CRT in education research, it also asserts the importance of explicit anti-racist pedagogy and a commitment to social justice, especially in predominantly White K-12 schools and in higher education settings (Parker & Stovall, 2004).

Lynn and Parker (2006) seek to understand the decade of prior research on CRT in education and compile their findings into a synthesis that explains the basic constructs of CRT as it has developed throughout its history, as well has how these constructs and tenets affect and influence the field of education, education research, and education leadership. Findings use
previous scholarship to define CRTs’ relevance to education, and focus on how the work has drawn important links to the fields’ legal origins and education, and helped drive CRT’s recognition as “scholarship of the people” (Lynn & Parker, 2006, p. 269-270). Authors also detail how CRT adds to linkages between inequality and schooling, and how the field is simultaneously a form of activism as well as scholarship (Lynn & Parker, 2006).

Further, the article focuses on CRT as used for qualitative research in education fields, and how its influence has driven teaching towards critical race pedagogies that focus on experiences of teachers of color as well as constructing new ideas as to how to “…address race and racism in the classroom” (Lynn & Parker, 2006, p. 273). Additionally, authors discuss the scholarship that centers around the lived experiences of marginalized students, K-12 education policy creation, and the future and impact thus far of CRT related studies in education, leading us as a field towards a critical race praxis (Lynn & Parker, 2006).

Parker and Villalpando (2007) write in an introduction to a special edition of Educational Administration Quarterly dedicated to CRT and education. The authors introduce the articles found in the issue, but also introduce CRT as a fundamental and “valuable lens with which to analyze and interpret administrative policies and procedures in educational institutions, and provides avenues for action in the areas of racial justice” (Parker & Villalpando, 2007, p. 519). In this issue, they identify five central themes that are present in the featured literature on CRT, including the centrality of race and racism, the challenge to dominant ideologies, a commitment to social justice and praxis, a centrality of experiential knowledge, and historical context and interdisciplinary perspective. Their goal is to “highlight the importance of CRT analysis to administrative policy and practice in the K-12 and higher education arenas” (Parker & Villalpando, 2007, p. 521).
Pollack and Zirkel (2013), conduct CRT analysis on a diverse California high school with a large gap in achievement between students of low socio-economic class and of color and their middle-class, and White peers. The study focuses on a single decision made by the high school in effort to close these gaps in science classrooms – to provide labs before and after school instead of during the school day, which increased in-class instructional time, and also allowed more time for lab experiences (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013).

This decision, made with equity in mind, ended up further marginalizing the students who it was designed to help. Students from low-income families had a much harder time accessing transportation to attend before and after school labs, and family schedules caused many to miss the labs entirely. The school noticed these results and decided to cancel the separately scheduled labs in attempt to rectify these unintended consequences. This decision became a highly publicized and widely contested debate in the school community, and instead of a complete cancellation of alternately scheduled labs, students in advanced placement courses could continue to benefit from the separate scheduling structure, and the general education courses were again re-scheduled to have labs during class time (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013).

Pollack and Zirkel (2013) contend that this conflict could have been avoided or minimized with the use of a CRT praxis, including first understanding property interests of all groups involved and how this decision might benefit and/or preserve the interests of non-marginalized students and families, how counter-narratives could be utilized to fight the assertions of “objectivity, colorblindness, and fairness” (p. 303) from parents and families benefitting from the schedule change, and focusing on areas of interest convergence (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013). They also broadly suggest that schools with equity-focused change operate with a
CRT praxis in mind to anticipate and defend against resistance to change from the status quo (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013).

Khalifa, Dunbar and Douglas (2013) summarize the collective work of CRT scholar Derrick Bell as it relates to educational leadership, in order to apply CRT’s relevance to the existing climate of reform in education. First explaining his entire body of work and scholarship as it relates to educational leadership, Khalifa et al (2013) then describe the standardization of the field and specifically how normed behaviors currently reflect neoliberal attitudes, particularly within data-driven leadership and social justice driven education leadership (Khalifa et al, 2013). Khalifa et al use CRT to expose “…breaches between language and lived experience…” (p. 505) in education, perpetuated by these cyclical leadership norms (2013). Authors use Bell’s scholarship to challenge these neoliberal and pervasive notions and explain a need for language and academic discourse that better serves the needs of children of color in schools (Khalifa et al, 2013).

In a synthesis of the existing literature on CRT as it pertains to education, Colleen Capper (2015) conducts a literature analysis to identify the tenets of CRT most commonly used in publications regarding education and education leadership over the past 20 years of CRT scholarship. Capper offers a brief history of CRT, and her findings include six main tenets that emerge as themes in the research in education: the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, counternarratives and the existence/acknowledgment of majoritarian narratives, interest convergence, a critique of liberalism - especially the critique of colorblindness, and intersectionality (Capper, 2015).

Finally, what follows is a short summary of the existing literature that encompasses the branches of CRT that go specifically beyond the Black-White binary, including Critical Feminist
Theory, LatCrit, and TribalCrit, as they relate to education leadership. Dillard (2000), studies three African American women leaders in education and research, and documents their experiences. She emerges with what she labels and “endarkened feminist epistemology”, which acknowledges the intersections of race, gender, and historical context in the realities and challenges these women face daily (Dillard, 2010).

Alemán (2009), uses a combination of CRT and LatCrit to critically analyze the experience of Mexican-American school leaders, specifically within the context of school finance and resource equity in Texas, and to offer an educational leadership framework based in LatCrit theory because of the continued marginalization of Latinx communities and voices.

Santamaría and Santamaría (2014) use race and gender lenses to study a Chicana university dean and a Latino principal in a multi-case study grounded in CRT principals of counternarratives, as well as applied critical leadership theory. Embracing positive identity traits and both raced and gendered perspectives allowed for these leaders to help foster an atmosphere supportive of social justice (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2014).

Garcia and Valerie (2012) call for more inclusive school settings, especially regarding Indigenous communities. Authors argue for a “decolonizing process of praxis” in schools (p. 76), where dialogue, critical consciousness, and Indigenous experience are privileged, so that Indigenous knowledge systems can be protected, and respected, and Indigenous communities can be effectively engaged (Garcia & Valerie, 2012).

In summation, an extensive review on CRT specifically in education leadership is important to this work because it grounds this study in its CRT framework, as well as detailing how CRT functions specifically in the field over time. This review also serves to explicate the importance of CRT as a functioning praxis in public education, as well as the need for school and
district leaders to utilize a CRT lens to promote truly equitable schooling. This study contributes to the call for a continued critical lens in education leadership research and adds to the growing body of existing scholarship.

Conclusion

“Although very little research on equity efforts across the country examines the role of the school district…” (p. 97), the available research on equity related education leadership and studies with a CRT and educational leadership focus help to contextualize the background, evolution of related scholarship, and new opportunities for growth in this field (Castagno & Hausman, 2017). This research offers something entirely new to the available scholarship in district level equity work and amplifies the voice of those individuals working through relatively new positions as DELs.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Purpose

This dissertation is a collection of three case studies on DELs and aims to fill the current void in the research on equity work at the district level in public schools, and to do so with a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens. The study’s primary focus is to document the lived experiences of individuals in this work, including challenges they encounter, implementation strategies they utilize, and how they understand and fulfill their roles - especially in the context of the current educational, social, and political spheres.

By studying individuals already in district-level equity leadership roles, their strengths, successes, weaknesses and challenges, we can compare these experiences across districts with different demographics and of differing sizes to reveal the nuances of equity related work at the district level. Commonalities, trends, and differences among districts and DELs can inform the work of all school districts in the pursuit of equity for students, faculty, and school communities. Although these positions are being created in states across the country, this study specifically centers DELs in the Southeastern United States, including the states of Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama and Mississippi, because of the strong influences of the social, cultural, and religious beliefs that are typical of this region; the goal is to give voice to the specific shades of struggle that may arise with equity work in areas that may be more entrenched in traditional systems.
Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes a CRT framework. CRT assumes certain truths, including the recognition that racism is pervasive and institutional, endemic to the American experience, and is the cause of marginalization of specific groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT challenges the societal status quo and is critical of claims of meritocracy, colorblindness, objectivity and neutrality, while affirming the experiences and value of people of color as agency to eventually eradicate all forms of racial oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

CRT is interdisciplinary, and within education its constructs include (but are not limited to): the permanence of racism, interest convergence, Whiteness as property, counternarratives and the existence and acknowledgment of majoritarian narratives, a critique of liberalism - especially the critique of colorblindness, and intersectionality (Capper, 2015).

A CRT lens contextualizes this qualitative study featuring three Black, male DELs, and grounds their personal truths, professional experiences, and lived realities in constructs that can give name to their experiences and frame them in a larger body of scholarship.

Research Questions

This study uses CRT to understand how DELs in the Southeastern United States interact with colleagues, teachers, parents, students, and each other, how they are received in professional settings, both formally and informally, how they feel they are perceived, and finally, how they compare across districts in mission, job description, implementation strategies and emotional experience. The primary research questions are as follows:

1. How do district-level equity leaders define and implement their vision for their position using a CRT lens?
2. How do these district-level equity leaders respond to barriers and setbacks to the implementation of their vision?

3. How are the experiences of these leaders similar or different across districts?

4. How do the CRT tenets most commonly found in education – the permanence of racism, interest convergence, Whiteness as property, counternarratives versus majoritarian narratives, critique of liberalism, and intersectionality (Capper, 2015) -- manifest in and/or impact district level equity leadership roles?

**Study Design**

This qualitative study is structured and organized as a descriptive, time-bound, multi-case study with cross case analysis (Stake, 2013; Khan & VanWynsberge, 2008; Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010), to understand the contexts involved in the work of DELs within a CRT framework. These contexts include any major trends, correspondences, patterns, commonalities and/or differences among these three participants, their individual roles, how they view and implement the vision for their job, and how they respond to barriers and setbacks related to their roles in their specific settings.

This methodology is the best approach for this research because it employs a critical framework and CRT lens, explores the distinct experience of three different participants in three different districts, and compares these experiences through triangulation to extrapolate new knowledge and/or contributions to the field of research (Stake, 2013; Khan & VanWynsberge, 2008; Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). As a dissertation study, it is bounded, with data collection occurring only throughout the 2017-2018 academic school year, and also by the professional practice and experiences of the participants as they work in district-level equity roles (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). As Yazan (2015) details, the methodology of the case study in
education leadership varies from the work of Stake (2013), Yin (2009) and Merriam (2009), but all three of their slightly different approaches include interviews (individual and focus groups), document review, and participant observation to ascertain and extract relevant data. Case studies are relevant to this qualitative research study in education leadership because the methodology provides portraits of unique and individual experiences with which to understand the application of equity and the complex role of DELs in schools (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015).

**Timeline.** IRB for this study was received in October of 2017, and participant selection began soon after, also in October of 2017. All district approvals were secured in November of 2017 after participants were identified. Data collection spanned over a four-month period, between November of 2017 and February of 2018, when all interviews, focus groups, and observations occurred, and relevant documents were collected. Analysis of this data began in February of 2018 and continued throughout the month of March of 2018.

**Participant selection and recruitment.** Participants have been identified through their job titles as professionals in equity-specific leadership roles within local public-school districts. I contacted each participant through their publicly available email addresses obtained via their respective district online homepages, and requested short, in-person meetings scheduled at their convenience to further explain the project. In these meetings, I distributed informational handouts about the study (see Appendix A) which contained research questions, the aim, and the rationale behind the research. All five DELs I contacted agreed to meet and expressed initial interest in hearing more about the project. After our meetings, three preliminarily expressed their interest in participating full, and two others expressed interest in attending focus group sessions only.
These five participants were targeted for initial contact because of the differences in their districts’ size, political structure, student population, teacher demographics, and the amount of time their district offices have included a DEL position, as well as the differences in organizational structure and where each DEL lands on the district’s organizational chart. In selecting these five participants, there is a broad range in each of these factors – the intent of which was to offer the most holistic and widespread comparison at all stages of implementation of the DEL position, and at varying degrees of district support.

This iteration of this study was capped at three case study participants, due to its time frame. Of the five DELs contacted, these three participants were selected because they each work in vastly different districts, varying in size, student population demographics, socio-economic status, professional culture, and political spheres. Additionally, the specific equity related position they hold in their respective districts have been in existence for different lengths of time – one participant occupies a brand-new equity role only created 10 months before this study began, another has worked as an equity professional at the district level for a few years, and the last has occupied two different district level equity roles in two different districts spanning a period of over 5 years.

All three participants hold doctoral degrees in an education related field, and all three have worked in the same region, even if not the same district, for years before taking the positions they currently hold as district-level equity leaders. Each participant self-identifies as both Black and male, and although they happen to share common racial and gender identities, they were not selected based on these criteria. In fact, the only criteria for inclusion in the study is that participants must hold a district-level equity role in a public-school system in the Southeast, or alternately be part of a team of individuals responsible for district-level equity
work in a public-school system in the Southeast. Each of the three primary participants hold different titles, but all are classified as DELs in their respective districts.

The two additional participants who volunteered for participation in focus groups are both part of more urban districts that are large in size. One self identifies as a Black male, with a master’s degree level of education, and came to his current position from education-related work in another state. The other self identifies as an African American female, also with a master’s degree, and has worked within her district for over a decade in different positions before being moved to a DEL role, although her title does not specifically mention equity. Both of these participants have held their DEL positions for just over one year.

**Interviews.** The three DELs that were selected to participate took part in three in depth, semi-structured formal interviews throughout four months of the academic school year (November of 2017 – February of 2018) (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). These interviews lasted between one and two hours each and were scheduled according to participant availability. Participants were audio-recorded while being interviewed. An outline for questions for the initial interview can be found in Appendix B. The first interview provided a general background and baseline, and was primarily about the position, the circumstances of its creation within the district, the job description, and the day-to-day activities involved in the work of DELs. The second interview focused on the emotional aspects of the work and how it may or may not intersect with their own identities, and the third interview focused specifically on CRT related questions in order to understand the framework’s explicit influence in their roles as DELs.

The content of interviews was also determined by the observations conducted during the study period and as follow up/expansion upon what data were collected and what specific
inquiries arose afterwards. I asked open-ended questions about their background and experiences, and I documented each of our interviews and critically analyzed their experiences and opinions within the CRT lens.

Semi-structured, in depth interviews yielded large quantities of data very quickly, allowing the participant to articulate their own perspectives and as they view their own circumstances with limited researcher interference; they also allowed for immediate and efficient clarification and further questioning (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Face-to-face interactions also yielded data on facial expressions, body language, and other communication that could have otherwise been lost in email or phone interviews, or other forms of qualitative data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Because this project is centered around the personal experiences of DELs, interviews and focus group interviews paved a direct path to the most efficient and data-rich data collection methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

**Focus group interviews.** All five participants also took part in two semi-structured focus group interviews (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) in both December 2017 and February 2018. These focus groups met at two different central locations convenient to all participants. Each location was vetted for privacy, and focus groups were conducted in closed door settings. Study participants answered a series of questions and responded to scenarios and elicitation devices (Appendix C) (Stake, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The first focus group interview was scheduled after each primary participant had completed one in-depth, semi-structured interview. Focus group interviews were audio recorded and provided the chance for instant cross comparison among participants.

Focus groups typically offer an opportunity to collect a wider variety of data, due to multiple participants and participant interaction. Fostering a supportive atmosphere encouraged
discussion, and elicited different viewpoints from participants, as well as conflicts, and areas of congruence and agreement (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Focus group interviews also allowed space to explore any differences in-depth and in the moment, as well as to record reactions, emotions, interactions, and other nuances of interactive behavior (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

**Direct observation.** All three primary participants were also observed at their jobs, where they were shadowed during typical work days, at specific events, leading professional development workshops and giving presentations, as well as meetings. Direct observation/shadowing was documented mostly through analytic memos, coding of interactions, and field notes, although when possible (e.g. when participants were presenting a professional development workshop) these interactions were audio recorded. Observations occurred for 10-15 hours for each participant, and hours were scheduled in accordance with each participant’s individual schedule. If presentations contained supporting documents relevant to the study (including but not limited to PowerPoint presentations and handouts) I collected what was able to be made available to me as a researcher, and considered those documents in context of the observation, as well as in my analysis.

Participant observation is the last data collection method for this study and filled in gaps and provided connection and context for the semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. By understanding the daily life, informal interactions, and experiences of each participant, data are enriched, and aspects of their day-to-day activities were recorded and analyzed for trends. Of course, respect for participants is paramount, and observations occurred at the discretion of participants. As an observer, I remained as anonymous as possible, again at the discretion of the participant (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).
Analysis. Audio files were transcribed and are stored on a secure UNC server. Data was coded (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) and analyzed for similarities, differences, and trends using a combination of initial coding and the use of a software for qualitative data analysis, NVivo. Field notes, analytic memos (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016), and other observational data were also analyzed and coded for inclusion in final analysis.

All data were initially open coded by hand. On a second round of coding, data were entered into NVivo using “a priori” codes (Saldaña, 2009, p. 49), and coded and sorted by the parent codes: Barriers and Challenges, Equity as Identity, Implementation, and CRT. In total, this study features 50 codes, including sub codes and parent codes. To further categorize data and detect trends and linkages, queries were run on the intersections of CRT and each participant, as well as queries on CRT as it related to each of the research questions, including implementation strategies for each participant, and the ways in with CRT explicitly manifests in each participant’s work. It is important to process and analyze this data with a CRT lens, not only because it is the framework of this study, but also, as explained in the literature review, because it is necessary to analyze equity related efforts in education with a critical lens.

Content of supporting documents also appears in analysis to provide context and depth to the interview and focus group interview data, as well as what is collected in direct observation. This document analysis includes but is not limited to documents expressing their office’s vision and mission, their formal job description, district websites, district equity plans and strategic plans, PowerPoint presentations collected from observations, and handouts given during presentations. This data offers substantive evidence of interview data and observational data in practice and serves as a triangulation tool in reference to the corroboration of their experiences,
their priorities, and implementation as expressed through the view of the district as well as through their own personal lens, ultimately further proving the study’s validity.

**Internal and External Threats**

**Positionality and limitations.** In conducting this work, it is crucial to understand my own positionality within the context of this study, as it presents as the primary limitation for this research based upon 1) my own personal beliefs as a researcher, and 2) how I identify versus the demographics of the DELs participating in this study.

As the primary researcher, my own positionality, privileged biases, and assumptions need to be addressed. I identify and present as a White, cisgender female; I am heterosexual, was raised in the Christian church, and in a middle-class home. I am an educator, with a total of 10 years of experience in public schools, working in both New York City and North Carolina in urban, low-income environments with high percentages of racial/ethnic minorities. I have taught preschool, middle school, and at the university level, but the bulk of my experience is in high schools. I am highly educated, and from a small, mostly segregated southern town in North Carolina. I personally believe that racism and inequity persist, are endemic to the American experience, and that these inequities and their consequences manifest in public institutions, including public school systems, and elsewhere.

I understand that in my efforts to research and analyze experiences of people holding district-level equity positions in public schools, I am responsible for relaying the lived experiences and the personal truth of participants who do not share my race, ethnicity or gender. Telling their stories accurately requires the recognition and consciousness of my own lens, biases and personal experiences, as well as intentional efforts in transparency and open dialogue with participants throughout data collection and transcription processes. By consulting with each
participated after semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews with copies of the initial transcriptions, I solicited member-checking (Stake, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) to further ensure that the transcriptions of the audio data collected fairly and accurately represent their views and personal experiences.

Ethical considerations are of the utmost importance regarding confidentiality, permissions, and in accurately and honestly representing the views, opinions and experiences of those interviewed and giving data. With interviewing, there is a responsibility to capture the meaning and the unbiased truth of what is said. This includes maintaining transparency with interview subjects regarding the goals of the research, within the selection of content and data included in the study, and all interpretations, conclusions and analysis.

Also with interviews, there are limitations in what may be discoverable because release of information relies on trust, comfort, and a certain fluency of thought, self-reflection and understanding from the participants about their own experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Likewise, questions and content may be influenced by the researcher and their knowledge and awareness regarding the topic at hand and what they hope to gain, as well as the ability to elicit and understand responses that potentially contain the answers to research questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To counteract these limitations, multiple interviews and focus group interviews were conducted in order to build trust and rapport, as well as participant observation to fill remaining gaps.

Other limitations include time constraints, relying heavily on field notes for data collection during participant shadowing and observation, and small sample size. Time constraints limit this study because although it is a case study, it is also a dissertation project. This limits the data collection and analysis to five months because of the sequence of my personal coursework.
and estimated graduation (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This methodology provides an interesting and compelling snapshot of these district level equity positions, the lived experiences of those who hold this role, and the nuances of this work, but the study is unable to capture longevity in this iteration.

Although semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, I collected data primarily using field notes and memos when conducting participant observation during their day-to-day activities on the job. By documenting major interactions, trends, and the more prominent relevant data, direct shadowing and participant observation provide important context for the data collected in focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. Unfortunately, there is no way to ensure during field observations that I accurately captured every aspect of our time together, and details could have gone unrecorded.

Lastly, this study only follows three district level equity professionals as primary participants, and two additional DELs as focus group participants, all located within the Southeastern United States. Without diminishing their experiences in these roles, it should be mentioned that the boundaries in geographic region and the low sample size may affect whether this work yields generalizable findings, and therefore limits its broader impact. As with any case study, this research and/or findings cannot be replicated.

Conclusion

The work of equity in schools and in academic research in education leadership is difficult, and oftentimes unpopular because it disrupts the status quo and makes people uncomfortable. With this in mind, it is even more important to capture the experiences of those at the district level doing specific equity-related work, and to understand the barriers, challenges, trends, commonalities, and differences in what those who hold this role face every day in school
systems, and to do so with a critical lens. As equity continues to move to the forefront in
education discourse, it is important that the scholarship reflects the lived experiences of those
who are engaging in leadership in social justice education.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

Problem statement and importance. DELs are relatively new additions in our nation’s school districts, with many positions only emerging within the last five years. Consequently, there is an absence of research and scholarship on district level equity positions, the experiences of the professionals that hold these positions, or the differences in how districts approach this work, why the positions were created, and the expectations they have for the individuals in this role. Although research discussing equity at a district level exists and varies in focus, a study crafted to define DELs, and understand trends and differences among these positions does not. By centering the experiences of individuals who hold equity-specific roles, we can understand how different districts prioritize and implement equity on a larger scale.

Theoretical framework. This study utilizes a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework. CRT assumes certain truths, including the recognition that racism is pervasive and institutional, endemic to the American experience, and is the cause of marginalization of specific groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT challenges the societal status quo and is critical of claims of meritocracy, colorblindness, objectivity and neutrality, while affirming the experiences and value of people of color as agency to eventually eradicate all forms of racial oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

CRT is interdisciplinary, and within education its constructs include (but are not limited to): the permanence of racism, interest convergence, Whiteness as property, counternarratives
and the existence and acknowledgment of majoritarian narratives, a critique of liberalism - especially the critique of colorblindness, and intersectionality (Capper, 2015).

A CRT lens contextualizes this qualitative study featuring three Black, male DELs, and grounds their personal truths, professional experiences, and lived realities in constructs that can give name to their experiences and frame them in a larger body of scholarship.

**Research questions.** This study uses CRT to understand how DELs in the Southeastern United States interact with colleagues, teachers, parents, students, and each other, how they are received in professional settings, both formally and informally, how they feel they are perceived, and finally, how they compare across districts in mission, job description, implementation strategies and emotional experience. The primary research questions are as follows:

1. How do district-level equity leaders define and implement their vision for their position using a CRT lens?
2. How do these district-level equity leaders respond to barriers and setbacks to the implementation of their vision?
3. How are the experiences of these leaders similar or different across districts?
4. How do the CRT tenets most commonly found in education – the permanence of racism, interest convergence, Whiteness as property, counternarratives versus majoritarian narratives, critique of liberalism, and intersectionality (Capper, 2015) -- manifest in and/or impact district level equity leadership roles?

**Content and organization.** Findings presented in this chapter are first introduced through the portraiture of each participant, derived from the rich data set collected. These thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) serve as a characterization and illustration of the participants’ representative selves. This section is organized to directly answer the research questions in this
study in the order they appear. The portraits will cover a) how participants personally identify, including values of equity as a key part of their identities, b) their career paths, c) information about the districts where they currently work, and d) how each defines their own job description and their vision for their position through a CRT lens.

First, the three participants are described in the following order: 1) Dr. Christopher James, Canterbury Public Schools; 2) Dr. Blake Kyle, Manchester County Schools; and 3) Dr. William Parker, Cambridge City Schools. After, findings are reported as per the order of the remaining research questions in this study: a) Implementation of Vision Through a CRT Lens; b) Responding to Barriers and Setbacks; and c) How CRT Manifests in DEL Roles. These findings will be reported thematically, but in aggregate and without specific identifiers in order to further protect the identity of all five participants. Comparison of similarities and differences between districts will occur throughout the presentation of the findings.

**Participants**

**Dr. Christopher James, Canterbury Public Schools.** The first thing that stands out about Dr. Christopher James is his easygoing demeanor, evident even when he is speaking about the most serious of topics, including racial disparities in public schools. He speaks with a calming tone; he is sure of his words. Quick to laugh and joke, Dr. James has a genuine interest in people, relationship building, and just chatting about life. He dresses professionally, but casually and comfortably, mostly in khaki pants and a sweater combination, sometimes with a tie, sometimes without. Dr. James is approachable, always kind, and possesses a natural leadership that does not threaten, but encourages. He emanates passion for social justice – it is in his blood, a familial and personal interest as well as part of his formal job description – and even in speaking to him for a few minutes, one becomes instantly aware of his deep knowledge on the
topic. This is not something he learned overnight, this is the way he was raised, the way he continues to live his life, and the understandings of which he and his wife strive to impart to their children.

**Identity.** Dr. James self identifies as a “straight, Black, African-American male”. He is Christian, and emphasizes that, “I really think that all of those frame who I am, you know, all the history that comes with that.” He goes on to talk about his childhood, a topic that comes up fairly often, especially around discussion of social justice, “You know, my father was very intentional about me understanding, I guess, who I was from a racial perspective – You’re a Black man in America”, and that “attached to that was his kind of model of what it means to be a Black man, which is certainly not what you see on BET.”

Dr. James continues to talk about being Black and male in the United States; he specifically speaks about the differences between Black culture and what is marketed as Black culture, “When you look at what is marketed”, he explains, especially about what it means to be a Black man, “…it only tells a slice of the truth, it doesn’t tell the whole truth…”. He reflects on his childhood again and says that, “I certainly listened to my share of hip hop and jazz and everything else, but I remember my father taking me to the symphony where I could see Black conductors and just folks doing different things.” He continues, “I don’t necessarily have a narrow view of what it [being a Black male] means…”

**Equity as identity.** Equity was instilled as a family value for Dr. James – His parents were “steeped” in the Civil Rights Movement, “they lived it”, and he says that for his family, “it’s always been important to stand for issues of justice…I don’t ever remember it being something separate and different from who I was.” Growing up, he vividly remembers standing on picket lines with his mother; he was president of the youth chapter in his local NAACP and
participated in the Urban League in his area. He says that equity, social issues and social justice were “…always a part of the conversation at our dinner table, around what fairness is, and what it looks like…”

Dr. James reiterates the intentionality with which his father approached issues of race with him, and talks about the importance of that emphasis because “I understand now that there’s no way I could get that in school…there was always this attention to it. He explains that, “it wasn’t always about race, but those who were kind of stuck in oppression, whether here in the states or overseas.” He laughs when he remembers the reading assignments his father gave him, “Have I told you about my book reports?!” One summer when he was in the 5th grade, he could not join his friends playing outside until he finished his chapter in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. “And it wasn’t even for school! …Isn’t that crazy? The *Autobiography of Malcolm X* in the 5th grade!”

Religion also plays a part for Dr. James – identifying as a Christian and growing up “in the church” reinforced the emphasis on the importance of equity that he was getting at home. “My church was always socially oriented, so fighting for social justice is what my church was about. The religion itself, Christianity itself, is a social justice religion.” He continues that passion for social justice in his personal life; “I do like addressing social issues”, and he does so not only professionally, but also through work with his current church, through a non-profit organization that he started with his wife, and through his parenting. “I talk with my [children] about it all the time. You know, it’s funny, I sign all their birthday cards, ‘keep fighting for social justice.’”

Even after a lifetime of work in social justice and equity, Dr. James does not feel discouraged or daunted, “I feel I’m a part of a long history of struggle. I hope I can get as far as I
can get, and some people might have a problem with that, but maybe… [our children] can pick up where we leave off…” He ultimately is motivated by his optimism, and the progress that he does see in the difficult work that he describes as “changing hearts and minds”. “You have to have some kind of hope that the system can change, so that’s what drives me.”

**Career path.** Born and raised in the Midwest, Dr. James comes from a family of educators. His father was a principal, and his mother was a kindergarten teacher for over 30 years. Although his parents were in education, his intent was to pursue a career in science, not teaching. He majored in Biology at a historically Black college in the Southeast, and he and his wife returned to the Midwest after their undergraduate studies. She was enrolling in medical school, and he wanted to continue his studies to obtain an advanced degree in research immunology. “But because she was in medical school, somebody had to work!” – He laughs as he recalls his entry into teaching; there was a shortage of science teachers in their urban city, and he entered education as a lateral entry teacher for high school Biology and Physics. Immediately, Dr. James “just really fell in love with teaching”.

After just one year, he partnered with a friend to start a charter school in the same urban, Midwestern city. He worked as a teacher and in some administrative capacity as the school was faculty-run, with responsibilities divvied up between staff. Eventually, he and his wife moved back to the Southeast, landing Dr. James in the area where he still works and resides.

In this state in the Southeast, Dr. James worked as an Assistant Principal for a rural county school district, and then transitioned to a role in policy advisement at the state level. After, he took a district leadership position in a small, suburban district in the area, where he worked for a total of eight years and completed his doctoral studies. Racial equity work in this suburban district had been ongoing since before 1998, around the time of the passage of the No
Child Left Behind Act that required districts to disaggregate data by student group. Dr. James could easily tie his role in curriculum and instruction into further equity work for the district: “We had equity strands and training all through the different levels of my job”.

In 2011, Dr. James was promoted to an Assistant Superintendent position that included “equity oversight” for the district. Despite equity initiatives being funded and staffed appropriately in the past and being “very much a part of the district’s focus…and mission”, the district “…also recognized that we needed systemic change around equity issues”, and that “…part of the systemic change was making it a part of someone’s role”.

This change occurred during a transition in leadership, and the next superintendent was grandfathered in to the notion of equity as a cornerstone of the district culture. “It was made clear to him by our board [of education] that equity was…very much a part of who we were, part of our DNA as a district”. As a result, equity was a large part of the new strategic plan for the district’s future under his leadership, “…so much so that he wanted to formalize what was already being done at the district”, and thus the position was born. For the next three years, Dr. James continued under this title that directly referenced his role in equity in the district.

In 2015, he was recruited by a large, neighboring district, Canterbury Public Schools (CPS) to fill the role in which he currently works as the Assistant Superintendent for Equity Affairs. The position had been created for a year, but was left unfilled, and although he turned the job down three separate times because of a vague job description, he ultimately accepted after being assured that his personal focus and beliefs around equity were congruent with those of CPS. He used that flexibility to essentially craft and define the position as it currently exists, “I’ve always liked a challenge…and because there wasn’t a lot of definition I could come in and try to create something that was aligned to my belief system around equity…” He explains that,
“some people talk about equity like cultural festivals…where we’re going to share each other’s food, but when I think about equity it’s more about interrupting systemic structures” and that “a lot of times school districts aren’t really interested in that type of equity.” He says that ultimately, he accepted the position because “I was assured…both at a very high level – the superintendent and the board [of education] members – that yeah, this is the type of equity that we’re interested in.”

**District.** Per their website, Dr. James’ current district, Canterbury Public Schools, is one of the largest in his state, with over 180 schools and more than 150,000 students, and is steadily growing\(^1\). About a third of CPS students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Almost half of the student body is White (46%); Black students comprise around a quarter (23%) of the population, Hispanic/Latinx students about 18%, Asian students at 9%, 4% identify as multiracial, and American Indians make up less than 1% of the CPS student population. There are around 19,000 employees in CPS. Because the district is so large, politically it is mixed, with more liberal-leaning concentrations in the more developed areas of the district, and more conservative views dominating in the more rural parts of CPS.

Currently, the official CPS job description for the Assistant Superintendent for Equity Affairs details that this position reports directly to the superintendent of CPS, with responsibilities including “…developing and implementing short and long range cultural diversity plans; planning, directing and monitoring programs and processes that promote and sustain diversity, equity, and respect; and achieving the school system’s strategic goals and objectives related to diversity…” Of his district job description, Dr. James says that, “I think they

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\(^1\) In the interest of maintaining the anonymity of participants, district data will not be cited or referenced directly. All information presented in this section was sourced from the district website and/or directly from the participants from internal documents.
were rewriting my job description when I was doing the interview because it’s tangentially connected to what I do.” He says it somewhat reflects what he does in his position, “but it’s very safe”. At the time of this paper, Dr. James only supervises an administrative position, but an expansion of his office has been approved and he will be onboarding two additional supervisees at the Director level, and an additional administrative staffer within the next year.

Dr. James thinks his colleagues at the central service level in CPS would describe his office as “probably the most valued, most innovative office” in the district, because of how early he reached out to them for collaboration, and how often he continues to offer support as a thought-partner and helping them see their roles in the district with an equity lens. The district website helps to corroborate this assessment, as a feature on CPS’ equity initiatives links directly to the website for the Office of Equity Affairs from the CPS homepage, publishing statistics, success stories, initiatives, and making their equity plan and progress a part of the district’s public face.

**Defining the role and vision of the DEL through a CRT lens.** Beyond his official job description, Dr. James’ duties are many, and his reach is wide. He explicitly defines the goal of his office, explaining that “one of the foundational aspects to our work is dismantling racism.” He goes on to detail that, “The way we define equity… It’s really the elimination of predictability of achievement based on social and cultural factors, and chief among them are issues of race.” In a meeting with central office staff and representatives from other districts in his region, Dr. James addresses his specific focus on race in CPS with his colleagues, “Our largest inequities are around race. Our grosses inequities are around race…So we don’t necessarily focus on race to the exclusion of others, but a large part of our efforts and our monies are focused on racial equity and anti-racist education,” and he ensures that strategic planning
regarding racial equity is happening “…at every level of our organization…including our students.”

Dr. James has a wide vision, and he approaches his DEL position as a tool to break down the systemic nature of the marginalization of people of color and how that manifests in public schools. “Inherently equity work is a resistance type of work, against systems… And so, I think it’s important whatever we do, to attack and address these issues from a systems standpoint.” He analyzes what kinds of decisions CPS is making regarding children, and with what effects, always with the responsibility of his job and his vision for the position looming close by, “Do we have the courageous fortitude to do what’s right? … We have to produce leaders who can interrupt inequities where ever they find them.”

To do that, Dr. James describes the way he organizes equity work in CPS as a “two-pronged approach”. The first prong is the integration of meaningful professional learning and development at every level of the district, “How do you get people to engage the concept of race, to talk in a critical way? A large segment of our population doesn’t talk about it every day, particularly in institutions, including our schools…” His response is to engage students, teachers, building leaders, central service staff, district leaders, and even board members in equity and race-based professional development. The second prong is the thoughtful design of effective policy, practice and procedures that will provide the accountability for faculty and staff to engage in equitable education practices. He rationalizes, “So, if I can’t change your heart or your mind, you just are going to have to be able to act right in my schools…so how do we begin to change culture based on policy, practice and procedure?”

Shifting district culture is a priority, and Dr. James has already had some success in establishing “race as the social and cultural factor that that divides a lot of this district. So, when
I first got there, at least among the administrators and teachers, and even at the central service level, there was a lot of conversation around social economics, visibility, language- But very few people focused on issues of race…” Thus far, of his three years of work within CPS he says that the conversations have started to take hold as part of the culture of the district, “…I think the issue of race is now firmly established in CPS. Whether people agree with it or not, the issue is on the table.”

Dr. James’ office owns the responsibility to educate CPS at every level and he uses a “three C” approach to do so: Coaching, Collaboration, and Community. He works at the school and central service level to do train faculty and conduct equity consultations, and to collaborate with other departments. For example, he is currently working with the human resources department “to make sure that we have an appropriate number of teachers of color, principals of color.” For departments over facilities, including budget, finance, and construction he asks, “are we doing business with women-owned and minority-owned businesses? How can we make stronger ties there?” Regarding student services and academics, “what does our curriculum look like? Who is reflected in our curriculum?” And lastly, he says, “…it’s about that Community piece. You can’t really do equity work unless you include the voices that are closest to it…”

In terms of a typical day, Dr. James says that his role is not very routine, and aside from designing and conducting a variety of trainings and professional developments he says, “sometimes my day is consumed with coaching and supporting schools… Some days I’m investigating racial incidents, or … trying to support a transgender student who’s feeling harassed.” He says that he can also be found “in the community on the weekends attending a rally on how the schools are racist, or at a church service just making myself seen.” He also spends “a lot of time in meetings. I sit on superintendent’s cabinet, so I spend a lot of time
there.” He can also be found immersing himself in the latest academic research regarding equity in schools, “I might spend two or three hours in here reading and outlining and reflecting on…what does that mean for my work…” especially in context with how to address teaching strategies and best practices for his district’s faculty and staff. “I really do think it’s my job to kind of see what the research says about these areas around equity and then to be able to design experiences for teachers to unpack” with that knowledge in mind.

When asked what he wishes people understood about his work, without hesitation he said, “Probably the organic nature of it. And, sometimes that’s not acceptable. When you think about institutions, you think about structure, definition, …direction… But when you do equity work, it’s all organic.” He continues to explain that this organic nature sometimes “clashes with… ideas we have around accountability: How do I know it’s working?” This can become difficult when considering that his brand of equity work is centered around the “transformation of hearts and minds, and sometimes that’s a bit too squishy for institutions…but that’s exactly where the work needs to be.”

Regarding CRT, Dr. James is immersed in the research, and is consistently striving to apply it realistically to his work. When describing an ideal fit for a person in a DEL role, he explicitly mentions CRT as a framework that is valuable to his work and to the structure of his office, suggesting that it be “someone who’s comfortable with the type of equity transformation work that we’re dealing with, so you’d have to know about institutional biases, you have to know about Critical Race Theory, so someone who’s been involved with the work perhaps before…”

He only sometimes references CRT by name in description of his position and the vision that he has for his office, but the values of the framework are imbedded in the way in which he approaches equity as a DEL. The construct of the permanence of racism has allowed him to
aggressively shift the culture in CPS to acknowledge the realities of race as a problem that needs to be addressed. He also readily addresses intersectionality and how bias may affect students, faculty members and community stakeholders that self-identify in ways that might compound their discrimination. He talks about race being CPS’ primary issue of educational disparity, but not to the exclusion of other issues, references helping transgender students navigate difficult situations, and recruiting more minority and women owned businesses to supply district needs. Additionally, his professional developments, trainings, and research help advance the ideas of the counternarrative – exploring alternate curriculum, conducting presentations on topics exploring race, biases, and coaching leaders into equity-based solutions, and always asking questions that re-center equity and social justice in CPS.

**Dr. Blake Kyle, Manchester County Schools.** Impeccably dressed, Dr. Blake Kyle is a person that you notice immediately, in any space. His presence is commanding, with a cool intensity that is almost sharp. He is an observer, but in an immaculately tailored three-piece suit he does not easily blend into any background. Rather, he owns his physical and intellectual space while surveying the room, pausing to ask questions occasionally, frequently to ask someone to “say more” about any given topic, especially race and equity. When presenting, he is “on”, quick-witted, quick talking, and fast-paced. He speaks with fluidity at a rapid pace, and especially when in front of people in an official capacity. When he is in casual conversation, he jokes more, laughs more openly, observes much less, and participates more, but his neutral disposition is decidedly formal. He frequently references research in his presentations and in his conversations about equity; even when he is speaking casually, it is easy to see why he characterizes himself as an intellectual. Dr. Kyle is incredibly responsive; he is quick to help,
offers his expertise to his colleagues, and prefers to just show up in response to a query when he can because sometimes it is easier than an email or a phone call.

**Identity.** When asked how he identifies and how that impacts his work, Dr. Kyle referenced “…just the Black maleness, I mean that’s it…I’m always looking at it [his work] from that standpoint…I think that definitely impacts my approach and my attack only because at the end of the day, it is my lived reality.” Dr. Kyle also frequently mentions his Christian faith as a key part of his personal and professional journey. For example, when referencing obtaining his doctoral degree in the face of the way he felt about school when he was younger, he says, “You’re talking about somebody [himself] who hated school, did not like any parts of it at all. But I saw the return on investment because I watched my mom and dad earn their higher degrees. So, in that regard, definitely it’s something I know is beyond me. I’m just letting Him take me where He wants to take me.” Although he identifies as a Christian, he also has significant critiques of how his faith has been interpreted at large.

**Equity as identity.** Similarly, Dr. Kyle also feels a deep sense of identity in social justice leadership and equity, especially as it relates to his lived experience as a Black male in the Southeastern United States. For Dr. Kyle, the stakes are high: “This really is who I am. And this is my everyday life, and so in that regard, it’s one of those things that when you’re talking about equity in particular, and you’re talking about racial equity, or issues of race, that doesn’t ever leave me, and so…I mean, I just don’t have time to play around.” He also comments on the seriousness with which he approaches his role as a DEL - there is a direct link to his everyday experience in a racialized world, the work in which he chooses to engage professionally, and the magnitude and realities of social change, “At the end of the day, I believe in what it is I’m doing and again, it is my truth…This is the state of our world, this is the state of my world…When
you’re in this work, your brain is constantly moving that way [towards equity]. It just is.” The importance of the work is always present for Dr. Kyle, and he sees it as a battle worth some perceived personal and professional risk as he continues to fight for change, “Honestly and truthfully, I mean, I’m willing to go down with the ship because, like I said, it’s different when it’s you…when it’s your life story.”

The truth is a reoccurring theme with Dr. Kyle. He readily acknowledges the realities of racism and emphasizes telling the truth about social justice work. He models sharing his own personal truth to encourage the same behavior from others, regardless of his audience, “It’s all about the authenticity… What you see is what you get.” During one such example mid-presentation, he detailed the way in which his parents raised him specifically around his own racial identity, and the realities of being both Black and male in America, “I can remember the conversations that my mom and dad had with me from a very early age making sure I was aware of my surroundings and what was up…I’m one generation outside of the Civil Rights Movement. My mom and dad were in the marches, so it was really raw for them.”

Through a combination of his family, his religion, and his personal lived experience, Dr. Kyle feels a direct calling to equity and social justice work, but it is a measured one, “This is my passion, and this is my mission…I mean, I definitely feel like I have a purpose, right, and that’s what I’m doing. But again, I don’t know so much that I see it as fulfilling- the word to really describe it is necessary.” He reiterates how his Christian upbringing reinforces his identity in equity and social justice work, “the whole essence of equity work, if we think about the foundational teachings of the Good Word, it really is love thy neighbor, treat others as you would want to be treated.” He goes on to explain that although he may not find the work fulfilling, sharing his truth both professionally and personally feels like something to which he has been
called. “I really do believe that He’s working through me to shine a light on some of these things. At least I’d like to think so …”

**Career path.** Like Dr. James, Dr. Kyle has immediate family in education; his father was a school principal. Dr. Kyle was raised in the Southeastern United States, just a few hours east of where he currently lives and works. He attended college in his home state, graduating with a teaching degree in math and going on to teach middle school for five years before entering school administration via a principal fellows program through which he got his master’s degree in school administration. After serving as an assistant principal for an additional five years in another middle school in the same district where he taught, Dr. Kyle “fell into this” DEL position that he currently holds.

He initially applied for a principal position in Manchester County Schools (MCS) as well as the DEL position. He interviewed first for the principal position, and the small district office at MCS called him in soon after for a follow-up interview for the DEL position instead. Dr. Kyle accepted the position with MCS as the Director of Equity Leadership (this title is truncated to protect the anonymity of Dr. Kyle, as his position is also in conjunction with another departmental program), where he has worked since 2014. Dr. Kyle finished his doctoral work while in his current role, his research exploring the effects of racial bias in the classroom setting. Eventually, this research formed the basis of his professional development trainings distributed to the district which he runs through online courses as well as in face-to-face trainings with schools.
**District.** According to their website, Manchester County Schools is a small district of only around 12,000 students across 21 schools, with about 2000 staff members\(^2\). The racial breakdown is 53% White, 16% Hispanic, 13% Asian, 12% Black, and 6% Multiracial.

Dr. Kyle reports directly to the MCS superintendent, as well as an Assistant Superintendent, but an Executive Director of Leadership completes his yearly evaluations as his supervisor. Dr. Kyle is an office of one, but he does supervise one full-time intern whose job description mostly reflects the programming that is also attached to Dr. Kyle’s role. According to Dr. Kyle, the district does not have a formal job description available for his DEL position. Even though a formal DEL position has been in existence in the district in some iteration since around 2011, it has had many different titles, and it has always been linked to other departments or programming despite the district’s long-time focus on equity. The MCS DEL position was held previously by two other people before Dr. Kyle, both under different titles than the one he currently holds at the Director level. There is no current plan for an expansion of his office.

Politically, MCS is largely a liberal-leaning district and has been for some time. The community base is very active in MCS, and school board meetings are frequently well attended by parents and other community stakeholders. The website features a link to the district’s equity plan on the homepage. It is fairly prominently featured near the top of a list of other links.

**Defining the role and vision of the DEL through a CRT lens.** Dr. Kyle’s district does not have an official job description for his role, and so his approaching and defining the DEL position was a calculated effort on his part. He “hit the ground running” and spent the first year of his work as a DEL primarily on a listening tour of MCS, learning how the district operated,

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\(^2\) In the interest of maintaining the anonymity of participants, district data will not be cited or referenced directly. All information presented in this section was sourced from the district website and/or directly from the participants from internal documents.
and where his role might fit in under his working title and the current district leadership. “You make no changes, you just sit, and you listen, you ask questions, you don’t make that many comments.” His entire purpose was “to look at what is the state of equity in the district since there had been someone who had been previously in a version of this role, so let me figure out exactly what’s going on and let me wrap my hands around what that looks like and where I want it to go.”

In year two, he understood the areas for improvement and his challenges, essentially crafting his own job description, he created a “road map” for where he wanted the position to go. “I started doing more research, started getting deeper into my own [doctoral] research, and then was pulling those pieces into this particular position.” In his third and most recent year, he wanted to expand his reach and empower other faculty in MCS to act and speak on behalf of equity, and to place school-based representatives, a MCS equity team, to handle issues as they came about in their own settings, with available support and continued training to guide them. “I said let me bring some other folks on board who I can align my vision with who will then be the orators of what that vision is in their buildings.”

He describes DEL work as a “boots on the ground” type of position, where collaboration is key, especially with district leadership, school and building leaders, and teachers and staff. Describing the scope of his work, he says, “ultimately, it’s [the superintendent’s] decision and [their] vision. …then I’m going to basically take that and figure out exactly how that’s going to look… also seeing to the execution of the various components of the equity plan…with a little bit of Title VII and Title IX mixed in.”

Like Dr. James, Dr. Kyle spends much of his time designing trainings and professional development opportunities for MCS staff. Again, he emphasizes truth and authenticity in a call to
action, arguing that even if a person has received training, it is different than integrating that training into their everyday practice, “When we’re talking about true social justice leadership, that means our words need to match our actions.” He says that “it is not enough to simply have something down, we need to also be making sure that we are acting and holding ourselves accountable for that work, and for that charge,” so that his district can “make sure every student graduates from our schools college and career ready.”

Of districts contemplating a DEL position, Dr. Kyle challenges them to really define the role, their motivations in the role’s creation, the scope of the work, and the efficacy their DEL may be responsible for as compared to the power they hold in title and/or authority. “What are you really wanting this person to do? Because even if you put some of those things in the job description, are you really wanting those things to happen? Or are you putting those things out there because it’s the politically correct thing to do for this particular position?” The work is not without its challenges. He says, “when it comes to being a true social justice leader, you’re not going to be the most popular person in the room…You just aren’t. But you are gonna be woke.”

When asked what he wished people understood about his work, he said “For as long as it took for this system to get built up, it’s going to take double that amount for it to be dismantled. The master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house.” He wants people to “have patience,” because “if we think about school, school is working for who it was made to work for: White boys. It’s just going to take time.”

In specific reference to CRT and how the critical framework may shape his work, Dr. Kyle does not mention the theory in direct concert with his job description, how the district may see his job, and of his day to day activities. He does, however, speak about CRT often and explicitly in reference to how he approaches the implementation of his work in later sections; it
is very much a guiding factor for his role. Most specifically, he frequently mentions his duty to always offer a counternarrative in professional developments and trainings. In presentations to his equity team, he has also used CRT as a framework for delivering the content of his presentations. When asked directly about CRT, he also emphasizes his own growth as a researcher and as a DEL, saying “because I was coming from building-level administration into this position… I brought that lens into this.” He states, “I could not have had this same level of conversation in the beginning that I’m having… right now.”

**Dr. William Parker, Cambridge City Schools.** Dr. William Parker is a deep thinker. As a colleague of his described him, “you can look at his face and almost see the gears turning”. He is thoughtful about everything that he says, and often pauses before he speaks so that he can fully process a question, his commentary, or what he is observing. He is careful, but that is not to be confused with worried or anxious – he is very calm, comfortable, and sure of his messaging. When asked, of himself he says, “I’m very thoughtful about what I say and how I say it… Especially in this work, you have to be thoughtful about what you are saying,” because it is important “to check yourself on some things, and I try to be mindful of any types of issues … or biases that I might have that might impact what I communicate and how I communicate.”

Dr. Parker is consistent – consistently thinking, consistently self-reflective, consistently talking about his equity work as his profession, but also as something that is a part of personhood, his family life, and his dedication to his community. In talking with Dr. Parker, it is obvious that not only is he trying to encourage others to see education with an anti-racist, equity-based lens, he is also dedicated to his own growth both personally and professionally. The impact of his own role and the content of his own professional developments, research, and training is not lost on him – he contemplates it all.
What is striking about Dr. Parker is his transparency and his vulnerability in this reflection. He is an observer, but he is also quick to share, especially in spaces where he feels comfortable. For Dr. Parker, that comfort may be found in a group of like-minded colleagues, in a one-on-one conversation, or in front of an entire room as he runs a formal professional development when he might share a story that some might consider personal. Dr. Parker is casual in demeanor, with flashes of formality. He knows when to turn that formality “on” – and can do so adeptly while still remaining quite comfortable and at ease. You may find him in a full suit, or more casual professional attire on any given day. He is quick to laugh, even at himself, and is generally positive in disposition.

Identity. Dr. Parker self-identifies as a Black male, of the middle class, heterosexual, and as highly educated. He also identifies as Southern, and as Christian. After being asked directly about his own positionality and how he identifies, he added that he completed “…a bias and privilege assessment and essentially race is my main area where I’m a potential target of discrimination, aside from that, which is significant, I do live in a privileged space for many of those other parts of my identity.” In response to how these intersections in identity may affect the work that he does, Dr. Parker says, “I really feel like aside from race, I have to be…reflective on…potential biases that may come into my thought processes.” He goes on to say that, “I do feel that in general being a young, Black, male presenter in this position, all of those are not seen as privileges, from the young to the Black and to the male…being a male in education isn’t necessarily the most privileged space…” He qualifies that by noting that education is traditionally a female dominated field, “I say that, but at the same time I understand that there’s still a lot of privilege in being male…but I continue to get indications that sometimes, depending on who I’m working with, that being male becomes a liability.”
**Equity as identity.** Dr. Parker speaks of equity as identity in a more present way, referencing less about his upbringing and more about his current studies, his relationship with his wife, and choices they make about raising their children. When asked if he has always operated with equity as a personal mindset, he responded that he “…already had the makings of an equity mindset”, but he highlighted his process of coming into equity work as a professional as a more intentional and academic process. He mentions that “…a number of professional development opportunities…a lot of reading, working on my doctorate” definitely all “sharpened that lens” for him. He thinks about the question a little more and clarifies, “I’ve kind of had it [an equity lens], but- I hate to say I’ve always had it, because what I’ve had before were the makings of it, but it was nothing like what I understand now.”

When asked if equity work was part of his personal identity, he responds quickly: “Yes. Very much so. And …it’s not just racial equity.” He speaks frequently in reference to both he and his wife. Her work intertwines with his own in education, equity and social justice, and these values seem to not only characterize them both personally, but also as a couple in partnership, “Being married to an anti-racist educator…this is really who we are, it’s who we’ve been.” He laughs as he says, “And I don’t know, I just know some people would think our marriage is pretty lame if they understood how much time we spend on this.” He explains that her support and like-minded work helps build his professional practice. “To be honest, I have more fun in these discussions with [my wife] than I do at work…I mean, we don’t talk about race all the time, but at any time it could flow into the conversation…and that’s okay.”

During a presentation, Dr. Parker fielded a comment from a participant during a discussion on implicit bias at a school in CCS, and his response is an example of his openness and of how deeply he identifies with equity. A White woman shared with the group that her
daughter, “has a child by a Black man, and how she told her daughter after hearing research about how people judge names” not to give the child a “Black-sounding name.” As Dr. Parker is recounting the experience, he laughs before he goes on, “And so…my response to that was, ‘Well you know that’s funny because my wife and I, when we were naming our kids, we purposefully tried to give them the ‘Blacks’ names possible.” He shared his children’s names with the staff to whom he was presenting. “And if you don’t think of Africa and Blackness when you hear [his children’s names], I don’t know what’s going to do it.” He continues, “…And I said, ‘do you know why we named them those names?’ I said, ‘because we are working to create a society that when they grow up, they will not be judged by their names, they will not be judged by the color of their skin.’” Dr. Parker recognizes the racialized reality of our society and our world, but he and his wife are dedicated to equity work and social change, “And you know, of course, that’s a very idealistic thing, but that’s…what fuels us.”

**Career path.** Dr. Parker grew up in the Southeastern United States, in the same state as he currently lives and resides, although in a different, more rural town a few hours away. He graduated from his undergraduate studies in his home state with a degree in teaching and was a classroom social studies teacher in two different high schools, both in Cambridge City Schools (CCS), throughout a total of seven years. While he was still in the classroom, he began pursuing his doctoral studies for a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction with the intent of becoming a university-level professor.

Around the time his coursework was completed and his dissertation work began, he was hired by CCS at the district level as a curriculum specialist. He worked in this role for four years, gradually moving towards integrating his personal interests of race and equity much more intentionally and explicitly into this role. In the fall of 2013, both he and his wife, a teacher in
CCS, were approached by a former mentor to create and deliver professional development “…specifically around race and equity and anti-racism”. The goal was to address some school-based issues that the mentor was seeing between White teachers in CCS and their Black students.

This opportunity arose organically, and what started as a race-based, site-specific equity training, transformed into a professional development series that grew in scope. As a district-level employee, Dr. Parker was always thinking bigger, and his “…next steps were to think about scaling this and how we could do this across the district…So, I shared what we did…a research study [on the professional development] …with district leadership.” He was encouraged by CCS leadership to reach out to other principals interested in possibly replicating the training and conducted them in two additional schools. “I had been advocating for doing more across the district this whole time…the first iteration we did, we planned in late 2013, implemented in 2014. I did the second iteration in 2015 at the second school.”

Around this time and continuing throughout 2016, Dr. Parker began to conduct more professional development around culturally relevant pedagogy, both in schools and district-wide trainings. The more trainings he did, the more he analyzed relevant district data, and he started receiving data sets from other subjects and in more specific demographic breakdowns. What he found, was that the CCS racial achievement gap was one of the widest in their state, “Our White students were outperforming White students across the state, while our Black students and Latino students were underperforming Black and Latino students across the state, which makes for an even wider gap.”

After consulting with his wife and his colleagues, he decided to “advocate for a position for someone to focus specifically on racial equity in the district.” He wrote up a proposal, presented his findings to the superintendent, and expressed the need for a DEL position at CCS,
comparing other districts with DELs in the Southeast with his own, and how their demographics compared to those of CCS, “…In our district, our percentage of students of color was way higher than any of the other districts that had these positions [DELs]…” When he broke it down even further, “…looking at the results we were getting as far as test scores of students of color and comparing that with other districts, and the fact that we’re not doing anything race-specific,” he put “forth the argument that we need this position,” and the superintendent agreed. Because he was already involved in the work at such a high level, the superintendent also decided that Dr. Parker was the best person for the job.

At the beginning of 2017, Dr. Parker began his work as the Executive Director for Equity Affairs for Cambridge City Schools. Because he proposed and essentially created the position, he wrote his own formal job description. He describes it as “pretty open”, and he feels it is an accurate reflection of his work and what his office strives to accomplish, which is a “wide net in some senses…I’m working on a macro level…in looking at systems, looking at different departments to enhance their understanding of equity and how inequity may play out…reflecting on that, and addressing that.” He drew from existing job descriptions for DELs in similar positions and combined those informational pieces with his personal view of what he felt this job should encompass.

**District.** According to the Cambridge City Schools website, the district has 53 total schools and almost 5,000 employees serving a total of around 34,000 students³. Their student body has a majority population of students of racial and/or ethnic minority: slightly over 44% of their students are African American, just over 30% are Latinx/Hispanic, almost 19% are White,

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³ In the interest of maintaining the anonymity of participants, district data will not be cited or referenced directly. All information presented in this section was sourced from the district website and/or directly from the participants from internal documents.
3.2% identify as multi-racial, 2.2% are Asian, 0.2% are American Indian and 0.1% identify as Pacific Islander. Sixty three percent of their entire student body qualifies for free and reduced-price lunch. Politically, CCS is a district that has been historically liberal, although there are some factions along the district lines that trend more conservatively.

Dr. Parker’s direct supervisor is the Deputy Superintendent of Academic Services, although he still also maintains a channel of communication with the Superintendent. Although formerly an office of only one person, he now has been cleared to hire a Coordinator level position for some of his specific programming initiatives in CCS. The onboarding for that process is also being completed at the time of this paper. The district website does not feature The Equity Affairs office at all on the homepage, but there is a dedicated link to the office’s district webpage in a drop-down list that appears after clicking on the heading “About CCS”.

**Defining the role and vision of the DEL through a CRT lens.** Dr. Parker has just completed his first year as a DEL in CCS, and says that overall, his “approach this year is really to start with awareness and helping people to develop that … racial equity lens so that they can use it in their work.” In defining his job and his vision for his position, Dr. Parker first says that his work centers around collaboration with “…various departments and educators, to enhance their understanding of equity to ensure that we’re providing the best educational opportunities possible to students of color, in particular.”

Dr. Parker also notes that the most prominent gaps in his district are those along racial lines, “I want people to know the foundation of my work is around racial equity because that’s where we saw the most stark disparities in the data. But I also expect the work of Equity Affairs to grow beyond racial equity into other concerns that…are also present in the district.” Essentially, he describes the crux of his work as “…really digging into the data, making sure
people are aware of where we are, and then action planning around addressing whatever disparity we are talking about…”

To address these disparities, Dr. Parker conducts professional developments and trainings for CCS staff and schools. He describes a typical week as one full of “multiple presentations to different audiences”, including district leadership meetings, principal meetings, working directly with school staff, or presenting data to other central office departments. “I always try to modify the presentations to utilize data that’s specific to the audience. So, it’s a good amount of data analysis, it’s a good amount of trying to learn more about the available data sets that are out there that can help us better understand our equity issues”. As an office of one, a large part of his job is also responding to email regarding equity-related questions from schools and central office staff, “there’s a lot of electronic correspondence, advice, just support that has to be provided”.

It is vital for him to stay close to “some of the challenges that teachers are facing in the classroom”, and so he tries to advise teachers in person when opportunities may arise so that he can continue to provide relevant support for classrooms. He says that even though he has “resources I can provide the teacher” to encourage them to try certain equity-based strategies, he clarifies that “in supporting teachers who may not have tried to have a conversation around race before … I feel like I need to be there to provide my support in how you facilitate that.”

Recently, a teacher experiencing some racial tension in her classroom asked him to come help her facilitate a lesson on equity and race with her students, and although that sort of individual attention is somewhat out of his scope - as a department of one representing the entirety of CCS, he also feels it is important. “To be honest, doing stuff like that for an office like mine, it also goes to establish some credibility around the work that you’re doing…when you’re in central office, teachers seem to think you’re disconnected from reality anyway” so he feels like
classroom-level help is “good for me, it’s good for the teacher, and it could be good for that teacher to learn… I’m helping to model, and they can share those practices with others.”

Dr. Parker takes a very deliberate community-based approach with his work in equity for CCS. Currently, he partners with the region’s Department of Health to help fund some of his trainings in racial equity for school staff, and he frequents meetings held by community organizations and coalitions as a representative for CCS. He prides himself on “communication with district stakeholders, not just employees, but community members” as well.

When asked what he wishes others could understand about his work, Dr. Parker emphasizes that, “there is so much potential in centering equity, in centering cultural relevance, and really in centering students of color particularly… or people of color”. He asserts that “it is liberating to challenge White supremacy even in majority White spaces”, and the work of his office is to do just that, with the success of students and equity in education in mind, “… but it’s a lot of work, it’s a lot of undoing, it’s a lot of researching, it’s a lot of reading, it’s a lot that I have to learn to be able to help others learn.” He says that for these reasons, he sometimes gets overwhelmed, “because I know for it to move forward, it’s taking a lot and there needs to be more.”

The value far outweighs the challenges for Dr. Parker. He goes on to explain that “doing this work and being dedicated to it is liberating not only for people of color but it’s also liberating for Whites…” His ultimate advice to those pursuing equity work, coaching others in equity work, and for those approaching these topics for the first time: “Don’t fight it. Don’t resist. And I say that for anybody… For us to move forward, we have to engage, we can’t retreat. We have to. And it’ll be worth it.”
The CRT framework is at work in Dr. Parker’s day-to-day proceedings and the implementation of his role, although he does not explicitly mention a CRT-based approach when speaking directly about his job description and the vision for his position. In presentations and with colleagues, he addresses implicit bias, disparities in data along racial lines, and the realities of racism in the United States, as well as intersectionality, White supremacy, and the systemic nature of marginalization of people of color. In terms of advancing the conversation around CRT, Dr. Parker has perspective, well-aware that it is still his first year and that equity-related change can be a slow process. He expresses that he is trying to be patient and scaffold the advancement of the depth of topics in a strategic way. For now, at the end of year one, he says he is going to “…stick to what’s working and the impact I’m having in those spaces… I do, as the work grows though, a year from now, I expect to be having a different conversation, where I could see some different dynamics coming in.”

Implementation of Vision Through a CRT Lens

Despite differences in district size, politics, student population demographics, the participants’ individual personalities, their experience in equity-related roles, and their approach to their work, all three DELs in this study share a vision to ultimately dismantle racism and inequity in public schools. Although goals and progress naturally range between them, their efforts to implement their visions rely on the same main tenets, even across their differences: 1) professional developments and trainings, 2) specialized programming, 3) policy creation and reform, 4) equity teams, and 5) community engagement and building relationships. These findings are presented in aggregate form to further protect the individual identities of the participants in the study.
**Professional developments and trainings.** The primary tool of implementation used by all three participants is the design and delivery of specific professional developments and trainings for all levels of staff and faculty in their districts. Each participant meets with, trains, and presents regularly to central service staff and leadership, boards of education, school administrators, groups of selected teacher leaders, and entire school staffs on issues like race, equity, inclusion, culturally relevant pedagogy and teaching practices, implicit bias, and identity.

The first goal is spreading awareness -- to engage in critical conversations around the existence of racism and the effect it has on our schools, and to create solutions-based dialogue to improve practices, culture, and environment for the ultimate success of children in their respective districts. All three DEL participants focus primarily on race, although not to the exclusion of other topics, as racial and ethnic disparity is what reflects the largest gaps in student achievement, district culture, attitudes, and teaching practices in each of their respective districts. These leaders are very similar in their approach to these professional developments and trainings, along with the structure and delivery, and the content.

**Approach to professional development.** At the time of this paper, each participant was functioning as a department of one – the only employee expressly focused on equity-related work for their entire district. Each describes their approach to their work as starting first with those who were willing and interested, for example, one DEL says that, “I think it’s important to start equity work where people are ready and asking for the work.” Starting with interested parties then snowballed to build a bigger demand for trainings and professional development. A DEL describes his approach as “grassroots oriented, and I think all equity work should be”. He started with schools, teachers and administrators because despite his district-level position, he initially was “…less concerned about making myself of value at the central service level, and so
I started working in schools because I know schools are dealing with issues of opportunity gaps on a daily basis.”

All DELs worked primarily coaching one-on-one with principals, teachers, and schools in order to gain footing at the beginning of their tenure, and “it was through word of mouth that we would go school to school. I say we, but it was me...” Each started small, and the impact and the value of their professional developments started to expand in reach, with one principal telling another, asking for whole staff to be trained after individual coaching sessions, or requesting in-person group presentations of online course material.

A DEL also says that the rapid growth of his equity related trainings “became a force of nature really, where the superintendent didn’t have an idea the extent to which it had grown.” Giving context, the DEL said that leadership was not necessarily privy to the changes and demand for the professional development because at that point equity was not a top priority: “This district had done nothing. They hadn’t, at that point [after the DELs first year], started that type of equity work, and so it kind of grew. It was largely under the radar for a lot of our top-level leadership, until…there was just this massive request [from principals] to have breakout sessions on race and equity.” Reflecting, another DEL mentions that the growth in the demand for professional developments and training was positive as principals and other staff “saw the value in the work”, but “It was tough because I was a department of 1.”

The presentation of materials, resources, and statistics regarding race and other issues of equity also requires careful consideration in approach and facilitation. It is “all a part of changing culture”, and as a whole, all three DELs present with much thought, established norms, and strive to make data and fact-based presentations so that information is clear and easier to process for audiences. In reference to planning and delivering professional developments on topics of
race, diversity, and equity, one DEL mentions that these kinds of critical conversations can produce some pushback and some emotions in audiences that he calls “constructive friction”. He advises his audience not to shy away from people disagreeing. He says that it is important to “Allow that, endure through it.”

All three DELs are careful to point out, however, that these presentations are an exercise in teaching and learning, “it is about the content…it’s curriculum and instruction”, and that the audience aptitude, attitude, and reception of the presentation is paramount to the success of the delivery of the material; just like in classroom teaching, “you gotta make sure you bring the class with you.” Similarly, a DEL discusses his pragmatic approach, “when it comes to presenting, I don’t point fingers, and I don’t blame, and I don’t shame.” One DEL describes presenting as “a check and balance” where reading the audience is a necessary skill, “so that may mean throwing in a joke over here…maybe try to push, prod and engage, so it really is a balancing act.” Another DEL also talks about the delicate balance in driving these conversations productively, “it’s like I’m pushing you but I’m not pushing you where I could push you, because I’m trying to keep ears open.” He says, “I’m trying not to push anybody to the point where I can’t even have a productive conversation, but in doing that…I’m running the risk of minimizing the effectiveness of the conversation we are having.”

Managing the depth of the conversation and calculating just how far to engage with audience members is common among the three DELs. One says, “I know there are some conversations I’m not having. …I’m having a specific conversation, and I’m not having another conversation. I do feel the conversation I am having is a conversation I’m comfortable having, and schools are more comfortable having.”
Another DEL notes that it is important to scaffold race, diversity, and equity-based conversations, trainings, and the depth of interaction during the delivery of the content, because they have acclimated to teaching these topics. What they may see as a simple concept, others may experience as extremely difficult, especially if they are engaging with equity-based material for the first time, “I’m doing these conversations all the time. I’m getting comfortable in having these conversations, this is brand new for them. They’ve been doing this work [teaching] for years, some of them, and they’ve never had to have this conversation.” He continues, and says, “there is a lot built up, there’s a lot there to unpack” Of the difficulties in deciding on the depth of the conversation, he says “part of me is like …I need to go deeper” but he also knows that “some people need to start here because they haven’t unpacked this ever before. And if, and when they’ve tried, it’s probably painful and they’ve stopped.”

*Structure and delivery of professional development.* In order to effect maximum reach with their trainings, all three DEL’s have explored ways to integrate their trainings through online platforms, in self-service formats, and through the formation of equity teams in their respective districts. All three use social media and the district website to provide opportunities for individual learning and help widely distribute resources.

One DEL pushes what he refers to as “micro-learning” through an online shared platform in his district so that principals, teachers, and other school personnel can navigate through topics based on interest and at their own pace, “Someone who’s serious and committed to it can take it and kind of gradually expand” their knowledge base independently. He stands by a philosophy of “if you build it, they will come”, and disregards the notion that everyone has to be on board and of the same mindset before equity work can continue to advance, “You can’t wait until you get
the principal to change their mind, sometimes you just gotta throw stuff out there and whoever comes, comes…you have to be able to start at that level”.

Another DEL has worked to incorporate equity-based training as part of a formal district initiative to accelerate professional development and recruit and retain more highly qualified teachers. The training is incorporated as part of an employee’s advancement through levels of district recognition, and teachers can either complete the training through online modules, or some school leaders call him in to conduct the course face-to-face. Additionally, one DEL also conducts “mini-workshops” on a variety of topics, where all district staff are invited on a first-come, first serve basis. These occur throughout the year, are open to everyone, and are not school-specific.

**Content of professional development.** The large majority of the content for the professional developments created by each of the three DELs is based on racial equity in classrooms, personal identity and how that intersects with others, culturally relevant pedagogy and teaching strategies, and how media can shape perceptions of Black and Brown students and perpetuate stereotypes and feed implicit bias.

All three DELs specifically base their content around school and district specific data. One primarily uses the results of survey given to students before his school- based presentations to target and talk explicitly about any school specific issues that are revealed through student input. Another found that upon his start in the position, after some initial conversations, “principals weren’t comfortable talking about race or didn’t know how to do that or…culturally responsive instruction”. Because he saw that they were hungry for this type of knowledge and examples they could easily recommend to their staffs, this DEL “would break down” the meaning of culturally relevancy, “and what types of strategies teachers could use in classrooms”.


He points out the importance of working with schools and audiences to define their needs, “because there are a lot of different angles to equity, so if I get up there and I’m just talking about anti-racism, that doesn’t necessarily help a teacher. You know, how can you connect that to what they’re doing?” A different DEL takes care to model “what the district’s classrooms should actually look like when it comes to cultural responsiveness. We’re living it. We’re breathing it… I’m giving you the tools, and I’m giving you the activities you can do with your staff.”

Other trainings are based on curricular choices for the districts. For example, one DEL designed a professional development series for middle school social studies teachers in their district after the district adopted a new book into the curriculum that featured the prominent struggle of several individuals during the Civil Rights Movement and the integration of schools. This DEL felt it paramount to bring these social studies teachers together “to talk about race before they enter this racialized text in a racialized environment.” He added that, “they’re [teaching] middle school kids, and stuff is going to get said and they need to know how to deal with it.” He attributes a lot of his success and positive reception to his connection with his audience and their needs, “we’ve talked with people, we’ve built relationships with a core group of folks, we know what they want, we know what they need. It’s not what I dreamed up, it’s what they told me.”

Specialized programming. In addition to professional developments and training staff, common amongst DELs is the offer of specialized programming within their districts. Programs these leaders had in common were initiatives designed specifically for Black males, mentoring programs for students of color, and staff of color affinity groups. One DEL is expanding his office for a role designed to specifically address issues pertaining to Black males in the district,
in order to formalize the efforts of his office in this regard. This person would specialize in instructional strategies and practices that targeted the achievement of Black males.

Another DEL is targeting Black males as well, but through a combination of an individual initiative and the linkage of schools to community-based student mentoring programs that center students of color, “we have a mentoring program for males of color…that is expanding pretty rapidly. We’re about to establish the same thing for young women”. Mentoring for students of color, a common theme among all DELs, is primarily community based and in partnership with organizations outside of schools. Two of the three DELs are looking at onboarding a mentoring program structure built into schools that target Black males. It is a school-based initiative that incorporates an academic component and an elective course in the schedule of the young men, and also provides them with mentorship among faculty of color in their buildings. Another DEL reports that there is a lot of autonomy in his district with regard to mentoring, and that “we have over 78 different mentoring programs…that schools can name. Many of them are for students of color.”

Lastly, all DELs have some sort of organized affinity groups for staff of color. In one district, there was recently a Latinx-only staff retreat. They also hold regular meetings for staff or faculty of color at district levels in central services, and at the building level in schools. Another district has mobilized a team of Black male individuals in district leadership as an advisory board and a support network. In different district, a DEL has worked directly with the human resources department to formalize a regular staff of color meeting where equity topics are discussed, and strategies are brainstormed for the recruitment and retention of more staff of color.

**Policy creation and reform.** None of the DELs in this study work in a district with an active equity policy, as approved by their boards of education, but all the DELs are active in
either aggressive policy review with an equity lens, or the creation of an explicitly clear policy regarding equity in the district. One DEL has recently focused his efforts on reading several sections of the current board of education policies that are active in the district, scrubbing them for gender-neutral pronouns, and editing them with an equity lens for accountability and clarity. As part of this comprehensive policy review, this DEL is applying a racial impact equity assessment, and “really digging deep and getting my hands on them [the policies] …some of them haven’t been updated in 15-20 years,” ensuring the use of an equity lens. Another DEL is working toward the development and passage of a formal equity policy, “one of the goals of my office … is to create an equity policy for the district…There are some other districts that have already done this. That’s something we hope to do in our district, too”.

The third DEL is actively engaged in negotiations to present a finished and vetted draft of an equity policy to their board for passage. He worked “with a team of principals and central service staff” to create a policy that addresses “…what we believe about equity, the interruption of systems, the recognition of institutionalized racism…what racism has done to communities, particularly communities of color, in education, and recognizes the board’s responsibility to interrupt those inequities.” The policy also “speaks to curriculum, it speaks to contracting, to data collection.” He says that although the policy has been done for “quite a while”, and because it is what he “would call a pretty a progressive policy…”, that “there was a lot of concern at the assistant and area superintendent level of having a policy like that.” Given the social and political climate at the time of this paper and leadership in his district, the adoption of the finished policy is currently on hold.

**Equity teams.** Equity teams are also crucial to the implementation and reach of each DEL in this study. All three DELs have operationalized some sort of equity team amongst staff
in order to spread and span their vision to the rest of the district. One DEL has a single representative from each school his district serves in order to train them quarterly meetings on issues of equity. They are largely data-focused and complete learning rounds to bring school-specific professional development back to their building and staffs. An additional main focus for this group is for the members to serve on their school-based strategic planning committees, to be “part of the school improvement team, and making sure equity is part of the school improvement planning process.”

Another DEL has a collection of school staff members, sometimes two from each school, who come together quarterly to talk about current political and social issues and how those might affect students and staff, cover broad issues of equity, teaching strategies, and challenges that may present in classrooms. These team members also serve as school-based resources for their buildings. The DEL who has organized this group charges them with actively calling out inequities, and using their voices to amplify social justice in classrooms, “Are you going to call your colleagues out, or are you going to let it slide?”

Two of the three DELs have assembled community equity teams in order to advise their office, and to understand the needs of community stakeholders in order to work together to build and maintain solutions for the district. “We have brought together all of the community advocacy organizations in the area that have a concern about race and achievement together, to hold the school district accountable for the work, but also to be a thought partner in terms of how to advance it.”

**Community engagement and building relationships.** The importance of community engagement and building relationships in their districts is crucial to the success of DEL’s work. In addition to the community equity advisory teams and mentoring programs discussed in
previous sections, there are multiple other avenues of community engagement utilized by these DELs in the implementation of their visions for their role. Prioritizing parent outreach and parent voice is key for all three DELs, with activity focused on increasing parent involvement and incorporating an equity lens in parent associations in each of their districts: “I feel like, that when you have honest conversation with parents, there’s a sense of hope that comes, and you need hope within this work.” These DELs often are partnering with local non-profits in their areas as well as with religious groups, and linking up with other organizations and departments in their area for sponsorship and collaboration in programming. One DEL even encourages community stakeholders to write op-eds in local newspapers to push an equity agenda from multiple avenues.

The importance of community is of high personal priority for one DEL, as he explains that bettering the school systems with an equity focus, and engaging community stakeholders to do so is also a personal investment: “This is our community, this is our city, if we want to see things change, we can be the ones to do it. And it feels very real, very organic.” He says, “I’m more excited about the potential of that [change] than some of the other things, cause its home, you know?” He goes on to suggest avenues for a community-based approach to equity-driven change, “…find your allies. I do feel like even in rural counties, you can find an ally that can help you get this conversation started, and you can go from there.”

Building community relationships and personal relationships in equity work is important for each of these DELs. Separately, all three emphasized the significance of strong relationships in delivering and encouraging equity work. One DEL said of his first year, that despite some challenges, building trust with colleagues through consistency helped legitimize his position, “there’s something to be said about actually keeping your head down and doing the work, and in
the process, that’s when you begin to build the relationships because people tend to see that you’re consistent in what you’re saying.”

Ultimately, relationship building among students and teachers and school staff also builds trust, and can help reverse some of the consequences that differences like race and socioeconomic class might have in our classrooms. If we “stop and actually have relationships with our kids, regardless of what they look like, regardless of where they come from”, one DEL says that channels of communication will open, bias will begin to fall away, and we will be able to understand ways to teach our students more effectively. “That’s why I say everything goes back to relationships. The more we know about our kids the more we can incorporate what is relevant and meaningful for them.”

Each DEL utilizes professional developments, specialized programming, policy creation and reform, the formation of equity teams, as well as community engagement and relationship building to implement their vision for their positions, aiming to increase awareness and education on racism, in order to ultimately dismantle it. These leaders rely on their basic understanding of CRT to provide a research-based foundation for the implementation of their plans for their district. Much of the professional developments and trainings they conduct establish the permanence of racism in the United States, and they attempt to activate participants’ own self-awareness and identity in order to illustrate the concept of intersectionality. They work to educate individuals at every level of their districts using a counternarratives to combat majoritarian ways of thinking, and do so in politically mixed environments, amidst well-meaning teachers who represent the concept of abstract liberalism. In many ways, the CRT framework acts as a support for their endeavors as they strategically define and implement their goals.
Responding to Barriers and Setbacks

Part of working in district level equity in public education is the interface with colleagues at all levels – teachers, administrators, central office staff, and boards of education– with the goal to improve understanding about equity related issues overall and in schools. With these interactions each day, DELs confront ideologies, egos, politics, and other factors that can greatly impact the efficacy of their work. The DELs in this study encounter many barriers and setbacks, but those most prominent and common among them are challenges related directly to the following four categories: 1) bias and fixed mindsets, 2) politics and power dynamics, 3) transitions and/or resistance in leadership, and 4) personal emotional toll. These findings are presented in aggregate form to further protect the individual identities of the participants in the study. The section concludes with challenges they face in responding to these common barriers and setbacks.

Bias and fixed mindsets. The individual experiences of the DELs as Black males in equity-related leadership roles is testament to the subtle and overt ways that race and bias still impact our everyday lives, as well as education. In their jobs, these DELs continue to combat fixed mindsets that manifest into microaggressions as they work to advance equity in public schools. “Helping some people to understand the need for the work, that’s still a challenge in some places. There are some people at the district and at the school level who don’t see it.”

A DEL speaks of the difficulties in trying to change a culture and belief system that is so engrained: “there is some active resistance, some people who I feel in their own ways devalue the work.” He explains that there are “people who feel like they genuinely don’t need to have these types of conversations, and it gets uncomfortable for some people to have to reflect on
these things.” He goes on to say that, “this [racism] is real. This is what’s fueling all of this. Like, we really believe that to be White is to be better…. That’s tough, and people really don’t get it.”

One DEL detailed the difficulty he personally faced at the start of his tenure, “it was hard in the beginning”, explaining that some commentary by community members and district staff made its way back to him, “I was told I was ‘too Black’ for this district.” His interpretation of that comment was that he was presenting as “too Black” because he was attacking issues of equity in a different, more outright lens than had been done before. A different DEL reports that because of his equity related work and explicitly naming concepts like White supremacy, institutional racism, and implicit biases in his district-wide trainings, that there is a “standing Freedom of Information request on my office. On all my emails, all my communications.” Additionally, local political parties have also gotten involved with one district, including the Tea Party; “they’ve complained” about the racial equity work that is ongoing in this DEL’s office.

Once, after giving a presentation at a school, a DEL was approached by a White administrator and invited to come speak to a group of young male students about his “checkered past”. Confused, he told her “No. Not at all, no checkered past here.” He continued to explain their conversation, “She said, ‘So, you’ve always been an academic?’ I said, ‘Yeah. Always been an academic...’” He explained her assumption as a manifestation of her implicit bias, and apologizing for his language, he said, “it just goes to show you, like my dad always told me, that at the end of the day you can have as many degrees as you want, you can go to whatever school you wanna go to,” but “I’m still going to be looked upon as just another nigga...with a degree.”

In somewhat of a contrast, another DEL spoke about how overall, he thought he was generally well-received by the district staff and stakeholders, “although I imagine there are a number of questions people have when I get up as a younger, Black male to do this work.” He
relays a story about how he once was approached by an elderly Black woman after a community meeting who said that “she thought I was gonna be an old, White man.”

Per the content of their work, the three DELs also experience the results of bias and fixed mindsets in the form of resistance to their efforts, including attempts at reforms made from an equity-based lens, as well as resistance to the general acknowledgement of racism and its effects. They all have reported fielding a variety of comments and questions, including but not limited to wonderings by colleagues if the issue of racial disparity was of a different origin. One such question occurs fairly often, “Could it be socio-economic status over race?” Another frequently asked question is, “why is race always on the table?” A DEL reports that “from my perspective, race is always on the table. When is it ever not on the table? …that goes to show the luxury of you not having to think about race the same way that I do…” He goes on to say, “But I think you just have to give people grace and understand that we come from multiple perspectives…”

Additionally, one DEL reports that he frequently finds himself “fighting against the pathology that a lot of people put around students of color”, and specifically around achievement gaps. He finds the sentiments are often congruent to thoughts and beliefs that, “Black and Brown kids can’t do anything. I’m like, no, even in our lowest performing schools, we have kids achieving at very, very high levels.” He goes on to say, “I’m not saying that every kid is where they need to be, but you have some …say that public schools will never work for Black kids. And I’ve sat in meetings like, yeah that ain’t true.”

In one presentation, a DEL showed a clip from a popular documentary series about the history of race and its development as a social construct, and “someone was just resistant to the content of the video and felt like …it was brainwashing.” The DEL said that he asked the staff member to elaborate on his concerns, “this person proceeds to talk about the breakdown of the
Black family- this was a White male- and he’s talking about, it’s all these other things that are leading to these outcomes that we’re seeing with students of color.” Another DEL reported that a member of the equity team from his district conducts “diversity workshops with the kids and she’s had little girls in the school say, ‘oh he’s not participating because his family doesn’t like Black people”, as explanations for why their classmates are not taking part in class activities.

These biases present even in somewhat coded language, with one DEL reporting that a district-sponsored community town hall was discussing “undisciplined youth” in coded, subtle reference to Black and Brown students in their district. In yet another presentation, a DEL asked audience members and participants to discuss an issue of race at their tables in small groups, “…and a Black woman who was at a table with at least one other Black colleague and then like three White colleagues turned around and said, “well this is awkward.”

“Every single one of us has implicit bias” and these biases manifest for everyone in different ways, especially in education. “So, for African American teachers…we wouldn’t call it racial bias there, but it could be an element of class bias, or whatever that heightens that distinction between teacher and student.” The same DEL makes clear that, “when there are these negative ideas about students of color that do fall along the lines of race… even within Black students and Black educators,” that there is “still this racial dynamic there, even if it’s an idea about students of color and their ability, or the potential that we see in them or an acknowledgement of the valuable culture that they bring to the classroom.” He says that it is “important for us to understand that things go beyond race, but then when it comes down to it, when we’re looking at primary predictors of outcomes…race is typically going to fall number one as a predictor for a student.” He makes a point to say that this “can happen regardless if it’s a teacher of color or a White teacher in front of the student”, and that overall, he thinks that
“acknowledging how race impacts the kids is still important in it all, because it impacts how we all perceive the children.”

Along with implicit bias, privilege is a recurring theme that provides friction for DELs in some settings, and is a concept that is difficult to receive for some audience members and colleagues, especially those that benefit from privilege. One DEL says that, “I don’t know if there’s ever been a vehicle for masses of White people to kind of understand it [privilege and racism] in this way.” He says, “they were brought up in this system as well. Where we live, how we live, how we obtain wealth- all of that is systemic,” and that “I don’t truly think that we’re in a space where we can come to a mutual understanding of what folks’ reality is.”

Another explains that “I don’t begrudge White people for what they feel. At all. …You don’t know what you don’t know. And you don’t know any other way than the supremacy that you were born into and all the stuff that you have benefitted from.” Often, district leaders, school leaders and others find themselves wanting to “to dive into this work, and they aren’t quite sure exactly what that means.” One DEL reports that as a result, they “realize that they are relying us to kind of guide that path. And then once they hear us speak and talk then” their enthusiasm wanes. “They’re just like “oh crap, we didn’t realize it was that involved, or that deep.’ Because it is.”

This DEL understands the stakes in his district, and that others may not be willing to endure the potential consequences, the discomfort, and the difficult conversations that come along with equity work. “I realize I’m one presentation away, or one meeting away, or one speech away from potentially losing my job,” and that “Folks don’t necessarily want to do that. You have to be in this mindset to be able to really want to do this work and do this right.” Ultimately, despite all the difficulties, biases, and battling fixed mindsets, for these leaders it all
comes back to the students, exemplified when one DEL asks a library full of teachers, “What price do kids pay when we shut down and disengage?”

**Politics and power dynamics.** Many of the challenges, barriers and setbacks DELs face are closely intertwined, but none more than politics and power dynamics in their respective districts. These challenges are inextricably linked, one often cycling through and compounding the other. All participants unanimously provide evidence that politics and power are ever-present actors and influencers on their work, with many complex examples. “Politics…are always at play, particularly when you’re talking about race.”

All three DELs reference the politics and power dynamics when considering the true scope of their positions, especially with all three functioning as the sole representative of equity work in their districts. One DEL says that, “I do feel like power and politics definitely play into my work…on a daily basis…” He explains that, “…being an office of one, I don’t have time to try and force myself into places where I’m not wanted. And so, with that approach, the power and political dynamics are kind of lessened in the day-to-day.” He does question however, how this might eventually “play out, because I mean ultimately if I were trying to have more of an impact, how much power or, how much influence can I really have as an office of one?”

Consistently framing solutions, another DEL asks himself, “what is it that we can do strategically that always elevates the work? Because this is work that needs to be elevated.” Even though he does find it occasionally frustrating to do so, this DEL continues to prioritize playing the politics of the position in order to keep progressing his office, “sometimes I think it’s a waste of my personal time, I mean there are a ton of things I could be doing right now, literally,” but he says, “at the same time, how can you use every little contact that you have to advance the work?”
Similarly, he also asks, “How can you use it to make decision makers look good?” After also asserting the existence of both power and politics as frequent hurdles, another DEL specifies that “It’s political. It’s symbolic. It’s all of that stuff…but it’s up to people in positions like this to say, okay, yeah that’s part of the job, but at the same time we’re gonna be doing all we can to dismantle racism and other things.” Another DEL says:

This is a soft position. There are a million districts out there that are running without an equity office. But how do you make it become so engrained in the organization so that they just can’t do without you. And part of it is just taking time and building those alliances, and it does take time.

Sometimes the nuances of the politics are not even about fighting against biases and mindsets; occasionally, “the road block is not necessarily about equity, but some type of relationship issue”. These issues occasionally manifest with the districts’ boards of education. Interactions with boards of education vary amongst DELs, and some find a need to delineate clear boundaries with their respective boards. “One board member wanted …a special line to me as the equity person… And I didn’t respect that, and I told him I wouldn’t serve in that capacity.” This DEL was very clear in his messaging. “I work for the superintendent…I don’t work for the board. …So, sometimes they [the board] don’t really understand that.” A different DEL points out that the politics of the board of education and what is in the best interest of the students may not always align: “Because you’re trying to appease to a wide variety of folks in a constituency, then that doesn’t necessarily mean that it matches what … really needs to be done.” Of board members, the same DEL adds, “You’re a political figure … and you’re going make certain decisions such that you can continue to sit on that seat and get elected.” He argues that rarely, if ever, do elected board members “come in and say, “I don’t care about my second term, this is what’s right by the kids”, because “that’s the nature of this business, because this is a business.” In progressing the work while navigating difficult relationships, one DEL likes to “think
strategically on how I want to align with people. Because you need allies - sometimes you need real allies, and sometimes you just need to keep the enemies closer."

Regarding power, one DEL describes “two things that really balance out: there’s authority and there’s influence, that’s where power is.” He speaks candidly about his first year in his role and how he collaborated with other offices to build his power through influence, but mostly out of necessity. “My budget when I first came on board was like $40,000. $15,000 of that went to a party that the Board had. And I hadn’t helped any school yet.” Without other staff, or money, this DEL “had to connect with people who had money, you know, my colleagues.” He was gradually added to budget lines from a variety of departments to facilitate equity-related work directly in line with their needs. “And so, the position became very influential—it wasn’t at first, but it very quickly became influential. …There’s a lot of authority that I have now, but it came through influencing people at all levels of the organization.” To that he adds that it may be “piecemeal”, but in this role he has to build relationships in order to “play the politics and make other departments look good” as a way to ultimately “…help them see some of their work from an equity lens. And with that, comes resources, and goodwill, and friendships.”

Conversely, another DEL does not feel he has power, either in authority or influence. “I cannot make any directives- over anybody, over anything. Don’t sit in cabinet, don’t sit in principal’s meetings, …don’t sit in on other executive level things- I don’t. So, then what do you want the person to do?” He continues, “I don’t have the power. So, in a way that’s a blessing but it’s also a curse. It’s a blessing because I can go in and piss a whole bunch of people off” by calling out the truth, but “at the end of the day in terms of holding them accountable, I can’t hold them accountable because I don’t have any power.”
Transitions and/or resistance in leadership. Coupled with biases, fixed mindsets, politics and power dynamics, transitions and/or resistance in district and school leadership are challenges that each DEL faces in different ways. At the time of this paper, all three DELs are at some stage of a superintendent’s transition in or out of the district, and although some are a bit more in flux than others, one constant among the DELs is leadership change.

Of these transitions, DELs report that “it’s just weird because you know, you’re trying to learn people and trying to figure out where stuff is going, and the new people” are as well. In the last year, one DEL’s district has transitioned from one superintendent to the other, and during that time, “my reporting structure changed.” With this change, his scope is a little more narrow, “I’m not sure if I’m getting to learn as much now as I was previously. So, yeah, those are some things I’m thinking about and struggling with a little bit.” Another DEL looks to the future during his change in superintendent, and says, “I am trying to see how things shape out as far as possible reorganization for things at the district level and how that might impact my office.” A new superintendent’s leadership style can also have an impact on the day-to-day functions of their offices, “I was more in the know with the previous administration than I am now.” In each transition, “You can be guaranteed that something is gonna change…folks come in with their ideas and focus points,” and so equity has to be “firmly rooted” in the district to weather the shifts in goals and priorities that come and go with different leaders.

On a building level, each DEL also shares sentiments that strong principal leadership is vital to the success of equity work in schools, and the work can suffer under an apathetic or disinterested leader on the school level. “A fish rots from the head. So, if the principal is not going to push it and demand it, then no one else is going to demand it.” Accountability is key, and just completing professional development is not enough, “we can train folks until we’re blue
in the face, but if the principal is not going to look for these things, then they’re not going to happen.” Another DEL corroborates this sentiment with his own frustrations with “other leaders that don’t get it. That’s where my frustrations are at. It’s not even the teachers. When I’m working with teachers, I feel like at minimum they somewhat understand what I’m talking about.” He says “when principals are really on board with this work, it can really skyrocket, but when principals are lukewarm or indifferent, I mean to me nothing is going to go anywhere. And I feel that’s the way our district functions.” The “top-down” approach to leadership is important, and “in particular, that building leader or that principal really has to cultivate that climate for us in order for that professional development and vulnerability piece to occur.”

**Personal emotional toll.** Each of the primary participants deeply identify with social justice and equity as a core personal value that is not just a component of their chosen work, but a part of who they are, how they were raised, and how they choose to live their lives. As a result of working professionally in a role that is so personal because of their individual passions and identities, each DEL in this study experiences a certain emotional toll. One DEL says with confidence that, “it’s definitely emotional work.” Another adds that the job and all its nuances “…kind of wears on you a little bit.” The third acknowledges, that “there is a lot of pressure” for many reasons, personally and professionally.

All three DELs report feeling strong emotions of all kinds in their pursuit of equity in public schools; “there are peaks and valleys”. One DEL notes that “this is the most rewarding job I’ve ever had, but this is also the hardest job mentally that I’ve ever had.” All three describe multiple scenarios, presentations, and professional developments where district and school staff have been moved to tears by the content and the delivery. One DEL details a time when he was leading a presentation and a Black female teacher shared her opinion on an article the group was
discussing. She got emotional in relaying her own self-reflection, which was so honest that it “got other people crying”. She shared a personal anecdote about her own brothers and their school experiences,

She kind of went into this personal thing, and then she started talking about her frustrations- and that’s a school that’s predominantly Black and Brown- her frustrations with her own students and you know, how she gets upset, and how she yells at them sometimes. I’m almost getting emotional remembering it because you could tell… it was hitting her that she was at times mistreating her own Black and Brown kids.

Even telling the story after the fact, this DEL began to get tears in his eyes, saying that “I’m just sitting here reflecting on myself right now.” He reiterates that “this is emotional work” and that he does “sometimes feel like I lose touch with those emotions and then when it hits me, it hits me.” A different DEL reports a similar experience leading a professional development because he was getting emotional in delivering the information and engaging with an audience member, “I realized that I had to stop talking for once or twice because I’ll be daggone if a tear was gonna come out of my eyes … but I could feel it.” Of that presentation and the reason he got emotional, he says, “I was trying to offer her a counternarrative, that one was draining. That one was draining.”

This work and content carries an emotional toll for both audience members and DELs alike. Another illustration of the emotional content of this work, in a presentation at an elementary school, a DEL had a slide in his PowerPoint featuring of a photo of Trayvon Martin. During his presentation, the DEL paused to talk with staff and the conversation became somewhat tangential, but Trayvon’s face remained as the back drop, projected largely on the screen in the media center where the DEL was presenting. A Black male teacher in the audience stopped the conversation after a few minutes to ask the DEL to switch the slide to “anything else, any other slide”, emotionally triggered by the slain young man’s face as the background for so
long. Although this was not an intentional decision to show the young man’s face for so long and during side conversations, the DEL apologized and switched the slide, aware of the emotional response it had elicited.

Another DEL says that in dealing with these emotions, “… Sometimes I don’t feel like I really process the depth of what I’m doing until something hits me. And that’s problematic.” He says that some of the advice he was given when first starting equity work was to “Let your passion fuel you.” But he admits that compartmentalizing that emotion to get through the day-to-day of the job can hinder those efforts to maintain passion, “sometimes I’m not doing it [the work] in a passionate way and that’s upsetting to me.”

The shared reality amongst these DELs is that passion is necessary for each of them to do this work, but maintaining that passion is also sometimes exhausting. One DEL explains that “in this work, you don’t get a lot of wins…this work is a resistance type of work …you don’t ever complete the project… you really never finish the task, which, a lot of people can’t necessarily deal with that.” Another DEL adds, “…you have to learn how to work being uncomfortable”. Unfortunately, the scope of the work does not allow them to aid “every student who’s getting kicked out of school, or someone who’s being called a racist term.” None of these DELs will be able to “close the achievement gap tomorrow”, so they must “learn to work being uncomfortable”. It is easy to get discouraged, “when I don’t see movement, when I don’t see things happening, or I see the same things continue to happen.”

To each other, and even to teachers, the messaging from all three DELs stays fairly consistent, “I often tell teachers…you can be discouraged but you gotta get over it because we’re connected to a long history of struggle, whether you’re White, Black, or otherwise.” If anything, the discomfort and the fatigue that results in working through these topics as a district is
testament to the need for, and the power of, equity work in public schools. When a DEL experiences a setback in a particular venture? “You just move on to the next thing, cause there’s a lot of work, there’s a lot you can focus on.”

Pressure is also a component of the work of these DELs. “There is a sense of pressure in having such a small office.” In a sense, whatever these three create and roll out is ultimately how equity officially presents in their district, “I’m the one that’s going to design it, and put it together, and practice it to make sure it’s worthy of their time. I don’t want get up there fumbling, last second stuff …there’s a lot of pressure that comes with that.” In addition, if the work goes well, the expectation remains high from others. One DEL notes that as he becomes, “known to do effective workshops …then you can’t mess up because they’ll be like, “oh he didn’t hit the mark this time.”

Additionally, pressure manifests from teachers, colleagues, and other district staff in the form of perceived authority. During one observed presentation, a White female teacher interrupted a DEL to ask him his advice on how the school should teach the history of Thanksgiving to their elementary aged students. The DEL took the question in stride and referred her to resources published on the district’s social media accounts regarding teaching the accurate histories of holidays like Thanksgiving and how to navigate teaching historical truths to children that may conflict with popular Whitewashed myths. Interestingly, this encounter serves as an example of the sometime unexpected pressure experienced by DELs in their roles – they are often looked to as the ultimate authority, sometimes to a fault, on all things equity-related by audiences, teachers, and colleagues.

There is also some pressure in working within the school systems as advocates for equity and in explicitly naming some of the concepts and constructs that exist in inequitable schooling,
like issues of race, socioeconomic class, and biases. When asked if they ever felt their jobs could be in jeopardy because of the approach that they take with equity, one DEL responds that “every equity leader, I think, knows this at some point. You work in an institution…you still work within a system” - one that has hired DELs to essentially break down components of its own foundation. Another DEL describes “having to walk that fine line of telling your truth, and telling your story, but knowing that at any time, you may offend the wrong person…” He goes one to say that for Black people in general, “that’s a real thing” for many in their daily lives, “…but in particular, Black people in this district very rarely get second chances.”

Even in the face of challenges like these, all three of the DELs in this study are still incredibly intentional about what they say, and they do not mince words, regardless of who they might be speaking with. They speak honestly about content that is hard for many to digest and accept – especially around racial equity – because they all do feel such deep, emotional connection to their work. For all DELs, this is not just a job. It is their lived reality.

What happens to me or what could happen to me does not change regardless of who’s in front of me. It still stays the same. The stats about a Black man are the same in this building, outside that building, driving down the road, in the police station, in the hospital, in a bank loan office, I mean, all the stats stay the same. So, if they stay the same, then I have to stand for the same, and stay the same with my message. …At least if I lose my job, I haven’t lost my life.

**Response to barriers and setbacks.** These three DELs all experience very similar challenges in their work, but their responses vary, often on the time, place and context they encounter these challenges, and the challenge itself. One DEL says the approach must always be proactive, and that they have to “consistently and constantly” engage in “crucial and critical conversations. You will never be able to stop those.” Another adds, that when a challenge, barrier or setback is encountered, that “if you go in as the equity police, you can hang it up. So that’s the mistake some folks make, not necessarily only in equity.”
When adversity, especially bias, is encountered, one DEL says that the way that he responds is strategic. “Sometimes in this position, you can’t say something. And it’s not because you’re not wanting to advocate and it’s not because you’re not wanting to be authentic, but I want that other person to say what they’ve got to say.” He says that “every voice definitely needs to be heard, and if anything, I don’t necessarily need to hear the voices of the people that sound just like me, I want to hear the other folks” who might not agree, or who might be holding on to implicit or explicit bias that may be negatively affecting school environments and children. He continues, “I want to hear exactly what you got to say, all the time” because it can help legitimize and advance the needs of his office. “Just like I need other people’s voices to be heard? I need for other people to hear it. So that way people will also say, ‘oh, he’s not crazy, or it’s not just him, this really is what’s going on.”

Similarly, another DEL says that “I think even if someone is wrong in something they’re saying, they still need a safe space to say it and communicate it,” because that is how we identify bias, and start a process of self-reflection that can eventually transform a person’s actions. He says he spends a lot of time contemplating “what can I do to create a safe space for people to share those types of ideas out loud versus just keeping them in their heads,” because he knows “there’s way more pushback to what I’m doing than what I’m receiving, but I’m not hearing it.” He says time is definitely a factor, and that in past presentations, “I felt like the more time I had with people, the more comfortable they got, and the more likely they would say something that might be problematic.” Ultimately, he wants “people to share some of those things that they’re really feeling and really grappling with,” so that he can help address those issues.

Redirection, or handling bias and conflicts as they might arise during presentations or meetings also presents as a challenge for these leaders. One DEL says that he is less likely to
find open negativity and resistance to his work, but “what has been a little more common is me having to redirect people that say things that might be racist or classist, and they don’t realize they’re saying it. They’re not actively resisting, but there’s some coded language in what they’re saying.” He mentions that the more he does these types of redirections, the more comfortable he is in stepping in and clarifying these comments in conversations. He tries to address the marginalization and the systems rather than the person.

He reports that these strategies are still a skill he is actively developing, “I’m still learning and processing myself as far as, like I can hear something and understand that it’s problematic, but I don’t always know exactly how to respond or help a person reframe.” He says that “I have missed some opportunities where I should have challenged some things I didn’t challenge, or I wasn’t sure about.” Another DEL takes a more direct approach. He says, “I’ve gotten to a place where I’ll just straight say, ‘we can’t keep blaming kids for the outcomes in our schools.’ Especially thinking about elementary schools! I mean, look, he’s 7, alright!”

Despite the many challenges, one DEL says, “I totally believe in the work we’re doing. It’s already yielded some results. I believe it’ll yield more results. And I’m so I’m not going to worry about it.” He says that although “there are some people that are resistant…I believe the work is going to grow and it’s going to continue to have a major impact on the experiences of students.”

**How CRT Manifests in DEL Roles**

The DELs in this study are all deeply connected to a continuing study of academic research, which, along with their own lived experience, also informs their foundational understandings of race and equity. All DELs approach their work with a critical lens. Each of them is familiar with CRT from their graduate and professional studies, and how the tenets
present in our society and also in our schools. With this understanding, they have explicitly used
the basis of CRT to not only frame their practice, but also to name some of the behaviors, trends, and district issues in a critical, research-based manner. Working from the six tenets that were found to be most common in education research, each DEL provides both explicit and implicit examples on how 1) the permanence of racism, 2) interest convergence, 3) Whiteness as property, 4) counternarratives versus majoritarian narratives, 5) critique of liberalism, and 6) intersectionality, all manifest and impact their roles in district-level equity work (Capper, 2015). These findings are presented in aggregate form to further protect the individual identities of the participants in the study.4

Permanence of racism. All three DELs agree that “there are systems we have in place that specifically and intentionally hold down students of color,” and that racism exists, is present, and manifests itself in education. Of racism, one DEL says, “it will always be present…particularly in this country because this is how this country was founded. Excuse me, this is how this country was taken. So, it’ll always be here, period.” He continues, “Seriously though, really, think of one thing where race doesn’t play a factor. You just can’t. If you’re in this work and really understand it, then you really can’t. It’s everywhere.”

Even with the acknowledgement that the breakdown of racism may not ever happen, and most certainly not in their own lifetimes, all three DELs continuously resolve themselves to attack racism in order to dismantle it. Their strategies vary, but all understand the longevity and the engrained history behind the constructs they are trying to dissolve. This is “something that’s bigger than us…we’re talking about something that’s been here since [before] 1492 and it’s 2018, and it ain’t changed. If it hasn’t changed in those amount of years, it ain’t getting ready to

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4 During a focus group, DELs designed representations of how all six tenets of CRT in education (Capper, 2015) manifest in their specific districts. These representations and explanations can be found in Appendix D.
change right now.” Still yet, this same DEL arrives at work every day to create change, even in ideologies he believes are permanent, “I try to really focus on smaller chunks. What can we do in our spheres of influence to try to dismantle the systems which we are in, from within?”

Another DEL subscribes to and understands the endemic nature of racism, but he does struggle logistically with the concept of its irreversibility, “I do think about how this [race/racism] is something we created, this is something we have learned, and if it’s something we have created, and we have learned, then can we not dismantle it? Or unlearn it?” Of his approach, he says “we’re really going at racism like we’re gonna defeat it. And we believe it can be dismantled. It won’t be anytime soon, because it’s very well engrained, but we work for that goal.” He goes on to explain that, “even though I do totally understand the idea of its permanence, I work as if it’s not permanent.”

**Interest convergence.** The tenet of interest convergence holds that any advancement that people of color have experienced against racist practices or racism only exists because the interests of people of color happened to align with those of White people, thereby ultimately reinforcing White supremacist power structures (Bell, 1980). Per this tenet, all DELs experience and can name interest convergence in their districts, and the complicated influence it has on their positions and their efficacy. One DEL explains that for him, “all of this is really about power. When you think about Whiteness, interest convergence, the permanence of race… it’s about power when you really get down to the elemental versions” of what those constructs really are. He argues that, “when you connect power and race together, there’s a special aspect to it …Which is interesting, because when I think about the successes and the expansion of my office – more people, more money – but even that was deeply rooted in institutionalized racism.” He explains that “The expansion didn’t come until three young White girls decided to say the word
‘nigger’ on social media”, while “the Black community that has been saying for 20 years that we [the district] need something different, we [the district] need something new, and it never came.”

He goes on to say that because of the new “…pressure on the district,” primarily from White parents and stakeholders, “all of a sudden money starts to flow, positions start to flow, increase of influence, of course. So, I think in many ways it was convenient.” He continues, and notes that it happened quickly, “literally, from one day to the next,” there was immediate action to activate more equity-based resources and programming within the district, something the Black community in the area had been requesting and advocating for throughout decades. “The Black community wasn’t necessarily thrilled…about the way it happened. And our superintendent didn’t understand why they weren’t happy and I was like, ‘well, you didn’t listen to them, but you listened to this issue.”

A question that all three DELs frequently report asking themselves is “who benefits?” One DEL describes himself as “naturally skeptical.” One of his primary concerns in equity-related work, and “where the interest convergence comes into play for me is, so what are you getting out of it?” He says that when he really thinks about it, the answer to that question sometimes is “the part that kind of gets uncomfortable, and gets creepy,” because everyone’s motivations, support, and ideas are not always because they see the value in equity work, they are because that work can serve them in other capacities.

In order to both fight against, and strategically utilize interest convergence as a tool for advancement, a DEL reports that he frequently asks constituents and stakeholders interested in equity work to explain their reasoning behind certain decisions and support, “Tell me your why. Because I know why I’m sitting here, and it really doesn’t have anything to do with a check. …but, what is your reason? That’s what I’m curious about.” He continues, “because it [equity
work] didn’t just become a thing. Some of these same things we’re trying to address have been going on way longer than before any of us had breath in our bodies, so why now, why today?”

Another DEL similarly attempts to use interest convergence as leverage when possible, explaining that some of his work has been troubleshooting how to “get White people to advocate on behalf of that [equity], and help push the work?” A different DEL speaks to his attempts to engage the White community more actively in his district in effort to gain more influence and momentum in his work, but still he reports that there is a divide there. He says “as I’m having these conversations and showing the data and showing how well White students are doing …I feel like it gives a sigh of relief to the White community” in a sense, because they think, “well, we are doing fine, so we can do this equity work because we’re doing fine. And as long as we continue to do fine, then we can continue this equity work.” He wonders, “what’s gonna happen when we start shifting around resources to make things equitable?” Shifts like these may correct imbalance in the district overall and give each child fair and equitable access to the available resources, but if these resources, facilities, teachers, and funds are currently structured to disproportionately positively impact White children in his district, reallocating them fairly “could cause issues.” He says, “…that’s not gonna be in the interest of interest convergence”, and he wonders what may happen if the district ever gets to that point, “because if we’re serious about equity and we see we have some kids that need additional support” then conflicts may arise if shifts to accommodate those children also create change for White students that could be seen as undesirable.

The same DEL says that he believes that true equity work will “benefit everybody”, because “it’s about educating, really trying to make sure that we’re providing the best educational opportunities as possible for all kids.” He does explain that his district’s “target
groups right now…are our Black and Latinx kids because they’re the ones that are currently not getting the outcomes.” But for him, it makes sense that everyone “would want them [Black and Latinx students] to at least achieve at the level of our White students.”

**Whiteness as property.** Whiteness as property maintains that whiteness *itself* is treated as something of value and is therefore likened to property, grounded in the “…parallel systems of domination of Black and Native peoples out of which were created racially contingent forms of property and property rights” (Harris, 1993, p. 1714). This concept provides infinite protection of privilege, in a sense, and therefore the absolute right to exclude the “other” or that which is not White, because it assumes that Whiteness is the standard, or the neutral (Harris, 1993).

In education, Whiteness as property can be a difficult concept, because it so closely adheres to what we as a culture refer to as the “status quo”. The neutral, in education, is the adherence to the inherent culture of Whiteness and White values that by default govern educational spaces and dictate much of the acceptable norms in classrooms.

Whiteness as property as it manifests in schools is sometimes more difficult to explicitly name since it masquerades as what is perceived as normal, or the baseline. One DEL explains that he does not encounter very many people who are conscious of their Whiteness in an overt way, “A lot of times, folks just don’t know. It’s like they’re asleep.” For example, “I know I have a home to go to, but I don’t really think of it as property. I know I have things in my house, but they’re just here.” He says, “I think when it comes to race, folks tend to think about it the same way.” Although he understand the concept of Whiteness as property by its academic definition, he still finds that in his day to day work it is difficult to explain to others, because “in many ways…when I’m speaking to, particularly White audiences about equity work, …they just don’t have any foundation to kind of understand what that [Whiteness as property] is.”
He continues to explain that from his perspective, “at a very human level, I don’t think most people go around saying, ‘I’m gonna hold onto my Whiteness.’” He says, “I just think people are on a very basic level- either you’re woke or you’re not,” and that “sometimes you get folks who are conscious about their Whiteness…” For the most part though, “people who are just walking around”, and he thinks “that group includes teachers”, do not appear to be conscious of or feel attached to their Whiteness as some component of their property.

Another DEL explains his understanding of Whiteness as property and how he works for the awareness of it as a component of his approach to equity it in his district, “In my day-to-day work, as I’m advocating for culturally relevant pedagogy and anti-racist curriculum, you know, just trying to help people to understand that there is this assumption of Whiteness as “normal” and helping people to understand that that exists.” He sometimes hears traces of statements that can be sourced to ideas like, “this is what’s White and this is the way that we should be, and things will be better once we assimilate into this White norm” and he finds it “very frustrating” that it is still “so difficult for us as educators to acknowledge the strengths and values, or the value in the kids that come to us.” He wonders what it would take for teachers, both implicitly and explicitly, to “stop trying to educate whatever culture that they’re [the students] bringing, out of them. I mean, we don’t have to ascribe to these ideas of White supremacy.” He adds, “and when you start using terms like ‘White supremacy’…it’s like you’re being too radical.”

Examples of Whiteness as property come through avenues of curriculum, as well as access and opportunity available in schools, and who they are made available for. One DEL explains that there are multitudes of “students of color who have demonstrated through testing that they’re very, very high achieving, but still don’t have access”, across our entire nation. He emphasizes that when this is brought up, “people can really drill down” and agree that these
issues are problematic, “But if that was happening systemically to White children?! …I mean, people’s heads would roll! Here you have it systemically happening to the Black kids and it’s like, ‘yeah, that was a nice article.’”

In one observed professional development presentation, a DEL presented an article on implicit bias and the disparity it causes within discipline practices and the way that teachers and faculty interact with students. The staff read and discussed the article as a group, and afterwards, the DEL was approached by an Assistant Principal at the school in a side conversation, who confessed that she “may be saying something about herself” with this commentary, but that she did perceive and understand Black and Brown children as having different, louder, and “more aggressive” behavior than her White students. She asked for advice from the DEL on how to better advise Black and Brown kids on code switching and “appropriate” behavior for school. This example serves as Whiteness as property, in that the assimilation to the dominant culture of Whiteness is the expectation base for the behavior of students in schools. In the non-confrontational culture of Whiteness, anything that is contrary to that inherently White status quo is seen as aberrant behavior.

**Counternarratives versus majoritarian narratives.** Linked to both interest convergence and Whiteness as property, majoritarian narratives are common assertions of fairness, objectivity, and meritocracy that actually work to maintain racialized power structures. Majoritarian narratives are fought with the existence of counternarratives, which tell the truths of marginalized people and their experience in the world. One DEL says that to him, counternarratives are a defining component of CRT, “when you break it down, it’s about the counter-narrative, it’s about understanding what your narrative and your lens is, and the willingness to accept that maybe there is a different lens.” He continues, “and if there is a
different lens, could you perhaps think of this system differently? And so, for teachers, that’s very important.”

Another DEL believes that “the whole basis of race equity work period is that you’re consistently bringing the counter-narrative…because you’re battling with those false ideas of different groups anyway. You’re battling with those stereotypes as it is.” A different DEL says that a “major part” of his job is communicating to teachers and school staff, “that there is another kind of narrative or reality out there. And how systems don’t really let that narrative come to life.” All three DELs express that explaining and activating counternarratives through the education of teachers, and the recognition of student culture in the classroom are vital parts of how they guide their work. One DEL says, “I just really see it as my job” to explain “that there are so many different narratives out there and intelligence is really found everywhere, in all of our students”, and to help schools and district staff understand how to help every student achieve through an equity-based lens.

As part of human nature, one DEL says that “we want to humanize each other”, but “the system has allowed us to dehumanize each other.” Another DEL says that for this reason, it is “really important for us to consistently expose ourselves, but also our students, to a counternarrative. There always needs to be a counternarrative… [students of color] don’t need to be “fixed”, we just need to be taught.” Solutions for this disconnection come in building relationships between students and teachers, because as relationships strengthen, so does understanding, connection, and humanization of others. One DEL says, “we always talk about connecting across difference, like as a way to interrupt the [majoritarian] narrative…And that’s how you create classrooms that are inclusive to all folks. He says it is important to “recognize that racism is there, not skirt over it, [and] allow your kids and teachers to connect across
difference. It will open up being more human.” He adds that “all kids, irrespective of who they are, will be ready to take academic risks because they trust you now, they’ll be willing to open up. They will probably be less of a discipline problem.” He asserts, “that’s the way you do it, but it’s hard.”

For another DEL, the counternarrative is also “all about pushing back against the ideas that we have accepted about you know, what curriculum looks like, which instructional strategies work best with kids” He wants to move his district’s approach to counternarratives towards curriculum and innovative teaching strategies as well, because he thinks now, “it’s about expanding the resources and the ideas we have about how we really come into direct conflict with White supremacist curriculum.” He continues to talk about the need to fight “against that majoritarian narrative”, in all aspects of the classroom, regardless of demographics. “Even if you only have one student of color in your room, we still need to make sure we’re giving diverse representations, because we’re invalidating other cultures if they have no voice or presence in the classroom.” He recognizes that this could be uncomfortable for some, but “as educators we have to make sure we are affirming our students…because if we eliminate those cultures from what we’re teaching, we’re reinforcing that White culture is the culture. And that it’s supreme.”

**Critique of liberalism.** In CRT, liberalism and meritocracy are often linked, and both receive critique because they represent the discourse of self-interest from the wealthy, powerful, and privileged (UCLA School of Public Affairs, 2009). Being colorblind, or not seeing race, is a common manifestation of the critique of liberalism in education settings, as seemingly well-meaning educators try to appear non-racist, but instead racially neutralize settings by refusing to “see color”, or differences among students. Liberalism and CRT are inherently in conflict, as “CRT argues that racism requires sweeping changes, but liberalism has no mechanism for such
change” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.12). For the three DELs, liberalism manifests primarily as a mix of good intentions and ignorance.

One DEL explains, “that’s the challenge of liberalism in the classroom…you have very well-intentioned teachers. They’re loving. They don’t wake up in the morning wanting to advance the school-to-prison pipeline…” But they still do not understand the impact their own lens on students of color and their experiences in school. He says that most are “oblivious, like they just didn’t know” that they were not doing the right thing by students. This DEL works to see the other side of the negativity associated specifically with White liberalism, and to understand their perspective in order to better understand how to navigate challenges when they arise. He says, “I have no idea what it’s like to grow up in a household where my father and grandfather are straight up racists. I don’t have that experience. And so, how could that person know something different?” He continues, saying that them even being “sort of liberal is a miracle, because look what you came up in! So, …I think just take people where they are, and hopefully they do have some inkling of right and wrong, fairness, equity,” and that his goal is “bringing them to the reality of what racism has done to us all.”

One DEL comments that as a result of their “abstract liberalism” staff and stakeholders in his district “don’t see that they need to apply this equity lens to every single thing that they do. They don’t see that an assignment they may do, how that’s actually going to impact some folks.” For example, during an upcoming unit in elementary social studies on the Civil War, the teachers at one school in this DELs district wanted to assign a project where students would assume a character of a historical figure that was prominent during that time period, and have them represent that person as a “figure” in a school “wax museum”. The students would choose who they would like to represent and while they were dressed as the figure, other students and staff
would circulate; the students would relay relevant information to the passerby as if they were the character themselves. This DEL, who was sitting in on a curriculum meeting, asked, “Who are the Black children going to play?” The teachers responded, “Oh, they could choose.” The DEL then stepped in and said, “Oh, so they could choose a slave owner or a slave. Who are they gonna choose? Think about the context in what you’re doing.” He continues, “It’s just stuff like that, … because they…just believe that they’re liberal so, ‘oh, I didn’t mean any harm so it’s okay’, or ‘there’s nothing wrong with this…” while the reality in their classrooms could potentially be damaging.

Liberalism presents differently and more intensely in some districts, and especially in political and social spheres. One DEL argues that with liberalism at play, “there’s always got to be some type of chaos, because there’s always got to be a cause to fight.” Another DEL says that he no longer believes “in liberal or progressive towns, particularly after this last election”. He advises to get a real read on a district’s priorities, to “Watch the policy. It’s not the words, it’s the policy. …you look at policies in school districts that are still maintaining the status quo even though we have this person here [a DEL position].” The policy, he argues, will tell you a district’s true allegiance and their real efforts in making focused change to enhance equity in public schools. It is one thing to talk about equity, implement trainings, and create positions to advance equitable schooling, but it is entirely another to back up those actions with policy and accountability structures that enforce equitable practices. Districts can highlight equity without really championing the work; without policy and structures to mandate equity, positions like DELs and the work within their scope can become largely symbolic in nature – serving to check the proverbial “boxes” of an equitable district without actually altering operations and/or practices.
A third DEL explains that in his experience in “working with people whom I perceive to be White liberals,” there are “still attempts to avoid the race conversation, and to try to focus on other issues like poverty or class or things of that nature, but really not wanting to own the impact of race in society.” He wonders, “Why do we not want it to be about race? What’s the motivation there? What are we trying to preserve? What are we trying to hold onto? What’s our fear in looking at this issue and saying, ‘oh yeah, it’s racial’?”

**Intersectionality.** Intersectionality, as it commonly manifests in education, is the understanding that all facets of one’s identity intersects with other facets, such as race, gender, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and national origin. Intersectionality reveals ways in which oppression may be compounded or nuanced, or ways in which racial identity may affect and appear in other aspects of one’s identity, and “…how their combination plays out in different settings” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 58). The concept can also be extended to how much and how often CRT scholars address aspects of racial identity across other races (Capper, 2015). All three DELs in this study prioritize anti-racist education practices because all three districts have the deepest disparities between races, however they do not work to the exclusion of other factors of identity and recognize that there is progress to be made in this area. All three DELs are actively planning ways to incorporate more facets of intersectionality as they continue the implementation of their visions.

One DEL describes intersectionality in his district, and says that “I really don’t think it plays out any differently than it does in society in our schools. When you think about all the components that make up who we are, we live on the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, all of those things.” Like counternarratives represents a person’s story, intersectionality represents key parts of their identity, and so this DEL says that with those parallels, he approaches it
similarly, “When I think about intersectionality, all the lines that have been drawn, the way you erase those lines is to humanize each other.” He adds, “…that’s how you open up educators to think about different ways, different policies and procedures and practices. That’s how you provide equity when you know folks over here have been systematically oppressed,” and most importantly, “that’s how you get the courage to do something different in your position of authority.” He says, “all of that happens when you understand that we all want the same thing.”

Another DEL notices intersectionality and its effects in his own district, in terms of staff members’ own identities, “I see a lot as it relates to intersectionality and people’s struggles with different parts of their identities.” He also speaks specifically about how teachers and leaders might have conflicts in belief systems and understanding along the intersections of student identity, “I see adults who struggle with class difference, I see adults who struggle with … religious beliefs and religious ideas and sexuality, and differences as it relates to sexual orientation.” He notes that he sees a lot about “gender and… language regarding boys and girls and different expectations about how girls behave, how boys behave. Everything is- as it relates to gender- is binary, or I haven’t seen much room for conversations beyond that.” He also says that as it relates to intersectionality, he sees “a lot of people struggling with bias and difference. And most people aren’t mindful of it, so I try to at least have it on their radars for them to think about it, because it is impacting their relationships with students.”

In a professional development designed to address “intersectionality within the LGBTQ youth population” in his district, one DEL “saw people struggling to understand. Some people were struggling to understand any of it, you know, much less how those things compound for different experiences for different kids.” Another DEL comments on the difficulty of obtaining accurate metrics for students who may identify as part of the LGBTQ community, because it is
rare that students will be administered surveys that attempt to capture that data, and even then it may not be representative depending on students’ comfort levels in self-identity, and also in recording that information in an official format. “Every now and again, you may get a piece of those stats, but it’s just very rarely,” and it makes it difficult to accurately understand the size of a particular population, or where demographics and sexual orientation might intersect in the student population of a particular district.

The same DEL expresses his interest in the topic, especially because he finds much of the available data in current trainings to be Whitewashed. In reference to a pamphlet distributed at a training, he says, “I’m looking at the back of it [the pamphlet] and it’s talking about survey participants, and it’s talking about the percentages of people of color that were surveyed versus the majority- that means your data are skewed.” He recognizes the power of intersectionality and the ability for race and sexual orientation to compound a person’s discrimination, “because we know that if we started looking at race, that it would immediately be this way [changed]. So, then there’s no way that the data can be accurate” as it is being presented. “So that for me is when intersectionality gets hard. It’s just really hard.”

In terms of moving forward to address intersectionality in their districts, one DEL has a plan to design a specific professional development totally around “gender, sexuality and sexual orientation”. Another DEL says that he partners with some community “organizations that try to engage people in speaking to” intersectionality, and that he has done it as well, “of course at a very surface level… I do totally see as my work moves forward, being able to help people dive deeper into intersectionality. I’m doing that at a surface, exposure level right now.” He explains that, “I feel like I have good entry points to the work that I can build upon for the future,” and
that the thinks, “I’m giving people a good dose of what they need initially to whet their appetite for a little bit more, and it’s a lot more we can do.”

**Conclusion**

These DELs all operationalize a CRT framework that manifests both implicitly and explicitly in the work they do each day to further their visions for their districts and to mobilize a response to the barriers and setbacks they encounter. Dr. James, Dr. Kyle, and Dr. Parker all bring passion, personal motivation, and a strong connection to equity related work in their districts. Their job descriptions, daily responsibilities and duties are impactful only because each of these men is tied deeply to the importance of this work, and they ground their foundations in academic research, their own lived experiences, and their desire to end inequity in schools.

Despite all their differences in district, years of experience, personality, and personal approach to the work, these three DELs are remarkably similar in the implementation of their vision for their roles, in the barriers and challenges they experience and regarding the impacts of CRT within their district-level equity work. The design of professional development, specialized programming, policy creation and reform, and emphasis on engaging their district communities is paramount to their success in their roles, but does not always mitigate the pervasive nature of bias, politics and power dynamics, changes in leadership, and the emotional toll these leaders experience.
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

Introduction

This collection of critical case studies on DELs aims to fill the current void in the research on equity work at the district level in public schools, on district level equity positions, and the experiences of the professionals that hold these positions. The study’s primary focus is to document the lived experiences of individuals in this work, including challenges they encounter, implementation strategies they utilize, and how they understand and fulfill their roles - especially in the context of the current educational, social, and political spheres.

This study uses CRT to understand how DELs in the Southeastern United States interact with colleagues, teachers, parents, students, and each other, how they are received in professional settings, both formally and informally, how they feel they are perceived, and finally, how they compare across districts in mission, job description, implementation strategies and emotional experience. This study also answers the call of multiple authors for more research in education using a CRT and/or critical lens. In equity work and in the work of these DELs, it is crucial to understand and apply frameworks like CRT in order to properly guide and advance equity initiatives within districts.

Even in understanding their personal and district differences, each of these DELs are very similar in their passion for the work, the ways in which they choose to implement their visions for their positions, the barriers and setbacks they experience, and their use of CRT as a guiding framework in their roles.
Implications

Primary implications for this study include the assertion that district-level equity positions are very much needed in this nation’s public-school systems, especially in the current socio-political climate, where race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and religion have major impact in student identities and their experiences in the classroom (Costello, 2016; Rogers et al, 2017; Sondel et al, 2018). Societal problems are reflected in our schools (Cohen et al, 2009); DEL positions in school systems can help mitigate the damage caused by inequities, and work to train faculty and staff in how to prevent and attack racism and discrimination in its many forms. Per López (2003), “The only way we will make advances in dealing with the problem of racism is if we take the time to see and understand how it operates, recognize it within ourselves, highlight it within our field, and take brave steps to do something about it” (p. 86).

Common among the DELs featured in this study is that they have personally shaped their roles to be as impactful as they are and strive individually to broaden the scope of their equity work in the districts in which they are employed. Without their individual effort and personal passion, these roles would be significantly less influential in their respective districts, and in their modeling and influence to surrounding districts. Their experiences as Black men in the United States also brings value to this role; Santamaria (2012) states that, “educational leaders of color think differently about how students reach goals, frame tasks, create effective teams, and communicate ideas,” and that “as a result of historical and often shared oppressions, they tend to challenge assumptions about ways in which schools and universities function, strategize, and operationalize teaching and learning in diverse societies” (p. 350).

If these roles were occupied by individuals who did not have a deep knowledge of equity, research and academics, public schools, shared lived experience, and how elements of identity
function within school systems to affect academic outcomes, the results of this study could be vastly different. Quite frankly, the districts where these three DELs work are lucky to have hired such dedicated, passionate, and knowledgeable people to fill these positions.

Additionally, prejudice, bias, and discrimination are current and prominent issues that negatively affect classrooms and school districts across the Southeastern United States, and CRT is a necessary framework for use in education-related academic research. This study reiterates the practicality and utility of CRT for use in public school systems. The framework is academic in nature, but it has successfully been implemented and applied as a logical solution and guide for working to dismantle racism. We must use a critical lens when analyzing our nation’s public schools, and especially when processing issues around racial equity in education. These issues are not going away, but they can be battled. In the words of Stovall (2004), “…CRT poses a call to work. It’s one thing to know and analyze the functions of race. It is yet another to engage in the practice of developing and maintaining a school with an anti-oppressive, anti-racist agenda in an age of conservative educational policy” (p. 10).

It is important to mention that the efficacy of these DEL positions, their reception with audiences, relations and success in power dynamics and politics, and their access to educational leadership positions are inextricably connected to the fact that they each identify and present as men. Although a gender analysis was not the explicit focus in this baseline level research, it is important to note that gender identity, specifically their maleness, is a significant factor in their work, and possibly a limitation in their attempts in successfully addressing intersectionality.

Also common among all three DELs featured, is their prior experience in school systems as school and/or system-level leaders, as well as their equal education levels in education-related doctoral programs. All three also had worked if not in the same district, in the same region for
multiple years. They are all either originally from the Southeast, or have lived there for many years, and have built cultural capital and connections within their respective regions and districts. Would a person outside of the education and/or education leadership field be successful in a DEL role? How much does cultural capital impact the success of a DEL? Would a person from a state or area outside of the Southeastern region be successful in a DEL role in the Southeast?

Although not the primary focus of this research, the Southeastern United States proves to be a unique and special place to study race, equity, and public schools. There is something special about the South, and perhaps of historical significance, that DEL positions are being created here and in growing numbers, especially given the deep and violent history of race, racism, prejudice and discrimination in this region; these things are deeply rooted here, and are part of the fabric of the culture itself, steeped in the way of life. The DEL experience in the Southeastern United States would surely, and notably, be distinct from DELs working in other regions, and especially in consideration of their race, ethnicity, and/or gender identities.

Recommendations

The primary recommendation as a result of this study is first, and most importantly, an urgent call for additional research on district-level equity leaders in public schools. At the time of this paper, this is the only research of its kind that centers the experiences of individuals that hold DEL-type roles in public school districts. This paper focuses exclusively on three DELs in the Southeastern United States. It is my recommendation that studies on DELs that follow this one encompass:

- How the DEL role is approached in other regions in the United States, especially large, politically liberal leaning, urban centers as compared to more rural and suburban regions that may trend as more politically conservative.
• A larger sample size of DELs.

• A study on if/how the DELs and their districts measure their effectiveness and impact, along with accountability structures in place for their offices and/or position.

• How DELs are hired, and under what circumstances their positions were created, along with an explicit study of the infrastructure in their respective districts to compare district organization, power structures, and where DELs are positioned.

• A future study on the turnover in DEL positions as it relates to district climate, sociopolitical atmospheres, and transitions in district leadership.

• A gender-based analysis, as well as a race/ethnicity-based analysis, specifically on DEL positions, and who holds them. It is important to document this work from a female and/or gender non-conforming perspective, as well as from the perspective of different races and/or ethnicities.

Additionally, it is recommended that a CRT-based handbook or guidebook is created to include a collection of best practices and minimum qualifications for DELs as a result of the above research, as well as frameworks for work in education with a critical lens.

Directly related, it is recommended that districts review their hiring practices and processes to ensure that they are clear in the type of person they desire to fill this role, and that careful hiring practices are taken to ensure that the person is qualified per the above recommendations. This will ensure that the position is dynamic, and that inequities are neither blatantly nor inadvertently perpetuated under the guise of reform.

Recommendations for the scope of this position include, but are not limited to:

• Direct channels to and supervision by the superintendent of schools.
• Involvement and consultation in district-level board meetings, and in higher-level
decision making for the district.

• Collaboration with other departments at the district level to improve equitable
practices in every category.

Recommendations for a standard of minimum qualifications for this position include, but are not
limited to:

• Education levels that reflect the study and understanding of CRT, equity in public
schools, and institutional racism.

• Experience in school leadership, in designing and delivering professional
development, and in leading conversations around inequity.

• Experience in connecting schools and community organizations, as well as
navigating the political arenas and power dynamics that exist in schools and districts.

It is also strongly suggested that districts with existing DEL roles conduct a critical
analysis of the job descriptions, expectations, and unforeseen limitations of the position so that
they may competently and effectively expand the oversight and scope of DEL roles and offices
of equity. The DEL position should be proactive, rather than only reactive. School systems
cannot afford to only respond to issues of race and other inequities after they occur – we must
design solutions that anticipate these inequities and educate staff and faculty to ameliorate
student experience in schools and to undermine and dismantle bias and discrimination.

It is clear that problems of racism, sexism, differences in class, ethnicity, religion,
language, ability, etc. remain steadfast in our society. We cannot ignore these issues in our
classrooms, nor the systemic roots of the marginalization that results. District and school leaders
have a responsibility to “…provide theoretical knowledge and practical experiences that prepare future leaders for these realities” (Brown, 2005, p. 587).

Teachers should be trained in equitable teaching practices by their districts, if not their teacher education programs. Principals should be committed to implementing professional developments, providing resources, and changing school culture to reflect a focus on equitable schooling. District staff should analyze their own practices through a critical, equity-based lens, provide training and resources to principals and teachers, and engage in critical conversations that advance equity at all levels, even with the superintendent and the school board. Capper (2015) notes that this process must be ongoing, challenging, and in depth, “Importantly, developing an antiracist identity cannot happen as the result of attending one workshop or reading a few articles or books on White racism” (p. 801). Consistent and continued focus on equity is paramount to the success of our public schools.

Limitations

In conducting this work, it is crucial to understand my own positionality within the context of this study, as it presents as the primary limitation for this research based upon 1) my own personal beliefs as a researcher, and 2) how I identify versus the demographics of the DELs participating in this study.

As the primary researcher, my own positionality, privileged biases, and assumptions need to be addressed. I identify and present as a White, cisgender female; I am heterosexual, was raised in the Christian church, and in a middle-class home. I am an educator, with a total of 10 years of experience in public schools, working in both New York City and North Carolina in urban, low-income environments with high percentages of racial/ethnic minorities. I have taught preschool, middle school, and at the university level, but the bulk of my experience is in high
schools. I am highly educated, and from a small, mostly segregated southern town in North Carolina. I personally believe that racism and inequity persist, are endemic to the American experience, and that these inequities and their consequences manifest in public institutions, including public school systems, and elsewhere.

I understand that in my efforts to research and analyze experiences of people holding district-level equity positions in public schools, I am responsible for relaying the lived experiences and the personal truth of participants who do not share my race, ethnicity or gender. Telling their stories accurately requires the recognition and consciousness of my own lens, biases and personal experiences, as well as intentional efforts in transparency and open dialogue with participants throughout data collection and transcription processes. By consulting with each participant after semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews with copies of the initial transcriptions, I solicited member-checking (Stake, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) to further ensure that the transcriptions of the audio data collected fairly and accurately represents their views and personal experiences.

Ethical considerations are of the utmost importance regarding confidentiality, permissions, and in accurately and honestly representing the views, opinions and experiences of those interviewed and giving data. With interviewing, there is a responsibility to capture the meaning and the unbiased truth of what is said. This includes maintaining transparency with interview subjects regarding the goals of the research, within the selection of content and data included in the study, and all interpretations, conclusions and analysis.

Also with interviews, there are limitations in what may be discoverable because release of information relies on trust, comfort, and a certain fluency of thought, self-reflection and understanding from the participants about their own experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).
Likewise, questions and content may be influenced by the researcher and their knowledge and awareness regarding the topic at hand and what they hope to gain, as well as the ability to elicit and understand responses that potentially contain the answers to research questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To counteract these limitations, multiple interviews and focus group interviews were conducted in order to build trust and rapport, as well as participant observation to fill remaining gaps.

Other limitations include time constraints, relying heavily on field notes for data collection during participant shadowing and observation, and small sample size. Time constraints limit this study because although it is a case study, it is also a dissertation project. This limits the data collection and analysis to five months because of the sequence of my personal coursework and estimated graduation (Stake, 2013; Yazan, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This methodology provides an interesting and compelling snapshot of these district level equity positions, the lived experiences of those who hold this role, and the nuances of this work, but the study is unable to capture longevity in this iteration.

Although semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, I collected data primarily using field notes and memos when conducting participant observation during their day-to-day activities on the job. By documenting major interactions, trends, and the more prominent relevant data, direct shadowing and participant observation provide important context for the data collected in focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. Unfortunately, there is no way to ensure during field observations that I accurately captured every aspect of our time together, and details could have gone unrecorded.

Lastly, this study only follows three district level equity professionals as primary participants, and two additional DELs as focus group participants, all located within the
Southeastern United States. Without diminishing their experiences in these roles, it should be mentioned that the boundaries in geographic region and the small sample size may affect whether this work yields generalizable findings, and therefore limits its broader impact. As with any case study, this research and/or findings cannot be replicated.

**Conclusion**

In the second and final focus group meeting, all of the DELs participating in the study are around a table in a conference style room. The lights are bright, and the mood is collegial; they are laughing with each other and trading stories. All are dressed professionally but sit casually. This is the last activity in the study, the last time they will speak on the record; although that finality was not explicitly communicated, the gravity of the simple exercise seems to fill the space. After the activity is explained and instructions are given, the room falls silent as the DELs start to write.

Participants were asked to complete four sentences about education, school, and solutions. Although the task is small, all the DELs are incredibly contemplative in their responses. One by one, after careful thought, they look up. In rounds, each of the participants share their sentences out loud. The room is very focused, almost reverent. After every response comes encouragement through snapping fingers, heavy sighs, and cheers. This scene, and their responses, are perfectly representative of the passion, thought, humor, and intellect that each one brings to their work as DELs. This job is difficult, but necessary, and each one goes to work every day to fight for something bigger than themselves.

The sentence starters, along with their aggregate responses are below:

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5 This includes the three DELs featured in the study, as well as the two additional DELs who only participated in the focus groups. Dr. James is not in attendance, but later submitted his responses via email. Dr. Parker had to leave early.
If I ruled the world…

• I would denounce my reign and work to interrupt the systemic inequities with the people.
• Race would no longer be a primary predictor of students' outcomes.
• I would ensure equity of funding in both schools and communities across the country.
• Schools would meet the needs of all students.
• Privilege would not exist, Black and Brown people would be valued and treated equitably.

The magic bullet is…

• Black Girl Magic and Black Boy Joy.
• Believing all students can learn and excel.
• Realizing, internalizing and digesting the truth such that a mindset shift can occur.
• An acknowledgment of inequity and a willingness to do something about it.
• Having the courage to humanize those that have been dehumanized by our system of education.

Schools are…

• Institutions which truly have the potential to create a more equitable society.
• A conduit to learning, to laying the foundation for a continuation of learning.
• Houses of knowledge with the ability to nourish or destroy.
• The last chance to right a wrong.
• The best hope for dismantling racism in society.

Education is…

• Community responsibility not just a school endeavor.
• A civil right for all students.
• A conservative’s worst nightmare.
• The gateway to truth. It is only successful or helpful when it is honest and representative of everyone’s past, present and future.
• Revolutionary. To truly educate is to prepare minds to create a more equitable and just society that has yet to exist.

“CRT in educational leadership literature calls on leaders to acknowledge the pervasiveness of racism within ourselves and our schools accompanied by the hope that change is possible” (Capper, 2015, p. 802). The work of these three DELs is highly inspired and hopeful, emotionally taxing, and grounded in Critical Race Theory, professional developments, specialized programming, policy creation and reform, engaging community and building relationships. These leaders work in the face of outright bias, fixed mindsets, complicated political spheres and power dynamics to dismantle racism and work for truly equitable public schools. In concert with Theoharis’ (2008) findings “…Although this resistance was indeed significant, it is important to recognize that creating more just and equitable schools was and is possible. The resistance was very real to these leaders, but it did not preclude advancing equity and justice” (p. 309).

These DELs “did not rest on the rhetoric of their values and beliefs, but expended considerable strategic and practical energy towards the realization of their vision (Walker and Dimmock, 2005)” (Jean-Marie, 2008, p. 351). As exemplified by the work, the challenges faced, and the progress made by Dr. James, Dr. Kyle, and Dr. Parker, Stovall (2004) provides a relevant call to action for all educators and education researchers in pursuit of equity in public education: “The road is bumpy. Many days are better than others. All said, the task of engaging the lives of young people in schools requires us to get to work” (Stovall, 2004, p. 12).
APPENDIX A: ONE-PAGER DISTRIBUTED TO PARTICIPANTS DURING RECRUITMENT

Critical Case Studies of District-Level Equity Professionals in Public Schools
Principal Investigator/Lead Researcher:
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Research Summary:

This study aims to fill a void in the current research with a specific study on individuals who hold district-level equity positions and their lived experience in this work, including challenges they encounter, implementation strategies they utilize, and how they understand and fulfill their roles.

A collection of critical case studies, this research will reveal the nuances of equity related work at the district level. By studying individuals who are already in these roles, along with their strengths, successes, weaknesses and challenges, we can compare these experiences across districts with different demographics and of differing sizes to reveal commonalities that can inform the work of all school districts in the pursuit of equity for students, faculty, and school communities.

Research Questions:

1. How do district-level equity leaders define and implement their vision for their position?
2. How do these district-level equity leaders respond to barriers and setbacks to the implementation of their vision?
3. How are the experiences of these leaders similar or different across districts?

Commitment:

Participants will commit to up to 4 in-person interviews, participate in up to three focus groups with other district equity leaders in the area, and agree to periodic on-site observation (shadowing day to day activities and/or observation of planned meetings, professional developments, etc.).
Timeframe:

- Data collection will occur from October through December of 2017.
- Potential contact for clarification and/or additional information, and processing of all data will occur January through April of 2018.

Risk:

Anonymity and privacy are priority with this project, and all reasonable measures will be taken to maintain your confidentiality throughout the process. All collected data containing any personal identifiers, including but not limited to audio tapes of interviews, collected artifacts, field notes, and memos will be stored under lock and key and only accessible by myself and my faculty advisor. Electronic files will be stored on a secured UNC University Server. Your identity will remain confidential throughout publication, with the use of pseudonyms for you, your school district, and geographic region.
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE OUTLINE, INTERVIEW 1

Note: The following is a basic outline for the initial one-on-one interview with each subject. This interview, as with the others (up to 4 total) will be formal, but semi-structured. These questions represent a basic guide to the conversation and will be supplemented with follow-up questions depending on where discovery is driven through the collection of data.

Questions for subsequent interviews will be dependent upon participant, data collected, and responses received prior to/during the interview(s). They could also include context within current happenings in our political climate, social context, and any happenings within the work site or related spaces/experiences that may develop over the course of the study.

1. How did you come to the position you currently have? What was your career path/background leading up to this position? Where do you see yourself in the future?
2. How long have you held this position?
3. Who do you work closely with? Describe those relationships. Do you supervise anyone?
4. What is your official job description? How would you describe your position?
5. Describe a typical day/week.
6. What are the district goals for this position? What are your goals for your work?
7. What are the biggest successes (personal and professional) you have experienced in this work thus far?
8. What are the biggest challenges (personal and professional) you have experienced in this work?
9. What is one thing that you wish people understood about your work?
10. How much influence do power and politics have in what you are able to accomplish or not accomplish within your role?
APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW ELICITATION DEVICES AND QUESTIONS

We will complete a couple exercises/questions as a group around CRT and some summative topics, and then do some follow up as we compare and contrast.

1. What are core issues as they directly relate to equity leadership in YOUR DISTRICT (either positive or negative)? List and rank them - Examples (feel free to add or subtract!):
   - Hiring
   - New leadership (new superintendents, turnover, etc.)
   - Pedagogy
   - Funding
   - Politics
   - Class size/other school-based environmental factors
   - Mindsets
   - Bias (implicit or outright)
   - Etc.…

Tell me any issues you had in this process, and why. Compare with your neighbor. Defend your choices. What would you add or subtract after seeing everyone else’s choices? Similarities? Differences?

2. We spoke about CRT in our last round of individual interviews and discussed if/how 6 specific tenets came up in your work. Those tenets came from an article by Colleen Capper in 2015, where she did a synthesis of the literature on CRT in education for the 20th anniversary of Critical Race Theory.

They are:
   - The permanence of racism
   - Interest convergence
   - Whiteness as property
   - Majoritarian narratives versus counternarratives
   - Critique of liberalism
   - Intersectionality

Take these 6 tenets and organize them in a way that makes sense to you for your district. You can group them, rank them, organize them in a graphic progression, a hierarchy, draw a picture, explain a metaphor, anything or any combination of things…however it makes sense to you. There is no wrong answer, this is just your interpretation. Reveal, and then explain why you organized the way that you did for your district.

3. Complete these sentences (regarding equity in schools). Be creative! No boundaries, no limits, no budget. ANYTHING is possible ---
   - “If I ruled the world…”
   - “The magic bullet is…”
   - “Schools are…”
   - “Education is…”
APPENDIX D: HOW CRT MANIFESTS IN DEL’S SCHOOL DISTRICTS

This appendix contains the representations and explanations of how CRT manifests in DELs’ specific school districts. These representations and explanations are a result of Question 2 in Appendix C.

The responses will not be named by the DEL’s pseudonym, so as to further protect their identity. These findings also include responses from the two individuals who only took part in the focus groups. Each letter (A-E) represents a response and explanation from a different individual.

Response A:
Response B:

1. Intersectionality
2. The permanence of racism
3. Whiteness as property
4. Interest convergence
5. Majoritarian narratives versus counternarratives
6. Critique of liberalism

I have started the majority of my conversations about race and racism with an activity that focuses on intersectionality. A few years ago, when I was in my previous role, a white male in one of my sessions had an "aha" moment when he was able to draw a connection between the power dynamics in racism to sexism. That helped to shape my strategy of using intersectionality as a starting point for understanding power dynamics, privilege, and bias. From here, people seem to be willing to dive deeper into racism (and its permanence) as a manifestation of power and privilege. I also try to help people to understand whiteness as power and how white supremacy still impacts society today. I feel as though interest convergence has allowed me to be progressive with my work, so far. I am interested to see what will happen when that convergence is threatened. My vision moving forward is that counternarratives will gain more traction in everything that we do (especially curriculum). I ranked critique of liberalism last because it is not as prominent in my mind or my work, but I still feel it is an underlying part of what I do.

Response C:

I looked at more at what I was seeing in my district as far as majoritarian narratives and the intersectionality. And we have folks that believe that equity equals the same, and I always throw my question mark up on how to remove them from that mindset. And the district states that we believe in equity for every child. However, our practices are more Anglo-Saxon in our selection of materials and how we teach. We purchase various cultural books that are representative of the various cultures in our schools, however our delivery lacks the intersectionality of truly encompassing the diversity we have. We champion inclusion but changes to the system are limited to low hanging fruit, what’s easiest – to maintain the status quo and majoritarian narratives…They want what’s easy. How can we-? “Well we did that already. We did it!” And we have these discussions, and it’s always “what’s the easiest thing we can do?” “We did that! We have all this going on! We have books that look like them, we have teachers in the building that look like them! We’re doing it! The whole equity assessment is part of their- “And I said, “racial equity assessment””. “Why do we have to have the word ‘racial’ in it? Why do you have to make it about race?” He says, “we’re past that”. And I loved my sister’s response, she stopped, and she came up and she says, “I can’t move on with this conversation. The hair on the back of my neck will not allow me to do this…” She said, “had we moved beyond race we would not be having this discussion”, And she went on this long…and “race” was left in the document, but the dynamics in the room- if we had not had leaders in the room to say it’s time for us to stop sugar coating what this is…I’m stuck there with a district our size having that as our mindset. That is where we are.
Response D:

So I drew a tree, and so beneath the surface I put the permanence of racism, and then on the actual surface I drew an arrow and put Whiteness as property, and I think all this will be pretty much self-explanatory...The trunk of the tree I put majoritarian narratives because I think that’s also, I think majoritarian narratives support all of this and really keep that in place, but then you have a few who feel as though that they are liberal and really kind of want to do. But I feel like sometimes they are up in the air, which is where I feel like these branches and stuff are. And so, then that’s where you have interest convergence, where I’m only going to get into this only when I can figure out when it’s benefitting me. Intersectionality- “well I don’t necessarily have to talk about race because I also have a gender and a sexual orientation, and so those are also nice things for me to be able to talk about.” And then critique of liberalism I also put over there as the third branch as well, because at the end of the day, depending on which way the wind is swaying will depend on whether or not they want to get into this or not. They have an option. And because of all these things deeply rooting that in place, that’s why they can do this. They can jump in and they can jump out, whereas we cannot.
I’m still struggling with one, so, but 5 of the 6 [tenets] I was able to sort of get a visual for. So, this is just my graphic here, so it’s like a piece of property, a yard. The house is Whiteness as property the way I sort of see it. I feel like there’s a lot of things systemically that keep people of color from having ownership. I just feel like having a house, dating back to like even generations before me, my mom’s generation, my grandparents, great-grand parents, they didn’t feel they had made it until they owned their own home, just coming from a family of sharecroppers. But they didn’t, they always rented for their entire lives. The ground we walk on is the permanence of racism. Just cause it’s always there. And then I see the cloud as sort of the majoritarian narratives are always showered down on us, and so they’re like watering the ground, it’s the water we drink, there’s a well here that’s capturing the water that this family is drinking from. The people here are intersectionality to me, and interest convergence. You can see these Brown and Black faces in the background, but I feel sometimes with intersectionality the voices of Black people get sort of pushed back, so that’s representing that. And I struggled with the critique of liberalism, so I don’t know how to capture that or if it’s already captured here somewhere, but that was my representation of these things.
REFERENCES


158


