

LEADING FOR EQUITY: PERCEPTIONS OF HOW SCHOOL DISTRICTS BUILD THE
CAPACITY OF EQUITY-DRIVEN DISTRICT LEADERS

by

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ABSTRACT

MICHELE SCRIVEN MASON. Leading for Equity: Perceptions of How School Districts Build the Capacity of Equity-Driven District Leaders (Under the direction of DR. REBECCA SHORE)

School leadership practices are changing and evolving as are the expectations for school leaders and, thus, central office leaders, to lead and support the creation of equitable outcomes for all students. School systems are recognizing methods to acquire and strengthen a critical lens for identifying the inequities within their school systems so that they can tackle barriers to advancement and root causes more directly (Cheatham et. al, 2020). Early research in this area suggests central office leaders should exemplify specific critical roles for school reform (Rorrer et. al, 2008). For this phenomenological study, six equity officers from five urban districts were interviewed about (a) how they define equity-driven central office leadership, (b) their perception of the skills needed for central office leaders to actualize their definition of equity-driven central office leadership, and (c) reflect upon their roles as equity officers. According to this study, equity officers need targeted knowledge, skills, and disposition to affect change on behalf of all kids, but particularly those furthest from educational justice. The findings also indicate that when equity officers have support from the district, including time, financial resources, and access to school leaders, they believe they can have a more significant impact on schools and leaders. Additional research is needed in the area of leading for equity; however, it is evident that school districts must focus on communicating a clear understanding and vision for equity.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my heartbeats, my support network-Andre', Jarrod, Serai, and Nemo. This dissertation is also dedicated to my foundation: my grandparents, Naham and Vashti McBride, my mom, Gloria Scriven, my in-laws, Leandrey and Jethro Mason, and my family and friends who have supported me through my life. My family's faith in me has allowed me to grow, learn and thrive.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
CHAPTER 1	1
Background of the Problem	3
Problem Statement	9
Purpose and Research Questions	11
Definitions and Key Terms	13
Assumptions	16
Limitations and Delimitations	16
Plan for the Study	17
Summary	18
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	19
Introduction	19
What is Educational Equity?	21
Role of Central Office Leaders	21
Equity-Driven Central Office Leaders	24
Equity-Driven School Leadership	26
Developing Equity-Driven Principals	29
Advancing Equity at the System-Level	32
Developing Shared Language	32
Decision-Making and Resources	32
Advancing Equity through Coherence	32

Central Office Leadership Design	34
Transformational Leadership	36
Summary	37
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	39
Research Method	39
Research Design	40
Research Questions	41
Positionality Statement	42
Recruitment and Participants	44
Data Collection	47
Data Analysis	48
Ethical Considerations, Risks, and Benefits	51
Ethical Considerations	51
Potential Risks and Benefits	52
Summary	52
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS	53
Research Question 1	54
Theme 1: Equity officers define equity from multiple sources.	54
School Systems can do Something Different on Behalf of Students	55
Liberation through Support	55
Know, See, Hear Students with High Expectations to create a Sense of Belonging	56
Theme 2: School leaders are a critical factor in creating equitable experiences for students.	56

Knowledge: Lead through an Equity-Lens	57
Skills	57
Dispositions of Equity-Driven Leaders	59
The Antithesis of Equity School Leaders	59
Theme 3: There are essential skills and knowledge central office leaders exemplify.	59
Knowledge of Equity-Driven Central Office Leaders	60
Skills of Equity-Driven Central Office Leader	62
Dispositions of an Equity-Driven Central Office Leader	65
The Antithesis of an Equity-Driven Central Office Leader	67
Theme 4: Districts can create the conditions to support, develop and recruit central office leaders.	67
Create a Collective Shared Vision Strategy	67
Organized for Equity	68
Provide Access and Opportunity to Engage	69
Provide Time, Talent, and Resources	70
Collective Effort	70
Designing Equity Leadership and Professional Learning	71
Theme 5: Challenges exist within and outside the school district, which can inhibit the development of central office leaders.	73
Internal and External Resistance	73
Inefficiency-- Lack of alignment, Lack of impact, Lack of Clarity, Comfort with the Status Quo	73
Research Question 2	74
Theme 6: There are common themes of how the role of equity-officers is defined and the conditions to thrive on supporting and leading the equity vision of the district.	75
Summary	85

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION	87
Introduction	87
Summary of Findings	87
Alignment of the Central Office Leadership and the 4 Dimensions of School Leadership	91
4 Dimensions of School Leadership: Equitable Schools	91
Central Office Leaders Advance Equity by Supporting Equitable School Communities	91
4 Dimensions of School Leadership: Learning and Teaching	94
Central Office Leaders Advance Equity by Supporting Learning and Teaching Data Collection	95
4 Dimensions of School Leadership: Resource Management	96
Central Office Leaders Advance Equity by Supporting Resource Management	97
4 Dimensions of School Leadership: Collective Leadership	99
Central Office Leaders Advance Equity by Supporting Collective Leadership	100
Limitations of the Study	101
Implications for Professional Practice	102
Recommendations for Future Research	103
Summary	104
Concluding Remarks	106
REFERENCES	108
APPENDIX A: SURVEY 1	128
APPENDIX B: SURVEY 2 (QUALIFYING SURVEY)	129
APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY	130
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	130

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: Summary of Participants	46
TABLE 2: The Relationship of the Research Questions, Themes, and Sub-Themes	81

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Coding Themes to 4 Dimension: Equitable Schools and Community	94
FIGURE 2: Coding Themes to 4 Dimension: Learning and Teaching Environment	96
FIGURE 3: Coding Themes to 4 Dimension: Resource Management	98
FIGURE 4: Coding Themes to 4 Dimension: Collective Leadership	101

CHAPTER 1

Our schools face significant challenges in ensuring that all students have access to an equitable learning environment. In addition, districts face challenges to ensure that every school can and should be organized and designed to support all students, of all identities and experiences to achieve self-actualization, maximize their potential, and participate fully in a democratic society (Cheatham et. al, 2020). In the 2015-2016 school year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 65 percent of the nation's students were more likely to be in high-poverty districts ("What is the Difference?", 2020). There are significant data which supports changes needed in our school systems to meet these goals and yet this has not been a compelling case for addressing equity learning with a particular focus on racial equity (Cheatham et. al, 2020, p.1). Recent racial upheaval and the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened awareness of the need for long-standing improvements in our schools, and which remain, disproportionately for our black and brown pupils. Educational disparities present or have existed in our classrooms are not just "gaps" that educators must fill; recent research suggest they are indicators of systemic racism and oppression at work (Cheatham et. al, 2020, p.1).

Previously, the research on the school factors which have the most influence on student achievement includes first, the teacher and second, the principal (Leithwood et al., 2004). Grissom concluded after synthesizing twenty years of leadership studies that the principal may impact students more than previously stated (Grissom et. al, 2021). Rimmer states that the challenge for principals is to ensure that every student has access to a high-quality educational experience (Rimmer, 2016). To meet this challenge, school leadership must prioritize both equity and excellence (Rimmer, 2016). Principals must be

instructional leaders who prioritize equity (Rimmer, 2016). Districts seek antidotes to the persistent disparities in academic performance between white students and students of color on standardized examinations, despite decades of efforts to narrow both opportunity and achievement inequalities (Cheatham et. al, 2020). The education system is undergoing a stage of innovation and evolution. Therefore, one critical area of the effort involves positing and instigating innovative research and methods to influence educational equity (“What is the Difference?”, 2020).

Most public schools in the United States function within a larger district structure that develops and supports the operations of principals in schools. District offices can be large organizations made up of hundreds of employees supporting dozens of schools and tens of thousands of students. It is the primary responsibility of the combined leadership personnel at the district office level to develop and support school leaders to build better and foster learning communities and maximize student achievement. Regardless of district office leaders' primary roles and responsibilities, be they organizational, financial, managerial, or otherwise, all work together for the ultimate result of excellence and successful student learning in all schools.

In order to address student learning and experience gaps, recent research suggests that it is necessary to support culturally responsive teachers and leaders who, as previously stated, can evaluate their practice through a critical lens and who can identify inequities within school districts in order to more directly address the barriers to improvement and their root causes (Cheatham et. al, 2020). A systemic equity blueprint that pervades every area of the education system's culture requires that district leaders in every position take purposeful risks to chart new and unanticipated courses, collaborate

productively, and resist the temptation to retreat into previous patterns (Cheatham et. al, 2020).

Background of the Problem

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to ascertain the perspective of equity officers regarding the skills central office leaders perceive they need to serve as equity-driven educational leaders. In North Carolina, as well as many other states across the country, all school principals are expected to demonstrate essential leadership skills in areas such as strategic planning, instruction, cultural development, human resource management, managerial planning, external development, micropolitical, and academic achievement leadership per the North Carolina Standards for School Executives (NCDPI, 2013). Research has shown that leaders do not acquire these skills in isolation and need ongoing support to develop these essential skills. Typically, for principals at the school-site level, the development of these skills is supported by the principal's immediate supervisor. In larger districts, this may be a dedicated senior manager responsible for a cadre of school leaders. In smaller, rural districts, the senior manager may support the development of the principals but may also have other roles, such as student support, federal funding, academics, and other district-wide responsibilities.

District leadership matters and has an impact on school effectiveness (Honig, 2009). Regardless of the structure of the school system, it is an essential responsibility of the school district leadership overall to ensure that principals receive the support and development needed to support the achievement of their students and their staff. In their meta-analytical study, Marzano and Waters (2009) found that central office leaders impact student achievement. Through an analysis of 27 related studies comprising 2,714

districts analyzed between 1970 and 2005, they concluded that when central office leaders are influential, academic achievement is affected when central office leaders are engaged in five initiatives: (a) ensuring collaborative goal setting, (b) establishing non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (c) creating broad alignment with and support of district goals, (d) monitoring achievement and instruction goals, and (e) allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction (Marzano and Waters 2009; Welch, 2020).

The North Carolina Department of Education recognizes that there are nested leadership systems within a school district (local boards of education, central office, school, and classroom). To ensure the organization's success, these systems must be aligned and supportive of one another and work as a cohesive unit in service of school leaders (NC Public Schools, 2013). A more recent addition being considered to the national standards for school leaders is a focus on equity and equity-based decision-making. There is already significant research on the need for equity-driven or culturally responsive school leadership at the site level (Khalifia, 2018). However, there is not as much research on how districts can create the conditions for principals to serve as equity-driven leaders, particularly capacity-building by a district leader other than a principal's direct supervisor. There is a growing body of research around how the principals' specific supervisors at their respective district offices can develop them as instructional leaders to gain the skills needed to meet the given standards for school executives (Honig et al., 2010). However, serving as equity-driven school leaders requires a comprehensive, integrated approach that is not present in many state principal leadership standards. For example, the NC School Executive Standards presently include eight leadership areas,

but many principals state that their districts do not necessarily give all eight standards equal focus; the primary focus of late has been on instructional leadership (Goldring et al., 2018). The topic of equity is moving into the forefront of reform efforts to improve learning for all students. Developing a shared definition of equity is one challenge that hinders the principals' acquisition of essential skills needed to create equitable school communities. While many explanations of equity exist, for this research, educational equity can be defined as the evolving from all students should receive an appropriate education regardless of the cost to include more than ensuring that school doors are open to all children; it now includes allocating resources and opportunities for learning that will prepare all students for success after high school, while acknowledging that some students will require additional support to succeed (Brighthouse & Swift, 2008; Center for Public Education, 2016).

Another national organization, the Center for School Leadership, states in their 4 Dimensions of School Leadership Framework (4D™) that equity-driven, student focused school leaders must possess the abilities and attitudes necessary to ensure that each student, particularly those on the margins of justice, is equipped for an infinite future. According to this framework, districts must collaborate with their principals to develop a shared vision for what it means to be an equity-driven leader. In addition, principals must cultivate reflective behaviors for themselves, their colleagues, and the broader community. Finally, principals must collaborate with district leaders and colleagues to identify professional development requirements for leaders and to propose areas of inquiry (Center for Educational Leadership, 2020). The 4D Framework advocates that the critical areas of an equity-driven principal are to a) create an equitable

school environment, b) learning and teaching environment, c) resource management, and d) collective leadership (Center for Educational Leadership, 2020).

Developing the principal's leadership skills, including equity-driven leadership, is not isolated to the principal's direct supervisor. Typically, public school principals undergo educational preparation programs through a master's degree or similar principal preparation program, leading to state licensure. After the candidate is licensed and working in a school leadership role, it is the responsibility of district office personnel to provide ongoing support and professional development. All central office leaders share this ongoing responsibility. An essential factor in school reform is maintaining that school leaders' knowledge, skills, and abilities to be responsive to the needs of their stakeholders is kept current. School district leaders must develop and strategically maintain a coherent and shared vision of principal leadership by identifying who will provide the principal support from the district office, in what areas, and how (Sykes et. al, 2006). Central office effectiveness is based on the establishment of assistance relationships with principals (Honig, 2008). The central office should develop "systemic solutions that ensure instructional leadership is the primary job of principals" (Center for Educational Leadership, 2016).

One of the goals of the overall central office is to provide effective, integrated support and services that enhance principals' ability to lead their schools successfully. (Center for Educational Leadership, 2016). This goal applies to central office leaders beyond just those that supervise the principals. In addition, central office services should be designed to anticipate and anticipate each school's needs. Relationships between the central office and principals provide value to the principal's and school's work. The

central office has a culture of continuous improvement and is capable of adapting to the changing demands of schools through learning, adapting, and responding. A well-coordinated and defined collection of operating systems results in efficiency (Center for Educational Leadership, 2016). The responsibility of the central office leaders who directly supervise school principals involves developing leaders that meet standards for school executives. They are also influential in ongoing professional development. However, in large districts, many additional central office leaders are also responsible for supporting school leaders based on their respective areas of responsibility and expertise.

The researcher chose to interview equity officers because, in most districts, the equity officer is the key senior leader who leads and supports the equity vision of the district. This person typically leads the district's strategy and may know which central office leaders need support to actualize this vision. This qualitative case study sought to understand the perceptions of equity officers on the development of equity-driven central officer leaders, to ascertain the perception of equity officers regarding the knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and their perception of the professional development central office leaders have received to support their ability to serve specifically as equity-driven central office leaders, regardless of their role or job title. In addition, the equity officers share their perceptions on the knowledge equity officers need to prepare for this role, the necessary support, and the barriers that inhibit them from serving as equity officers. The researcher sought to investigate how these equity officers define equity, how they define equity-driven leadership for senior managers in non-supervisory roles for principals, their perception of the skills needed to actualize this definition of equity-driven leadership, and its ultimate impact.

Research suggests that students need school leaders who create equitable and inclusive learning environments and focus on creating equitable outcomes for all students, particularly those furthest from educational justice (Warren, 2014). To make these equitable learning environments, school district leaders need to identify the practices principals should exhibit to create equitable school environments. Consequently, districts need to create the conditions for equity-driven leaders to support those who lead equitable school environments (Welch, 2020).

Large school districts, mainly metropolitan districts, have undertaken bold modifications of their central offices in order to aid in the improvement of teaching and learning in all schools (Honig, 2012). These reforms have created central offices have shifted their focus away from periodic professional development for principals and toward continual, intensive, job-embedded support for school principals to assist them in improving classroom instruction—roles frequently referred to as “instructional leadership” for principals (Honig, 2012). Central office leaders now need to serve in their roles as teachers as well (Honig, 2012). Honig further argues that rather than delegating such principal support to coaches or mentors inside other central office units, executive-level staff—those directly reporting to superintendents, deputy superintendents, or the equivalent—work intensely with principals to develop their instructional leadership. (Honig 2012). In her research, Honig noted that in some larger urban school districts, from curriculum and instruction to facilities and maintenance, all central office departments have been shifting their focus away from business and compliance and toward supporting district-wide teaching and learning improvement (Honig 2012). Researchers have used [to] discover behaviors linked with increasing professional

practice in authentic work situations using concepts from sociocultural and cognitive learning theories (Honig 2012). Honig noted that a distinct set of methods that central office leaders might employ to teach principals' instructional leadership (Honig, 2012).

Problem Statement

Despite the focus on learning that has pervaded educational reform efforts and the literature on student learning since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the opportunity gap between some groups of students has remained unchanged. Darling-Hammond notes that while all groups' high school graduation rates have increased steadily, significant gaps in high school graduation persist between non-Asian students of color and White students (Darling -Hammond, 2018). In addition, Darling-Hammond further notes that while all groups' high school graduation rates have increased significantly, major discrepancies in high school graduation persist between non-Asian students of color and White students (Darling-Hammond, 2018). Federal policies attempt to mandate and script equitable practices. However, Darling-Hammond further notes that despite this, during the No Child Left Behind era (2002–2015), several states focused only on testing without investing in the resources necessary to attain greater standards (Darling-Hammond, 2018). Darling-Hammond also states that the future of our society will increasingly be determined by our ability and willingness to teach all children effectively (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Leaders must be prepared to address the challenges and changes of our growing student demographics and the current research on the social-emotional learning needs of all students (Theoharris, 2007). Williams notes that the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) sent an urgent plea for district and school leaders to develop the skills necessary

to improve results for historically underrepresented youth (Williams, 2018). Williams also states that developing leaders with the courage necessary to intervene and reverse inequitable outcomes for underserved children and youth is critical work (Williams, 2018). A particular opportunity gap has persisted between students of color, students from low socioeconomic standing, students from different cultural backgrounds, and other groups of students such as White, Asian, or high SES (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Consequently, a more recent reform effort focuses on addressing the critical topic of equity issues in education and its role in effective school administration, which begins with school and district leaders and leadership preparation and development. Khalifa states that leadership preparation programs should prioritize CRSL [Culturally Responsive School Leadership] as much as, if not more than, other forms of leadership, particularly in light of the persistently low academic achievement and exclusionary schooling practices that frequently confront students of color (Khalifa, 2016). In addition, Rimmer states that to ensure excellence, equity, and a high-quality learning experience for every child in every classroom, every day, and to close these gaps, the principal and other school leaders must model equity-centered instructional leadership in collaboration with families (2016). Rimmer further states that equity-centered leadership is critical because, through a sharp equity lens — i.e., the process of diagnosing and assessing equity within a school's culture, policies, programs, practices, and processes — leaders model and set direction; they shape an environment in which equity and excellence are the standards for everything; they develop people personally and professionally; and they ensure that the organization "works" so that teachers and school-site staff can engage in efficient instruction (Rimmer, 2016; Leithwood, 2004). ESSA is

definitive in articulating the value of leadership to establish, maintain, and promote equitable school systems (Welch, 2020). However, district leadership has a significant role in creating the conditions for principals to serve as equity-driven leaders.

Whereas prior research has supported the development of the teachers, teacher leaders, school leaders, and principal supervisors, this study solicited equity officers' perceptions of the knowledge skills and dispositions to develop equity-driven central office leaders. This study investigated the perceptions of equity officers on the professional learning experiences, through the lens of equity officers, on the impact, design, and need to inform their development and the ability to do their job concerning equity and leading using equity-based decision making.

Purpose and Research Questions

This researcher seeks to expand the study of central office senior managers by first focusing on a specific group of central office leaders to understand their perception of any particular set of skills needed to serve as equity-driven leaders. The phenomenological study focused on the following two research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of equity officers on the role of equity-driven central office leaders?

- a. How do their perceptions define their understanding of equity-driven central office leadership?
- b. What informs their perceptions of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of central officer leaders?
- c. How does this inform their perceptions of professional learning?

Research Question 2: What are the lived experiences of equity officers?

- a. What is the perception of district equity officers on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for the job position?
- b. How does this inform their perceptions of professional learning?

Expectations regarding leadership practices have changed and evolved, as have the expectations for school leaders and thus, for central office senior managers, to lead and support the creation of equitable outcomes for all students and the need for school districts to ensure that district leaders are equipped with the support for principals to be equity-driven school leaders. The study examined the facets that the participants deemed consequential in their profession as leaders. This study used a phenomenological research method to define clarity based on the perceptions of the practices and professional learning experiences that informed central office senior-level leadership positions' leadership development. This study's findings may contribute to the knowledge base about the professional learning experiences of central office leaders that they needed to be equity-driven central office leaders. By interviewing equity officers from large urban areas, the researcher learned of the practices to support specifically how central office staff executes their roles as equity-centered leaders and their perceived readiness and effectiveness.

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to ascertain the perception of district equity officers regarding the skills central office leaders perceive they need to serve as equity-driven school leaders. Cheatham notes, that in school districts, equity work is emerging and frequently defined narrowly as the work of a “equity office” or “equity officer,” or as focused primarily on professional learning and bias-training (Cheatham et al, 2020). The researcher interviewed equity officers because they have a

unique role in leading the district's equity agenda and may know the development skills needed to support the development of central office leaders. The equity officers shared their perspectives regarding their abilities and the skills of other central office leaders to serve as equity-driven leaders. School districts could benefit from having a clear understanding of leadership strategies and structures to develop equity leadership at the central office level. And, amid day-to-day pressures, the development of leadership skills may help district and school leaders do more with less, streamline and focus their efforts, and achieve practical goals and targets that support student achievement, as noted in Marzano and Waters's (2009) research. The researcher hopes to contribute to the knowledge base through these interviews regarding the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to support an articulated talent management framework for developing equity-driven leaders through large school districts.

Definitions and Key Terms

Anti-racism. Anti-racism is the act of opposing racism by advocating for changes in political, economic, and social life. According to Ibram X. Kendi, one can be anti-racist only if they support anti-racist policies and express anti-racist ideas; there is no such thing as a "neutral" position. If educators, for example, do not work to promote anti-racist policies and practices, they are promoting racist policies and practices. Thus, from an anti-racist perspective, the question is not "Did racism occur?" but "How is racism occurring?" because the underlying assumption is that racism is always present (Cheatham et. al, 2020; Kendi, 2019)

Culturally Responsive Leadership. Culturally responsive leaders are a dynamic, fluid collection of [anti-oppressive] behaviors that continuously (re)develop both the

individual and the organization in response to a steady stream of data from the school and community (Khalifa, 2018).

Educational Equity. Educational equity is a state in which dimensions of privilege and oppression (e.g., race, ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, and religion) are not significantly predictive of or correlated with educational outcomes broadly defined, and in which all learners have equal access to high-quality learning experiences (Poekert, 2020).

Equitable Leadership. Equitable leadership focuses on marginalized communities, discusses processes, and is structured around gaps. Equitable leadership is more concerned with the outcomes, disparities, and equity of those (Rigby et al., 2019).

Equity-Driven Instructional Leadership. Systematic and intentional efforts that seek to disrupt traditional inequitable classroom practices (Simon et. al, 2022).

Equity Lens. Employing an equity lens means taking on an intentional disposition to see the invisible structures, policies, and behaviors that sustain unequal outcomes and interrupt the ways of working that serve, implicitly, to perpetuate gaps in opportunity for vulnerable communities. The development of a racial equity strategy requires that leaders employ a racial equity lens (Cheatham et. Al, 2020).

Leadership. Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate and create support systems for professional learning. Poekert states that leadership is defined as the exercise of influence and can be undertaken by anyone, whether formally or informally (Poekert, 2020).

Learning Designs. Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes.

Learning Communities. Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.

Power. “The dictionary describes power as 1) the ‘ability to do something or act in a particular way’ or 2) ‘the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events.’ School districts generally concentrated the power to act in the hands of a few and the power to influence in the hands with the most privilege. It is also important to note that power can be wielded in ways that are hard to see, ‘activated out of public view, by parties or interests which, while influencing community values and manipulating political processes, keep more fundamental issues and resource among students, staff, and families is critical for districts commuted to leading for racial equity.’ (Cheatham et. al, 2020, p. 4).

Racial Equity. Racial equity is the condition that would be achieved if one's racial identity no longer predicted how one fares in a statistical sense. Addressing racial inequities requires moving beyond acknowledging gaps or disparities between racial groups and creating a deliberate racial equity strategy to combat racism in all of its forms (Cheatham et. al, 2020; Racial Equity Tools Glossary; Singleton, 2015).

Reciprocal Accountability. “For every unit of performance required of teachers, administrators have an equal responsibility to provide teachers with a unit of capacity . . .

no one is expected to demonstrate knowledge and skill that they haven't had the opportunities to learn" (Elmore, 2002, p. 25).

Social Justice Leadership. Social justice leadership enables principals to prioritize [issues of] race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States in their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision (Theoharis, 2016).

Talent Management System. Talent Management is a set of integrated organizational human resource processes designed to attract, develop, motivate, engage and retain a productive workforce.

Assumptions

The principle assumption related to this study was that the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews would articulate that central office leaders can develop and need to develop skills to support the vision of equity in school districts. This study assumes that equity officers have an awareness of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of central office leaders to lead with an equity lens.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study investigates equity officers' perceptions of the professional learning needed to equip central office leaders to serve as equity-driven leaders. However,

- It does not gather principals' perspectives regarding the impact of central office leaders to support them as equity-driven principals.
- It will not explore in greater detail the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for teachers, teachers' leaders, or to serve as equity-driven teachers and school leaders.

- It does not assume that equity-driven central office leaders are central to increasing student achievement.

In addition, five of the six participants work in large, metropolitan school districts in North Carolina. Their perceptions and recommendations for improvement may be less transferable to other types of schools. This research is a phenomenological study of the perceptions of equity officers regarding how they define equity and the professional learning that equipped central officer leaders and equity officers to serve as equity-driven leaders. This study does not explore in depth the various factors which support student achievement.

Plan for the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One makes a case for the need for equity-driven central office leaders. It also presents the purpose of this study and explains how this study aims to contribute to the limited literature on equity-centered central office development. In addition, Chapter One identifies the significance of the study, delimitations, limitations, assumptions and specifies relevant terms. Chapter Two reviews studies related to effective leadership development design and equity-driven central office development characteristics. Chapter Three describes the methodology of this study, including a description of the proposed qualitative phenomenological approach, the data sources, and the analysis of the process. Chapter Four presents the research findings, including highlighting the essential themes connected to each research question. Chapter Five summarizes the study's important findings and shares the findings that will further contribute to the literature on equity-centered central office development and implications for school districts and potential recommendations for future research.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to ascertain the skills that select central office leaders perceive they need to serve as equity-driven educational leaders, how well-equipped they perceive their training to develop these skills, and the perceived impact of this knowledge on other school leaders. This chapter provided an introduction of the study by examining the statement of the problem, the need for the study, defining the research questions, and giving an overview of the methods and procedures to be used for the research study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature relevant to this study. The review of related literature will extend the introduction and background information provided in the opening chapter.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

“Equity isn’t a rubric row. It is the rubric” (Jordan-Thomas, 2021). School districts typically have a shared leadership vision to ensure that principals understand the day-to-day practices that guide their daily routines. School systems often define the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions school leaders need to create equitable outcomes for all students. To build the capacity of principals as equity-driven leaders, districts should also determine the necessary support to principals to actualize these skills. To accomplish this, central office leaders can support principals in becoming the educators they need to be for their students. Students need school leaders who create equitable and inclusive learning environments and focus on creating equitable outcomes for all students, particularly those furthest from educational justice. School leaders need conditions to allow them to serve as the type of leader students need. Central office leaders should exemplify specific critical roles for school reform (Rorrer et. al, 2008). School systems are recognizing methods to acquire and strengthen a critical lens for identifying the inequities within their school systems to tackle barriers to advancement and root causes more directly (Cheatham et. al, 2020). To achieve this vision, districts should examine and ensure that all its organizational components, culture, systems, structures, resources, and stakeholders— are being used to enact an equity-based theory of change and a strategy that is consistent with a robust vision of excellent teaching that is culturally responsive. It is insufficient to develop a coherent strategy that has a positive effect on the instructional quality for all students. The district's strategy must prioritize equity. (Cheatham et. al, 2020). A key lever to support this strategy is the central office.

Larger school districts' reform efforts have focused on helping central officers increase their understanding of teaching and learning (Honig, 2012). These efforts have required systems to deepen their professional learning from sporadic and episodic experiences to provide ongoing, intensive, job-integrated support to school principals as a high priority (Honig, 2012). Expectations regarding leadership practices have changed and evolved as the expectations for school leaders and, thus, central office senior managers, to lead and support the creation of equitable outcomes for all students and the need for school districts to ensure that district leaders are equipped with the support for principals to be equity-driven school leaders. This literature review explores the definition of equity, the essential ideas to prepare an equity-driven central office leader to support principals. There are many facets to the work of central office school leaders. Central office leaders must have the skills to support principals, but they all must also build capacity to support principals through the teams they support. The purpose of this research study is to determine the perceptions of central office senior managers who do not supervise principals, the definition of equity-driven leadership, and their perception of the professional learning they have received to build their capacity to serve as equity-driven senior district leaders. There are many vital concepts to unpack to understand equity-driven district leadership. This chapter focuses on the literature review on the following key concepts:

- Defining equity school and central office leadership
- Defining the role of central office leaders
- An understanding of organizational learning design.

What is Educational Equity?

“The impact of educational inequity is felt most clearly at the classroom level and ripples its way throughout school districts.” (“What is the difference?”)

Educational equity is a state in which dimensions of privilege and oppression (e.g., race, ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, and religion) are not significantly predictive of or correlated with educational outcomes broadly defined, and in which all learners have equal access to high-quality learning experiences. (Poekert, 2020). Equity and equality are often confused (Cheatham et. al, 2020). Equality means that each student or school receives the same resources regardless of context (Cheatham et. al, 2020). Equity in practice in schools is defined as every student or school receiving what they need to meet their full potential (Cheatham et. al, 2020). Efforts in both equity and equality are those that strive to create more just and fair options for students. However, equality as the critical strategy only works when all students begin at the same starting point (Cheatham et. al, 2020). Schools create equitable outcomes by allocating resources and practical experiences to prepare all students for success (Center for Public Education, 2016).

Role of Central Office Leaders

The research on how central office leaders impact, influence, and advance equity in school systems is emerging. Central office leaders can act as a mediator by interpreting state and federal policy through an equity lens and promoting an equity agenda at the local level. Fundamentally, equity framing is a drive (Welch, 2020). The way central offices define and frame equity and equity-related issues affects how principals and educators conceptualize their work/goals and make decisions/take action to address them. They participate in broader public dialogue or "marketing," which can assist school leaders in their interactions with community members (e.g. buffering against

backlash/pressure from parents regarding detracking) (Welch, 2020; Ladd, 2021). They use narratives to connect the intent and purpose of using instructional or curricular choices to broader values (Welch, 2020). Central office leaders can play a mediating role by interpreting state and federal policy through an equity lens and promoting an equity agenda at the local level (Welch, 2020). Fundamental to this is the equity framing (Ladd, 2021). The way central offices define and frame equity and equity-related problems affects how principals and educators view their work and goals and make decisions and take action to address them (Welch 2020; Ladd 2021). Central office leaders participate in broader public discourses (and "marketing"), which can aid school leaders in their interactions with community members (i.e. buffering against backlash and pressure from parents regarding detracking) (Ladd, 2021). They construct narratives that connect instructional or curricular choices to broader values (Ladd, 2021). They establish expectations regarding the use of data as a decision-making tool, the types of data collected and tracked, and whether and how data is disaggregated (Welch, 2020). These actions refocus school leaders' attention (for example, away from blaming students and toward addressing systemic issues) and suggest specific initiatives or strategy solutions (Ladd, 2021).

While not extensive, several frameworks address the roles of the central office in supporting principal development, including the Ontario Leadership Framework and the Center for Educational Leadership Principal Support Framework. This literature review explores elements of both of these frameworks to support equity-driven central office leaders: personal development (Ontario Leadership Framework). School districts, as stated in the preamble of the Principal Support Framework, should:

"develop a vision of what it means to support principals, assess and determine strengths and next steps in their school system's approach to supporting principals as instructional leaders, surface technical assistance needs, and highlight areas for inquiry and next-stage policy development" (Center for Educational Leadership, 2020).

A "strategic partnership between the central office and principals... [to ensure] that the central office delivers effective, integrated support and services that increase the ability of principals to successfully lead their schools" is needed (Center for Educational Leadership, 2020). Action Area 3 of the Principal Support Framework encourages districts to aspire to these vision statements, and the literature will explore how senior district managers, who do not directly support principals, equip principals through these vision statements, which fall under the big concept of "effective, integrated support and services," which states that:

- Schools receive differentiated and integrated services rooted in an understanding of the needs of each school.
- Central office services are designed to anticipate and proactively meet the needs of each school.
- Central office relationships with principals add value to the work of the principal and school.
- The central office has a culture of continuous improvement and can learn, adapt and respond to the changing needs of schools.
- There is an efficiency created by a well-coordinated and defined set of operational systems (Center for Educational Leadership, 2016).

Equity-Driven Central Office Leaders

Research is limited in the skill sets needed to develop district leaders and leaders who can build the capacity in others. However, there exists significant research on the need for leadership development. Spillane states that three critical components or defining elements of leadership activity are leaders, followers, and situation. And, from our distributed vantage point, practice is a collaborative effort between all three (Spillane et al., 2001).

Through the research and support of leadership and research organizations such as The Wallace Foundation, The Bush Institute, and other noted internationally recognized organizations across the county, etc., many more districts have developed principal pipeline programs. Some districts, such as Long Beach Unified School District, have an intentional leadership continuum that supports the development of teacher leaders to central office leaders (Zavadsky, 2016). Districts recognize that they need to continue strengthening the selection process and the professional learning for leaders, such as teacher leaders, assistant principals, and principals. Fenwick further encourages districts to be intentional about developing a more diverse principal talent pool by diversifying its teaching pool (Fenwick, 2001).

Effective district leaders are working to develop the next generation of school leaders who will impact student outcomes. School change can occur with outstanding leadership. Spillane states that when a potential leader possesses certain forms of capital (human, cultural, social, and economic...) and his or her followers value these forms of capital, the followers confer legitimacy on the leader (Spillane et al. 2001). It is recommended that district leaders must possess these skill sets and can develop this

"collective capacity" in others. However, few districts have considered the components needed to support growing all central office leaders. The University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership has created a Principal Support Framework for central office leaders as a self-assessment and guide to determine critical actions to shift district practices. As shared previously, The Center for Educational Leadership states that the Principal Support Framework (PSF) represents the best thinking among educators across the country about the kind of support that is required to advance principal leadership focused on improving teaching and learning at scale. Leaders of school systems can use this framework and its accompanying self-assessment tool to address critical questions in three action areas:

1. To what degree does the school system have a shared vision of principals as instructional leaders?
2. What – if any – systems of support for developing principals as instructional leaders are in place?
3. To what extent does the school system make it possible for principals to be instructional leaders? (Center for Educational Leadership, 2020)

Each action area highlights several vital ideas that make up the vision for that area, with statements that provide possible evidence that would show a school system is fulfilling those ideas (Center for Educational Leadership, 2020). Each action area highlights several critical ideas that comprise the vision for that area, along with possible evidence that a school system is implementing those ideas. The entire framework is grounded on the findings of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Leading for Effective Teaching

project and other critical research, including Meredith Honig's and colleagues' work at the University of Washington on central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement (Center for Educational Leadership, 2020).

Theoharis notes that scholarly works on social justice leadership identifies schools that have achieved extraordinary success not only with white, middle-class, and affluent students, but also with students of diverse racial, socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds (Theoharis, 2007 as cited in Capper & Young, in press; Maynes & Sarbit, 2000; Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000; Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002; Scheurich, 1998; Touchton & Acker-Hocevar, 2001).

Equity-Driven School Leadership

School districts are responsible for ensuring that students have school leaders who can create a school experience to succeed in their school environments. As the principal's role has shifted from building managers to instructional leaders, the expectations for principal support have also shifted. Principals' support has shifted from ensuring that principals successfully manage the operational components and understand how to support their students and staff in their practice problems and other essential areas.

School leadership has a direct influence on students, and the factors of an equitable learning environment include helping students have a sense of belonging, responsiveness to traditionally marginalized groups, an intentional focus on equity-focused professional learning, and a focus on inclusivity (Ross & Berger, 2009; Welch, 2020). The Great Schools Glossary of Education reform defines equity as a "principle of fairness" (Equity Definition, 2016). Great Schools editors further provide evidence for the need for education reform because certain students or groups of students may attend

school, graduate, or enroll in postsecondary education at a lower rate, or may perform poorly on standardized tests for a variety of reasons, including inherent biases or flaws in test design (Equity Definition, 2016). The editors make a case for the need to focus on issues that affect schools across the country.

Khalifa defines culturally responsive school leaders as a dynamic, fluid collection of [anti-oppressive] behaviors that continuously (re)develop both the individual and the organization in response to a steady stream of data from the school and community (Khalifa, 2018). Johnson urges culturally responsive leaders to focus on leaders, on inclusivity, on community input, and on strengthening cultural identity through culturally responsive curriculum, pedagogy, and equitable assessment practices that promote collaboration across race and ethnicity (Johnson, 2014). Johnson further describes these leaders as:

- Public Intellectuals (e.g., Increase the proportion of African-American administrators and teachers, advocate for racial equity)
- Boundaries Spanners (e.g., build partnerships between the school and community)
- Advocacy Leaders (e.g., work is rooted in culture and politics to best advocate for culturally relevant curriculum and community-based schools) (Johnson, 2014 p. 158-160).

Juettner states that creating culturally responsive schools requires leaders who foster community collaboration, articulate a clear vision for change, and foster teacher and community member trust and respect (Juettner, 2003). Fraise states that culturally relevant leaders should focus on recognizing and valuing the distinct cultures that

comprise the school (Fraise et al., 2015). What are the proper roles and responsibilities of a school and its educators? Are schools necessary to maintain or improve society in its current state? (Equity Definition, 2016). Should a teacher work actively to change the status quo or should he or she support it? (Equity Definition, 2016). In this case, some might argue that the primary goal of a school should be to prepare students to enter the labor force and contribute to the existing society (Equity Definition, 2016). By contrast, some argue that schools should work to address and resolve social issues, as well as contribute to the identification and promotion of solutions (Equity Definition, 2016).

The research on how central office leaders should support principals to support equitable practices, such as those listed in the 4 Dimensions of School Leadership (4D™) is emerging. In addition to literature specifically addressing leadership, the 4D builds on the research knowledge linked to the science of learning and development and the function of collective teacher efficacy in fostering student learning (Rigby et. al, 2019).

Equity is not a separate dimension or category. It is integrated throughout the framework, just as equity is not a separate part of the work of the principal or the school. It is not an addition to the work of a leader or teacher, and it is not a separate component of school planning (Starr, 2019). Equity should be integrated and woven throughout the fabric of the school. An equitable school community encourages leaders to define their vision and mission and develop the culture and climate. The second dimension, learning and teaching environment, encourages principals to have a vision for learning, an understanding of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, and the improvement of teaching practice. The third dimension, resource management, maintains that principals must identify their priorities, align their resources, and develop talent. Dimension four,

collective leadership, supports the concept that principals must work with others through personal development and building a collaborative culture. If these are the fundamental concepts of an equity-driven leader, schools and districts must engage in the collaborative work... to bring to light the professional development needs of leaders and to highlight areas for investigation (Center for Educational Leadership, 2020).

Developing Equity-Driven Principals

Principals set the conditions for learning within a school, which is vital for closing the opportunity gap (Rimmer, 2016). Great teachers work for great principals. In addition to improving the capacity of sitting principals, research also supports building the capacity of assistant principals. With the increase in federal and state accountability regulations, more schools are challenged to meet their accountability goals. Therefore, some districts, such as Hillsborough Public Schools, have created partnerships with local universities to develop turnaround leaders (Waite, 2019). Large school districts, such as Hillsborough and Palm Beach County Public schools, recognize the high priority need in determining how metropolitan school districts are building high-quality turnaround principals. The principalship continues to evolve, and school districts must continue to learn and adapt. Leadership development is a shared effort, and superintendents must harness the power of stakeholders and other leaders.

While the principal is responsible for all areas, they do not have to lead and perform all duties and actions that support an effective school. Principals lead strategically and determine when and how to distribute leadership. They make numerous decisions a day that impact the experiences, the quality of education students receive, and the ability of their staff to teach and lead. One researcher notes that during a school year,

a principal can have an impact on the lives of between a few hundred and a few thousand students (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011). School districts are essential in creating the conditions for principals to succeed, beginning with how principals are prepared for the principalship's role and equipped to lead the multiple facets of school leadership.

Research supports that school districts should do more to leverage their resources to improve the quality of principal training, ensuring that graduates are more prepared to meet their needs (Mitgang & Gill, 2012).

There has been a shift in the expectations for principals from building managers to instructional leaders. With recent changes in school demographics and increased knowledge to ensure that schools have a greater focus on equitable outcomes, the principal role has become even more nuanced and focused. Bogotch notes that social justice cannot be detached from the way educational concepts and practices are (re)defined and practiced by educators in schools (Bogotch, 2002).

According to Rost (1993) and Kotter (1998), leadership is a process of influence that occurs within the context of relationships between leaders and their collaborators that involves establishing direction (shared vision), aligning resources, and generating motivation, and providing inspiration. School leaders are the second most crucial factor in students' academic success (Bartoletti & Connelly, 2013). Leithwood & Azah further notes that conventional wisdom and substantial empirical evidence indicate that school leaders, particularly those in principal and vice-principal positions, account for a significant portion of the variation in student achievement across schools (Leithwood & Azah, 2014). Principals play an indispensable role in creating a learning environment that supports all students' needs, particularly those who are furthest from educational justice.

Principals are responsible for all areas of a school, with the most important responsibility of serving as instructional leadership. The Wallace Foundation conducted extensive research and identified five critical elements of school leadership:

- Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards.
- Creating a climate hospitable to education so that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.
- Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision.
- Improving instruction enables teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost.
- Managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement (Wallace Foundation, 2011).

The Wallace Foundation further explains that each of these five tasks needs to interact with the other four for any part to succeed. It's hard to carry out a vision of student success. For example, if the school climate is characterized by student disengagement, teachers don't know what instructional methods work best for their students or clumsily analyze test data. However, leadership is at work when all five tasks are well carried out (Wallace Foundation, 2011).

Advancing Equity at the System-Level

Developing Shared Language

School systems dedicated to addressing inequities often work to develop a shared language to build critical knowledge (Cheatham et. al 2020). A shared common language may assist systems in reducing and eventually eliminating the use of "code words" such as "urban" or "diverse," which are laden with racial stereotypes and thus inhibit and enable leaders to avoid discussing race unequivocally (Cheatham et. al 2020).

Decision-Making and Resources

Leadership decisions regarding resources and district policies can either assist or inhibit the efforts to construct more equitable learning opportunities for every student (Diem & Welton, 2020). Therefore, central office leaders need to have clarity regarding their beliefs and be intentional and purposeful regarding their actions and decisions (Diem & Welton, 2020). Welton and her team created a framework to guide system leaders in reframing and supporting their perspectives on racial justice.

Advancing Equity through Coherence

It is not enough to develop a coherent strategy that positively influences the quality of instruction for all students. The district strategy must be “coherent and equity-focused” (Cheatham et. al, 2020, p. 1). Research indicates a need for districts to change or develop district alignment and the execution of developmental learning and develop a theory of action for central office development. Cheatham (2020) further states that to attain high performance on a more holistic set of quantitative and qualitative measures...a district must ensure that all of its organizational elements—its culture, systems, structures, resources, and stakeholders—are

being utilized to enact a theory of change that is grounded in racial equity and a strategy aligned to a robust vision of excellent teaching that is culturally responsive (Cheatham et. al, 2020, p. 5)

Alignment consists of the intentional alignment between department leadership plans such as academics/learning and teaching, school performance/leadership, and human resources to define key roles and responsibilities for development to focus on job effectiveness. For example, the research may help leadership development offices determine how they can continue to build on district leaders' knowledge and develop strategies for improving leaders' practice by providing leaders with targeted, timely, and personalized professional development focused on qualities and skills. Honig advocates for districts to ensure that every aspect of the central office supports the improvement of schools (Honig, 2018).

Additionally, districts can execute a theory of action to collaboratively define and communicate competencies, skills, and beliefs for district and school leaders by creating alignment to facilitate, measure the impact of, and continuously improve professional development to support the school and central office leaders that advances the capabilities of school and district leadership. There is a need to provide clarity regarding how to increase the intentional alignment between central offices, both academic and operational, to define key roles and responsibilities for development to focus on job effectiveness and provide a clear understanding of what an effective school and district leadership look like in the education setting. Amid day-to-day pressures, effective leadership skills can help us do more with less, streamline and focus our efforts, and achieve our practical goals and targets. Chapter 4 will share the knowledge, skills, and

competencies select district leaders perceive they need to support the development of an equity-driven central office and the talent management framework needed for central office leaders.

A district's leadership development office might continue to build on leaders' knowledge and develop strategies for improving leaders' practice by providing leaders with targeted, timely, and personalized professional development focused on qualities and skills needed to lead the development of teachers and other staff in the school to impact student achievement positively. The editors of the Ontario Leadership Framework encourage system leaders to interrogate how leadership practices can assist system leaders in accomplishing more with less, streamlining and focusing our efforts, and achieving its practical goals in the face of daily pressures (Leithwood, 2012). School leaders play a critical role in fostering excellent teaching, excellent schools, and, ultimately, increased student achievement and well-being (Leithwood, 2012). System leaders are critical in establishing supportive system practices and procedures (Leithwood, 2012).

Central Office Leadership Design

Education is the new civil rights movement. As educators and as community members, we must ensure that our public schools are viable and that our leaders are equipped to create the conditions to support an inclusive environment. For school leaders, this occurs through the development of school leaders in principal preparation programs, through the induction and onboarding programs, through the ongoing professional development of leaders in not only receiving updates of the policies but also an

understanding of what these practices look like in action, feedback on areas of strength and concern, and feedback from all stakeholders, including parents and students.

District leaders often move from the classroom or principalship into critical roles. Many others who support the operations area matriculate into these positions through corporate experiences. Mainly operational district leaders often lack formal training and exposure to effective equitable and inclusive practices. Therefore, school districts should provide formal and ongoing training on the policies and procedures, which support the development of school and district leaders for school leaders to lead equitable and inclusive schools effectively and for district and school leaders to support these practices from their area of influence. In addition, ineffective methods which do not support the growth of the staff can lead to disengaged leaders who operate out of compliance instead of an articulated belief and deep understanding of their role in the district and their ability to grow and learn. Leadership practices are needed to develop and sustain such districts on those in director and superintendent positions. Personal leadership resources are precious for those in director and superintendent positions; strong districts add value to their students' achievement over and above school and classroom contributions (Leithwood, 2013). In addition, districts should consider reorganizing and re-culture each central office unit to support partnerships and teaching & learning improvement (Honig, 2010). Honig further believes that districts should develop learning-focused partnerships with school principals (Honig, 2010). In addition, there should be an intentional focus, and there is an excellent need for stewardship of the overall central office transformation process (Honig, 2010). District stewards need evidence throughout the central office to support the continual improvement of work practices (Honig, 2010).

Transformational Leadership

In 2010, Shields defined transformative leadership as follows: (a) developing a shared vision and building goal consensus; (b) holding high-performance expectations; (c) providing individualized support; (d) providing intellectual stimulation; (e) modeling valued behaviors, beliefs, and values; (f) strengthening school culture; (g) building structures to enable collaboration; (h) engaging parents and the wider community; (i) focusing on instructional development; (j) using contingent rewards; and (k) managing by exception. (a) Combination of both critique and promise; (b) attempts to affect both profound and equitable changes; (c) deconstruction and reconstruction of the knowledge frameworks that generate inequity; (d) acknowledgment of power and privilege; (e) emphasis on both individual achievement and the public good; (f) a focus on liberation, democracy, equity, and justice; and (g) evidence of moral courage and activism (Shields, 2010).

Theoharris and Ranieri (2011) analyzed four qualitative studies to identify how transformative school leaders address issues differently than other leaders, mainly how students with disabilities are served. They identified four leader orientations: the helpless orientation, the bully orientation, the misguided orientation, and the advocate (transformative) orientation. Boske (2011), based on her study of leadership for social justice course, developed the Catalytic Framework for Social Justice and Equity-Oriented School Leadership that includes a continuum of transformations: transformative learning, reflection on lived experiences, ways of knowing, ways of responding, and being a catalyst, which can involve bridge building, "interrupting hegemonic practices and inspiring others to engage in such work", and creating alliances to further social justice

work (Hewitt, Davis, & Lashley, 2014)" (Boske, 2011; Hewitt, Davis, & Lashley, 2014, p. 373).

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher reviewed the literature on the definition of equity, the role of school leadership, the part of the central office leaders as equity leaders, and the opportunities to develop central office leaders through a coherent model to impact equitable outcomes. Various studies and articles regarding the components of equity leadership were included. While the literature is growing, the literature supported the further study of the role definition, support, and development of an equity-driven central office leader. Furthermore, the literature articulated the growing need, the demand, of an equity officer in guiding and supporting the district's vision and strategy of equity. Through the review of relevant literature, the research conveyed the opportunity of a more aligned and intentional focus on the role of the district manager. The literature describes the challenges facing school systems in addressing the inequities present in our K-12 schools. While Grissom and his colleagues articulate the increased value of a principal who leads from an equity lens, the research also notes that for teachers and school leaders to eliminate these inequities, the study provides evidence and strategies for districts to craft an intentional approach to create the conditions for sustained support and development of central office leaders (Grissom et. al, 2020).

This study will add to the emerging research regarding the knowledge skills and abilities central officer leaders need to serve as equity leaders. In Chapter 3, the researcher will explain the methodology of this phenomenological study, including

aspects of the research design, the participant selection, the data collection process, and the analysis of participants' responses.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Method

Chapter 1 introduced the purpose and need of this research, while Chapter 2 summarized the scholarly research and theories used to interpret the findings. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology and design of this study to investigate the perception of the professional learning experiences of central office leaders to equip them to serve as equity leaders. This chapter describes the research methods and design and highlights the research questions.

In this study, the literature indicates a need for central office leaders to support school leaders. However, the research is limited in creating a comprehensive professional model with identified knowledge, skills, and abilities to prepare and develop equity-driven central office leaders who support schools. There is growing research supporting the need and methods of developing some central office roles; however, there is not less research and intentionality by school districts in developing other essential central office managers (Honig, 2012).

The purpose of this phenomenological research study is to investigate the perceptions of equity officers in the development of equity-driven central officer leaders and their development as equity officers. In addition, the study explores the intentionality in which competencies, skills, and beliefs should be explicitly taught or modeled for developing school leaders. This study identifies what scaffolds and equitable practices can be used to meet the needs of central office leaders to serve as equity-driven leaders. A qualitative methodology used best enables the researcher to understand a phenomenon and describe the meaning of a lived experience of equity-driven leaders (Shank, 2006).

Research Design

To determine the perceptions of preparation and development professional learning experiences for central office leaders, the researcher focused on amassing data through qualitative methodology techniques (Creswell, 1998). Qualitative research is a technique for examining and comprehending the meaning assigned by individuals or groups to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009). Glesne (2006) notes that qualitative researchers are interested in comprehending and interpreting how various participants in a social setting construct their worlds. Merriam further notes that qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and how they assign meaning to their experiences (Merriam, 2009).

A phenomenological research design is most pertinent for this study to ascertain the lived experiences of central office leaders from their frame of reference and to develop themes that envision a more intentional, deliberative, and impactful way to develop them. The phenomenological study includes six steps as noted by Bernard et al. (2010):

1. Identifying a thing, a phenomenon, whose essence you want to understand;
2. Identifying your biases and doing as much as you can to put them aside;
3. Collective narratives about the phenomenon from people who are experiencing it by asking them a good, open-ended question and then probing to let them run with it;
4. Using your intuition to identify the essentials of the phenomenon;

5. Laying out those essentials in writing with exemplary quotes from the narratives;
and
6. Repeating steps four and five until there is no more to learn about the lived experiences of the participants you are studying.

Qualitative researchers must not impose explanations prior to an in-depth understanding of the phenomena (Moran, 2000). Moustakas states that the phenomenological method provides resources that are logical, systematic, and coherent for analyzing and synthesizing information in order to arrive at essential descriptions of experience (Moustakas, 1994). The basis of phenomenology is to comprehend the phenomenal in their own terms—providing a description of human experience as experienced personally by the individual (Bentz et al., 1998). Therefore, the phenomenological approach is the best method to assess the experiences of central office leaders to understand their experiences in serving as equity-driven leaders. As stated previously, for many phenomenological researchers, this research method provides a process for evaluating challenging social elements entailing a variety of variables of noted significance to comprehend phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). This study will demonstrate the skills equity officers perceive that central office leaders have received, the need to be equity-driven leaders, and the meaning they derived from their development of equity-driven leaders.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to investigate the perceptions of equity officers in the development of equity-driven central office leaders and their

development as equity officers. The following research questions were investigated in this qualitative study:

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of equity officers on the role of equity-driven central office leaders?

- a. How do their perceptions define their understanding of equity-driven central office leadership?
- b. What informs their perceptions of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of central officer leaders?
- c. How does this inform their perceptions of professional learning?

Research Question 2: What are the lived experiences of equity officers?

- a. What is the perception of district equity officers on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for the job position?
- b. How does this inform their perceptions of professional learning?

Positionality Statement

I used a process of bracketing as described by Creswell (2013) to analyze the research data. Creswell (2013) shares that bracketing is a method where the researcher shares experiences with the research topic to bracket them self out of the research study. Through analysis of my lived experiences and purposefully looking at my thought process and any biases I may unintentionally be using, I plan to mitigate any effects of biases. I separated my interactions with leading at the central office level, my knowledge of equity-driven leadership, and how I was prepared and developed to lead. I hold perceptions about and have experiences of leading as an equity-driven central office

leader. I interact with central office leaders in my current role as a leader in a non-profit organization, particularly around the area of equity-driven leadership.

As a high school turnaround principal, I saw the disparities in resources for some schools and some students. I experienced an increased number of new teachers who aspired to support students with a significant opportunity gap. Through these challenges, I experienced success by believing the impossible was possible for all students. As a principal, I recognized that with the support of my team, I needed to ensure that my teachers were developed and supported to ensure that my students had the best learning experience that we could provide.

I also recognized that our school team could not change achievement and experience outcomes for our students without the support and direction from the central office team. As I moved from serving as a principal to a central office leader who coached new principals and designed professional learning for other central office leaders, I recognized the need for professional learning to support central office leaders in their functional skills, which includes their abilities to support principals and other departments in achieving equitable outcomes for all students. I appreciated the shift in one of the school districts where I worked to help us reflect and understand our biases, which may impact how we examined data and supported schools and other departments. Our district began to have meaningful conversations regarding equity, review our inequitable practices, and engage in reading professional literature and additional professional learning. Each central office leader and school leader took the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which gave me insight into how I engage with others and where I am on my equity journey. I received coaching, and I engaged in learning sessions

with others. I encountered our functional responsibilities and who we are and how we allow our authentic selves to “show up.”

As I moved from the central office to working with a non-profit organization that supports teacher leaders and school and district leaders, I now work closely with school and district leaders working hard to create equitable outcomes for students. I see examples of how district leaders clarify their equity stance by leading crucial conversations, examining the data from an equity lens, and ensuring clear sponsorship of the equity agenda throughout the district. It is important to note that I helped to design the 4 Dimensions of School Leadership and I am currently redesigning a Principal Support Framework. In addition, I designed an equity leadership assessment to determine the perceptions from school district stakeholders regarding how they defined equity-driven school leadership. This sparked my interest in learning specifically regarding how to define and develop central office leaders. My engagement through these processes may affect my interpretation of the data; however, through the process of bracketing any effects will be limited.

Recruitment and Participants

The researcher reviewed district websites and LinkedIn to identify potential participants and created a database of equity officers to email. Each selected participant received an email describing the study, a consent form, and a time for a conference call to explain the process. The researcher conducted an initial screening survey to determine if participants met the criteria and to clarify questions to decide if the participants wanted to participate in the survey. The screening consisted of the equity-officers sharing their district’s equity statement, confirming that they expect to remain in the district and

stating the number of staff supervised. She then conducted semi-structured virtual audio-only interviews using the interview protocol designed around these five key areas:

- definition of equity,
- definition of equity-centered school leadership
- definition of central-office school leadership and the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions, and capacity building to do the job,
- the knowledge skills and abilities of the equity-officer and any barriers, and
- challenges that prevent equity-officers from leading and supporting the equity vision.

The researcher sent emails to 56 participants from across the country (Appendix A). Eight individuals initially agreed to be interviewed, with six ultimately participating in the semi-structured interview process. It is unknown why the two participants did not attend the scheduled interview. The six participants who agreed to participate in the survey work in large, metropolitan districts. The researcher sought participants working in districts with a publicly declared focus on equity, such as the district's vision and mission statements, strategic plan, dedicated positions, and teams focusing on equity and other artifacts. The respondents did not have to work in a particular type of school district. The researcher sought to understand the perception of central office equity leadership from a varied audience. The participants in this study included five equity officers from four districts currently serving in North Carolina and one equity officer serving in Illinois. One participant stated that he wanted to use these questions with his district, and one participant commented that the questions were organized logically. All

participants wanted to receive the study results mainly to understand how to support equity-driven leaders in large, metropolitan districts. All of the participants offered to answer additional questions if needed.

Six participants agreed to an audio-recorded Zoom interview. Two of the six participants were from the same district. Two participants (33%) were male, and four were female (67%). The same district employed two participants. A summary of participants is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Participants

Participant #	Years as Equity Officer	Professional Background	Gender	Race
1	1-3	Education	M	W
2	1-3	Education	F	B
3	1-3	Business	F	B
4	1-3	Education	F	B
5	1-3	Education	F	B
6	4+	Education	M	B

The researcher emailed the participant the questions before the interview, allowing the participants to have more thoughtful and intentional responses. As the researcher interviewed the different participants, it was interesting to note the other years of experience and the types of experiences (education versus business background, principal background, etc.). While it was not the researcher's intent to analyze the data by years of experience or background, it evolved to be an attribute to explore as the researcher

analyzed the responses. Conducting virtual audio-only semi-structured interviews, six themes and several sub-themes emerged from this qualitative, phenomenological study.

Data Collection

The researcher collected qualitative data using semi-structured interviews to understand participant perceptions of the equity officers and their perception of how central officer leaders and equity officers currently developed as leaders who support school outcomes (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The researcher conducted an initial screening survey to determine if participants met the criteria, to clarify questions to decide if the participants wanted to participate in the survey (see Appendix A). The researcher emailed participants a copy of the consent form for them to review and sign. The researcher obtained either verbal or written agreement from the participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through video conferencing, Zoom, in the fall of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The online interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes based on

the participant. The interview protocol was designed around these five key areas:

- definition of equity,
- definition of equity-centered school leadership
- definition of central-office school leadership and the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions, and capacity building to do the job,
- the knowledge skills and abilities of the equity-officer and any barriers, and
- challenges that prevent equity-officers from leading and supporting the equity vision.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the data using general inductive coding to categorize and interpret the data. A series of iterative phases and a structured coding processes were used to analyze the responses to the 4 Dimensions of School Leadership (Holton, 2007; Center for Educational Leadership, 4 Dimensions). The researcher analyzed the participant's responses to determine the themes of how the central office leaders are developed as equity-driven leaders.

To analyze the data, I used an in vivo coding process to generate codes from the semi-structured interviews' data. In vivo codes are derived from the language and terminology used by participants, as opposed to codes derived by the researcher. This enables codes to reflect the participants' perspectives and actions. In vivo coding enables researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the direct narratives, concepts, and meanings expressed by research participants. I concentrated on deciphering the semi-structured interviews' words, codes, and themes. Each semi-structured interview was

transcribed to elicit themes and categories. Then, I analyzed the themes that emerged from each individual interview, resulting in the development of overarching common themes. After identifying the themes, I used the peer debriefer validity strategy to have the data peer reviewed (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The researcher continued to analyze the data after receiving peer feedback in the hope of gaining a better understanding of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of equity-centered central office leaders.

Phase 1 consisted of becoming familiar with the data (Nowell, 2017). Qualitative data can include a range of structures such as observations, focus groups, documents, public resources, and other artifacts (Thorne, 2000). Braun states that researchers should submerge themselves as a result of the breadth and depth of the content (Nowell, 2017). The researcher conducted a manual review coding process to interpret the interview questions. The researcher analyzed the data to determine the knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Once the interviews were completed, the researcher reviewed the Zoom transcripts and used the researcher notes as a reference. The researcher uploaded the transcripts into NVivo to assist in organizing and analyzing the data. She then reviewed both the audio transcripts and the researcher notes several times and annotated every interview using an in vivo coding process in NVivo.

In Phase 2, initial codes were generated, which involve the initial generation of codes from data, a theorizing activity that requires researchers to revisit the data on a regular basis (Nowell, 2017). Data was examined to determine codes and then identified themes.

The researcher organized the codes into themes based upon the research questions and sub-research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of equity officers on the role of equity-driven central office leaders?

- a. How do their perceptions define their understanding of equity-driven central office leadership?
- b. What informs their perceptions of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of central officer leaders?
- c. How does this inform their perceptions of professional learning?

Research Question 2: What are the lived experiences of equity officers?

- a. What is the perception of district equity officers on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for the job position?
- b. How does this inform their perceptions of professional learning?

The data was used to determine, depict, and identify the knowledge, skills, and abilities considered essential to serve as an equity-driven central office leader who supports school outcomes. Nowell states that Phase 3 begins when all data has been initially coded and collated, and a list of the various codes discovered throughout the data set has been developed (Nowell, 2017).

In Phase 4, the researcher examines each theme's coded data and extract to determine whether they appear to form a coherent pattern (Nowell, 2017). Data were analyzed into categories and themes that are described based upon the research questions. The analysis of the interview transcripts allowed the researcher to determine themes and trends of the equity officers' perceptions of the development of central office leaders and

their development as equity officers. Once the coding process was finished, the researcher organized the data using a structural coding process aligned to her theoretical framework, the 4 Dimensions of School Leadership, to see if participants' perceptions correlated to these equity-driven school leadership skills.

Nowell summarizes the research of Braun et al. by stating that in Phase 5, the researchers determine which aspects of the data each theme encompasses and why they are interesting (Nowell, 2017). The researcher unpacked the responses to determine the perceptions of the participants' knowledge, skills, and dispositions of equity-driven central office leaders. The coding process was used to find common themes in the data and potential similarities and differences across the perceptions of how central office leaders are developed as equity-driven leaders. The researcher sorted the data and found six themes. Further, data were analyzed and compared to the 4 Dimensions of School Leadership to see if participant responses aligned to equity-driven school leadership practices.

Finally, in Phase 6, the researcher provides a summary of the fully established themes and begins the report's final analysis and writing (Nowell, 2017).

Ethical Considerations, Risks, and Benefits

Ethical Considerations

Participants were selected to participate in this study because of their role as district equity officers. Per the guidelines of The University of North Carolina Charlotte regarding the protection of human participants, a request was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval to collect information from six participants for this study. Participant responses were confidential. Participants' names,

roles, district, email addresses, and phone numbers were used for the initial selection and notification process. After the participants' responses were coded and analyzed, they were not distributed to anyone other than the researcher.

The consent form (Appendix C) outlines the purpose of the research study, the length of time for each participant, and the measures. The consent form confirms confidentiality, the nonexistence of any risk factors for those participants engaging in the study, voluntary participation, and a notation that participants could withdraw from the study if needed.

Potential Risks and Benefits

Participants were permitted to excuse themselves from this study at any time, as stated on the consent form. Participants received a \$5 Starbucks electronic gift card by email after completing the survey. Participants did not benefit personally by participating in this study beyond informing how school districts build the capacity of equity-driven leaders, which may be beneficial to others. The results of the study may assist school districts in designing, planning, and funding professional learning experiences to support central office selection, preparation and development programs.

Summary

This chapter describes the methods used in this phenomenological study including a description of the research questions, research design, the setting selection, the selection of the participants, and the data collection process. This chapter further explains how the researcher analyzed the risks, benefits, ethical considerations, and quality assurance strategies.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to ascertain the perspective of equity officers regarding the skills central office leaders perceive they need to serve as equity-driven educational leaders. This chapter contains the results of a phenomenological study to answer the two primary research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of equity officers on the role of equity-driven central office leaders?

- a. How do their perceptions define their understanding of equity-driven central office leadership?
- b. What informs their perceptions of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of central officer leaders?
- c. How does this inform their perceptions of professional learning?

Research Question 2: What are the lived experiences of equity officers?

- a. What is the perception of district equity officers on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for the job position?
- b. How does this inform their perceptions of professional learning?

This chapter describes the research participants' responses and analyzes their perceptions related to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of equity-driven, student-centered central office leaders resulting in six themes and sub-themes that reflect the constructed knowledge formed from participants' lived experiences. Many of the themes overlap and repeat highlighting the essential nature of the district's focus responsibility as well as the equity officer's professional aptitude and skillset. The data is shared using an organizational process which intends to share the participants' perspectives regarding an

equity-driven central office leader and their perspective as an equity officer. Significant findings and interpretations are shared with evidence, such as select examples from participants. Research question 1 indicated results for five separate yet overlapping themes. Research question 2 yielded an additional theme. All themes and subthemes are discussed in Chapter 4.

Research Question 1

What are the lived experiences of equity officers? How do their perceptions define their understanding of equity-driven central office leadership? What informs their perceptions of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of central office leaders?

The following themes describe how these district equity officers define equity. In addition, themes emerged on how equity officers define school and central office equity-centered leadership. Participants also shared their perceptions of understanding an equity-driven central office leader's knowledge, skills, and dispositions. In addition, participants shared concepts to describe the ideal district conditions for an equity-driven central office leader and the challenges and barriers.

Theme 1: Equity officers define equity from multiple sources.

Participants defined equity by the district's definition, additional research, and their personal experience. Equity is based upon their current district statements or research-based definitions from professional organizations. As participants reflected on their definitions, they often grounded their definitions by first noting the current state of schools and how the equity officers define equity. For example, one participant shared that the school district combines "equity and accountability" which is stated in the district's definition.

In addition to referring to the district's definition to equity, the participants relied on their personal and professional experiences and professional goals for equity. These subthemes are discussed in the following sections.

School Systems can do Something Different on Behalf of Students

In reflecting on the current state of equity and schools, one participant shared that school systems have had “many opportunities where our country could have done something different” and that schools should focus on removing predictabilities. Another participant shared for a “long time, [the] people in power were the ones who benefited from the change.”

Participants further defined equity based upon their own lived experiences. They shared whether their definition of equity was based on their experiences growing up in schools or what their children experienced. Other interviewees shared their definition of equity based on what they saw, heard, or the experiences they currently observe in their school systems. One participant said the “conversations became real for [them]” as they taught and interacted with their students in their classes. One participant shared that they have personally “witnessed impetus and harm” towards students.

Liberation through Support

The participants shared that equity is not something done to students. It is, in partnership with students for the benefit of students. A participant shared that equity is a “pathway to liberation” and “human beings can choose how they lead their lives.” Another participant shared that students should have “full access to the quality of their life.” Participants defined *equity* as “a child receives what they need” and that a child's need or “a child's circumstances should not affect their outcomes.” One participant

shared that students “should learn about diversity when they are born.” School systems should provide increased support and notably increased support for “those groups who need in the moment” support. School systems demonstrate their belief in equity “as it relates to [allocation] of resources.” Educators cannot create these equitable experiences on their own. Still, they should be in “partner[ship] with [the] community,” and the school systems should be proactive by “creating prevention strategies.”

Know, See, Hear Students with High Expectations to create a Sense of Belonging

Participants further defined *equity* as having a “high-level of expectations” and that educators must “expect that we get high expectations,” which leads to them being prepared for their future, including being a part of the “community” and for “college” if they choose to attend. One participant also shared that equity “goes beyond achievement.” Students should be “seen, valued and heard,” and the failure to “understand that known, seeing, and belong” is part of the definition of equity “is a major crisis.”

Evidence shows that equity leaders rely on the district’s definition as well as personal and professional experiences, and their goals and expectations of equity. This definition places the responsibility for equity on the district as a whole, the community, the students and the equity officer.

Theme 2: School leaders are a critical factor in creating equitable experiences for students.

Participants noted the significance of school leaders’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to equity. Knowledge and understanding through an equity-lens along with strong leadership skills such as analysis of data, communication, presentation of

professional development, and leading the adaptive and technical were viewed as essential. Dispositions and antithesis of equity-driven leader were shared.

Knowledge: Lead through an Equity-Lens

School leaders must be able to adapt their knowledge and understanding of equity leadership. Using knowledge includes seeing through the equity-lens to be intentional and work with other district leaders to constructively make positive change. To serve as equity-driven school leaders, they must be “able to change mindsets” with an “end goal...to change...mindset and their approach” and “intentional and thoughtful about the decisions.” Equity leaders should have “fire prevention” structures such as a “school leadership team.” School leaders should “be looking at [everything] through an equity lens,” including “looking at data.” Leaders should consider at all times when they “engage with students and families with positivity and [by being] constructive.”

Skills

Leadership skills are essential to navigating and positively creating change in school district equity. Six skills were prominent.

1) Analyze Data to Interrogate School Policies and Practices;

Participants shared their perceptions of the skillsets needed to support equity within their school districts during the interviews. She shared that school leaders should “work to get to root causes” and examine and “look for inequities in their school.” One participant shared an example where principals believe they use equitable strategies, but more application and depth of working from an equity lens is needed. For example, a principal was working on their goals, principals would say that their families are involved,

but the diversity of participants are “disproportionate.” Another participant shared that they are “looking forward to leaders who can provide a different spin or data.” School leaders should use “equity audits based on their results.” School leaders should “involve those who are closer to the gap.” For example, the data shows that “black girls are six times more likely to be suspended. School leaders should involve black girls to assist in finding solutions to the issues.” The students or groups whom the “leaders are solving for should be part of the solution.” “Principals have to be keen on and identify inequities” and able to problem-solve around these issues.

2) Change Management;

School leaders should know how to “us[e] ever-changing data” and how to “design [-ing] solutions to [address] the equity challenges” by being able to be reflective and to incorporate “preventive measures.” Leaders must know that they are not only leading change in their school, but they are also part of shaping change “in the school system [in which] they are leading.”

3) Ability to Build Relationships and Communicate;

School leaders need “to be human-centered.” School leaders maintain “ongoing correspondence” with their stakeholders.

4) Ability to Lead Professional Learning;

School leaders must be able to “provide their staff with learning around equity” and “know-how to develop their teams.” School leaders must know how to frame their “approach with new learning for their staff.”

5) Ability to Lead the Adaptive and Technical

School leaders need to be “adaptive in their work” and lead the equity’s technical part, such as the “masters schedule.”

Dispositions of Equity-Driven Leaders

Participants shared that equity-driven school leaders are student-centered, visionary, adaptive, advocates, are connected to their staff and their districts, empathetic yet with high expectations, are persistent, and results-oriented. Participants said that equity is reflective and should do “a lot of self-work.” School leaders need to know how to articulate where “equity fits into the vision of the school.” School leaders must “constantly advocate” for their students. School leaders must be “in tune with their staff.” School leaders must be empathetic with their students yet ensure that this empathy “does not get in the way of their high expectations.”

The Antithesis of Equity School Leaders

In describing the characteristics of an equity-driven school leader, participants also described the antithesis of equity school leadership are those leaders whose “actions are not aligned to [the district’s definition of equity]” especially when their actions “requires system change.” A participant shared that some school leaders look at equity as “this thing we need to do without making the change.” This idea may occur because of a “lack of true understanding” and that some leaders “don’t understand what [equity] means.”

Theme 3: There are essential skills and knowledge central office leaders exemplify.

Theme 3 takes a deeper dive into the skills and know central office leaders must exemplify including their understanding of the role and antithesis of an equity-driven central office leader. Participants shared that central office leaders’ understanding of

equity goes beyond “an understanding that your schools need more than two gender bathrooms.” Central office leaders should have clarity around their role and know that actualizing equity “is the right thing to do” and that equity for every student “can be achieved in multiple ways.” By having greater clarity on their work, one participant shared that they were able “to focus their work [to] serve in deeper ways.” The role of the central office leader is to be “the third eye” for schools and leaders. The system was “not designed for the success of students,” and it is the role of the central office leader “to change the system.” For one participant, the “field of education provided them a different lens” to understand how to consider the needs of students.”

Participants shared many roles of equity-centered central office leaders, including holding principals accountable for implementing practices with support. Central office leaders should have the skills to develop and plan equitable practices throughout the school system. Essential knowledge and skills sets are described in the following paragraphs.

Knowledge of Equity-Driven Central Office Leaders

Equity-drive central office leaders must have a strong understanding and knowledge of equity; instructional learning and experiences; assessment of the current state; building capacity and develop learners; and distribute resources through an equity lens. There are basic misconceptions about the understanding of equity. A participant shared that central office leaders need to understand equity, and school leaders often mistake equity and equality. For one participant, central office leaders should know what equity is and how equity connects to students.

Beyond understanding equity, central office leaders must can make connections by realizing that “knowing, seeing and belonging is a major crisis” in how districts define and create equitable outcomes for students. A participant shared that working in education provided her a different lens in understanding the challenges students currently experience after working outside of education. A deeper understanding of equity allowed one participant to focus their work in more profound ways, such as to center equity in their discussion and “systemize equity throughout what they do.”

Participants did not share a significant number of responses that described the role of equity-centered leadership and instructional leadership. One participant shared that central office leaders should know what is being taught and the “type of stories” being told through curriculum and resources.

Central office leaders’ knowledge and understanding of the current state of school related to equity is essential. A participant shared that central office leaders need to understand their district context to assess the current state to have “an understand of inequities and they came to be.” Central officers need to “be informed,” look at what is being provided” to “know[-ing] what needs to be changed.” Central office leaders need to “look at what is integrated in the policy.” Central office leaders need to “look at historical data.” Central office leaders to examine what they “believe[-s],” how their beliefs impact “practices and policies,” and this impacts “how they are leading.” “People have narratives,” and central office leaders need “to interview” stakeholders, particularly to determine to gather the “community aspects.” Central leaders need to know the community and “how to center their needs.”

Central office leaders then must be able to communicate and build capacity around this topic to other central office leaders. A participant shared that part of the central office leaders is to “build the knowledge of leaders.” One participant shared that the lack of knowing how to build capacity “can slow down the progress.” She shared that central office leaders need to assist these leaders and have conversations with them. A participant shared that central office leaders need to build the capacity of school leaders, other central office leaders, and their teams within their department. To develop the ability of school and other central office leaders, a participant shared that equity-driven central office leaders should be “well-read and able to talk” about equity issues. A participant shared that there is a “huge transition of leaders, particularly young leaders.”

A participant shared that equity-driven central office leaders need to make sure they can frame their department’s work around new learning, particularly how to connect their work to support schools and students. In addition, a participant shared that central office leaders need to “systematize equity throughout what we do.”

Central office equity leaders’ knowledge of resources available and proper distribution of those resources to ensure change. A participant shared that central office leaders need to consider distributing resources and doing so with an equity lens.

Skills of Equity-Driven Central Office Leader

Analysis of the participants’ responses indicated evidence for a deeper dive into the skills needed by central office equity leaders. These skills are essential to implement and support change. Skills include: supporting and interrogate the instructional vision on behalf of marginalized students; relating to people in intentional ways; leading strategically and telling the story; engage stakeholders about race and systemic racism in

multiple authentic, compelling, meaningful, and purposeful ways; and consistently advocating for those who do not have a voice. The skills are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Central office leaders need to determine “what type of supports” schools need, “how they are doing the scaffolding,” “how they are monitoring what has been monitored,” if the standards “are aligned to the standards of the state” and they are working with the school “leadership [and] coach [ing] their team[s]. Central office leaders should determine how “to hold” school leaders “accountable” with “support” to determine the “quality [of] instruction and teaching.”

Central office leaders must “be[-ing] aware of the needs and concerns” of their schools and school leaders. To do so, they must be “present in schools.” As the central office leaders learn of the needs of their school leaders, they must be willing to put forth the emotional labor by “checking in on their emotional well-being.”

A participant shared that one of the “biggest hurdles is starting initiatives” and telling the narrative in an effort to move forward. A participant shared that district staff knows that districts “move to the next shiny thing.” Central office leaders “need [to be able] to connect to the actual gap.” Central office leaders need to consider “how they are doing the scaffolding” when working with principals. Central office leaders need to analyze the “data demonstrates the need” for schools to create “the baseline for every school.” It is the central office leader’s responsibility “to hold principals accountable and support.” Central office leaders need to solve problems with an equity lens. A participant shared an example where their district needed to address the bus driver shortage and prioritize buses for those with the highest need”. To solve the bus problem, the district

leaders analyzed the problem through an equity lens and prioritized buses for those with the highest need. The district determined that those with the highest need were students who would not get to school if not picked up by a bus. Central office leaders need to “target and tailor” their support on “areas of strength.” Central office leaders need to determine the “right question to ask to provoke thinking.” Central office leaders need to be able to “tell their story.” A participant reflected that “that we should stop working at and start doing for.”

Ability to bravely engage stakeholders about race and systemic racism in multiple authentic, compelling, meaningful, and purposeful ways is one of the significant finding. Participants shared the most significant number of responses, 20, which supported the inclusion of this subtheme. Participants shared that central office leaders need to be able “to talk about race, talk about racism and systemic racism,” “engage about race and racial experiences, racial humility, and cultural humility.” However, central office leaders are not “acknowledging racism” and the “impact [of] talk [-ing] about race and racial subgroups.” A participant acknowledges that this is challenging, particularly when “people will not let facts get in the way of their opinions.” Central office leaders need to be able to “eye-ball” their stakeholders and have the “skillset of having brave conversations,” recognizing this is now they can “challenge mindsets.” To engage in systemic racism, central office leaders need to know how “to get [this] information, how to ascertain, acknowledge and see “voices of various stakeholders throughout the district.” participant shared their own experiences where “people were forced to listen to each other.” A shared that an equity-driven central office leader needs to be able to tell the story of public education [which is] the strongest tool in our

toolbelt.” Leaders “need to be able to [articulate] [the impact of] the new learning.”

Central office leaders are “often seen [as] not [being] very connected to the community, not often talking with the community, [to determine] what we need in the community.”

Central office leaders need to be able to “call people out and bring them in, and bring them along.” Central office leaders “need to be able to understand between the written word” and know-how “to connect between different staff.” Central office leaders need to “do a good job of talking about things” by getting “rid of simple rhetoric” and go beyond a checkmark.”

A final and essential skills is the ability to consistently advocate for those who do not have their voice, particularly marginalized students who are not making the decisions, to remove barriers. Central office leaders must “constantly advocate, need to talk loudly and advocate for those who do not have their voice. A participant shared that the “minoritized are not making the decisions.” Stakeholders should be engaged in meaningful ways, such as to include them in decision-making. One participant shared that is better to engage stakeholders in decision-making than to allow the “superintendent to make the decision.” A participant shared that a central office leader should **advocate** for the district’s equity vision and articulate this vision in the communities and connect to the schools. This knowledge and these skills sets are in essential to central office equity leaders. In addition, the following dispositions were described by the participants.

Dispositions of an Equity-Driven Central Office Leader.

Participants shared several reflections on the dispositions of a central office leader, coach, and disrupter. A participant shared that central office leaders should approach their schools and departments as a coach who provides support. Participants shared that a

central leader can “identify barriers” and “disrupt some of [those barriers] and understand that “it is [their] role and responsibility to interrupt] inequitable practices. A participant noted that “if we are creating rules that have privilege, that this is not where we want to be.” Instead, a participant noted that we want to promote policies and examine the rules within the district. One participant shared that, for example, central office leadership should examine resource distribution through an equity lens, and leaders should move from any formula. Dispositions include: equity-centered, empathetic, inquisitive, persistent, humble, reflective, and strategic.

Participants shared that central office leaders should ensure that their work is all-encompassing with shared language and systems in place. A participant shared that equity grounds their work, and the role “can be a lever of change.” A participant also reflected that after understanding the district’s stance on equity, central office leaders should also consider if they are the best fit to lead their teams and support their schools. They office leaders should “empathize with kids.” One participant stated that “central office leaders have not thought about the world outside of themselves.” As part of their roles and responsibilities, central office leaders should not only focus on the “stories [they] tell” as part of their department goals but also the “stories that [we] ask.” Central office leaders must be “willing to work hard.” Humility is essential. A participant shared that central office leaders “do not practice humility.” Humility and being reflective enables central office leaders to grow. They must be “self-reflecting” and “unpack why they are making the decisions.” A participant shared that we should work with “receiving the thing” and use a holistic approach to supporting schools.

The Antithesis of an Equity-Driven Central Office Leader

Participants describe that central office leaders may sometimes be a “do-gooder” who are (is) not being challenged.” Some central office leaders often “lack a true understanding.” Central Office leaders often “create challenges because people are not doing something different.” Central Office leaders often receive professional learning that does not support their understanding. For example, one participant described an activity, a poem called “Crayons” as “trash.” She did not feel the activity provided the depth of knowledge or engagement to impact educators’ practice.

With the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of a strong central office equity leader, districts will have difficulty making the essential changes needed for equitable education.

Theme 4: Districts can create the conditions to support, develop and recruit central office leaders.

Participants shared that there are conditions that districts can create to support the development of equity leaders. Four participants provided examples that school districts should have an effective implementation method and process that includes engaging people around the strategy. The participants indicated the following conditions are essential: a collective shared vision strategy; organization for equity; access and opportunity to engage; available time, talent, and resources; tools designed to assess current state; collective effort; and a design for equity leadership and professional learning. Actions to create these conditions are included in the following paragraphs.

Create a Collective Shared Vision Strategy

Creating a collective shared vision is essential to the work of equity. Everyone is to have the same vision and direction. A participant shared that the district needs to craft

a vision of equity that everyone understands. One participant shared that school districts need an equity policy. Participants shared that the progress monitoring, accountability, and expectations, need to be articulated even at the board level. A participant shared that this should occur even at the board level. One participant shared that the district should provide cross-department opportunities to learn of the practices districts are creating. A participant shared that equity leaders need allies. Two participants shared that the districts can create a roadmap for every school and department, clarifying that the district's focus is equity-centered leadership. Two participants shared that school districts need to explain who and what are the levers of change. One participant said that principals are the better lever and another participant shared that results come from principals.

Organized for Equity

The ability to articulate and sponsor an equity stance for the school system aids in communicating a shared vision includes the role of the superintendent and message shared by central office. Participants shared seventeen examples of the various ways and values of articulating an equity stance and the role of the superintendent in leading the equity work. A participant shared that the school district should formalize a “commitment that they can stand on.” A participant stated that equity reflects on” how they are leading.”

The role of the superintendent is imperative. A participant shared that the superintendent should “pave the way your work becomes easier.” A participant shared a specific example where community members connected their equity work with Critical Race Theory (CRT). One equity officer shared that she valued that the superintendent was articulating at the board meeting that we “have a racial equity issue” and then

“coming in behind” her “puts you in a place where you feel supported and willing to do the tough work.” A participant shared that the superintendent has to speak the same language and demonstrate trust by public supporting the equity officer by stating that this equity work is the “right thing to do.” Each participant shared that more than “one person should not be the spokesperson” and that “one person is not going to help the district actualize their vision.”

A participant shared that central office leaders should “fully own” their equity stance in words, actions, resources, and in voice.” Participants shared that an equity stance helps everyone understand the vision, knows what equity looks like, knows that this equity is the focus and that equity informs the decisions in order for equity to “permeate the system.” A participant shared that equity needs to permeate the system. A participant shared that central officer leaders should listen to people. Each participant shared in different ways that the systems should put in “a lot of thought for how the office of equity is organized and how their teams are organized to support schools.

Provide Access and Opportunity to Engage

Creating access and opportunity to engage in dialogue is essential. Participants shared that central office leaders need to engage in conversations to dialogue with internal and community stakeholders. A participant shared that people need to know how to engage in dialogue. A participant shared the value of when he “forced people to listen to each other.” A participant shared that the equity-driven central office leaders need to “talk loudly” to others to advocate. In addition, a participant shared that leaders need to consider “who is not at the table and who should be” at the table.

Provide Time, Talent, and Resources

Providing time, talent, and resources creates an optimal condition for building central office equity leaders. Participants shared various ways their district provides or could provide support to build equity leaders. Support involves providing and allocating time and resources, financially and through human capital, or “supporting the people doing the work.” A participant shared that school systems need to back their commitment to equity with financial and other types of resources. A participant shared that mentors for school and district leaders are needed to build the capacity to lead for equity. A participant shared that principal supervisors support principals and provide them with ways to engage with their peers through a problem of practice. A participant shared that “we need more time.”

Central office equity leaders need tools to assess the current state of the district. Two participants shared that they use resources from the National Education Project and Asset Surveys. Another participant shared that there is a need to create a tool to help participants understand using an equity lens in their responsibilities.

Collective Effort

Participants shared that it takes a collective effort and shared accountability with everyone having an equity lens to do this equity work. A participant shared that everyone must be bought in, there needs to be collective agreement, and it starts by bringing people along. Participants shared that school districts need to have the “whole community talking about” equity and creating ways for “whole community to buy into the decision.” Participants shared that equity work cannot advance without the school board’s support

of making policy. To do this equity work, a participant shared that school districts must help shift mindsets.

Designing Equity Leadership and Professional Learning

Professional learning along with authentic learning experiences are essential to equip central office leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to enhance equity. A participant shared professional learning centers around equity, and another shared that leaders need to be equipped to advance the district's vision of equity. One participant shared that:

We have an evaluation tool and measures. We need teaching that goes beyond how they perpetuate their biases. Create time in your profession to receive that critical learning from your group base. Learning about equity is something that is never-ending. Leaders need to be journaling and engaging. Leaders need to know how you participate in your equity journey. This journey is not only built on teacher workdays but is based on how you grow. For example, to maintain licensure takes place, [the equity work] is located in some deep undoing of new teacher orientation. [Equity leaders] need implicit bias training aligned to the district equity values, for all, but particularly for those who are doing this work. [Equity] is part of your day-to-day work. Leaders should show evidence of this [learning] and get some perspective. Leaders need to reflect on how do you see me? [There] should be built-in mechanisms. How are you seeing me?

A participant shared about how professional learning on equity is required for everyone include the Leadership Council. They must participate in training before anything is disseminated to the district and other key leaders. Another participant shared that they

have created micro-credentials as part of the professional learning model. Another participant shared that professional learning should help the central leader “gain a perspective on how they live the values of equity.” Professional development without authentic experiences is not sufficient. A participant shared how learning experiences should be reflective and personal. She said that central office leaders should “notice when we are silent.”

When asked how central office leaders should be prepared to lead for equity, a participant shared that central office leaders should understand that everyone has biases and central office leaders should own when their biases show up. A participant shared that leaders should “go deep” in reflecting how central office leaders present themselves. A participant shared that central office leaders should recognize and own what they do know and what they don’t know. A participant shared that central office leaders need to work in schools that serve “diverse” populations. In addition, central office leaders need to know the district and history of their school system, such as,

When did segregation end? What type of integration? They need to understand the context. The context is fairly universal across the south and the country. How did your city experience change? Know the people in the 40s-50s who integrated. Know the history. Have experience with working people who have been affected by policies.

Another participant shared that the central officer leaders need to know their community and center their needs.

Hiring the correct person for equity work is essential. A participant shared that school districts should “hire someone who respects and loves this” equity work, “have the

right mindset” and “checks the box” regarding the district expectations. Participants shared that the districts should determine what skill sets are needed and adaptable in their work. The equity officers shared that districts should hire people who ask questions and learn about the school and community gaps. New staff members should go into their new job asking questions and yet be thoughtful about their elevating concerns. A participant shared that they should recognize and own what “you know and don’t know.”

One participant shared that she works with her human resources department to design tasks aligned to their equity-focused for every application. Upon hiring, each new district staff takes two foundational courses model after the “Beyond Diversity” professional learning. In addition, she has created a two-phase Racial Equity Institute, which she considers the foundation.

It is the district’s responsibility to hire and train central office equity leaders to provide them with knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to share a common vision around the equity-focused and student-focused schools. District leaders must provide time and resources to assess the current state of the district, communicate the shared vision, and facilitate change.

Theme 5: Challenges exist within and outside the school district, which can inhibit the development of central office leaders.

Internal and External Resistance

Internal and external factors can inhibit the development of central office equity leaders. Participants reflected that there will always be challenges because of people who “resent the equity work and are not supportive.” Participants responded that this resistance pushback occurs because of genuine misunderstandings and “willful

ignorance.” Internal and external factors may cause inefficiency which can also inhibit the development of central office leaders.

Inefficiency-- Lack of alignment, Lack of impact, Lack of Clarity, Comfort with the Status Quo

A participant shared that the districts have inefficient methods aligned with a strategy, and there is often no infrastructure to support the equity strategy. Lack of alignment between leaders, vision, and action can hinder development as well. A participant shared a lack of alignment because the work “applies in certain areas and not all,” and there is an inability to expand the vision is often limited, mainly when the departments work in silos.

Lack of impact, lack of clarity, and comfort with the status quo all can negatively affect the central office leaders as they support and lead the district’s equity vision. A participant shared that due to some of the challenges she is encountering in her district, the impact is limited. A participant shared a lack of clarity regarding whether their office is outward-facing or internally facing. Is their office for the community, the district staff, or both? Who is the primary audience? A participant shared that central office leaders are comfortable in their place and need to approach the district’s challenges around equity.

Themes 1 through 5 are based on the responses from research question 1. An additional theme was determined based on the responses to research question 2. Similarities between the subthemes and prior themes and subthemes are evident.

Research Question 2

What is the perception of district equity officers on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for their position? What is the perception of district equity officers on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for the job position? How does this inform their perceptions of professional learning?

Theme 6: There are common themes of how the role of equity-officers is defined and the conditions to thrive on supporting and leading the equity vision of the district.

In response to research question 2, participants shared their perspectives on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to serve as equity officers and prepare to lead in this role. In addition, participants shared their views on the conditions required for them to advance equity through the district.

Participants indicated that a board range of knowledge and support are essential to serve as equity officers. A participant shared that she needs to have someone who helps “me to navigate professional development. Another participant said that to do her work, she has to work cross-departmental. Another participant shared that it is “hard to navigate the system.”

A participant stated initiatives are complex, and the biggest “hurdles is starting initiatives.” She said that starting initiatives is the biggest hurdle and that district staff is used to the “shiny next thing.” A participant shared that the most significant challenges occur in determining where to start. One participant shared an example of working with their technology department:

The technology department needed to have a parent/student advisory committee. They wanted us to help diversify the committee, design training. They had a

bunch of different areas, including how to engage the community and determine what success looks like.

Another participant shared that equity officers need to:

Take advantage of the negative spaces. These offices are soft positions. Start a fire from where you are ready to burn. You have to move from power and authority, that is, influence. You are influencing the top and bottom.

Knowledge and experience being a leader in this challenging work is essential. A participant shared that “people are being shamed and then put up a wall.” A participant shared that equity officers need to help district staff be reflective “without turning them off.” Another participant shared that equity officers must recognize that they lead in “very diverse districts” and meet some of the communities’ diverse needs. A participant shared that work is “always political.” Another participant shared that equity officers “have to play politics” and “navigate the terrain to keep advancing the work.” One equity officer that part of their work is helping district staff to “unlearn.”

Integrating equity in schools is complex and challenging. Knowledge of assessing the current situation and making change is crucial. One participant shared that her schools completed an in-house equity audit. Once completed with the equity work they were able to use it in their work using data. The participant shared that she is “learning from them what happens in school and how they are using the ever-changing landscape of how equity fits into their building.”

Understanding and believing the equity work is an area that involves continuous Improvement. Two participants shared that equity officers need to share the mitigation strategies and a systemic way to address them. A participant shared that if equity officers

are not engaging in productive conversations, they will not get there. Another participant shared that equity officers should have ongoing correspondence.

A participant said that equity officers should practice “cultural humility” and cultural responsiveness by asking questions. The ability to communicate and act upon dialogue enhance equity. A participant said that equity officers move to districts where leadership permeates the office. A participant shared that equity officers should determine how to promote professional learning throughout the office.

Along with knowledge, equity officers must have necessary skills such as the ability to adapt, the ability to challenge and interrogate the current state, the ability practice reciprocal accountability, and the ability to shift mindsets. Participants shared that equity officers should practice adaptive leadership. Participants shared that equity officers need to be able to “address situations,” “look at intersections,” and “raise up permeance of inequities. A participant shared that equity officers need to have something in place and consult with schools and other offices.

Dispositions and tools that were found to be important to the participants include being reflective, curious, and persistent. A participant said that to lead this work, equity officers “have to work on ourselves first.” Participants shared that equity officers have “to understand their biases, how we view others, while self-reflecting.” A participant shared that equity officers need “a space to see something to do a different action.” A participant shared that equity officers need to be “continuously challenging and checking.” Another participant shared that an equity officer needs to go beyond the relationship and “do not put up barriers for yourself.”

One participant shared that equity officers need to ask the questions, “What are we trying to solve? Ask, “What are our mitigation strategies?” A participant shared that this is “challenging work, and you have to keep plowing through.” A participant shared that work is hard, draining work, and people are quitting their jobs. Another participant shared that it can occur “when folks say they are preaching something when we are not.” A participant said that equity officers need balance.

A participant shared that she uses equity audits using book studies. One participant shared that he needs to create a tool to help his district use an equity lens.

District Conditions to Support Equity Officers were highlighted in the participants responses. The following paragraphs discuss support, socio-emotional learning and support, common focus, direction, and clarification regarding the district’s definition of equity and the equity leaders required skill set and responsibilities, and resources.

A consistent response from each participant is that the superintendent must be supportive of the work and “have your back.” A participant shared that if the superintendent does not have your back, it makes the work much harder, and you can’t get traction.”

A participant shared that self-care is necessary. Two participants shared that they had to file police reports. A participant shared that equity work is personal, and she puts herself “in harm’s way to do good.” Another person said that this work is stressful and she has to find balance.

One participant shared that the equity officer can impact every level of our organization and that “we are working from all levels of the organization. A participant shared that a “lack of direction leaves then floundering.” One participant shared that his

office consults with schools and other offices. Another equity officer said that “Various districts take different approaches. Some are organized around the policy. Some are organized around cultural celebrations, closing gaps and eliminating inequities, or organized to eliminate opportunity gaps shared by a participant. Another participant shared that districts should define what the work is and what it looks like:

want us to help diversify the committee, design training, and a bunch of different areas, such as engaging the community.

Resources to move the equity agenda to past an initiative is imperative. A participant shared that the district should back its commitment to financial and other types of resources. Equity officers shared that while there is more funding currently due to ESR funding, funding is always a challenge, and this equity work requires a budget and funding. In addition to a lack of funding, a participant shared that they experience insufficient staffing, and the lack of resources will force their equity work to “remain an initiative.” One participant shared that he has been fortunate to have a well-resourced office, and he said you need to have people. Four of the six participants shared that they consider their school staff as part of their equity team. However, each participant discussed how their offices were understaffed. One participant reflected that his office is expendable to others that appear more critical, such as academics. Another participant shared that the equity office needs to be organized, and the district should consider how equity offices are organized.

A participant suggested that equity officers find a mentor and build a network outside of their district. Each North Carolina Equity officer is part of a state job-alike leader who leads a component of their district’s equity agenda. Through this network,

participants were able to submit a practice problem, look at policy together, and brainstorm. A participant also shared that their roles are very different, and they occupy different spaces.

Each of the participants shared the challenges of serving as equity officers. One participant shared the challenges of starting an initiative as advised to other equity officers start where there is energy:

Where do you start? You start where there is energy. You don't start at the top.

Start at the teacher level. Start with the community. I made sure that they knew my office was contact and a refuge. Teachers asked principals for more, and then principals were asking for more. They then pushed up to the central office. It took four years. It is interesting that there was not never enough to fund our office.

However, it took two white students who created a rap song that created an uproar and then we said that we would fund equity.

Participants shared that equity officers need more opportunities to dialogue with internal and community stakeholders to engage in conversations. She shared that she finds ways to engage with principals through a Principal Think Tank. She shared that this process helps her gain perspective on how principals are living their values of equity.

A participant shared that it is suitable for equity officers to have professional learning. One participant started with the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). Another participant shared that they read *Coaching for Equity* and *How to be Anti-Racist*. Another participant shared that she participated in Essential Foundation for Culturally Responsive professional learning for thirty-six hours. Table 2 summarizes the themes and sub-themes of the study.

Table 2***The Relationship of the Research Questions, Themes, and Sub-Themes***

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-Themes
1. What are the lived experiences of equity officers?	Theme 1: Equity officers define equity from multiple sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Systems Can Do Something Different on Behalf of Students • Liberation through Support • Know, See, Hear Students with High Expectations to create a Sense of Belonging
a. How do their perceptions define their understanding of equity-driven central office leadership?	Theme 2: School leaders are a critical factor in creating equitable experiences for students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge: Lead through an Equity-Lens • Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Analyze Data to Interrogate School Policies and Practices ○ Change Management ○ Ability to Build Relationships and Communicate ○ Ability to Lead Professional Learning ○ Ability to Lead the Adaptive and Technical
b. What informs their perceptions of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of central office leaders?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dispositions of Equity-Driven Leaders • The Antithesis of Equity School Leaders

Table 2 (continued).

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-Themes
1. What are the lived experiences of equity officers?	Theme 3: Central office leaders exemplify essential skills and knowledge to advance equity in a district.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of Central Office Leaders • The Antithesis of an Equity-Driven Central Office Leader • Knowledge of Equity-Driven Central Office Leaders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Knowledge of Equity ○ Knowledge of Instructional Learning and Experiences ○ Know how to Assess the Current State ○ Know how to Build Capacity and Develop learners ○ Know to Distribute Resources through an Equity Lens
a. How do their perceptions define their understanding of equity-driven central office leadership?		
b. What informs their perceptions of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of central office leaders?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills of Equity-Driven Central Office Leader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Support and interrogate the instructional vision on behalf of marginalized students. ○ Relate to people in intentional way. ○ Lead strategically and tell the story. ○ Ability to bravely engage stakeholders about race and systemic racism in multiple authentic, compelling, meaningful, and purposeful ways. ○ Consistently advocate for those who do not have their voice, particularly marginalized students who are not making the decisions, to remove • Dispositions of an Equity-Driven Central Office Leader. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Coach ○ Disrupter ○ Equity-Centered ○ Empathetic ○ Inquisitive ○ Persistent ○ Humility ○ Reflective ○ Strategic

Table 2 (continued).

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-Themes
	Theme 4: Districts can create the conditions to support, develop and recruit central office leaders to be equity-centered and student-focused.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a Collective Shared Vision Strategy • Articulate and Sponsor an Equity Stance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Role of the Superintendent ○ Language, words, and actions ○ Organized for Equity ○ Provide Access and Opportunity to Engage ○ Provide Time, Talent, and Resources ○ Design Tools to Assess Current State ○ Collective Effort ○ Designing Equity Leadership and Professional Learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Professional Learning ○ Design Authentic Experiences ○ Prepare to Lead for Equity and Understand the context • Hire School Leaders Who Love Equity
	Theme 5: Challenges exist within and outside the school district, which can inhibit the development of central office leaders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal and External Resistance • Inefficiency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lack of alignment ○ Lack of impact ○ Lack of clarity ○ Comfort with the status quo

Table 2 (continued).

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-Themes
RQ2: What is the perception of district equity officers on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for their position?	Theme 6: Districts can create systems and structures that enable equity officers to support and lead the district's equity vision.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions of an Equity Officer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How to Lead Initiatives by Navigating through the Central Office and Schools ▪ Lead People in Challenging Work ▪ Know How to Integrate Equity in Schools. ▪ Understand Continuous Improvement. ▪ Engage in Difficult Conversations ▪ Practice Cultural Humility ▪ Able to Build Capacity ○ Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Able to adapt ▪ Able to challenge and interrogate the current state ▪ Able to practice reciprocal accountability ▪ Able to shift mindsets ○ Dispositions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Be reflective. ▪ Be curious. ▪ Be persistent. ○ Tools • District Conditions to Support Equity Officers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ My Superintendent has my back. ○ Equity officers need socio-emotional learning and support. ○ Provide focus, direction, and clarification regarding the district's definition of equity and how this role supports this definition. ○ Provide resources to move the equity agenda to past an initiative. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide mentors. ▪ Start where there is energy ▪ Provide access and opportunity to engage ▪ Provide professional learning before and while in the role of the equity officer.

Summary

The findings represent themes that are organized and reported for each research question. Six themes and multiple several sub-themes surfaced from the responses of the six district equity officers. Each of the themes connected to the two research questions, with many themes intersecting multiple questions. The study's findings revealed six themes and several sub-themes relating to defining an equity-driven central office leader's knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The participants revealed that the defining and support of the central office leader centers around defining equity and knowing how this vision is actualized in a school through equitable leaders who model and lead on behalf of high expectations for students learning and experiences. These leaders know that students must be seen and heard and know how to support principals to use their resources to achieve this vision. Participants shared that the work of creating effective equity-driven leaders is amplified and accelerated with essential district conditions. The conditions are needed for the central office leaders and those equity officers who lead this work. The results revealed that this work is challenging, particularly in contentious climates where the vision is unclear and external groups have agendas and knowledge opposite of the district's vision.

In Chapter 5, the conclusions resulting from this data will be analyzed in connection with the review of the literature and the statement of the problem. In addition

to analyzing the responses by research questions and unpacking the themes and subthemes, the researcher analyzed the responses through a structured coded process to determine if there is a correlation to the 4 Dimensions of School Leadership to see if their responses align to this research-based framework which defines *equity leadership* as one who leads and understands how to build equitable school communities, how to lead and create a learning and teaching environment, how to manage and use resources effectively and how to maximize the collective efforts to lead the school community. Recommendations for action and further research will also be presented.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological research study is to investigate the perceptions of equity officers in the development of equity-driven central officer leaders and their development as equity officers; the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of central office leaders and equity officers were uncovered. In addition, the researcher learned of the conditions needed to allow both the central office leaders and the equity officers to thrive. This chapter summarizes findings, noting the implications as they connect to the literature and the coding of the themes to the 4 Dimensions of School Leadership™.

Summary of Findings

The following section shares the significant thematic findings through inductive analysis of the participants' lived experiences working as equity officers in public schools. Conducting virtual audio-only semi-structured interviews, six themes and several sub-themes emerged from this phenomenological study. The researcher sorted the data and found six themes. Once the in vivo coding process was completed, the researcher organized the data using a structural coding process aligned to the researcher's theoretical framework, 4 Dimensions of School Leadership™. This process allowed me to understand the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of central office leaders.

The researcher engaged in this research study to contribute to an emerging body of research on equity-driven central office leaders' knowledge, skills, and dispositions. In this final chapter, the researcher will share the findings and discuss the implications and limitations of the research. The researcher endeavored to explore strategies school districts utilize to develop equity-driven central office leaders who can create the

conditions for principals to serve as equity-driven leaders through the perceptions of the recipients of those strategies.

Finally, this chapter provides recommendations for further study. It was beneficial to understand this perspective from equity officers, who are essential to actualizing the district's vision of equity. The following sections summarize the critical thematic conclusions through an inductive analysis of the participants' lived experiences serving as district equity officers.

Research Question 1, *What are the lived experiences of equity officers? How do their perceptions define their understanding of equity-driven central office leadership? What informs their perceptions of the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of central officer leaders?*

During the interview process, an initial theme emerged regarding how participants defined equity through derive from multiple sources and with a focus on equity. Participants defined equity by the district's definition, additional research, and grounding their definitions in their personal experience. Equity is based upon their current district statements or research-based definitions from organizations. Participants further defined equity based upon their own lived experiences.

A second theme related to this question was that school leaders are critical in creating equitable experiences for students. Participants shared that school leaders need to lead through an equity lens. In addition, participants shared skills that school leaders included analyzing data to interrogate school policies and practices and leading change management. Equity-driven leaders can build relationships and communicate. Participants shared those leaders can lead professional learning to build their capacity and

the capacity of their teachers. An equity-driven leader can manage the adaptive and technical aspects of school leadership. Participants shared that equity-driven school leaders embody the dispositions of being student-centered, visionary, adaptive, advocates, are connected to their staff and their districts, empathetic yet with high expectations, are persistent, and results-oriented. In addition to sharing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions, participants shared traits of practices that inhibit school leaders' ability to advance equity within their schools and for their students, including not aligning their actions to the district's definition of equity particularly when this alignment requires changes by the school leader. In addition, a participant shared that some school leaders look at equity as a technical change and not as adaptive or interpersonal (Ladd, 2021). This belief that implementing equity at the school level is technical and not individual or interpersonal, may occur because of a lack of true understanding for some leaders, a participant shared, do not understand what equity means.

A third theme related to this question and the primary focus of this research is that participants shared that the central office leaders need to exemplify the skills and knowledge needed to advance equity in a district. Participants articulated this role of equity-driven central office leaders. Participants also shared the knowledge skills and dispositions of equity-centered school leaders, such as assessing the current state, building capacity and developing learners, and distributing resources through an equity lens. Participants shared that equity-focused central office leaders are coaches, disrupters, empathetic, inquisitive, persistent, practice humility, reflective, and strategic. Similar to their reflections of an equity-centered principal, the participants articulated the practices that inhibit central office leaders.

A fourth theme emerged from the data that many complex challenges exist, which the district should mitigate to advance equity. Participants shared that they experience internal and external resistance to advancing equity. In addition, participants shared that they experience inefficient organizational structures which inhibit the advancement of equity, such as a lack of alignment, lack of impact, a lack of clarity, and district staff comfortability.

Research Question 2, *What is the perception of district equity officers on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for their job position? What is the perception of district equity officers on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for the job position? How does this inform their perceptions of professional learning?* The researcher sought to learn from equity officers their perceptions of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to perform their functional responsibilities. The equity officers are also central officer leaders who impact schools, albeit indirectly. The participants shared that equity officers should know how to lead initiatives and navigate through the central office; they need to know how to lead people, integrate their work in schools, and practice humility. Equity officers should be able to adapt, Interrogate the current state and practice reciprocal accountability. Equity officers should be reflective, curious, and persistent. The participants shared that equity officers should have tools, such as helping district staff to lead and teach through an equity lens.

The participants also shared those different conditions would support equity officers in leading this work. The participants shared that the district must have an equity stance, starting with the superintendent. Equity officers also discussed that this work is challenging and sometimes personally and professionally unsafe. Therefore, equity

officers need socio-emotional learning and support. Participants shared that they need focus, direction, and clarification regarding how the district's definition of equity and the purpose and organization of this role supports this definition. Finally, the equity officers shared that they need resources to move the agenda past an initial stage. These resources can include mentorships, access, and opportunities to engage. The equity officers also shared professional learning, which they deemed valuable to prepare for this position and while in this role.

Alignment of the Central Office Leadership and the 4 Dimensions of School Leadership

In addition to analyzing the responses by research questions and unpacking the themes and subthemes, the researcher analyzed the responses to determine if there is a correlation to the 4 Dimensions of School Leadership, a research-based framework which defines equity leaders as one who lead and understands how to build equitable school communities, how to lead and create a learning and teaching environment, how to manage and use resources effectively and how to maximize the collectively lead the school community. The researcher analyzed the data using a structured coding process to identify themes and correlations between what the equity officers perceived as the knowledge, skillsets and dispositions needed for equity-driven central officers to support equitable school leader practices. The 4 Dimensions of School Leadership describes the "key actions and dispositions for equity-driven school leaders. It illustrates what school leaders need to know and be able to do to ensure that each student, particularly those furthest from justice, has a school experience that prepares them for a limitless future." (Center for Educational Leadership, 4D). Equity is not an addition to the work of a leader or teacher, and it is not a separate component of school planning (Starr, 2019).

4 Dimensions of School Leadership: Equitable Schools

Communities Dimension that equity-driven leaders have a vision and mission and are responsible for culture and climate. The equitable school leader crafts a vision and mission that empowers students, crafts a vision and mission-aligned to goals and actions, provides clarity on roles and consistently communicates this vision and mission with progress monitoring (Center for Educational Leadership 4D). Equitable school leaders also lead culture and climate by creating inclusive climates, "privileging student's voice, and sustaining a learning culture." The framework provides several guiding questions for leaders to self-assess their leadership:

- What do the vision and mission communicate about the possibility of limitless futures for each student?
- How do leaders communicate the "why" and progress towards the vision and mission? What impact does this have?
- How do central office leaders affirm and value the racial, cultural, and individual identities of students and staff?
- What evidence exists that community members feel a sense of belonging, significance, and agency? (Center for Educational Leadership 4D).

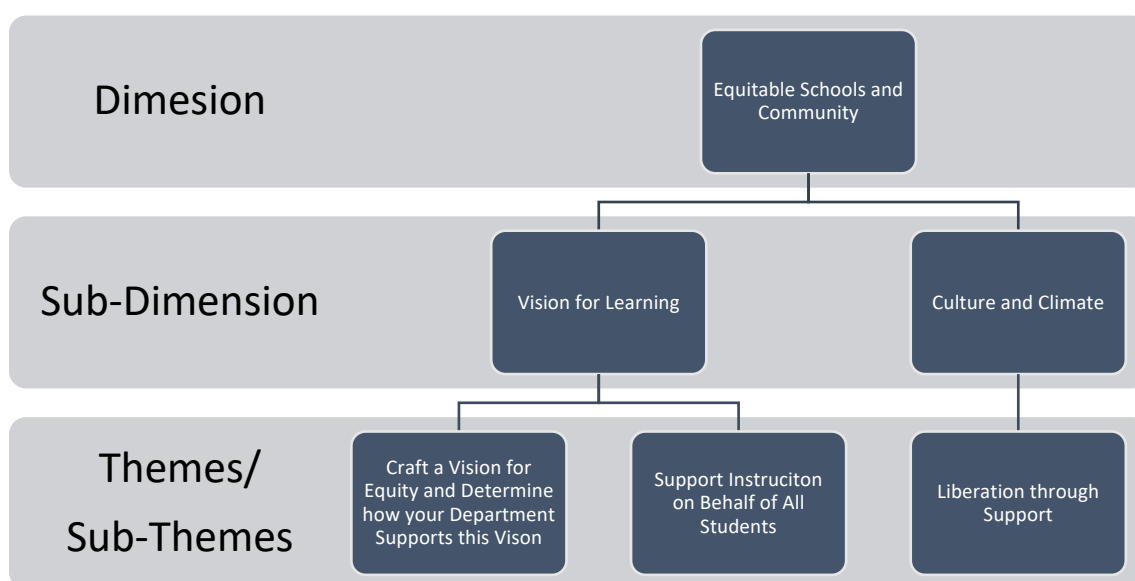
The following paragraph articulates the correlation between the themes and subthemes and the Equitable School Community Dimension and the role of the central office leader.

Central Office Leaders Advance Equity by Supporting Equitable School Communities

School systems dedicated to addressing inequities often work to develop a shared language to build critical knowledge (Cheatham et. al, 2020). Shared common language may assist systems in lessening and eliminating the use of “code words” such as “urban”

or “diverse” which is burdened with racial stereotypes which inhibits and allows leaders to avoid unequivocally discussing race (Cheatham et. al, 2020). Participants shared critical responses and quotes which connect to how an equitable central office leader supports an equitable school environment. Participants shared that central office leaders should define equity and determine how their work supports the school environment. Participants shared that central office leaders should focus on "equity and accountability" and have a "high-level of expectations". Participants shared that educators must "expect that we get high expectations," which leads to them being prepared for their future, including being a part of the "community" and for "college" if they choose to attend. One participant also shared that equity "goes beyond achievement." Students should be "seen, valued and heard," and the failure to "understand that known, seeing, and belong" is part of the definition of equity "is a major crisis." Educators cannot create these equitable experiences on their own but should be in "partner[ship] with [the] community," and the school systems should be proactive by "creating prevention strategies." Figure 1 summarizes some of the themes and subthemes which connect this dimension.

Figure 1: Coding Themes and Sub-Themes to 4 Dimension: Equitable Schools and Community



4 Dimensions of School Leadership: Learning and Teaching

The Learning and Teaching Dimension of the 4D™ defines an equity-driven leader as one who has a vision for learning, leads curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, and knows how to improve teaching and practice. The school leader's vision for learning includes ensuring that students have agency and ownership in their learning, crafts a share vision with high expectations for students, and building the capacity to understand and respond "to how individual and institutional racism impacts [the] expectations for diverse learners" (Center for Educational Leadership, 4D Framework). The equity-driven school leader understands and can lead the curriculum.

In addition, the equity-driven school leader understands how to improve teaching practice by grounding the school's instructional vision and teacher learning in student needs, "support teacher reflection, goal-setting and growth through conversation, focused observations, feedback and professional development" (Center for Educational

Leadership 4D). The following paragraph articulates the correlation between the themes and subthemes and the Learning and Teaching Dimension and the role of the central office leader.

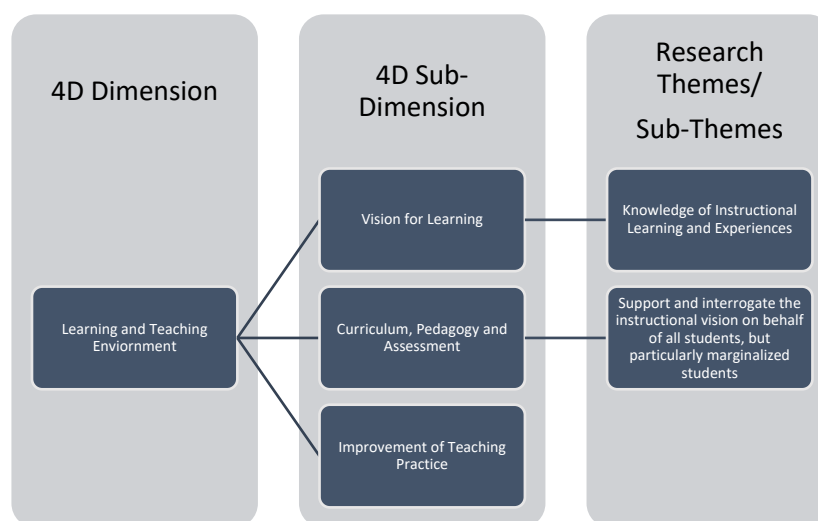
Central Office Leaders Advance Equity by Supporting Learning and Teaching

Larger school districts reform efforts have focused on helping central officers increase their understanding of teaching and learning (Honig, 2012). Strong districts add value to their students' achievement over and above school and classroom contributions (Leithwood, 2013). The participant's responses did not significantly align to leading and teaching and the role central officers play in supporting a learning and teaching environment for all students. One participant shared school systems should "build the capacity [of central office leaders] to understand and respond to how individual and institutional racism impact expectations for diverse learners." Participants shared that central office leaders should support and interrogate the instructional vision on behalf of marginalized students. Central office leaders need to determine "what type of supports" schools need, "how they are doing the scaffolding," "how they are monitoring what has been monitored," if the standards "are aligned to the standards of the state" and they are working with the school "leadership [and] coach [ing] their team[s]. Central office leaders should determine how "to hold" school leaders "accountable" with "support" to determine the "quality [of] instruction and teaching."

Districts should consider reorganizing and re-culture each central office unit to support partnerships and teaching & learning improvement (Honig, 2010). Honig further believes that districts should develop learning-focused partnerships with school principals

(Honig, 2010). Figure 2 summarizes some of the themes and subthemes from this research study which connect this dimension.

Figure 2: *Coding Themes and Sub-Themes to 4 Dimension: Learning and Teaching Environment*



4 Dimensions of School Leadership: Resource Management

The Resource Management dimension of the 4D™ defines a school leader as one who identifies priorities, aligns resources, and develops talent. Identifying priorities include using data to understand student learning and experiences to inform the vision and mission, measurable goals, and ascertain the school's instructional program (Center for Educational Leadership, 4D). An equity-driven school leader leverages resources, continues to improve a school by maximizing and incorporating assets, and uses community partnerships to align support for school priorities (Center for Educational Leadership, 4D). An equity-driven leader knows how to develop talent by cultivating staff based upon student needs, providing individualized professional learning

opportunities, and creating opportunities for staff members to reflect and receive strength-based feedback (Center for Educational Leadership, 4D).

In addition to the Resource Management vision statements, the participants in this research study shared responses that connect to several of the guiding questions, including the following:

- How do the school's vision and mission drive strategic planning to ensure opportunities and outcomes for students?
- What data inform reflection on progress towards goals, strengths, and priorities?
- How are all perspectives, especially those furthest from justice, included when determining and assessing priorities and goals?
- What evidence exists that the needs of those furthest from justice are prioritized when allocating resources (e.g., staff assignments and school schedule)?
- In what ways do community partnerships link to strategic priorities and help the school thrive?
- What mindsets, policies, and practices help leaders attract, hire and retain a diverse team? (Center for Educational Leadership, 4D).

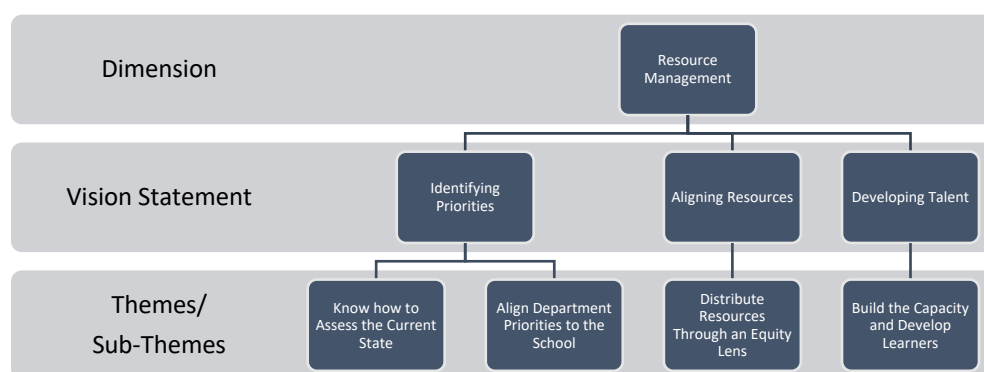
The following paragraph articulates the correlation between the themes and subthemes and the Resource Management Dimension and the role of the central office leader can play in advancing these practices.

Central Office Leaders Advance Equity by Supporting Resource Management

Honig advocates for districts to ensure that every aspect of the central office supports the improvement of schools (Honig, 2018). School systems are recognizing methods to acquire and strengthen a critical lens for identifying the inequities within their school systems to tackle barriers to advancement and root causes more directly (Cheatham et al., 2020). Participant responses from this study significantly intersected with the Resource Management Dimension. Leadership decisions regarding resources and district policies can either assist or inhibit the efforts to construct more equitable

learning opportunities for every student (Diem & Welton, 2020). Therefore, central office leaders need to have clarity regarding their beliefs and be intentional and purposeful regarding their actions and decisions (Diem & Welton, 2020). Welton and her team created a framework to guide system leaders in reframing and supporting their perspectives on racial justice. It is not enough to develop a coherent strategy that positively influences the quality of instruction for all students. The district strategy must be “coherent and equity-focused.” (Cheatham et. al, 2020, p. 1). Participants from this research study shared critical responses and quotes which connect to this dimension. Participants from this research study shared that school districts should "hire [a central officer leader] who respects and loves this" definition. The central office leader is someone who is "adaptive in their work." School systems demonstrate their belief in equity "as it relates to [allocation] of resources." Figure 3 summarizes some of the themes and subthemes which connect this dimension.

Figure 3: *Coding Themes and Sub-Themes to 4 Dimension: Resource Management*



4 Dimensions of School Leadership: Collective Leadership

In the 4D™, the Collective Leadership Dimension defines an equity-driven leader as one who focuses on the personal development of themselves and supports the personal development of others, and can create, build and sustain a collaborative culture (Center for Educational Leadership, 4D). An equity-driven collective leader who focuses on personal development is self-aware of their biases, reflects on their personal beliefs by examining the perspective of "marginalized and privileged identities" (Center for Educational Leadership, 4D). An equity-driven collective leader "builds authentic relationships with racially and ethnically diverse school and community members" and continues to "refine [their] leadership practice for social justice through learning and reflection (Center for Educational Leadership, 4D).

An equity leader who focuses on collective leadership is creating the structures and processes where their school community see themselves as problem solvers with agency and accountability for student learning, are part of the decision-making, planning, learning, and can, encouraged to give feedback, for the ultimate goal of improving learning for all students, but especially those furthest from justice (Center for Educational Leadership, 4D). An equity-driven collective leader "collaborates with members of the school and the broader community, especially those furthest from justice, to analyze and revise structures, policies routinely, and practices that uphold institutional racism" (Center for Educational Leadership, 4D).

In addition to the Collective Leadership vision statements, the participants shared responses that connect to several of the guiding questions, including the following:

- How do leaders pursue personal growth and development? What is the role of ongoing reflection for developing and sustaining an equity stance?
- In what ways do leaders advance and demonstrate empathy, trust, and mutual respect?
- To what extent does leaders' learning influence equitable opportunities for students? What evidence supports this?
- How do leaders reinforce the belief that adults can and do impact student learning? To what extent can adults name and solve problems, take action and track evidence of impact?
- What is the purpose and intended impact for leadership, decision-making, and collaborative learning teams at the school?
- What does leadership from students, staff, families, and community members look like? (Center for Educational Leadership, 4D).

Central Office Leaders Advance Equity by Supporting Collective Leadership

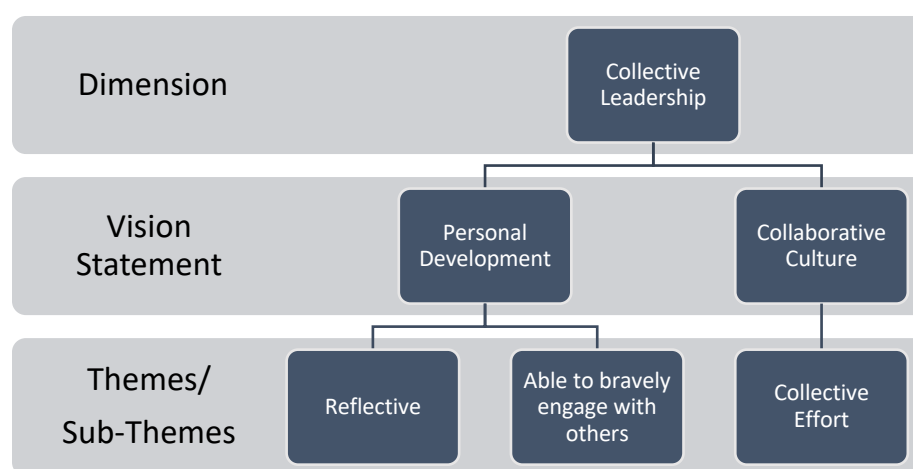
Participant responses significantly intersected with the Collective Leadership Dimension. Participants shared critical responses and quotes connect to this dimension. Participants shared that in order to serve as equity-driven central office leaders, they must be "able to change mindsets" with an "end goal...to change...mindset and their approach", "intentional and thoughtful about the decisions." Equity central office leaders should have support schools in creating "fire prevention" structures such as a "school leadership team."

In addition, participants shared that equity-driven central office leader should have "have the right mindset" and "checks the box" regarding the district expectations. Participants shared that the districts should determine what skill sets are needed and adaptable in their work. The equity officers shared that school districts should hire people who ask questions and learn about the school and community gaps. New staff members

should go into their new job asking questions and yet be thoughtful about their elevating concerns. A participant shared that they should recognize and own what “you know and don’t know.”

Figure 4 summarizes some of the themes and subthemes which connect this dimension.

Figure 4: *Coding Themes and Sub-Themes to 4 Dimension: Collective Leadership*



Limitations of the Study

While it was informative and inspiring to learn from six district equity officers who serve large metropolitan districts, this research study contained limitations. The initial intention was to obtain participants from North Carolina and a more extensive national representation, ideally from participants from various regions across the United States and different school demographics, small, rural, and diverse in experiences and backgrounds. Therefore, the findings of this study may not be generalized to the more extensive network of district equity officers.

Another limiting factor is that this study occurred during the COVID pandemic, and this may have impacted the capacity of equity officers to participate in the study due to the increased demands on their time. In addition, the recruitment process occurred when equity and culturally responsive messages were battling erroneous political messages, which are in opposition to the intent of the equity officers and districts.

The study included only equity officers who assume that the person in this role is the primary person who supports the district's equity vision. In some districts, the person who leads the equity vision may serve in a different role.

Implications for Professional Practice

This phenomenological study was intended to gather a greater understanding of perceived knowledge, skills and dispositions of an equity-driven central officer leaders from the perspective of equity officers. It is necessary to identify the needs of central office leaders to create a pre-service, on-boarding, and job-embedded development program. Rather, in my findings and summary, the data analysis more specifically articulated the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of equity-driven central office leaders and equity officers. The investigation also amplified the district's role, particularly the role of the superintendent in sponsoring and advancing equity throughout the system. The participants shared that equity-driven central leaders must have high expectations for students in their district. Galucci (2008) noted that the problem of learning lies with the expectations educators have for students. Central office leaders can impact schools by valuing and promoting high expectations and a student-centered learning environment regardless of their direct supervisory role of principals (McLaughlin, 2016).

This is not a new concept that districts have been addressing student achievement gaps, disciplinary measures, staff hiring, and curriculum that more accurately reflects students' experiences and identities while paying attention to equity, diversity, and inclusion (Rosenburg, 2021). These positions have been typically divided across various departments, such as human resources and instructional roles (Rosenburg, 2021). The hiring of chief equity officers has increased by 84%, possibly as a response to the occurred due to the increase in racial unrest and due to the continued inequitable outcomes for students (Rosenburg, 2021). The increase in equity officers occurs in large and small districts and districts with small numbers of students of color (Rosenburg, 2021). Hiring an equity officer and focusing on the development of all leaders, both school and district leaders, may signal for some that the district is committed to supporting its equity vision (Rosenburg 2021).

Research is limited in the skill sets needed to develop district leaders and leaders who can build the capacity in others. However, there exists significant research on the need for leadership development. Spillane states that the three critical components or defining elements of leadership activity are leaders, followers, and situation (Spillane et al., 2001). Practice is a collaborative effort between all three (Spillane et al., 2001).

Recommendations for Future Research

The body of research is extensive for developing cultural competence teachers, principals, and superintendents. The body of research for equity-driven central office leaders limited yet is growing and should be expanding. In addition, emerging research on the multiple aspects of the equity officer position is growing. Currently, much of the position research exists in job announcements, articles, and interviews (Garrett, 2020).

For this study, six equity officers were interviewed from large urban districts. As discussed as a limitation, the principals in those districts were not interviewed regarding their perspective of the support principals received from their central office leaders. In addition, the central office leaders who directly support or supervise these principals, were not interviewed to ascertain their lived experiences. Future research may be valuable in order to triangulate the perspective of district leaders who typically lead the district equity agenda, equity officers, central office leaders, and principals to determine where is there alignment in their perspectives and where are these opportunities to strengthen practices and to create the conditions for principals to serve as equity officers.

The participants for this study work in large urban districts with public vision and mission statements—future research on developing equity-driven mid-level leaders in smaller, rural districts to determine the opportunities and challenges. Future research may include studying practices on how to grow equity-driven central office leaders through succession planning and craft a student-focused central office evaluation.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to investigate the perceptions of equity officers of the development of equity-driven central officer leaders and their development as equity officers; the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of central office leaders and equity officers were uncovered. In addition, the researcher learned of the conditions needed to allow both the central office leaders and the equity officers to thrive. Students need school leaders who create equitable and inclusive learning environments and focus on creating equitable outcomes for all students, particularly those furthest from educational justice. School leaders need conditions to

allow them to serve as the type of leader students need. Central office leaders should exemplify specific critical roles for school reform and model those to support school leaders (Rorrer et. al, 2008). School systems are recognizing methods to acquire and strengthen a critical lens for identifying the inequities within their school systems so that they can tackle barriers to advancement and root causes more directly (Cheatham et. al, 2020). To achieve this vision, districts should examine and ensure that all its organizational components culture, systems, structures, resources, and stakeholders—"are being utilized to enact a theory of change that is grounded in racial equity and a strategy aligned to a robust vision of excellent teaching that is culturally responsive. It is not enough to develop a coherent strategy that positively influences the quality of instruction for all students. The district's strategy must be equity-focused" (Cheatham et. al, 2020, p. 5). A key lever to support this strategy is the central office. This qualitative phenomenological study sought to understand district equity officers' perceptions of equity-driven central office leaders. The researcher aimed to explore how the equity officers define equity, equity-driven school and central office leadership, and their perception of the skills needed to actualize this definition of equity-driven senior manager leadership for central office leaders and their role as equity officers.

Larger school districts reform efforts have focused on helping central officers to increase their understanding of teaching and learning (Honig, 2012). These efforts have required systems to deepen their professional learning from sporadic and episodic experiences to placing a premium on ongoing, intensive, job-embedded support for school principals with an emphasis on assisting principals in improving their instructional leadership (Honig 2012). The researcher endeavored to explore the perception of equity

officers regarding the current state of the development of equity-driven central office leaders. For this study, the six equity officers from five urban districts were interviewed about their perceptions of and experiences to serve as equity-driven equity officers and as equity-drive central office leaders. Expectations regarding leadership practices have changed and evolved as the expectations for school leaders and, thus, central office senior managers, to lead and support the creation of equitable outcomes for all students and the need for school districts to ensure that district leaders are equipped with the support for principals to be equity-driven school leaders. The study's findings informed the researcher regarding the professional learning experiences of central office leaders to be equity-driven central office leaders. The results indicated that districts could implement intentional practices and conditions to support the development of equity-driven central office leaders much like what is occurring previous and currently to develop the type of leaders our students need.

Concluding Remarks

The findings of this study propose that participants' lived experiences as equity officers can inform how central office leaders can be recruited, hired, and developed to advance the district's equity vision. Data analysis was used to describe the perceptions of equity officer office leaders to understand their preparation as district managers and the current support they receive to perform their functional job descriptions. In addition, there is limited information and data to determine if the needs of existing central office preparation programs are achieved in the current school district and university programs. Districts may benefit from learning more about the practical core skills, behaviors, and comprehensive leadership development practices to develop equity-driven central office

leaders who impact their districts. The critical learnings regarding equity-driven central service office leadership are emerging, and the findings from this study may provide vital learnings for other districts to replicate.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that when equity officers have support from the district, including time, financial resources, and access to school leaders, they believe they can have a more significant impact on schools. This study attempted to provide a deeper understanding to fill a gap in scholarly knowledge to inform the educational community of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to develop central office leaders who support schools and other offices.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY 1

Dear [Name]:

You are invited to potentially participate in a research study conducted by Michele Mason as a graduate student to earn the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership from University of North Carolina-Charlotte.

This study will explore the of public-school equity officers' perceptions the development of equity-driven central office leaders. If you are selected and agree to participate, the researcher will contact you with an Informed Consent form and more information. In addition to the preliminary survey, you will be asked to volunteer an hour of your time for a virtual interview that will be scheduled at your convenience. You will have an opportunity to review the interview transcript, to respond to any follow-up questions, and to complete a second interview that will collect demographic information.

If you are not willing to participate, please disregard this email. If you agree to participate, please select this link and answer questions on the survey. Completion should take fewer than two minutes. Please complete the survey by September 24, 2021.

I will be in touch if you qualify for participation in this study.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Michele Mason
xxx.xxx-xxxx
xxxxxx@uncc.edu

APPENDIX B: SURVEY 2 (QUALIFYING SURVEY)

Potential research participants will participate in a 15 minute qualifying interview to determine if the participants qualify for the study and to clarify any questions the participants may have regarding the purpose of the research study. Participants will receive an electronic copy of the Consent Form and the participants will return the form electronically to the researcher.

Clarifying questions:

1. What questions may I clarify regarding the research study?
2. Do you choose to continue with the qualifying interview?

Background:

1. Participant Name:
First Name:
Last Name:
2. What email address will you prefer for me to use for communication?
3. Please enter the name of your current district.
 - a. District Name:
 - b. Current Position:

Qualifying Responses:

1. How does your district define equity?
2. How many direct reports do you currently have?
3. Do you intend to voluntarily remain at your current district and your current position for the current school year?

APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY



Department of Education Leadership
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001

Title of the Project: Leading for Equity: Perceptions of How School Districts Build the Capacity of Equity-Driven District Leaders

Principal Investigator: Michele S. Mason
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Rebecca Shore

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to give you key information to help you decide whether or not to participate.

What is the purpose of this study?

1. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of equity officers on the development of central office leaders as equity-driven leaders.

Important Information

2. You must be age 18 or older to participate in this study.
3. You are asked to complete a survey asking a series of questions about what motivates you. The questions are not sensitive or overly personal.
4. It will take you about 45 minutes to complete the survey.
5. We do not believe that you will experience any risk from participating in this study.

Why are you being asked to do this study?

You are being asked to participate in this study because of your role as district equity officers.

What benefits might I experience?

You will not benefit personally by participating in this study. What we learn about how school districts build the capacity of equity-driven leaders may be beneficial to others.

How will my information be protected?

Your privacy will be protected and confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible. Your responses will be treated as confidential and will not be linked to your identity. You are being asked to provide your email address. Survey responses and email addresses will be stored separately with access to this information controlled and limited only to people who have approval to have access. We might use the survey data

for future research studies and we might share the non-identifiable survey data with other researchers for future research studies without additional consent from you.

After this study is complete, study data may be shared with other researchers for use in other studies without asking for your consent again.

Will I receive an incentive for taking part in this study?

You will receive a \$5 Starbucks electronic gift card by email after you finish the survey. We cannot give you a gift card in a smaller increment. If you do not complete the survey, you will not receive the gift card. Also, incentive payments are considered taxable income. Therefore, we are required to give the University's Financial Services division a log/tracking sheet with the names of all individuals who received a gift card. This sheet is for tax purposes only and is separate from the research data, which means the names will not be linked to (survey or interview) responses. We need your email address in order to send you the e-gift card. After we send you the e-gift card, your email address will be deleted.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

The data we share will NOT include information that could identify you.

Participation is voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study. You may start participating and change your mind and stop participation at any time.

Who can answer my questions about this study and my rights as a participant?

If you have questions concerning the study, contact the principal investigator, [contact information removed]. If you have further questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, contact the Office of Research Protections and Integrity at (704) 687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Consent to Participate

You may print a copy of this form. If you are 18 years of age or older, have read and understand the information provided and freely consent to participate in the study, you may proceed to the survey.

1. I agree to participate in a Zoom recorded interview my camera on.
2. I agree to participate in a Zoom recorded interview with my camera off.
3. I agree to be audio-recorded.
4. I do not agree to be audio-recorded.

Name (Print)

Signature

Date

Name and signature of person obtaining consent

Date

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Audience: Equity Officers

Welcome and Introduction:

1. I will begin the interview by reminding the participants about the purpose and process of the interview.
2. The interview is being recorded. The participant may request that I turn off the recording at any point in the interview.
3. All of the information will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for final data collection and reporting purposes.
4. All questions are optional and the participant may end the interview at any time.

Interview focus: This interview will focus on your experiences and work in your school district. If you have had prior experiences in other districts, please clarify this information in your response.

1. What inspires you to serve as an equity officer? What is your why and your purpose?
2. How do you define equity? Please share examples of your definition.
3. How do you define equity-driven school leadership?
4. How do you define equity-driven central office leadership?
 - a. If you were to actualize these skills you described in the previous question, how will your actions support the development of equity-driven principals and transform school districts?
5. What preparation do senior manager central office leader receive that supports your definition of equity-centered central office leadership?
 - a. What additional preparation do you believe is needed either before central office leaders assumed their central office position or while currently serving in their central office positions?
6. What additional preparation do you believe is needed either before equity officers assumed an equity officer role or while currently serving in your position?

7. What other conditions are needed from the school district to support equity-driven central office leaders?
8. What are some potential challenges and barriers that you currently face that prevent you from serving as an equity-driven central office leader?
9. Are there any additional questions that I should have asked you?